The Dean K. Phillips Memorial Drop Zone

by

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HIKERS ambling along Whip-poor-Will Way Trail at the Patuxent Research Refuge's North Tract in Maryland skirt a large open field. Few realize this was once the parachute drop zone (DZ) of an elite U.S. Army Reserve (USAR) unit. Nor would they know the DZ is named in honor of a bona fide Vietnam War hero and fighter for veteran's rights. Their hike may take them past a small plaque beside the trail. If curiosity impels them to approach and read the plaque, they will learn a little of the story of Capt. Dean K. Phillips.

North Tract abuts and until 1991 formed the training area of Fort George G. Meade. Since its activation in 1917, Fort Meade has experienced several mission changes. It served as a training site for drafted and mobilized U.S. Army combat and support forces in both World Wars. The interwar Army tank corps was located there, and the fort processed USAR and Army National Guard (ARNG) units from several states for the presidential call-up in support of Operation Desert Shield (1990). Fort Meade has also supported major Army administrative operations, notably the headquarters of the Second U.S. Army and later First U.S. Army. Since the end of the Cold War, the fort's mission has again changed to focus on supporting information, intelligence, and cyber operations. Currently the major tenant organizations are the National Security Agency, Defense Media Activity, Defense Information Systems Agency, Defense Courier Service, and the U.S. Cyber Command.[1]

Among the units stationed at Fort Meade was the USAR's 11th Special Forces Group (Airborne) (SFGA). Elements of the group first arrived in 1973, when the group Headquarters and Headquarters Company (HHC), and the Signal Company of the Support Battalion relocated without personnel or equipment from Tappan, New York. In 1974, the Support Battalion's HHC and Service Company moved to Fort Meade from the Southern Maryland Memorial USAR Center in Upper Marlboro. Shortly thereafter the Support Battalion HHC was inactivated, leaving the Service and Signal Companies to report directly to the group commander. During the early 1980s, the 426th Chemical Detachment (NBC) (Reconnaissance), and 808th Chemical Detachment (NBC) (Staff) were activated and assigned to group headquarters.[2]

Soldiers on jump status are required to maintain parachuting proficiency by making quarterly jumps. To do so, they need access to a surveyed DZ. Parachutists from the 11th SFGA and other airborne units stationed at Fort Meade initially used the old Beltsville airport and the fields of the U.S. Naval Academy Dairy Farm in adjacent Gambrills. But Beltsville closed and became part of the USDA Beltsville Agricultural Research Center. And the Naval Academy was under increasing pressure to relinquish the Dairy Farm property, which was ideally situated for development as housing, an equestrian park, a general use golf course/public park, or other application. The threatened denial of its one remaining DZ spurred a search for suitable areas within the Fort Meade reservation.

FIG 1. Sgt. Dean K. Phillips, date unknown but probably early 1970s. Courtesy of Frank Phillips.

In 1980, Maj. Robert Jones, 97th U.S. Army Reserve Command senior adviser to the 11th SFGA, and Maj. Ron Hrynyshen, a full-time technician in the Support Battalion, were tasked to locate a new DZ site. They conducted a phys-

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ical search for the required space and "spent considerable time driving/walking through the post looking for any area that would meet basic DZ requirements." Applying standard pathfinder survey methods, they found but few options since the post was small, with a limited number of suitable grounds outside of designated impact areas. Other possible DZ sites were precluded by the presence of major power lines. The site they eventually recommended was a natural clearing in Training Area W, just southwest of Tipton Army Air Field. This proximity was an added attraction because it allowed short turn-around times, permitting maximum use of helicopters in supporting jump missions. The team submitted their recommendation to the group, which in turn obtained necessary approvals from the post commander. The first jump into the newly approved DZ was made on 28 June 1980 by members of the Centurion Sky Diving Team, most of the jumpers being from the 11th SFGA.[3] Army helicopters served as jump aircraft because the DZ was too short for static line jumping from faster-flying Air Force troop carriers. Such aircraft were also more likely to be a problem due to proximity of Baltimore-Washington International Airport airspace.[4]

In January 1981, Capt. Dean K. Phillips joined the 11th SFGA at Fort Meade. Phillips had a remarkable background. He was born in Youngstown, Ohio, on 7 June 1943. After graduating from Ohio University, he enlisted in the Army despite having received a student deferment to attend law school. He also refused a commission "out of a desire to serve in the ranks." Phillips completed the airborne, air assault, and Ranger courses, then deployed to Vietnam with 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division in November 1967. He was a member of the long-range reconnaissance platoon used by the brigade commander to locate enemy units and regularly volunteered for dangerous assignments. As a result he found himself in several intense, bloody fights. In one combat action he "was the sole survivor, having been

FIG 2. From left: Don Pfeiffer, Brian Adams, and Dean Phillips of the Colorado chapter of Vietnam Veterans Against the War at a press conference. Courtesy of Denise Phillips Sarigianopoulos.

FIG 3. A composite ODA, with men from 11th SFGA ODAs–223 and –225, on the last day of its July 1982 qualification FTX; photo taken in Center Sandwich, NH, while waiting to be trucked back to Fort Devens, MA. Standing from left: S. Sgt. Steve Karpiak, demolitions; S. Sgt. Bob Rose, weapons; Sfc. George Reed (intelligence); S. Sgt. Mark Mantini, weapons; S. Sgt. Manuel Torres, medic; Sfc. Mark Stoner, medic; Capt. Mike Langlin, 10th SFGA, evaluator; Captain Phillips, team leader; and 2d Lt. Milan Kobulnicky, XO. Kneeling from left: Sfc. Carl Brugman, communications; Sgt. Roger Baardson, demolitions; M. Sgt. Jim Kerr, operations sergeant; and Sgt. Bernard Blakely, weapons. Courtesy of Steve Karpiak and Bob Rose.

shot and left for dead by the North Vietnamese." His brigade commander was so impressed with Phillips' gallantry and performance in combat that he later stated, "If I had the authority, he would have received a battlefield commission." Phillips never achieved that particular distinction, but his service during November 1967–November 1968 was recognized by award of two Silver Star Medals, two Bronze Star Medals, a Purple Heart, an Air Medal, and an Army Commendation Medal.[5]

After leaving the Army, Phillips earned a master's degree at Ohio University followed by a law degree at the University of Denver. His Vietnam experiences convinced him "the war was being fought by men at the bottom of the nation's socio-economic ladder, and he was determined that they should not be denied full veterans benefits." He applied his legal talents and personal passion in tireless advocacy of veteran's rights. In Colorado, he helped form the United Veterans Committee. He was appointed to the state Board of Veterans Affairs in 1974 and became vice chairman. Among his achievements were obtaining partial veteran tuition waiver at state schools and developing a legislative package providing over $9 million for veteran education in the state. He drafted the Colorado Veterans Reemployment Rights Act of 1973 and the Paraplegic and Blind Veterans Tax Credit Act of 1976. He served on the Colorado Jobs for Veterans Task Force and in 1975 became chairman of the board of the National Association of Concerned Veterans.

Phillips' activities quickly garnered national recognition. In 1976 the U.S. Jaycees named him "Outstanding Young Man of America." The next year he was invited by the head of the Veterans Administration (VA) to serve in the office of general counsel in Washington, D.C. He was named special assistant to the administrator in 1981. His work with the VA involved liaison with numerous veterans organizations and working on policy issues such as veterans benefits, veterans preference, and upgrading discharges. Phillips' office door famously carried a sign reading "Fasten Seat Belts" to forewarn visitors of his passionate advocacy. He provided frequent congressional testimony and worked to establish the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. He was active in Vietnam Veterans Against the War, Disabled American Veterans, the American Legion, and Veterans of Foreign Wars. In 1984 he left VA to serve as National Judge Advocate on the staff of the Military Order of the Purple Heart. His work on behalf of

FIG 4. Capt. Dean K. Phillips as commanding officer, Signal Company, 11th Special Forces Group (Airborne). Note the Combat Infantryman Badge and ribbons denoting receipt of the Silver Star Medal, the Bronze Star Medal, the Purple Heart, and other awards;11th group beret flash and parachutist badge; background trimming, and Vietnamese Army parachutist badge just visible above right breast pocket. Courtesy of Denise Phillips Sarigianopoulos.

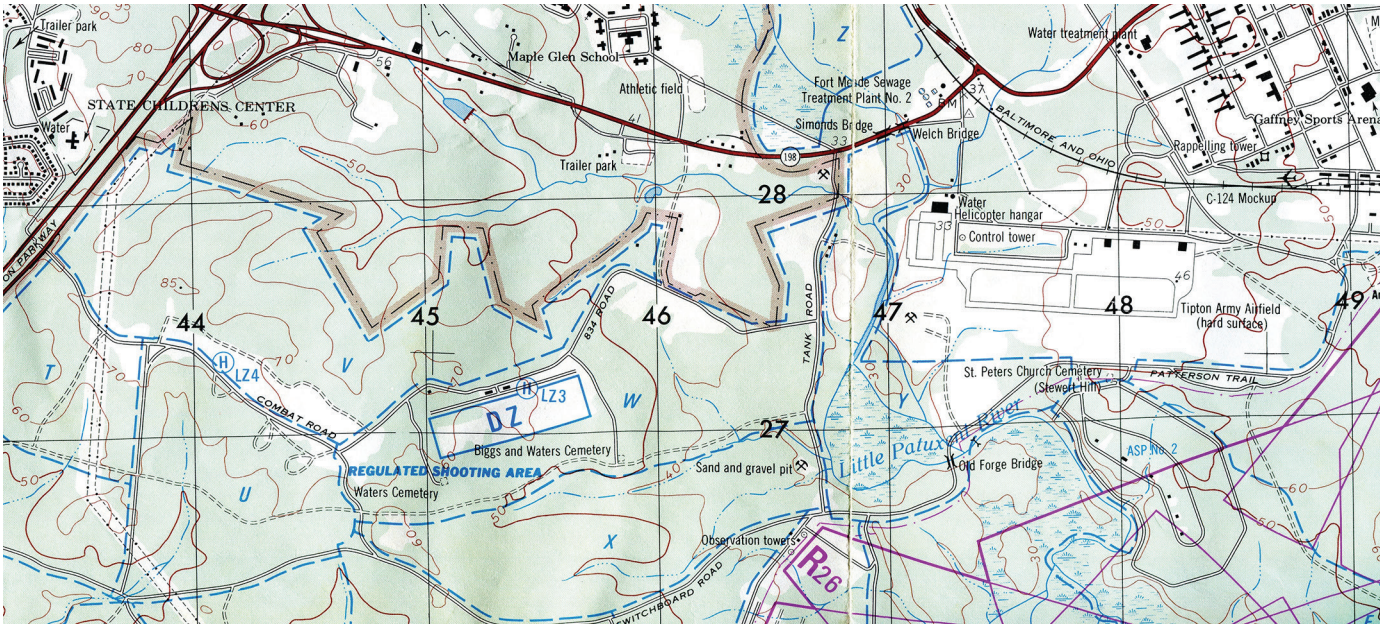

FIG 5. The Fort George G. Meade DZ, later named in honor of Captain Phillips, appears in this map extract. This same area is now contained within the North Tract's 1.8 mile Whip-poor-will Way trail. Extracted from Defense Mapping Agency topographic map, Fort George G. Meade (1976), Sheet Fort Meade, Series V833S, Edition 1–DMA, Stock No. V833SFTMEADE. Courtesy of Wendy R. Hatcher.

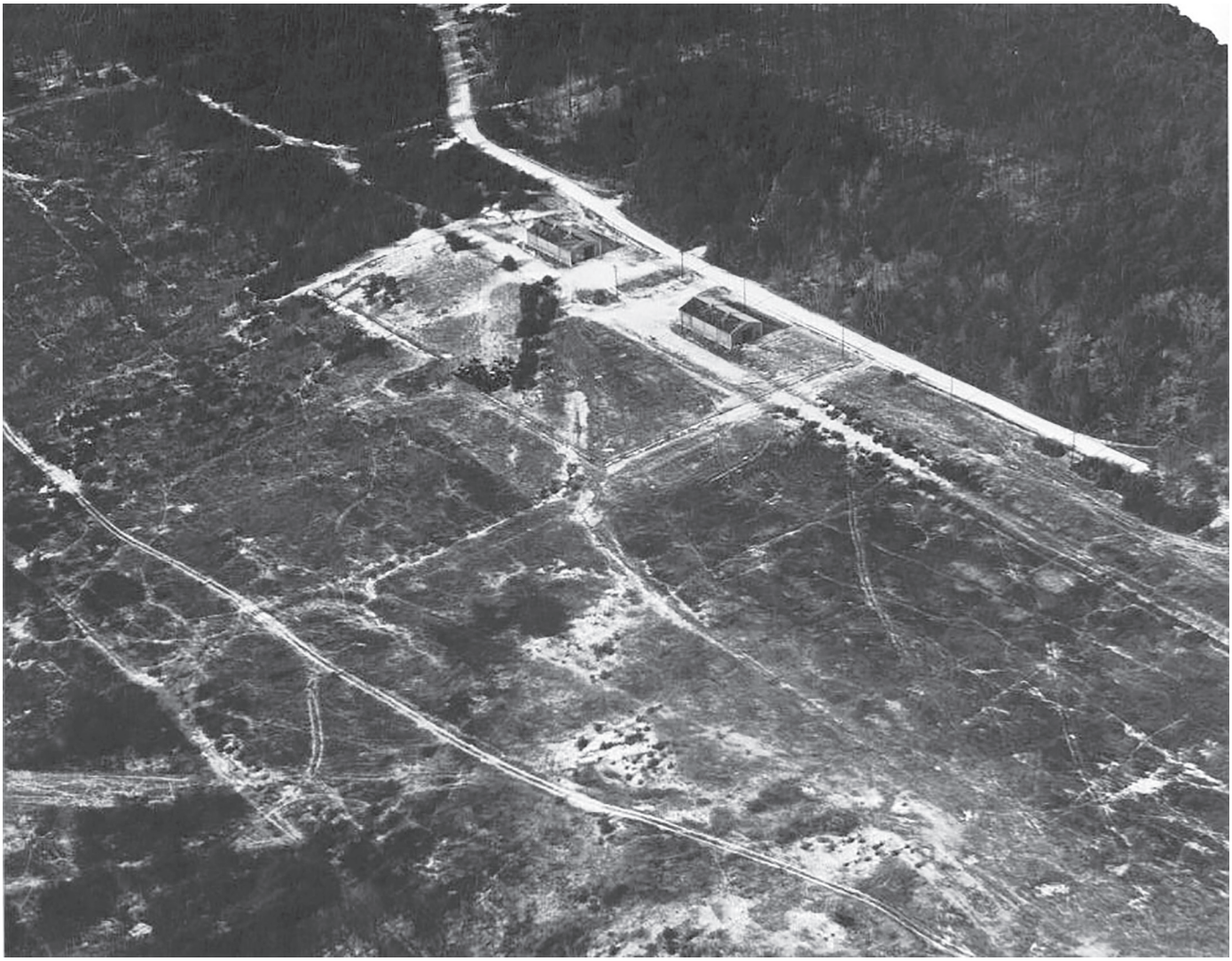

FIG 6. An early view of the DZ named for Captain Phillips looking southwest. The buildings were "basic tin storage facilities for range/road maintenance equipment." Courtesy of Walter "Doc" Roberts.

veterans was later eulogized in the *Congressional Record* by Senators Orrin Hatch and John Glenn, and Representative Patricia Schroeder.[6]

Phillips was strongly opposed to what he believed were inequities in the selective service laws, notably student deferment, and believed the country's involvement in Vietnam a mistake because it had not been essential to national security. But he was a patriot who continued to believe in the importance of military service. He was appalled by the failed attempt to rescue American hostages held by Iranian revolutionaries (the so-called Desert One). In 1980 he had applied for and received a commission as captain of Infantry in the USAR and the next year joined the 11th SFGA.[7]

From about August 1981 until June 1982, Captain Phillips attended reserve drills with the 11th's Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA)–223, Company B, 2d Battalion, based in Youngstown, Ohio. In July 1982, ODA–223 deployed to Fort Devens, Massachusetts, to participate in "Operation Golden Eagle." During this field training exercise an evaluator from the 10th SFGA determined whether team members had successfully accomplished assigned tasks and were fully qualified to participate on an ODA.[8]

On 1 September 1982, Phillips was appointed commanding officer of the 11th Signal Company. He "assumed command of a unit suffering from poor discipline, low morale and a lack of motivation. Through his dynamic leadership, personal example, job knowledge and desire to excel … [he] turned the unit around. After the unit passed a demanding inspection, he introduced a series of new programs and continued improving the unit's morale and *esprit-de-corps*." Col. James E. Willoughby, the 11th's commanding officer during 1980–1983, amplified: The company "had passed only one inspection of any kind since its activation in 1974. Some of the key NCOs had even resigned en masse as a protest of conditions in the unit." Phillips' leadership created an "almost unbelievable improvement in the moral and combat

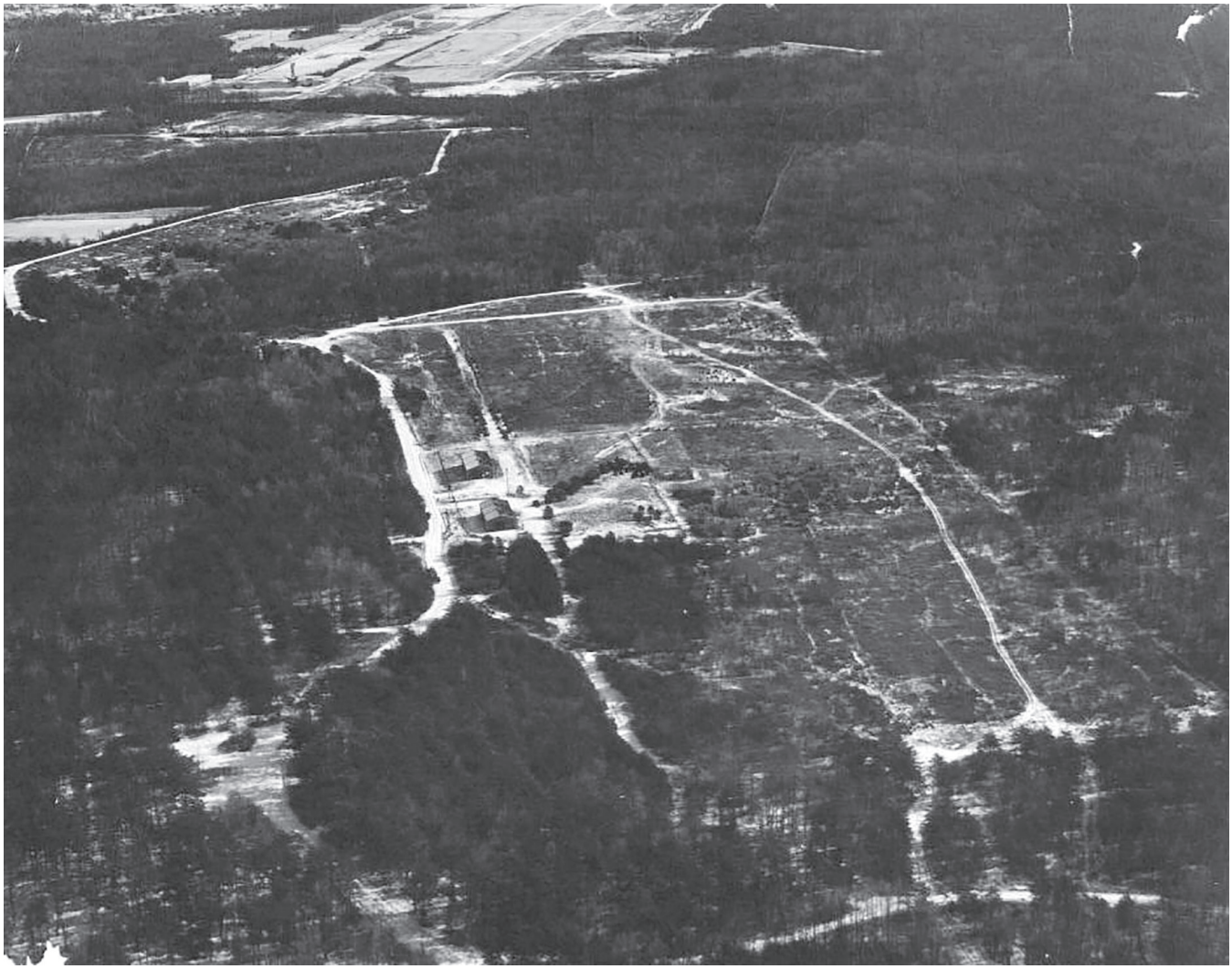

FIG 7. Another early view of the DZ looking to the northeast. Note runway of Tipton Army Air Field visible in background. Courtesy Walter "Doc" Roberts.

effectiveness of the organization … . Dean's troops truly worshiped him and some of the former members who had resigned in protest even sought to rejoin the unit." For his outstanding leadership through the spring of 1985, Phillips was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal.[9]

Despite a five-year struggle against "prolonged, terminal cancer" and recurrent hospitalization, Phillips had remained "active and unwavering … as a company commander through the week of his death." Aged only forty-two, Captain Phillips died at his home in Arlington, Virginia, on 22 August 1985. He was interred with full honors in Arlington National Cemetery on 26 August.[10]

On 6 January 1986, Col. Wilson C. Barnes, the group commander, initiated a request to the post commander to designate the previously unnamed DZ in memory of Captain Phillips. The colonel emphasized that Phillips' "name is a byword" in the 11th's Fort Meade units "for excellence in airborne operations, and he actively directed the conduct of an airborne operation on the Ft. Meade DZ on 17 August 85 (five days before his death)." As the 11th "is now engaged in a major effort to raise the standards of safety and efficiency of its airborne operations … it would be especially appropriate and useful to memorialize his name at the drop zone."[11]

Although there were other USAR airborne units stationed at Fort Meade, 11th SFGA was the main user of the DZ. As noted in *The Beret*, the 11th's quarterly newspaper, naming the DZ in honor of the captain "was highly appropriate. Totally committed to the unit, he was known for his aggressive dedication to excellence in all endeavors, and particularly in the conduct of strict, meticulous, and safe airborne operations." Moreover, "As stated to those close to him, he actually wished to die on the drop zone." The request satisfied conditions laid down in Army memorialization regulations and following concurrence by First U.S. Army headquarters on 13 March 1986, the request was approved. The DZ was officially named on 25 September 1986 and the group held a ceremony to install a bronze commemorative plaque at the northwest corner of the DZ.[12]

FIG 8. An 11th SFGA jumper ensnared in a tree on the DZ perimeter; something very like this—but more painful—happened to Captain Phillips there. Scanned from "Good to the Last Jump," Sound Off!, *January 1988.*

FIG 9. U.S. Naval Academy midshipmen in a stick approaching their assigned jump helicopter. Photo by and courtesy of Douglas C. Seeley, Jr.

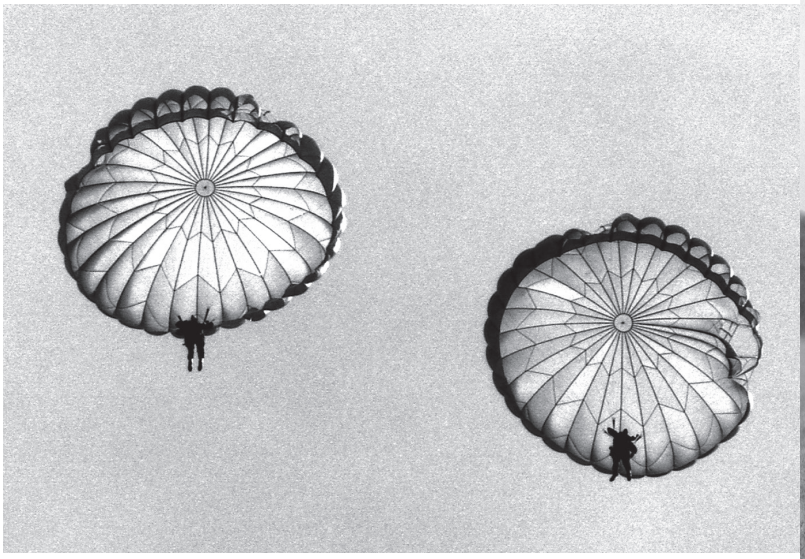

FIG 10. In the air over Phillips DZ. Photo by and courtesy of Douglas C. Seeley, Jr.

FIG 11. 11th SFGA inactivation ceremony, 14 September 1994; color party approaches the reviewing stand on Fort Meade's McGlachlin Field. Photo by and courtesy of Douglas C. Seeley, Jr.

FIG 12. Troopers from USAR 5th Infantry Platoon (Pathfinder) (Airborne) and 426th Chemical Detachment (NBC) (Reconnaissance) waiting their turn to board helicopters at Phillips DZ, circa 1982. Standing at far left is Walter "Doc" Roberts and at far right "Iron Mike" Parris. Tim Moriarty is middle row front, hands on helmet. Photo taken by and courtesy of Douglas C. Seeley, Jr.

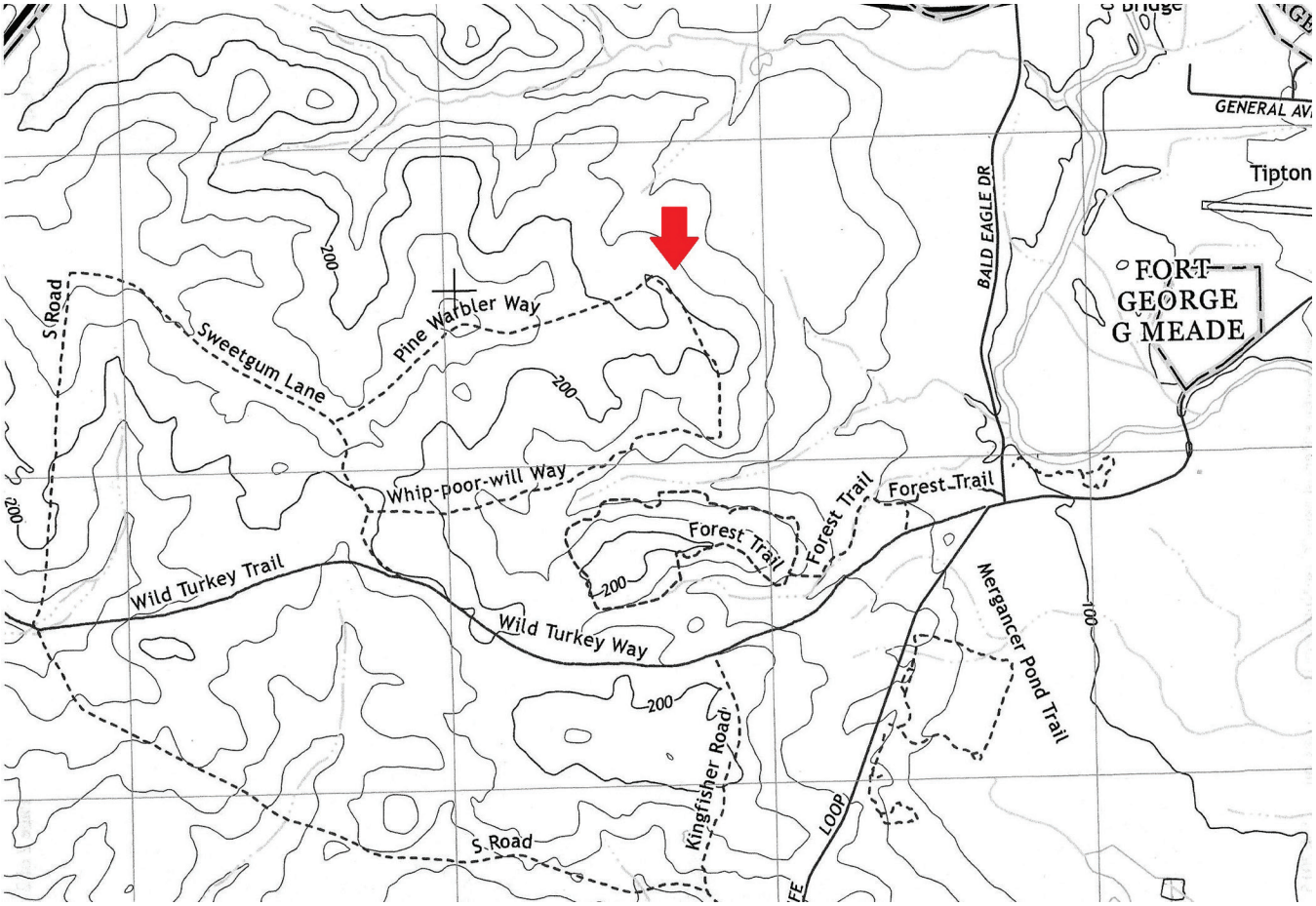

FIG 13. The former DZ is now encompassed by Whip-poor-Will Way trail. The commemorative plaque is at the arrowed site, GPS coordinates 39.08323048988344, –76.784 2894 7925568. Department of the Interior, U.S. Geological Survey, Laurel Quadrangle, Maryland, 7.5–Minute Series, Laurel, MD, 2014.

FIG 14. The original deteriorated commemorative plaque. Photo by Len Ignatowski. Courtesy of the Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 227.

As the old saying goes "the only constant is change." Such has certainly been true for the Army Special Forces program. The first unit, 10th SFGA, was activated in June 1952 and over the next few years ten more groups stood up in all Army components. The Reserve Components (RC) participated from as early as fiscal year 1960, when 80 operational detachments had been authorized in the ARNG and 35 in the USAR. But within a decade after the end of the Vietnam War, the program had been trimmed to three Regular and four RC Groups—two each in the ARNG and USAR. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, further defense downsizing targeted two RC Groups for inactivation. As often happens, the more politically powerful ARNG won the struggle for retention in the Offsite Agreement discussions of 1993. The USAR groups were accordingly inactivated effective 14 September 1994, thereby ending the 11th's tenure at Fort Meade.[13]

Due to the refocusing of Fort Meade's principal missions, as noted earlier, its maneuver areas were no longer required. Following an extensive demilitarization operation—locating

FIG 16. The commemorative plaque in August 2015. Photo by Dana M. Lamberti.

FIG 15. Joe Celesnik, left, and Len Ignatowski of Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 227, kneeling next to the refurbished plaque. Photo by Diane Ignatowski. Courtesy of the Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 227.

and disposing of unexploded ordnance and other military items—the Department of Defense transferred ownership of 8,100 acres to the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1991. Interior consolidated the acreage into its adjacent Patuxent Research Refuge (established in 1936) and designated it North Tract. The property was then opened to the public for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, hiking, interpretive programs, and other recreational activities.[14]

Visitors to the North Tract saw the 11th SFGA commemorative plaque and began inquiring at the Visitor Center about Captain Phillips' identity. A refuge volunteer made an internet search and came across the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) Dean K. Phillips Memorial Chapter 227, located in Arlington, Virginia. Following an e-mail inquiry, chapter members Len Ignatowski and Joe Celesnik inspected the DZ and noted the deteriorated condition of the original plaque. The chapter approved funding the plaque's renovation—an approach deemed more practical than completely replacing the monument under environmental and refuge regulations. A project was initiated to replace the existing damaged and corroding plaque with a larger bronze plaque, which also included more personal information about Captain Phillips. Alex Bigler, retired Marine Corps officer and owner of the National Trust Foundry, took a personal interest in the plaque's inscription and casting. Ignatowski and Celesnik, accompanied by their wives Diane Ignatowski and Sharon Celesnik and Esther Woodworth, a refuge volunteer, installed the new plaque on 26 August 2006.[15]

If you have occasion to visit North Tract, be sure to stop by Captain Phillips' plaque to pay your respects to a fine American soldier and champion of fellow veteran's rights.

Acknowledgements: The author acknowledges the invalu-

able assistance provided by CWO4 (Ret.) Peter J. McDermott, former Military Personnel Technician and Supervisory Staff Administrator, 11th SFGA; 11th SFGA veterans Bill Hanrahan, Steve Karpiak, Ming Hugh Chow, Walter "Doc" Roberts, Bob Jones, Douglas C. Seeley, Jr., and Tim Wehr; Denise Phillips Sarigianopoulos; Frank Phillips; Robert S. Johnson, Director, Fort George G. Meade Museum; Veronica Castro, Dijon Rolle, and Steve Ellmore of the Fort Meade Public Affairs Office; Len Ignatowski, Vice President, Vietnam Veterans of America Chapter 227; and Dana M. Lamberti and Wendy R. Hatcher.

Notes

1. Fort George G. Meade (FGGM) Web pages at http://www.ftmeade.army.mil/pages/about/ about.html, and http://www.ftmeade.army.mil/Museum/history/history.html, both accessed 17 July 2015.
2. CWO4 (Ret.) Peter J. McDermott to author, 29 June and 24 July 2015.
3. Robert Jones to author, 23 July and 24 August 2015.
4. Jones to author, 23 July 2015; McDermott to author, 5 July 2015. Air Force troop carriers from Andrews Air Force Base were sometimes used for jumps at the larger Dairy Farm DZ. Use of the Dairy Farm was negotiated by the Group S–3 and was mutually beneficial. U.S. Naval Academy midshipmen who had completed the airborne course at Fort Benning, Georgia, as part of their summer training program needed to maintain jump proficiency and the Army could provide the parachutes and jump aircraft (helicopters). McDermott to author, 6 July 2015. The Dairy Farm was the site of the HHC's only fatal jump casualty, Pvt. Martin S. Eskew, on 2 December 1989. McDermott to author, 24 July 2015; Carlos Sanchez, "Parachutist Dies in Routine Jump Near Ft. Meade; Army Reserve Soldier Lands in Liquefied Manure Pond Just Outside Jump Zone," *Washington Post,* 3 December 1989 (http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/ 1P2-1226478.html).
5. Documents in Memorialization File for the Phillips Drop Zone, FGGM Museum (hereafter FGGM Museum file): Action Memorandum, AFZI–PTS–MU, 6 January 1986, subject: Naming the Ft. Meade Drop Zone as "Phillips DZ" (hereafter AM); Disposition Form, AFZU–PTS–MU, 6 January 1986, to Post Commander, subject: Decision Paper—Naming the Fort Meade Drop Zone "Phillips DZ" (hereafter DF); statement of Col. (Ret) Lawrence L. Mowery, former commander 3d Brigade, 101st Airborne Division, 8 August 1980; Bart Barnes, "Dean K. Phillips, Advocate of Veteran's Rights, Dies," *Washington Post,* 24 August 1985: B4; and Lewis B. Puller, "The Bonding of War," *Washington Post,* 31 August 1985: page unk. See also "Atty. Dean Phillips; was hero of Vietnam War, official of VA," *Youngstown* (Ohio) *Vindicator,* 23 August 1985: 24, copy provided by Denise Phillips Sarigianopoulos; Capt. Gary L. Brohawn, "Captain Dean K. Phillips Remembered," *The Beret* (Summer 1985): 2–4, copy provided by Len Ignatowski; and Col. James E. Willoughby, "Letters," *Army Reserve Magazine* (Winter 1985): 5, copy provided by Steve Karpiak.
6. AM; Barnes, "Phillips"; "Dean Phillips," *Colorado Statesman* (6 September 1985): page unk, in FGGM Museum file; "Atty. Dean Phillips."
7. Barnes, "Advocate"; "Atty. Dean Phillips;" Brohawn.
8. Steve Karpiak to author, 17 July 2015.
9. FGGM Museum, "Army Values, Integrity. Do what's right, legally and morally—Captain Dean K. Phillips," http://www.ftmeade.army.mil/museum/values/ArmyValues_5.html; Meritorious Service Medal certificate dated 19 August 1985; Willoughby. It is noteworthy that the *Army Reserve Magazine* editors were so taken by Willoughby's description of Captain Phillips' character, achievements, and leadership qualities, they made an exception to their "long-standing policy… never to run obituaries, and to run—only rarely—commentaries and personal reflections about service in the Army Reserve." When the letter arrived, they changed the editorial policy: "Just like that. Just this once."
10. Barnes, "Advocate," "Atty. Dean Phillips;" Brohawn; Willoughby.

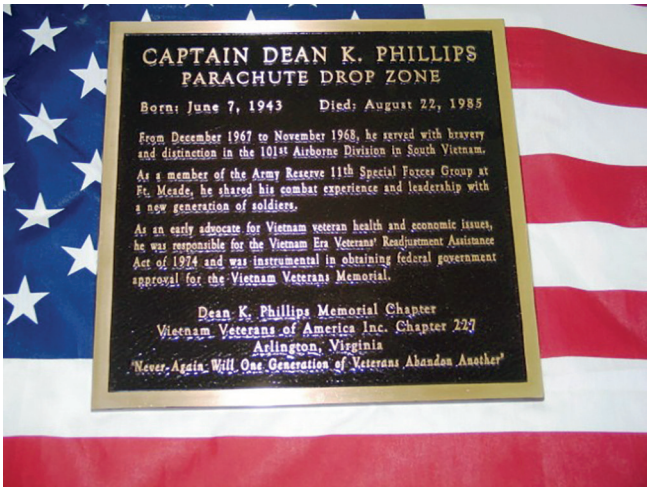

FIG 17. A fitting tribute. Photo by Len Ignatowski. Courtesy of the Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 227.

11. AM.
12. AM; DF; Memorandum, AFZI–PTS, 25 February 1986, to Headquarters First United States Army, subject: Designation of the Ft. Meade Drop Zones as "Phillips DZ"; 1st End, AFKA–PR (AFZI–PTS/25 Feb 96), 13 March 1986, Headquarters First United States Army to Commander, Fort George G. Meade, subject: Designation of the Ft. Meade Drop Zone as "Phillips DZ," in FGGM Museum file; Brohawn; DZ naming date is from FGGM Museum, "Army Values." The only other parachute unit stationed at Fort Meade was the 5th Infantry Platoon (Pathfinder) (Airborne). It was assigned to the 97th ARCOM and attached to 11th SFGA for administration and logistics. The platoon conducted its annual training with other USAR units. McDermott to author, 29 June 2015; Bill Hanrahan to author, 5 July 2015. A former medic relates a tale of treating Capt. Phillips after he had "impaled himself on a tree limb" while jumping the DZ. "We used the UH–1H [helicopter] to transport him over to the [post] hospital for his injuries. He was a character. The limb had been removed and he had a hole through his thigh and kept trying to stick his finger through the hole … while we were in flight to the hospital." Walter "Doc" Roberts to author, 20 July 2015. An article dealing with the final pre-retirement jump onto the Phillips DZ by the 11th's deputy commander appeared in the FGGM post newspaper in January 1988. See Jonathan Montag, "Good to the Last Jump: Special Forces Salute Their Commander," *Sound Off!,* 21 January 1988: 10–12.
13. W. D. McGlasson, "Have Guts, Will Travel," *National Guardsman* 14 (April 1960): 2–3, 31; John K. Mahon and Romana Danysh, *Infantry, Part I: Regular Army,* Army Lineage Series, rev. ed. (Washington, DC: GPO, 1972): 892-918; Geoffrey T. Barker, *A Concise History of U.S. Army Special Operations Forces, with Lineage and Insignia,* Vol. 1, 2d ed. (Tampa, FL: Anglo-American Pub. Co., 1993), 204; Col. Raphael Semmes Duckworth, "The 1993 Offsite Agreement: Undermining Goldwater-Nichols and Special Forces Capabilities," Strategy Research Project, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Barracks, PA, 30 March 2007: 4–6; McDermott to author, 5 August 2015. An article in the Special Forces Association publication states: "By 1974 and the end of the Vietnam Conflict, Special Forces had shrunk by more than half, from its greatest end strength of 12,500 men in 1968 to 5,500." 1st Battalion, 1st Special Warfare Training Group (Airborne), "The History of ROBIN SAGE and Unconventional Warfare Training," *The Drop* (Summer 2012): 42.
14. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Patuxent Research Refuge brochure (June 2010), http://www.fws.gov/uploadedFiles/Region_5/NWRS/South_Zone/Patuxent_Research_Refuge/PatuxentBrochure.pdf, accessed 7 June 2015.
15. Vietnam Veterans of America, Dean K. Phillips Memorial Chapter 227 Web site (http://www.vva227.org/dean.html), accessed 7 June 2015. The chapter received its charter in September 1985.