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Sidewinder pioneer LaBerge dies at 80

By Laura Dobbins

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Dr. Walter B. LaBerge helped design the Sidewinder missile at China Lake, and worked with the NASA space program in Texas to put a man on the moon.

Life was always about pursuing ideas and inventions for LaBerge.

No dream was too huge to pursue or conquer, and that's how LaBerge lived his life before passing away July 16 at the age of 80.



*Dr. Walter B. LaBerge
Former NOTS Technical
Director*

"What a great life it was. Walt was a good time and oft times a great man," recalled his children and friends.

LaBerge is best known for helping design the original Sidewinder Air-to-Air missile at the Naval Ordnance Test Station at China Lake.

Or as he liked to jokingly say, "I was one of 5,000 people who single-handly built the Sidewinder."

It was an era of ideas and inventions during the 1950s and for scientist such as LaBerge there was no better laboratory to explore theories than the desert.

LaBerge was born in 1924 in Chicago, IL, the eldest child of a Fuller Brush Co. salesman. After graduation, he served aboard the U.S minesweeper YMS 165 in the Palau Islands and was promoted to Captain in 1946.

Returning to Notre Dame after the war, he married Patricia Sammon of River Forest, IL and started a family.

After receiving his Ph.D. in Physics in 1950, LaBerge became a member of the original Sidewinder Air-to-Air missile development team at the Naval Ordnance Test Station in China Lake.

Dr. Frank Cartwright who worked with LaBerge and was a good friend, recalls those early years.

"Many of our tests were conducted in parking lots. It was a different time when we actually were allowed to explore and test things," Cartwright said.

Many scientist moved to the area seeking to team on innovative projects in those days.

"It was uncommon to sit around for hours talking about ideas. Many projects were invented in people's backyards," Cartwright said. "That's back when we were allowed to test our ideas."

For families it also was a good experience. Children had access to a full-time science lab.

"It was an interesting time to be a kid growing up in the desert. We could watch rockets launch and see how missiles worked," said LaBerge's son Pete. "It was just a bunch of scientist doing something never done before."

And the stories they could tell, said LaBerge's daughter, Jackie Gunn.

"My dad loved writing songs and skits about the desert and the work at China Lake. One of our favorites growing up was called 'On the Road to Inyokern'" Gunn said.

Few of the scientist and engineers that worked on the Sidewinder could have foreseen that the missile would still be a mainstay in the aircraft weapons world today. But in spite of variations and modifications made to the weapon it remains one of the most widely used missiles in the world.

LaBerge also was known for his work with NASA. In 1962, he headed the team that designed and installed the instrumentation at the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston.

In that role, he worked closely with NASA management and became a close friend of several of the original U.S. astronauts.

LaBerge returned to government service in 1971 as Technical Director of the Naval Ordnance Test Station in China Lake.

In 1974 he received his first Presidential Appointment as Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Research and Development.

In 1976, he served as Assistant Secretary of NATO for Defense Support in Brussels, Belgium.

Returning to the Pentagon in 1977, LaBerge served as Under Secretary of the Army. His last government appointment was as Under Secretary of Defense for Research and Engineering in 1980.

He continued to stay busy until he retired in 1989. But he never stopped researching or discussing ideas.

His avid interest in military history didn't wane either.

"He took us on many trips to Revolutionary and Civil War battlefields. He also became interested in genealogy and traced our family tree," said his son Phil.

A memorial service will be held on Aug. 14 in Santa Cruz. The location and time of the event are yet to be decided, but will be posted on the Website www.philiplaberge.com, within the next few days.