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# Vietnam combat engineers hold annual reunion

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**By Rachel Parks**  
**Special to the Daily Guide**  
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Zoom

Veterans of the 19th Combat Engineers stands in formation during a remembrance ceremony Saturday night in Waynesville City Park. The annual reunion included a luncheon and day of camaraderie in the park, as well as an evening memorial service to remember the 105 soldiers of the battalion who were killed in Vietnam.

locations around the U.S. to take part. The luncheon provided an opportunity to meet up with old friends who served together in Vietnam and build upon the already tight camaraderie of the group.

Fred Smith, a Vietnam veteran of the battalion and the group's historian, said the event is always well attended by veterans and their families.

"When the battalion left Vietnam we all scattered," he said. In the early 1990s, a concentrated effort was made to begin identifying veterans and the annual reunion was created.

"This was before the internet," Smith added. "We were contacting people who knew other people and slowly we got organized." After several years of meeting at sites around the Midwest, the reunion was relocated to the Fort Leonard Wood area.

"Basically, because of the intensity of what we did over there, we have a shared experience that is

The annual reunion of the 19th Combat Engineers took place in Waynesville City Park Friday and Saturday. The group of veterans and their family members have been meeting in Waynesville for nearly a decade, to remember their fallen brothers and maintain their ties to their unit and its lineage.

Saturday afternoon the group sat down to a luncheon provided by donations from the community. Former Parks Superintendent Rick Sallee and current superintendent Randy Brown manned the grill for the event.

"Every year they return back," Sallee said. "From what I understand they decided to make this their permanent place of reunion."

Veterans from the storied unit traveled from

enough of a common thread to have people come together once a year from around the country,” Smith said.

In addition to the veterans and their families, the current commander of the battalion, Lt. Col. John Lloyd, attended and brought several current soldiers from Fort Knox, Ky.

“It is an amazing experience,” Lloyd said. “You are really impacted by the stories and the history of the unit becomes a lot more personal.”

He added, “I think it is vitally important that soldiers today maintain the linkage to the veterans of a unit. That’s really how the unit’s defined by its legacy. And the 19th has such a historic past. It’s one thing to read it ... but this is a completely different experience.”

The 19th Combat Engineers sustained a high number of casualties in Vietnam. Some of the family members of soldiers killed in action also attend the reunions year after year.



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"I think the reason most of us are bound together the way we are and have never forgotten that experience is because of the price we paid. A thing is valued by the price you pay for it, and the price that this battalion paid was pretty high," he said. "No engineer battalion in the Vietnam War lost more people than we did."

To close the reunion Saturday evening, the veterans and their families held a memorial service, where all 105 names of those killed in Vietnam were read aloud, as well as the names of soldiers of the 19th Engineer Battalion who have been killed in more recent conflicts.

Rudy Mandeville came from Oklahoma, in honor of his brother Ross, who was killed in Vietnam in 1969.

He said the reunion allows him to fill in a more complete picture of his brother, who was killed when Mandeville was 12.

"I feel like it's filled an empty space in my life, to the best that it can," he said of meeting the men who served with his brother. "I'm here to support these guys too."

Many of the veterans from the 19th Combat Engineers said they rarely miss a reunion.

John Boyle, a medic who served in Vietnam from 1966-1968, said they all share a deep bond that