

Billy Reid Sparks  
"Sparky"  
7 December 1934 - 10 May 2013

Big eyes, warm heart, baritone voice, quick wit, and non stop tales describe a man who was loyal, loving, sentimental, entertaining, and at times larger than life. Those eyes were his window to the world; they captured the sights, sounds, and events which when filtered through his compassion, patriotism, humor, and slightly??? mischievous thought process produced his wonderful, spellbinding tales. When the pulpit was his, he commanded your attention, ignored surrounding events or consequences, and spared no details as you were a captive audience until that wonderful and unique laugh signaled the conclusion.

He was the pied piper for fun, a magnet for laughter, and the prime instigator of songfests, jokes, and tales. We all know more about Spangdahlem than this Marine knows about any base, any where. Hell, I had never heard of the place nor could I spell it, but now I think I might have been stationed there.

Another of Sparky's endless venues for incredible experiences was something called the Hobacks. According to Sparky, this section of the Jackson Hole Ski Resort provided the finest skiing one could imagine. It was the platform for his 3 year sales pitch to Aspenosium and promised to be the highlight of what he hoped to be our impending trip to Jackson Hole. The length of the run was unrivaled, the beauty unparalleled, the conditions pristine, and the experience one of a lifetime. We could only picture Sparky floating through the fluff with those twinkling eyes and that megawatt smile. We bit, and Aspenosium was off to Jackson and Sparky's famed Hobacks.

Since we had had no boots on the ground in Jackson, it would require reconnaissance and planning before we could descend on the good folks of Wyoming with our laundry list of unusual requests all centered on frivolity and an endless supply of Booze. Naturally Sparky, our President and fearless leader, would lead this expedition along the path to guaranteed organization and flawless execution. However, Sparky viewed this summer trip as an opportunity to find fresh folks who had never heard of Spangdahlem, Takhli, The Thud, Weasels, Jolly Greens, and Weapons School nor did they know the words to all of the songs they were about to learn. While Tip and I worked on the details, our very own pied piper, with Scotch and Soda in hand, entertained the masses at The Mangy Moose Saloon. Upon reflection, Sparky had insured Aspenosium a warm reception when we returned 6 months later and a warm reception it was indeed.

The day came, we all arrived, and the fun commenced. Sparky was in heaven; after years of salesmanship we were all in Jackson, the weather was perfect, the conquering Pied Piper had returned, and the locals were predictably excellent hosts. Sparky regaled us all with endless tales of the family trips and days gone by with vivid descriptions of each and every run and colorful depictions of the cast of characters participating.

After informing us that a knee injury prevented him from leading us, he implored us to tackle the Hobacks on Wednesday and pledged a day to remember in this Nirvana of fluff and beauty. Once again we bit and Stormy, T-Bone, and I were off without our fearless leader. We boarded the gondola with countless new best friends and shot to the top to find fluff, beauty, and ideal cold temperatures. Within 10 turns and a bare minimum of our impending 4100 foot descent behind us, we were in Sparky's famed Hobacks. However, we were without any of our new best friends from

the Gondola, no way out, and ever-changing conditions which offered each and every season until we were mired in cement with a mile to go. The climate we had descended into rivaled San Diego and we were dressed for Alaska. We emerged soaking wet, pissed off, worn out, and in search of our fearless leader. Upon finding HIS-SELF, our request was simple (and I have really cleaned this up), "tell us about the frigging Hobacks". Sparky's answer was priceless: "Oh hell, Babes, I've never skied them but Reid told me all about them". Vintage Sparky!!

Yes, those eyes were Sparky's window to the world, but they worked both ways as they also provided all of us a portal to his big heart and wonderful soul. One never wondered where they stood and that is a tribute to Sparky's integrity of which he spoke often and held dear. Chances are that after your first "encounter", and I chose that word carefully, you were welcomed into his massive legion of friends and you had a home for life.

My first "encounter" was from afar and ironically it came through a story being told in a bar. The bar was the Danang Officer's Open Mess or DOOM Club which, for the uninitiated, was the Officer's Club on the Air Force side of Danang Air Base in South Vietnam. This story was being told in the hushed tones of reverence while unveiling the heroic rescue mission of a legendary Fighter Pilot that had taken place deep in North Vietnam that very day. It was the story of another valiant Jolly Green Crew that hung it all out for one of us and it was a story that would be retold as long as Fighter Pilots gather. I was at a table with a number of Air Force Fighter Pilots and it seemed everyone at the table had a personal interest in the outcome of that mission that far exceeded our normal levels of concern for one another. They spoke of this pilot as they would their best friend, and I wondered how many best friends can one guy have? A few years later I understood when I met Sparky for the first time and, in the ensuing 40+ years, I have been reminded of that night each and every time we have been together.

The terms WARRIOR and HERO are often employed, especially at times such as today, for reasons we all understand but, in reality, those terms accurately describe very, very few. Today, however, they both apply. Robin Olds, when we were on one of our road trips to nowhere, told me Sparky was the bravest man he had ever known and then he proceeded to tell me why. I was reminded of Robin's words and stories from long ago a couple of months back when reading Takhli Tales. Sparky's version gives much of the credit to his Bear, Major Carlo Lombardo, but Robin's version leaves no doubt about Sparky's willingness not to just be out front, but to drive the tip of the spear, and to do everything in his power to assure the Force came home. Yes, he led, protected, and bled with the Force. That devotion to Mission Accomplishment makes one wonder how many came home to their families or to become Husbands, Dads, and Grampas because of the courage, tenacity, and ingenuity of Barracuda Alpha and Barracuda Bravo.

His accomplishments are legendary, and recognized by the virtual litany of decorations he wore but, in truth, most medals collect dust in a drawer somewhere. However, the love, respect, and admiration of one's peers is timeless and one look around this chapel says it all. Sparky was a Warrior, he was an American Hero, and indeed Sparky was larger than life.

We were truly blessed, in so many ways, to be Sparky's friends and the most prominent of those was knowing you, Dell, and experiencing your charm, spirit, and great sense of humor. Your priceless "one liners", none of which can be repeated here, are audibly etched into the walls of our house. You were the wind beneath his wings, the magic behind that megawatt smile, the love of his life, and together you gave us the miracles that made Sparky's life complete: Reid, Peggy, and their families

Yes, he was known to some as Barracuda, to most as Sparky, and to the civilian population as Dell's husband. He was always the most proud of being Dell's husband and Reid and Peggy's Dad.

In closing I'll borrow a quote from an unknown author:

God saw you were getting tired, and a cure was not to be, so he put his arms around you and whispered "come to me". With tearful eyes we watched you and saw you pass away. Although we loved you dearly, we could not make you stay. A golden heart stopped beating, hardworking hands at rest. God broke our hearts to prove to us, in this case, He only takes the best. As Sparky would say to all of you "Hug one another"!!

Godspeed old friend and Semper fidelis, you always were.

Jack McEncroe  
Nellis AFB Chapel  
14 June 2013