

## Walter LaBerge

Walter LaBerge was a Renaissance Man.

He is probably best known technically for something he did as a young man. He was co-inventor of the first guided missile, the Sidewinder. The physical principles he developed provide the scientific and technical underpinnings of all the guided missile systems today.

But throughout his scientific career, he was first and foremost a physicist. He had an incredible, inquiring mind – active until his last day on Earth. His son Steve told me that the evening before Walt passed away, he was discussing his planned visit the next week to the Naval Post Graduate School and he was describing some of his research interests at the University of Texas Institute for Advanced Technology (IAT)

In the early 90s, I had the opportunity to serve with Walter on a panel for the National Academy of Sciences. It was called the “Strategic Technology for the Army” (STAR) panel and consisted of distinguished scientists and engineers from industry and universities. Our task was to speculate on technologies that we thought would be important to the Army in the next 30 years. The panel was not doing well. After several painful meetings with no focus and little progress, Walter, by virtue of his intellect and wisdom, quietly offered critical suggestions and provided the leadership to make the panel a success. At the conclusion of the study, several of us were selected to visit most of the Army R&D facilities over the course of a year to report on our findings. During these travels, Walter and I became very close friends.

We initially recruited Walter to come to the University of Texas for one year as a visiting professor. After a brief respite in California, we later convinced him to return to the IAT as our Chief Scientist.

At the IAT, he became an expert in hypervelocity impact physics. But most importantly, he helped create the IAT culture.

1. Be the best in the world in our core technology
2. As a consequence, we should be our own strongest critics.

Walter loved this and thrived on it! He was totally invigorated by the scientific challenges and discussions with the IAT research staff and students.

Our seminars were lively, to say the least! Everyone in attendance felt comfortable participating in the discussions. The seminars (and arguments) were usually loud, emotional, but always technical – never personal. Two of our bright, young research staff have traveled here for this service. Ravi Subramanian and Mehmet Erengil were protégés and both became good friends of Walter’s. I don’t think either one of them ever gave a twenty minute seminar that didn’t last two hours with Walter. The arguments were passionate - but at the conclusion, we were all friends and we had all learned from

the process. Both Ravi and Mehmet continued to interact technically with Walter and visited him in his home to discuss their research results after he moved back to California.

Walter and I often discussed the various jobs and positions we had held in our careers and the conditions that made them fulfilling. We agreed that the technical challenges, the camaraderie, the intellectual stimulation, the culture of the IAT would be hard to beat. It was fun! And Walter helped to create that culture.

Most of all, we at the IAT remember Walter as the wisest, kindest, most considerate man we've ever known. My family and everyone at the IAT dearly loved him.

Let me give an example that captures the essence of Walter. I have a daughter, Katie, who is just finishing undergraduate studies at UT. Walter would frequently invite us to dinner, usually with very distinguished guests, and insist that we bring Katie along. Katie was always the only teenager and always sat next to Walter. After one particularly long dinner while Katie was still in high school, the dinner conversation had ranged over international affairs, the Mideast, issues in science and technology, and on and on. At the end of the evening, Walter rose, clinked his glass to get our attention, and made a toast,

“To Katie, a really nifty kid who has graciously tolerated the long pontifications of a bunch of old farts.”

Some of the distinguished old farts smiled – some didn't. But Katie fell hopelessly in love with him – we all did, and to this day, we all remember his toast and his thoughtfulness to the kid at the dinner table.

Walter was the most respected and most loved person at the IAT. We are honored to have known him. We have benefited immeasurably from his wisdom, knowledge and insight. Most of all, we are grateful that God has given us the opportunity to love and be loved by this remarkable Renaissance Man.