

The 5th of July 1971 was a defining day for Phil Pearce. On that Monday morning, Phil embarked on a great adventure when he joined over 1400 “brothers” in a union that would be forever dear to him, one as close as family—the US Air Force Academy Class of 1975. Four years later, only 756 would remain; Phil was among them. He conquered the first of many challenges he would face in pursuit of his dreams.

The lessons and experience he gained in the foothills of Colorado were the cornerstone for his success. In 1977 came another significant day in his life when he met Christine Schmitt in Shreveport, Louisiana. Chris would become his wife and together they would raise three children in a union called the Pearce Family. Phil’s mission in life was forged by love for his family and the Academy legacy. Phil’s adventure ended on June 30th, 2011. On that day, he passed away peacefully with his wife and family at his side, after confronting his greatest challenge and one he was unable to overcome. He joined several classmates who preceded him to the eternal by being laid to rest at the Air Force Academy Cemetery.

Phil Lee Pearce was born on April 10, 1953 in Wilson, North Carolina, one of two sons to Robert Lee and Martha Pearce. Since the early 1800s, his entire family, five generations of ancestors made their home in Nash County, North Carolina. Like Phil, his mother would struggle in her later years from the devastation of Alzheimer. Growing up during the 1950s and 60s, his parents promoted in him the traditional values of America—a love for God, family, and country. He learned the value of integrity, loyalty, hard work, and dedication. His heroes were Douglas MacArthur, Winston Churchill, and Robert E Lee. Following high school, he set off for Colorado Springs in pursuit of a dream—to become a military professional, an Air Force pilot, and to fly airplanes.

At the Air Force Academy, Phil thrived in leadership. He quickly refined the traits that would serve him well in his professional and personal career as a leader of men. In his senior year, he was selected as Squadron Commander of Ninth Squadron. He was selected for Wing Staff and filled the prestigious leadership position of Wing Operations and Training Officer. He graduated from the Air

Force Academy in 1975, with the class motto, “75, Best Alive!”, ingrained in his personality. After Nav School at Mather AFB, Phil was assigned as a B-52 crewmember to the 596th Bombardment Squadron at Barksdale AFB, Louisiana. He quickly distinguished himself in this organization through performance and leadership. In record time, he upgraded to radar navigator and instructor, and was selected for an elite Senior Crew. It was during this time, he met Chris. They fell in love, got married, and made Haughton their home. It would be the first of many homes they would make together. Shortly after his marriage, Phil confronted the most difficult decision of his life: whether or not to continue a career in the Air Force. Phil was torn over this question. His heart was always with the Air Force and a military career, but he was an impatient man with goals that he wanted to accomplish. He recognized his natural talents in leadership, but the Air Force schedule stifled his plans. So in 1983 he pursued what would become an exciting and rewarding future in private industry.

Phil transitioned to his new career as a “corporate executive.” Phil had a plan...he sought jobs progressively more challenging, with greater responsibilities. Many companies would benefit from his leadership and direction: Morton Thiokol, General Electric, Kilgore Corporation, Medco, Merck, and PCS Health Systems. He made the tough decisions and then singularly transformed the consequences into resounding success. His executive career culminated with the formation of two companies: Baffin Aviation Inc which offered air charter service and Churchill Lee Consulting for his professional expertise.

He also served as a Major in the Louisiana Army National Guard Engineer Battalion. Phil was a “no nonsense” leader who expected results and judged people principally by performance and loyalty to the mission. He set very challenging goals for his himself and his organization, and met them. Despite being a tough guy, those who knew Phil appreciated a sincere and caring friend who always had the time to share advice or counsel.

Although driven by challenges and career demands, there is no doubt his family was the most important aspect of Phil’s life. He

continuously struggled to balance career goals with family time and fortunately was blessed with Chris who helped him carry this load. He was most proud of his children, Sean, Shannon, and Brandon, and would always take time to tell you about their accomplishments. Despite the many family moves, Phil and Chris always provided a warm and loving home for their family. Phil loved dogs and they were always a big part of his family. Later in life, he would finally realize his ultimate childhood dream of becoming a pilot. Phil obtained a private pilot license and confidently operated his own airplane, a twin Beech King Air. He loved flying solo and the freedom that came with being able to witness life and the country he loved from a unique vantage point in the sky. Phil also enjoyed his home near Kitty Hawk on the Outer Banks of North Carolina where he became an active member of the First Flight Society. He was most comfortable in the tranquility of sitting on the deck within sight of Kill Devil Hills, enjoying a glass of The Macallan Scotch and a fine cigar.

A few years ago, he came back to Colorado and he and Chris made Monument their home. Included was a spectacular view of where the great adventure began—the Cadet area of the Air Force Academy. When it became apparent that he would become victim to the same disease that he watched his mother endure, he stayed brave and courageous. We watched Phil struggle and slowly lose the battle against the challenge he could not overcome. We will remember him as that loyal and devoted friend, classmate, partner; most of all, a devoted husband and loving father, who cherished and appreciated his family. So, a toast to Phil Pearce, our brother and classmate: “Here’s to you old friend, until once again, we are all together to proudly proclaim—’75, Best Alive!”

*Perry Lamy | July 2011*