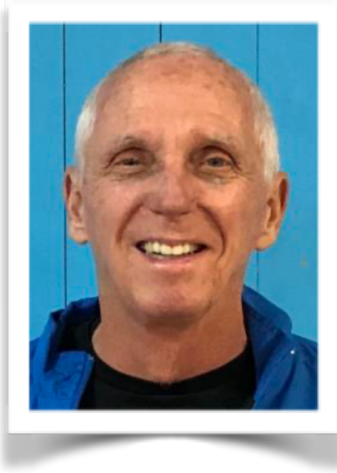


This monthly article highlights one of our branch members. We hope that you enjoy knowing a little more about your fellow members and the interesting life they have had. If you have someone you would like to nominate or if you would like to help author an article, please email the editor, Ron Nakamoto, at [ron.nakamoto\(at\)yahoo.com](mailto:ron.nakamoto@yahoo.com).

PHIL VANDERWERF



“I enjoy playing golf with my fellow seniors and try to play as many times as possible! Often, as we banter during our round, I’ve been asked, ‘So what did you do for a living?’ I respond with; ‘Along with the two airplanes I owned, I did drugs!’ It is always fun to see their reactions. Once I clarify that my airplanes were a hobby and that the drugs were linked to my career in the pharmaceutical industry, I am again accepted as just another law-abiding Sir!

“Born in New Jersey to a Dutch immigrant father and a pastor’s daughter, I’ve had the unique experience of growing up in a small conservative town called Prospect Park. My mother was a teacher, until five kids came along. My father worked for Allied Chemical as a draftsman. The town was populated with Dutch Reformed Churches, bakeries and Christian schools on every street. I enjoyed a secure, easy childhood where all questions of right and wrong, good and bad were answered with ‘... work hard, speak English, and go to church twice on Sunday’. I attended the local, small Eastern Christian High School, loved music and played the saxophone as part of the school band. What got me in trouble was starting a rock band and then having the nerve to play, ‘When the Saints Come Marching In’ right after Chapel. The Calvinist ministers and devoted teachers frowned on this music but my band and I were a hit with the girls. I did letter in both tennis and track.

“My college options were limited since my father had died of cancer while I was a Junior in high school. My father worked in a building next to the chemical smokestacks that spewed toxic fumes every day. No one knew to avoid breathing the polluted air back then. He along with a number of his fellow employees contracted leukemia and died.

“Of course, without my father and a mother with five children, money for college was an issue, but I was determined enough, searched and found Calvin College, a small college in Michigan which was rated good academically with an affordable tuition. I worked summers delivering bakery products to tourist resorts in the Catskill mountains and was able to save the money I needed. I still remember the attic in an old boarding house that I shared with six other guys and one bathroom. Talk about having to time your visits!

“My dual majors of History and Economics didn’t specifically prepare me for any career, but I became fascinated with flying in my junior year when I met a fellow student whose father had a small plane. From that point on my dream was to be a commercial airline pilot. So, upon graduating, I took any job I could find to fund my private pilot training to include delivering Gerber Baby food to grocery stores. After about a year of ground school and flight training, I obtained my private pilot license. Now I was ready to go to United Airlines to enroll in their commercial pilot program. Every moment was exciting as I got closer to realize my dream job until I took the comprehensive physical and found out that I was slightly red/green color blind, an absolute no-no for pilots. I was devastated and to add insult to injury did not have a Plan B.

“As life would have it, a friend I knew told me about a job opening in the Pharmaceutical business. I applied with a New York company called Lederle Labs, interviewed and got the job. The position was for a “Detail-person” who was - and still is the person you see in the doctor’s office with a bag of literature and samples trying to convince the doctor to prescribe his drug versus the competitors. This was in the early 70’s and they were paying a whopping \$7,000 dollars a year, with a company car and a full expense account! As a single guy, I felt like the richest person on the planet. In addition, while I worked, the company paid for my night schooling. I earned my MBA in Economics with a specialty in the pharmaceutical business from Fairleigh Dickenson University. The curriculum for this MBA was somewhat unique as many of the drug firms were in New Jersey and, for example, the CFO for Pfizer taught the finance course.



1968 – The beginning of a great Journey

“Around this time, my sister happened to set me up with blind date. I knocked on the door and this gorgeous girl in a bra and panties answered the door. I said, ‘Grace?’ ‘No,’ she said, ‘that’s my little sister!’ Well Grace turned out to be just as gorgeous, fun and smart. She was just going off to college and was a bit young (18). Our first date was memorable as I picked her up at her home, which her parents also used as a home for unwed mothers. She went off to college and we fell in love, albeit long distance and wed the next year when she was an older 19. We have been happily married for some 51 years now with two children, Nancy and Brian. After the kids grew up, Grace got her degree and has been teaching for the last twenty years.

“Our daughter Nancy is now 49 living in San Jose with three wonderful sons. Our son Brian started life on the wild side, embracing the Grateful Dead, taking drugs, and running off with a girl named ‘Sunflower’. We made the tough decision to cut him off and hope

he would hit bottom and call home to come back. He finally did and I flew to Pittsburg, to a broken-down house with no heat. I fixed his old jeep and we drove cross country to San Diego. So started his detox program with strict rules involving a regimen of counseling, exercise, diet and no parties. It worked, principally because he wanted it to. One day, he came along with me to an Instrument Flying class taught by an Air Force Flight Controller. He was fascinated by what they did and how they executed their jobs so much so that he immediately decided to join the Air Force. His career, over the last twenty years, has gone from becoming a certified Air Traffic Controller ('OK but too boring') to a Combat Air Traffic Controller for the Joint Special Forces Command. He has recently 're-upped' for five more years and is senior enough (Master Sergeant) to supervise the missions rather than 'jump in' the dangerous stuff. I can't say enough about the wonderful Special Forces Community. (Special Forces is comprised of Navy Seals, Army Green Berets, elite from the other armed forces and is used for non-conventional missions around the world.) These men and women are the most unassuming, well trained, lethal, good family people I have ever met.

"My career progressed through the "pharmaceutical ranks" to Marketing Director of Cardiovascular Products at Merck Pharmaceuticals. Later, a big break came with an offer to be a Senior Director at Abbott Labs in Chicago. I eventually moved on to become Vice President, Marketing for Schering Plough Pharmaceuticals back in New Jersey. I made a big decision there to accept an overseas position running the operations for the Schering Plough subsidiary in Milan Italy. I was fortunate enough to lead the Italian subsidiary to three of its highest sales years ever and one day got a call from a US headhunter looking for a COO in a small (I mean 4 person small) start-up in Redwood City called SciClone Pharmaceuticals. SciClone owned the marketing rights to a drug to treat hepatitis B and C in Asia, an area where hepatitis is still at epidemic levels. I took the job and was able to help grow the business and hire key medical and marketing staff to the point where we were able to take the company public. My experience with similar drugs was a critical factor towards convincing investment firms to fund the offering through a multi-country 'road show' towards a successful IPO. After four long years of building up the company, I decided to retire at the ripe old age of fifty. (I had promised myself that if I lived to 50 (my dad died at 49) I would live every year after that as an outright gift and live it to the fullest). So, for the next twelve years Grace and I travelled worldwide, buying and flying airplanes, sailing and living in various homes around the country. We eventually settled down as 'gentlemen farmers' on an Avocado ranch we purchased in the hills of San Diego. It was a challenge and even fun to try to break even with the many challenges that face a small farmer. Eventually we decided to sell the farm rather than continue to compete against the cheaper avocados from South America and the drought and high wind conditions that had become the norm.

"We were now unencumbered again and decided to live with our grandchildren in San Jose. The days are now filled with grandparent duties helping babysit and cooking for the tribe. I do a lot of the cooking because both my daughter and Grace work, teaching at the Bowman school in Palo Alto, a school my daughter helped start some twenty years ago!

“I really look forward to our golf tournaments every Monday and Thursday as well as bowling on Tuesdays. The friendships and camaraderie that SIR provides have made my life very enjoyable. Thank you, fellow Sirs!”

(Editor's note: Phil loves to compete, is quite athletic, and is one of the branch's best golfers and bowlers. He seems to possess another gear when there is some skin in the game. He used to be consistently awful chipping around the green but adapted to using the "Texas wedge" (golf slang term for using your putter off the green) to get his ball close to the hole. This adaptation was one of the key contributors to his winning the Four Ball Match Play Championship for 2019 along with his buddy Joe Cioni.)