

PHILIP MERRILL:

Executive, Patriot, Servant, Philanthropist, Environmentalist,
Wise and Great Guy

Remarks by Dr. C. D. Mote, Jr.
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Phil was a beautiful guy, often difficult, but beautiful indeed. We join here today to offer our deepest condolences to Ellie, Doug, Kathy and Nancy. We hope that our collective strength will help carry you, your families and us through to brighter days that lie ahead.

I thank the family for this opportunity to say a few words of about Phil. I feel very privileged to be asked. Why do we appreciate this special man so much ... love him so?

Phil was a man of striking contrasts. His volatility is legendary. But in meetings of more than a few people, he spoke selectively and carefully. His speeches were precisely prepared.

Phil was fiercely independent and loved it that way. Whether as a publisher or a single-handed sailor, he loved running the show and was not inclined to work for anyone. He was The Executive. At the same time he was a devoted public servant at the Export-Import Bank, NATO, and the departments of Defense and State. He gave up substantial independence for public service – a striking contrast indeed.

Phil was liberal and conservative, privileged and egalitarian, philanthropic and demanding, selfish and generous, wealthy and frugal all at the same time. Rather than pay \$3 for coffee at a fancy hotel, he'd find a diner down the block. Italian suits were not for him. He wore the same red striped tie to every Maryland event for years – stains and all. I hope to enshrine this treasure in the University Archives some day.

Most notably Phil was both “street smart” and sophisticated. This characteristic may have evolved from a rough childhood, or his merchant marine service, or his life as a journalist. He understood the pulse of organizations from the dirt to the boardroom, how they worked or whether they will work. His vision was clear, and his advise crisp. I learned immediately that to ignore his counsel was risky – so I didn't. To have him take me, an unknown newcomer from California, under his wing just doesn't happen in this town. I will remain forever grateful for his confidence. He believed in building a great university in College Park and I needed someone who did.

Phil had great passion for education and higher education in particular. He and his children are Cornellians; he had served on its board and has supported it generously. Phil also backed the Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies for many years.

But he profoundly changed the University of Maryland, and any list of shapers of the university will have Phil Merrill's name etched on it. Phil saw that he could make a difference at Maryland. His passion for excellence was palpable. In the 1980s he was a co-founder of the School of Public Policy. His link to the College of Journalism is long standing; Ellie is currently chair of its board of visitors. Soon after I arrived in 1998, Reese Cleghorn, then the dean of Journalism, introduced me to Phil and Ellie. A couple of months later I asked Phil and Ellie to consider a \$10 million gift to lift journalism to be the best school in the country. Phil loved 'best.' After setting out the strategic plan and taking a couple of sailing trips together, he said OK. But he said, "no endowments." He wanted us to spend it down and make big things happen . . . now. And we are doing it . . . now.

On our sailing trip in the Grenadines and with Nancy's enthusiastic backing, we created the Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars program recognizing the best high school teacher and university professor of a top Maryland student. Twenty-five Philip Merrill Presidential Scholars are selected each year. Phil's passion for excellence and his respect for great teachers underpinned the program.

We were a compatible pair. He talked and I listened. We also liked the same things. Phil favorite saying, always presented with a sparkle in his eye was that his passions were: skiing, sailing, ice cream and sex. I know what you're thinking. . . . What flavor ... ice cream? I don't know.

My wife Patsy and I sailed often with Phil and Ellie on the bay and in distant waters. We had great adventures indeed. We arrived in Tonga via New Zealand to find the small plane that was to ferry us to our boat was out of commission. A village funeral had commandeered the only other plane in the islands – our reservations were summarily canceled. We were grounded. Phil would have none of it and immediately sprung into action. After exhausting all efforts to charter anybody's private plane, he went straight to the Generals using his department of defense credentials to get a military helicopter to drop us off. But alas he was finally advised that His Majesty King Tupou IV was his only remaining bet. So we waited two days for a plane.

Off St. Martin in a 35-knot breeze and 9 foot seas we sailed through the breaking surf coming over the reef to get into the harbor. As we surfed in on the breakers, we hoped that we had found the unmarked and invisible passage through the reef. It worked. Phil was an excellent sailor.

Phil conducted his first board meeting as president of the Export-Import Bank by satellite telephone from the foredeck of our boat as we bounced through 6-foot seas off Canuon Island in the Grenadines. When Cathy delivered her first child, we were sailing off Martinique. Not surprising to anyone but Phil, Ellie remained with Cathy while Phil, Patsy and I went off to Martinique. Phil and I went ashore to a small village to phone the hospital and check up on mother and grandchild. We found a phone outside a local post office and called Cathy's hospital room. Phil's first question was "what's his name?"

Then he shouted “Philip, Philip!!” It was “lift off.” He literally danced in the street and could not have been more excited. Oh yes, Cathy and little Win Philip were fine too.

Phil’s life had long been wrapped in sailing. His first date with Ellie was on his first yacht, a 15-foot snipe. All the children are excellent sailors, growing up in boats of all sizes. Cathy’s husband, Paul, was checked out on the Tongan sail, which was more than a test of wind and water. Cathy announced the coming of her first child out on the bay.

Phil, a master sailor, singled-handed his boat often and knew the bay perfectly. He lived his life the way he wanted to. He was free and independent, was committed to his family, his country and his passions. He has left a permanent mark on the University of Maryland.

Phil wrote in the Tongan boat log after a fine sail one day: “Sun is setting. Drinks are disappearing. A good Cuban Habana cigar is consumed by fire. This is the 7th day without a single radio broadcast, newspaper or contact with the outside world. We are doing just fine. So, no doubt is the world.” That is the way I remember him, and the way I want to remember him until we again set sail together.

Our prayers stay with the family.