

# Captain Gardner Stevens, 1926 - 2002

By Brett Mattei, Department of State, U.S.A.

*“I miss Gardner Stevens and the color and wisdom he brought into my life. But, as I reflect on the man and his legacy, I realize that many of my most cherished memories and important decisions, and those of many others, were colored by his full and happy life.”*

To this day, almost 30 years after I met him, I have a vivid first memory of Gardner Stevens. He was bigger than life in his red and blue uniform, laying down the law to me and a bunch of squirrely 10 and 11-year-old junior lifeguards. “You know boys and girls.. a job worth doing is a job worth doing well.. and you are just plain wrong if you think junior guards is going to be a walk in the park.” I was amazed, excited and even scared as I looked up at that stern figure ordering us to tread the straight and narrow on his beach in that summer of 1974. But somehow I knew, even then, that underneath Gardner’s trademark gruff exterior, beat a big messy heart of gold.

As the years passed and I grew up into a teenager, and then into a young man, I often turned to Gardner for his unique brand of homespun wisdom. Typically, on a winter day after school, I would walk into the tower calling out “Gar..” and before I had a chance to finish he’d flick his cigarette butt out the window into the dory and say, “Brett, let’s go for a drive.” The conversations on those long patrols were often quite spare. I would hint at a problem with school or an argument I might have had with an authority figure, or some such thing. Gardner would usually respond with a funny but apropos story or otherwise find a way to reveal that the folks with whom I was in conflict were more often than not looking out for my best interests. He always managed to do it in a way that demonstrated respect, concern, and unconditional admiration. That was his gift.

Reflecting back, I realize that I was but one of many young men and women who had the privilege of working for Gardner as a Del Mar Lifeguard, and of being brought somewhat into the larger Stevens clan. It must have been an amazing burden at times for the Stevenses, particularly Peggy, who was running a household and her own business while “Uncle Gardner” ministered to his many young charges. In addition to his own biological family, Gardner’s legacy includes literally dozens of men and women who grew into adulthood with a keen sense of personal and civic responsibility. There are today many doctors, lifeguards, firefighters, accountants, lawyers, teachers and others working at their professions, and active in their communities, whose sense of service was honed under the guidance of Gardner and his successors at the Del Mar Lifeguard Department.

A couple years ago, while I was visiting friends and family between overseas assignments, my wife Caroline accompanied me to a very well attended barbecue at Jack Ross’ home in Encinitas. Gardner and Peggy were the guests of honor. It was a wonderful evening replete with stories of the adventures and misadventures of Gardner Stevens and the DMLG. As we drove away from Jack’s that night, Caroline turned to me and said, “My God, all of you love that man, don’t you?” And without even realizing it, I responded in typical Gardner fashion, “Did I ever tell you about the time one September when we traveled all the way down to a campground in Mexico just to throw a pie in Gardner’s face?”

Since I heard the news of his passing, I have had a vision of Gardner sitting in heaven with an old friend who has long since passed on. The two of them are looking down at the many friends and family assembled at Gardner’s funeral. And it goes something like this:

Friend: “Gee Gar, listen to them, those folks really loved you.”

Gardner: “Hmmm. Did I ever tell you about the time they attacked me with cream pies at the San Diego State football game in front of 40,000 people?”

I miss Gardner Stevens and the color and wisdom he brought into my life. But, as I reflect on the man and his legacy, I realize that many of my most cherished memories and important decisions, and those of many others, were colored by his full and happy life. Captain Gardner Stevens set the example for all of us as a husband, father, mentor and friend.

*Ed note. Although seemingly slapstick, the pie-in-the-face tradition was dead serious. In fact, it was a congratulations to the Captain for leading us through another season without a drowning.*