

Firebird Memories of Colonel Robert “Bob” Shellenberger

Firebirds,

Drove to Jacksonville this morning for Bob’s funeral. Briefly talked to Margaret, Robbie and Bob’s sister.

For those of you who don’t know, Bob was West Point, Class of 1958, two Masters’ Degrees from University of Michigan, was a mathematics instructor at the USAF Academy, decorated Vietnam veteran and Firebird One for 3 years. Actor. Choir member at his church.

The Beach Honor Guard saluted him and ashes interred at Saint Paul’s Episcopal Church by the Sea’s Memorial Garden.

Paul Lotakis



I came to the 17th in April 1977 as a butter bar fresh out of Little Rock. I was fortunate to have Col. Shellenberger as my first squadron commander. He was a consummate gentleman and leader.

A year later, April 28, 1978 was a bad day for the Firebird family. We lost friends at Sparrevohn. A few days later Bob called me into his office. He sat me down and told me he was appointing me Jim Gainey's Summary Court Officer. I did not know what that meant. Jim was the accident loadmaster and I had flown with him numerous times. Colonel Shellenberger handed me my orders and the supporting regulations and said they would guide me to seeing to Jim's affairs on base and I had full access to his quarters and the cooperation of base authorities. Still in shock from the accident, I told him I did not feel qualified to do the job. (I was 25 years old).

He got quiet for a moment, then looked at me and said, "Paul, I have only known you for a year. You are a fine young officer. I have every confidence in you. I will be with you every step of the way if you need help. I know you will do your duties to the best of your ability and make your decisions with discretion. You will remember this assignment long after your flying career ends. It will be a defining experience in your life."

The defining experience was understanding how a leader can inspire you, support you, and show his love for others. That is the Bob Shellenberger I remember.

Bob Shellenberger was the best of us and he shared it freely.

Godspeed Robert,

Paul Lotakis

Firebird 1977-1981

"To fly west, my friend, is a flight we all must take for a final check"- (author unknown)

In the spring of 1975, as a reserve officer, I turned down my reassignment and was going to separate from the Air Force. As was photocalled at the time, I had a meeting with Col Schellenberger our squadron commander who was a Lt Col at the time. He said I was going to be a loss for the Air Force. When I explained I wished to only fly aircraft and not get involved in staff work. An airline career would allow that wish but would seek a slot in the National Guard. He surprised me by saying he understood my reasons for separating and a desire to follow a dream. He wished me good luck and a happy career. I followed thru on those plans, flying for United for over 35 years and retiring from the Wyoming ANG with almost 22 years of total service.

Col Schellenberger was a good squadron commander and a decent human being.

Robert Schmidt