

In Remembrance of CAPT Robert W. "Mole" Vail, USCG (Ret), Who Crossed the Bar 15 October 2005

My Dear Friend Mickie, members of the Vail family, friends of Bob, Coast Guard Academy classmates of '71 and '72, and Shipmates:

One thought that has helped me most in getting through each day since Bobby crossed the bar is that the Big Guy in the Sky must have needed Bobby more than we mere mortals do...he must have needed Bobby for a special mission, and took him sooner than we would have ever imagined. I can just see and feel Bobby doing his good work right now, carrying out that special mission, up in heaven singing and dancing with the Angels. This thought has helped me immensely in coming to terms with why Bobby has been pulled from our midst prematurely.

How do you define Robert W. Vail: I could use a thousand adjectives to describe Bobby, and list them off one after the other, but I'm confident Bobby would prefer a more simplistic and direct assessment. Knowing Bobby, he would want it all summarized into a single word, because he was never one for hyperbole (unless, that is, he was telling a sea story). So I choose the single word ECLECTIC to define my best friend. Bob had a broad wingspan: part sailor, part chaplain, part instructor, part mentor, part journalist, part philosopher, part conservationist, part community leader...kind neighbor, loyal classmate, devoted husband...a man of substance and style, a man of love and peace, a man of God...he could talk like a sailor when the occasion arose, talk with the sensitivity and profoundness that only a chaplain, a man of deep faith and conviction, could muster. He could curry his donkeys or tend his forest in the morning, and lay hands on the sick and ailing and grieving in the afternoon...he could listen to Janis Joplin or the Motown sounds at one moment, and be writing philosophical or theological prose in the next....

Upon learning of Bob's crossing the bar, our Classmate, John Boggs, wrote:

Quote Ancient Egyptians believed that upon death they would be asked two questions, and their answers would determine whether they could continue their journey in the afterlife. The first question was, "Did you bring joy?" The second was, "Did you find joy?" We all know how Bob answered. Pleasant journey friend...Unquote

The first time I met Bob was our first day at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy on June 26<sup>th</sup>, 1967, when we were inducted into the Class of 1971. The first months for a new Cadet at the Coast Guard Academy are known as Swab Summer. During that first Swab Summer, Bob and I were in the same summer platoon, known as Xray. In those days, the Academy was a physically grueling experience for a Swab, as a first year Cadet is known, especially the summer. At the time, Bob and I were both of small stature, the smallest guys by far in the platoon. We both barely met the minimum weight and height standards to enter the Academy. The platoon commander took great pleasure in pointing Bob and I out as we were put through the rigorous exercises, some of which were quite unorthodox, which today would be called hazing, or worse...the platoon commander would yell and sneer at our classmates, saying that if Vail and Newell can do it, so can you! Bob and I, despite our small size, were in top physical shape and had the tenacity and fortitude to keep up the pace. We quickly learned to slow the pace down so as not to show up our classmates, which only resulted in more punishment to ourselves at that particular moment, but won us the respect of our peers. During the Swab Summer cruise on the Academy training bark EAGLE, a grand square-rigger sailing vessel, Bob and I would both be assigned to the mainmast, and we both worked the top most sail together, known as the royal. I will forever remember running up the ratlines, and climbing out onto the royal yardarm, with Bob at my side, as the EAGLE heaved and yawed in the swell, with us 135 feet above deck. That summer we both also had the honor of climbing all the way up to

the very top of the mainmast, the highest point on the ship, to re-rig the pig stick, which had become fouled, from which flew the traditional commissioning pennant. We were the heroes of the day, since this feat was usually left to the ship's permanent party and rarely accomplished by Cadets. I can still see the smile on Bobby's face after our climb. We were forever bonded by those early events at the Academy.

Although Bob and I excelled at the physical challenges during that first year at the Academy, we both struggled with the heavy load of demanding academics. Many cadets couldn't make the grade. A lot simply quit. Others were bilged out. A few cadets who had difficulty with the academics but showed good potential were invited to remain as members of the Corps of Cadets. At the end of the year, Bobby and I and ten other classmates fell into this category and were "reverted" to the next class, the Class of 1972, and offered a second opportunity to meet the academic standards. So we repeated Swab year all over again, and became loyal members of the Class of 72, and made the grades to continue our Cadet and Coast Guard careers. Being a Reverter distinguished you among other Cadets as having an invisible badge of courage since you were willing to once again undergo the rigors of Swab Year. Instead of feeling like you had failed, the unwritten code of the Academy social system wiped the slate clean and gave us a whole new life as long as we worked hard to meet the high standards. Bob and I were given a second chance early in life to make amends and excel, and on various occasions we would reminisce about our Reverter days and give thanks for our good fortune. Over 400 select young men entered the Class of 72, and only 186 graduated 4 years later. I can't help but believe that Bob's experience as a Reverter played a major role in shaping a part of Bob's character, that helped Bob develop into an even stronger and more determined man, a tenacious fighter who never gave up in the face of adversity, a more giving and inspirational person, always looking to lend a helping hand, always willing to extend the olive branch, always being there for a friend in need, always rooting for the less fortunate, the misunderstood, the loner, the underdog, the runt of the litter, and finding a way to help that person start over, stand on their own, to grow and excel. Bob epitomized compassion and brotherly love, coupled with dogged determination.

As I talk about our Academy days together, I have to mention Bob's passion for soccer. If ever a sport personified an individual, then soccer personified Bob. In soccer, you have to be swift and have endurance, be tenacious and patient at the same time, be combative yet play with finesse, be a team player as well as an individual player at any given time, and play with not only your physicals skills but also your head and heart. Bob relished playing soccer, and he took a special interest in helping me improve my skills. On weekends during our Swab Year, during the precious little free time we had as underclassmen, Bob would grab me and we would go to the gym, deck out in our soccer gear, check out a bag of soccer balls, and head to the lower field, where he would literally "coach" me. I actually made the team thanks to Bob, and we played side by side. Those were some of the best days of my life, playing soccer with Bobby Vail. Bobby went on to earn four varsity letters in soccer. Whenever I even hear the word soccer, instant memories of Bob come flooding back to me, and I envision us on the field together.

Another early memory of Bobby is fishing and skiing with him in his beloved Vermont's Green Mountains, when he invited me home with him during one of our early holiday retreats from the Academy during Swab Year. Bobby was in his element, wading in the beautiful clear and cold stream as we caught trout, and roaring down the slopes as we skied. I have fond memories of the Vail family's hospitality and kindness during that, and subsequent visits, especially sister Debbie's delicious pork chops.

At the Academy you were assigned a roommate, known as your "wife", and you changed roommates several times each semester, as a way of exposing Cadets to different people and lifestyles. Bobby was one of my first "wives". We lived together three, maybe four times during our Academy years. Bobby was a great joy to live with. He was so popular that our room was always full of guys, and he would crank

up his record player, and dance around the room singing to the tunes. After study hours, Bobby liked to stay up extra late, spouting off his latest philosophical thoughts, though the only one of us who even pretended to understand what he was talking about was our other class philosopher, Craig Leisy. But not everything was rosy living with Bob. He snored like a lion, and was a horrid sight to see first thing in the morning. We truly enjoyed living together as roommates, as “wife” and “wife”.

Joining us today are three other classmates who were also roommates, or “wives” of Bobby: John Larned aka Lardass, Craig Leisy aka Space Man, and Steve Osmer aka Ozzie. Other classmates in attendance are Laird Hail aka Lizard, Greg Johnson aka Gramps, Kevin Scheid aka KJ, and Mark Noll. Though not in attendance, 179 other classmates are here in spirit with us today.

As is apparent, most of us were labeled with nicknames by our classmates during those early years at the Academy. And yes, indeed, Bob also had his own special moniker. Our classmate and Bob’s good friend Denny Gillespie, also a former “wife” of Bobby, emailed this memory of how Bob earned his nickname. Denny writes:

Quote Bobby & I roomed together 3/c year, and when we’d get tired of listening to scratchy Motown records on the highly sophisticated and incredibly expensive machine Bob called “The Tunemaker”, we’d go down the hall and burst into the room of our neighbors Pat Stillman and Penn Shade. Bob would dive under the top sheet of one of their beds, starting at the pillow, and burrow down to the foot, popping out at the end and totally messing up the perfectly made rack, which of course they’d have to re-make. It was a maneuver he called “THE MOLE”, and it resulted in the nickname by which we would affectionately refer to him ever after.

Denny continues to write:

The other memory everyone should be aware of is that Bobby was doing karaoke years before the word “karaoke” was invented. The best parties at 33 Bayview were the ones that culminated in Bob pulling on his black leather jacket to do his rendition of Dion’s “The Wanderer”, complete with Rosie on his chest. And following it up with a little “Duke of Earl” as an encore. It always brought down the house.

And so another Dion song came to mind as I looked through the ’72 yearbook yesterday:

*Has anybody here*

*Seen my old friend Bobby?*

*Can you tell me where he’s gone?*

We know where he’s gone, and he’s looking down at us with that devilish little grin, like he just messed up Stillman’s rack. And we’ll never forget him as long as we live. Unquote

Thanks for the memories, Denny...

I have fond memories of Mole’s Bar and Grill...only a risk taker as ingenious as Bob would be able to run a bar and grill out of his Academy barracks room during 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Class years...this was a momentous achievement, and the penalty if caught was indeed high, since unauthorized food, and of course any liquor, were against regulations...never the less, Mole, with the help of unnamed classmates, would on frequent occasions, have pizza and beer nights in his room, as he played his favorite tunes and did his little dance that only the Mole could do...have you ever seen the American Express commercial on TV that describes well remembered life events as PRICELESS, like a father taking his son to his first baseball game, or proud parents watching their daughter’s first piano recital...well, memories of those

days at Mole's Bar and Grill are PRICELESS to me and many other classmates...Mole gave us so many PRICELESS memories...

Bobby was the glue which held us all together...this was a recurring theme between classmates as we exchanged emails and phone calls over the last few weeks since Bob's passing...at the Academy, even though we were all close as classmates, there were the invariable social cliques and factions amongst us. Bobby stood out as the one person who was able to cross the lines between the various cliques, acting as a moderator, peacemaker, facilitator, referee, sounding board, or whatever it took to keep us aligned, and living our class motto "Not for one, but for all." This continued after graduation, throughout our careers and friendships, and eventually into our retirements and second careers. In retirement, Bobby excelled in keeping classmates in touch and in harmony by serving as our Class Correspondent who was responsible for writing up class activities for publication in the bi-monthly Academy Alumni Bulletin. Bobby was indeed our "glue".

As our classmate and good friend, Pat Stillman, wrote:

Quote I generally thought that Mole would be the last one to depart. Always had the right perspective...a sparkle in the eye, the wry smile, the crackle in his laugh, a balance and perspective that grew with time...loved his friends, loved his Mickie, and loved his Coast Guard. And of course he loved the simple things in life...a good beer, a Marlboro, a campfire, and the opportunity to gaze upon the many gifts of nature and the good Lord, and spin a few too many yarns in the process. He was blessed with the adult supervision of Mickie; we of course, failed miserably in providing that essential element in our more formative years. The Mole knew of our shortcomings and rose to the cause by keeping us all connected...a call out of the blue, the class notes, the principled reflections, the encouragement and an enduring attachment to that which matters most. He gave us the greatest of gifts...his friendship and the best of examples of how to live life right. We sail in his wake and we will see him again. I'm not quite sure how to fill the void but Mickie will figure it out. She always has...Sail on!!! No recourse...Mole wouldn't have it any other way. Unquote

I know in my heart that one of Bobby's most cherished days was the day he and Mickie were married. Two of our classmates here today, John Larned and Craig Leisy, were at that joyful celebration. They remember with fondness the wedding festivities and the coming together of the Vail and Jaissle families. From that day forth, Mole lost his identity as just being the Mole, and they together became Mole and Mickie, two very strong individuals who retained their independence, yet were one. You had no doubt that the two were made for one another, and you just knew that their love would last eternally.

Throughout his career, Bobby loved the Coast Guard, especially the people and the Service's humanitarian missions. Bobby was very devoted to his shipmates, particularly the enlisted personnel. I've heard many enlisted personnel refer to Bobby as an "enlisted man's officer", which is a very high compliment indeed coming from within the ranks. Just like when he was a Cadet, Bobby continued to challenge the Coast Guard "system" to be a more practical and sensitive organization with regards to it's personnel. Bobby was indeed a "rebel with a cause" throughout his Coast Guard career.

I fondly remember the day Bobby called me from his post at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, DC, in 1994, to tell me that he had just made the decision to retire and move back to Port Angeles. He sounded so happy to be going back to the Pacific Northwest, to the home Bobby and Mickie had bought when Bobby had been stationed in Port Angeles as the Group Operations Officer. Within the year I was able to visit the Vail's in Port Angeles, and it was easy to see that Bob and Mickie had found the essence of life at Homeport Homestead, as Bobby proudly called his spread. Bobby was thriving as a "gentleman

farmer". He loved his property and his animals, particularly his donkeys and dogs, especially his puppy Finlett. He couldn't wait for me to see Heidi, his first donkey, and we went out and fed the critter some carrots. On subsequent visits, Bob would walk me through his property, which was always growing as he added contiguous acreage at every opportunity. He took great delight in his conservation efforts, with his property earning recognition as a Stewardship Forest and Tree Farm. Bob hand built a wooden cabin out in the thick of his property, his retreat, a place where he would go to read and write and be one with the world...his own Walden pond. That was a side of Bobby which I learned to cherish and admire; the quiet, reflective, philosophical side of Bobby which came alive in solitude with nature.

In retirement, Bob found a new calling in the form of theology, a new avenue for him to continue on as a humanitarian and life saver, just like when he was in the Coast Guard. He studied and worked hard to earn a position as a lay chaplain at the Olympic Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, where we are gathered today. He was very modest about his work for his church, but in what little he would say, I could tell he relished his new found vocation. All the while, he was working as an instructor in the Work First program at Peninsula College, again, giving back to the community to help others find their way. Bob also served as a member of the County Planning Commission, serving as chairman in 2001. Bob loved serving his church, and his community. And the community loved Bob right back.

Shortly after I retired in 1998, one of our illustrious classmates named John Larned, aka Lardass, whom I mentioned earlier as one of Bobby's former wives, called to say that he would be in Seattle on business and that the four of us, including Mole and Space Man Leisy, should get together for a mini-class reunion. Mole was all for it, even though he had daytime obligations on both sides of the night we planned to meet. Somehow Mole made the transit from Port Angeles to Seattle in time to meet us downtown at the Metropolitan Grill for brews and a great meal, then toured the city cultural sites with us well into the early morning as we continued our toasting and reminiscing of days gone by and prophesizing what the future held, as we smoked our stogies. Somehow Bobby made it back to Port Angeles in time, after pulling an all-nighter, to teach his class at the college. That was classic Mole. He never let anything get in the way of his loyalty and affinity for his classmates, especially if good chow and brew were included along with the fellowship. The four of us have always remembered that night together as the Seattle Rendezvous.

Bob was a nurturer and a pillar of strength for many. During a classmate's health crisis a few years ago, Bob was there for him, calling and emailing on a daily basis, and frequently praying with him and for him. Bob had his bags packed ready to fly to our classmate's side. Fortunately, the crisis, by God's grace, was resolved. That's the kind of person Bobby Vail was: a devoted friend who would drop everything and make way to be with a classmate in his time of need.

His commencement prayer at the Class of '72 Thirty Year Reunion Dinner Dance at the Coast Guard Academy in September 2002 was an absolute classic. After the first 2 minutes he had us teary eyed, after the second 2 minutes we were wishing he'd hurry up and finish, and during the final 2 minutes, he had invigorated us with hope and faith. After dinner, when the music started, someone got a dance line going, and one of the highlights of the evening was watching Mole dance and prance his way down the dance line...we were all once again amazed and mesmerized by the Mole's moves, his smile, and his singing and humming to the tunes.

Bob worried that I might never remarry and have someone in my life to cherish as he did Mickie. But by the grace of God, with Bob as his witness, Bobby married Arlis and I in May 2003...it was an extraordinary feeling, having a classmate perform your wedding ceremony...Mole fixated on getting his sermon just right, and went through many variations of his message with Arlis in the month preceding the wedding. It seemed as if Mole was beaming as much as I was as he pronounced Arlis and I "husband and

wife”. What a grand moment that was in my life, having my best friend marry me to the woman of my dreams! I’ll forever be indebted to Bob for his goodness in performing our marriage.

The last time I saw Bobby was at the Vail’s annual 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration at Homeport Homestead, in 2004. Bob was in his element, working all week setting up the grounds, and hosting all his friends...he got great joy out of seeing others enjoying themselves, participating in the many varied discussions, talking to each and every person there. I was privileged enough to attend one of those memorable celebrations, and watched in awe as Bob seemed to spread his cheer and goodwill throughout the day, well into the night. From now on, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July will not only be the day to celebrate our great nation’s independence, but also to celebrate the memory of a revered brother known as Mole.

I enjoyed a long phone call with Bobby three days before he left us. Another classmate, Ben Stoppe, spent the day visiting Bobby in Port Angeles two days before Bobby passed. Classmates seemed to naturally migrate towards the Mole, and I find it fitting that classmates had the good fortune of talking with and seeing Bobby during those last few precious days, though none of us could ever imagine that Bobby would soon cross the bar.

One of our classmates named Charlie McCarthy, wrote a poem entitled “Full Circle” to celebrate our 25<sup>th</sup> year class reunion in 1997. A few days ago I asked Charlie if I could recite the last verse of the poem, which reads: Quote “We come and go like the tides of the sea, But classmates we will always be.” Unquote. Bobby loved his classmates, and we in turn cherished our Mole.

I’m a better man for having had Robert W. Vail in my life as one of my closest friends. He was truly like a brother to me. It’s hard to imagine life without Bobby, who was always a constant I could depend on, a source of strength, inspiration, hope, compassion, and most of all, brotherly love. He set me straight so many times as I wandered through life. He enriched my life immensely. Mole, I love you, and I’ll dearly miss you. I pray I’ll make the grade, and have the opportunity to see you above decks when Gabriel blows that horn. Until that day, dear friend, be with God, be at peace. I respectfully ask my classmates to stand and join me in giving you a final salute, Mole...all Coast Guard personnel, and members and veterans of the other military services, active and retired, are invited to join us....[salute]...And by the way, don’t slack it up there, get that special mission accomplished with gusto. Aloha, my dear friend...