A salute to Cmdr. Frank Wikenheiser, an Emmons County hero


Full military honors were given for the Interment Service of Frank J. “Wick” Wikenheiser, Commander, United States Navy, Retired, of Nags Head, N.C. He died June 18.

Wikenheiser, the son of the late Anton and Eva (Baumgartner) Wikenheiser, grew up in Strasburg. He and his wife, Happy, owned a home in Strasburg that they used during pheasant hunting season and other visits back home.

As a boy, Wick dreamed of being a pilot, and his dream came true after he enlisted in the U.S. Navy during World War II. He received his Wings of Gold in October of 1944. He was a member of the Torpedo-18 Squadron on the U.S.S. Takanis Bay in the South Pacific near the end of the war. After the war ended, he decided to pursue a career in naval aviation.

During the Korean Conflict, Wick first deployed aboard the USS Boxer as a pilot on the Night Attack Team. He deployed on the USS Princeton for a second night attack cruise. One of his basic tactics was to induce the North Koreans to turn on their radar units and burn up ammunition shooting at him. He bombed trains, tunnels and bridges—any transportation bottleneck—shortly before dawn. Day bombers would then come in and wrap up the stalled convoys. He served as an instructor in tactics in Hawaii during the war, too. After Korea, Wikenheiser tested ordinance and was involved in early development work on the sidewinder air-to-air missiles. He also began flying jets. He was an ordnance test pilot in China Lake, Calif., among other tours of duty. Wick flew AD-Skyraiders, the most advanced night attack bombers at that time. Jets weren’t very efficient yet, Wick told friends.

For several years, Wick served mostly aboard aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean.
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He is believed to have been the only UND law student with a daughter as a classmate. Cecelia “Ce’Ann” was a freshman law student when Wick was a senior.

Law degree in hand, he went to work for the Wheeler Wolf Law Firm which opened an office in Linton. His childhood friend, Albert Wolf, was (and is) a partner in the firm.

He served as the officer in charge of the Joint Reconnaissance Center, Atlantic fleet, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, planning and supervising the execution of over 800 reconnaissance flights conducted over Cuba. He was based at the Atlantic Fleet Headquarters in Norfolk, Va. He was awarded the Joint Service Commendation Medal for his performance.

Wick was the skipper of VT-7 at NAAS Meridian, Miss., where he trained student naval aviators in jet transition, precision acrobatics and formation flying.

His final tour of duty was as air operations officer on the staff of Commander Carrier Task Force 77 operating in Viet Nam waters, planning flight operations and briefing pilots. For his service Wick was awarded the Bronze Star. He made 750 carrier landings during his naval career.

While in the Navy, he at one point served under the late Admiral John S. McCain, Jr. and, later, John S. McCain III (the U.S. Senator from Arizona and the 2008 Republican Presidential candidate) served under Wick.

After retiring from the Navy in 1966 as a Commander and engaging in private business on the West Coast, Wick returned to North Dakota to enter law school at the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, in 1973.

“My intentions were to do this when I got out of the Navy,” Wikenheiser told a newspaper reporter who featured him. “I just got sidetracked.”

At age 56, Wick was an intern at the North Dakota Legislature in Bismarck.

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At the service at Arlington National Cemetery were several of Wick’s and Ce’Ann’s law school friend, including Wolf, Tom Dickson of Bismarck and Father Phil Brown, S.S., who presided at the burial.

Father Brown is now the Rector of Theological College, the seminary of the Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C.

Because of Wick’s rank in the U.S. Navy, he was entitled to full military honors provided by the U.S. Navy at Arlington National Cemetery. Present were a Navy Band, a Colors Team, an Escort Platoon and a Caisson Section. The horse-drawn caisson carried the casket from the hearse to the grave site, with family and friends walking behind the Navy personnel.

Those gathered at the 1 p.m. service were guests at a reception at the Fort Meyer Officers’ Club.

That evening, several of the group gathered for dinner at the North Dakota Farmers Union’s Founding Fathers Restaurant in Washington, D.C.

Wick is survived by his wife, Happy of Wanchese, N.C.; one daughter and son-in-law, Ce’Ann and Jim Weschler and their two sons, Jimmy and Billy, all of Chesapeake, Va.; one sister, Tillie (Jack) Domito of San Clemente, Calif., and “cousins by the dozens,” along with his nieces and nephews.