



My Memories of 1^s Lt. Ralph Schiavone, U.S.A.F. H.H.S. ~ Class of 1960

By

Denny Tillman

Ralph and his twin brother, Phil, were and have been my friends since the 4th or 5th grade. 5th for sure. But it seems like we have always been friends. We were really, the “best” of friends. We each went our own ways, but always came back together again like a compass comes back to true north. We accepted each other absolutely.

I don't remember much of junior high school, only that it was a scary time because we were all high-test fueled with testosterone and it was the days of Blackboard Jungle (the author of which lived just down the street from Ralph and Phil, but it supposedly wasn't based on HHS or Jr High.) Our ninth grade class was all boys. It was either 9-1 or 9-9 I forget which. Every so-called bad boy in the school was in one of those two homerooms. Classes were chaos ruled by out-of-control “youts”. I'll not name names.

High school was another story. There were sports; Ralph was a wrestler. After realizing junior year that I had no future in football unless I could learn to love being crushed, I went onto the wrestling team, too. Ralph was a hall cop. I didn't have any connection to that aspect of his life. Nor to the math/science whizzes he hung out with like Richie Olins, Tom Kramer, Jack Gould, Henry Landau and others. I was busy playing music in the concert band, marching band and jazz groups as well as variety shows.

During those years the three of us used to skin-dive a lot together, both at Jones' Inlet, off the jetties, but also in Bayville where the water was calm, but dismal and dark grayish-brown. The visibility almost always sucked. Despite those conditions, we at first made our own Hawaiian sling spears with parts that we put together and actually speared some blackfish. That was exciting. Then we graduated to real spear-guns from a dive shop. Our fish kill average went up considerably. Spear fishing was fun; the camaraderie and the outdoor life satisfied all of us. It was adventure close to home.



Me and Ralph

We each went off to colleges far apart but holidays and summers we would get together. Ralph went up to *Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute* to study engineering. Phil to SUNY Farmingdale and after a year there myself I went off to Pratt Institute to study Architecture. On school holidays, Ralph and Tommy Kramer sometimes helped me with my Calculus understanding. My problems were so simple to them, whereas they were inscrutable to me.

Ralph was a really smart and charming guy. He was really very funny, too, as is Phil. Their humor was and is acerbic, but never mean; sharp but rarely pointed, abstract as only a really creative free-thinker could be. Ralph loved cars, as both Phil and I did and when we got the chance we would race each other around parking lots and the back roads of the north shore. We'd also go out to Bridgehampton to the road races and, (was it Westhampton?) to the drag races. Taking pictures of the events was fun and important to all of us. Both Ralph and Phil took terrific pictures.

Then Ralph and I discovered The Village together and would go there often to listen to folk music at Gerde's Folk City on West 4th Street. Mostly we'd go on Hootenanny nights where musicians would sign up to play – not for money, but to get up in front of an audience and try out their stuff. During that time we heard Bob Dylan, Judy Collins, Dave Van Ronk and many others while standing at the bar drinking Löwenbräu beer –that was the original beer imported from Germany – and meet girls. Village girls!

One time we met two girls and made a date with them for Saturday night at The Bitter End. I can't remember who was singing that night because Woody Allen was doing his stand-up routine four feet in front of our little cocktail table. Woody was hilarious and Ralph and I were in stitches. The girls didn't laugh at all. They didn't get what was so damn funny. After the show, we escorted them to the corner and said goodnight. Time was not to be wasted. We were young and on the move.

After college I got married and went to work. After graduation Ralph worked for IBM. He applied to the Peace Corps and was accepted to teach math in India. Ralph decided, though, to become an Air Force pilot. He went into active service and went to flight school. All my days growing up my dream was to become a military pilot but my eyes weren't good enough. Ralph fulfilled my dream. He looked great in his officer's uniform with those coveted silver wings. Now he was really moving into his own. He bought a new, dark green '67 Corvette Stingray convertible, then went off to war in Viet Nam.

In Nam Ralph flew the C-7A, Caribou.



It didn't seem like Ralph was away long at all when one night Phil called me and said,

“Ralph’s dead.” Just like that. He had been killed when his plane crashed.

It was a crushing announcement. Short and complete. My knees buckled and I began weeping terribly. My wife was near and consoled me, but it was so sudden and so unbelievable I could not grasp it. I still remember and miss Ralph today and I know I always will.





Pictures of Ralph Courtesy of Phil Schiavone.

