

PHIL COACH CAVERHILL
United States Army (Marine-trained) AO
1968-69

Edited and arranged by Dennis Currie



Fort Dix, New Jersey. Does that seem like a lifetime ago, looking back retrospectively? There at that old army post, thousands of other new recruits and I spent some of our formative military years learning how to adjust as soldiers. Basic training became a whirlwind of aches and pains and endless verbal tirades by our seemingly heartless DI's. But, in the end we graduated with our pride and dignity intact and an almost recognizable sense of purpose. As I moved on to Fort Holabird, Maryland, to tackle the Military Intelligence curriculum, the 1968 TET Offensive had already taken place, and that far off war in Vietnam was not even on my radar screen as I plowed through the nine-week course. I suppose I was thinking that an MOS in intelligence would somehow correspond to my degree in physical education, but I was young and what did I know.

By June, I had graduated, and I suppose by then the reality that I would be sent to war had entered my mind. However, it is always a surprise when you receive your orders, and when I arrived in Vietnam, in July of 1968, that reality finally set in. So, what happened next, to this day, totally mystifies me. Almost as soon as I landed at Ben Hoa, with orders to report to the 9th Infantry, located in the Mekong Delta, but instead found myself being routed up to the 24th Corps in Phu Bai. Being somewhat oblivious to what was happening, I suppose, this changing nature of military decision-making opened me up for the continuous change that was about to overcome me.

Major (Tank) Meehan, United States Marine Corps,* arrived in country about the same time as myself. Please don't forget that at this point I'm just along for the ride. However, Major Meehan found me at 24th Corps, and quite figuratively adopted me as his aide. Looking back, we certainly must have been an oddity. Me (an army specialist) and Tank (a marine major), were an interesting partnership, indeed. His mission in life was to establish a Visual Aerial Reconnaissance Surveillance Airplane Company, or VARSAC for short. We were designed to schedule Birdog flights, and to assemble daily intelligence reports. At some point I became aware that Tank was ex-FBI, if that is possible, and possibly explained his ability to skirt the million and one questions I was always asking him relative to exactly what we were doing. I believe I had an underlying need to understand why I felt clueless most of the time. I didn't complain though, being a desk jockey was right up my alley, and besides—the work was very interesting. *See NOTE, last page.



Tank never left anything alone. He must have thought I wasn't busy enough taking care of VARSAC, so he asked if I would be interested in becoming an aerial observer. Oh, how naïve I was as I decided to take on this training, which eventually moved me further away from the security of my desk. I would wonder what I was thinking as I sat there in the back seat of an O-1, when the possibility of being shot down would cross my mind.

What offset my fears, however, were the opportunities I had flying with pilots such as Charlie Finch, Andy Anderson, and Sarge Means. I believe each enlisted man had their favorite pilots, for a variety of reasons, but these three were truly inspirational men to me. The following photos show a few of the missions I was to fly and the variety of landscape that we had to perform reconnaissance over. While the pictures looked peaceful, they were anything but!



The most memorable missions I flew were with Charlie, when we actually buzzed the deck of the battleship New Jersey. What an incredible experience and adventure, since the man was fearless and could seemingly make an O-1 Birddog perform incredible things. I photographed some great pictures of the New Jersey during our fly-over. However, another honor for which I will never forget was when I was asked if I wanted the rear seat in Andy Anderson's "Fly By." By this time you would have thought that some of my naïveté would have worn off; but no, I agreed, without hesitation I might add, to sit in that back seat. Had I known what a "Fly By" was, I may not have ever experienced the full effect of placing an L-19 into a stall condition, without the engine running, and letting it plummet to the earth. How severe is that? When the engine was finally started, and we pulled out of the free fall, I became truly the happiest man on earth. To this day that experience of flying with Andy in celebration of his service to the 220th is one of my most cherished memories.



Remembering now that Major Meehan never leaves anything alone, he must have thought that my physical education degree would in some way atrophy without use. So it began with volleyball, which actually was a great diversion from the tensions produced from war. We played volleyball, lots of volleyball, in our company area due in great part to the contributions of our Sea Bee neighbors. The 220th actually had, from my professional opinion, the best volleyball court in Vietnam. Our court was short lived, however, until the Sea Bees discovered where their stuff was. To this day I have wondered where, or more appropriately, who procured the equipment for us.

So, what were we to do? Resorting to our real national pastimes of basketball and softball was the logical answer. As you can imagine, Major Meehan was once again behind the scenes directing me to organize the effort. It was basketball that would consume us, and Major Meehan decided that he would coach our team. As enthusiasm for the competition grew, we played many teams in the area; however, as you can imagine with each success, we drew closer to the big game. Picture this: a marine coach on an army basketball team playing the runway championship against a marine outfit. The tension built as the ultimate trophy was procured; the pilots of the 220th readied themselves for the game at the officers club and threw in their full support as our cheering section. The game was intense from start to finish, with each point and counterpoint adding to the fan frenzy. However, the 220th team prevailed and demolished the opposition by an unprecedented single point advantage. The crowd went wild as the victorious 220th accepted their prized trophy. Celebrations extended well into the night, as fan and athlete alike shared in the victory glow. On a sad note, Major Meehan left our coveted prize in Vietnam. We took with us some remarkable memories of our experience, and I earned the nickname of “Coach.” The photo below was taken at the celebration party with Major Meehan, the team and myself, celebrating with the officers that evening.



Now don't get me wrong, it wasn't all work and no play. Between scheduling missions, flying in the back seat of an O-1, and coordinating athletic events, there had to be time for resting and recuperating. The photo above right is from one of our more casual moments. I must say that Vietnam had some of the whitest sand around!

However, in order to play as hard as we did, one required fuel to keep the energy levels up. The best way to ensure we had plenty was to be in good graces with (who else?) but the mess hall staff. I wish I could remember the cook's name; however, here are a few pictures of our chow hall with Kent Hall, the unknown cook, and me in the left photo, Kent Hall is on the left and Bill Ledford on the right in the second photo.



Bill was my bunkmate in Phu Bai, and while Bill did not play basketball he was quite a soccer player. We ventured up to Hue one day to challenge the local Vietnamese team in soccer. Here we were with an all American goalkeeper and a crowd of Vietnamese spectators, and we were trounced something like 12-0. Those guys could eat with their feet!! I wonder if they were VC?!!!!!!!!!!!!

I suppose the worst time away from home is the holidays, and as you might imagine Christmas is the one time of year we most want to spend with our families. In Vietnam you had to make do with your surrogate family and enjoy the well wishes from home.



While you will hear many stories about the air war in Vietnam, the ground war was an everyday reality for many of us as well. The following photos show the devastation that resulted from well-placed 122mm rockets into our compound. Fortunately, our security and training provided us with some protection from these random attacks. I guess the VC was just reminding us why we were there in the first place.



Now after 43 years I have received the secondary honor of Charlie Finch remembering me for the contributions we all made. Thank you Charlie for your kind words and friendship over these decades. Charlie related the following;

"Phil Caverhill was important to all of us Catkillers, simply because he organized all of our athletic teams, games, lineups, scheduling and was probably the best, most well-rounded athlete in every sport. He was the Coach. Rank meant nothing to him, and he would never play favorites regardless of who would try to influence him. He picked the best players and managed them with an iron hand.

My favorite story revolved around the fact that I was a very good softball player, and Phil would not start me as he had not seen me play that much. Finally, he inserted me in the lineup. I hit two home runs, made a great catch in centerfield and never let him forget it. We have laughed about that since 1969.

Everyone talked sports with Phil, and he was the hub around the orderly room where we hung out before and after missions. No one really knew what Tank and Coach did for our unit, but they acted very, very important. Tank and Coach played a lot of handball against one another and were always going over to 24th Corps Headquarters, so we thought they were always doing something secret.

Phil had several nights where he may have had too much to drink, and that is why I sent a picture or two taken when he was hung over. Phil was a treasure. Rooting for the Celtics as they were winning championships or the Red Sox. He was passionate about sports and was most entertaining to be around. We respected him for his intelligence and sense of humor. One of my favorite soldiers ever...."



Once I departed Vietnam, in July of 1969, and finally left the Army, I decided to pursue my education at the University of Maine and there received my masters in Guidance. I continued on afterwards to obtain my Certificate of Advanced Study, and taught for two years in grades five through eight. By the third year I became a teacher-principle and went on to serve thirty-two years as a full principal in kindergarten through eighth grade. Of my accomplishments in life, my most memorable are certainly with my 220th brothers and becoming not only their coach but also a coach to my students through my education. Now, fishing is my pastime in the northern most reaches of the Maine woods, where I can reflect on flights, and games played, with men of honor.

NOTE: "Tank" Meehan: As the liaison officer between the 12th Marines and the army's XXIV Corps, it was my job to keep the Catkillers away from the political infighting of those who wanted to tell them how to fly and when to fly. I also ran interference for them when some senior officer, who knew neither air operations nor the taste of antiaircraft fire, wanted them at his beck and call. It gave me the opportunity to fly with and schedule Catkiller missions, day and night, in support of all ground combat operations..... SOURCE: Jim Hooper, *A Hundred Feet Over Hell* (Minneapolis, Minn., Zenith Press, 2009), p.1