



The Walter B. LaBerge Distinguished Leadership Award



Dr. Walter B. LaBerge

Pioneering aerospace research scientist Walter Barber LaBerge was born in 1924 in Chicago, the eldest child of a Fuller Brush Co. salesman. Over the course of his 60-year career, Dr. LaBerge brought wisdom, inspiration, and his renowned sense of humor to a variety of scientific and technical projects of international importance.

Upon graduating from the University of Notre Dame in 1944 with a degree in naval science, young Walter served aboard a US minesweeper in the Palau Islands and was promoted to captain in 1946. He returned to Notre Dame after the war, where he earned a PhD in physics in 1950.

Dr. LaBerge then brought his growing family to California, where he joined the Sidewinder air-to-air missile development team in China Lake as program manager. The Sidewinder—a short-range, heat-seeking weapon carried by fighter aircraft—changed warfare, becoming the most widely used air-to-air missile ever built.

In the early 1960s, Dr. LaBerge headed the Philco-Ford team that designed and installed the mission control instrumentation at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston. Those instruments were used to direct the space missions that culminated in the Apollo moon flights.

Dr. LaBerge returned to government service in 1971 as technical director at China Lake. In quick succession, he served as Assistant Secretary of the Air Force, Assistant Secretary of NATO in Brussels, and Undersecretary of the Army. His last presidential appointment was as Undersecretary of Defense for research and development, in 1980.

In 1981, Dr. LaBerge began work for the Lockheed Corporation, from which he retired in 1989 as vice president for advanced planning. During this time, he continued his government service as Chairman of the Army Science Board. In 1993, Dr. LaBerge became chief scientist at The University of Texas at Austin's Institute for Advanced Technology, where he was fascinated by the ability to achieve hypervelocity. His curiosity and enthusiasm guided the Institute's interest in hypervelocity physics, leading to development of the most advanced projectiles in the world. He retired again in 2003 to California and maintained his scientific interests as visiting professor of physics at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey.

Dr. LaBerge passed away on July 16, 2004, in Santa Cruz, California, after a lifetime of selfless service.