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UW recognizes four outstanding alums during Homecoming 1991

Four University of Wyoming alumni will be recognized during 1991 Homecoming festivities Oct. 11-12 in Laramie. Three -- the late Rodney Guthrie, Harold Kester and Ed Witzenburger, will received Distinguished Alumni Awards.

A fourth, Dick Brown, will receive the 1991 Medallion Service Award. Judge Guthrie will be honored posthumously, with his family accepting on his behalf. Shown, from left, are Brown, Guthrie, Kester and Witzenburger.

Dreams of flight became reality for Witzenburger

A boyhood dream of becoming a military pilot translated into a distinguished 30-year military career for Col. Ed Witzenburger.

Witzenburger, a 1991 Distinguished Alumnus from Rancho Mirage, Calif., saw action in World War II, the Korean War and Vietnam as a fighter pilot. He realized his dream while enrolled in UW's inaugural Civilian Pilot Training (CPT) program.

A track star at Brooklyn Technical High School, Witzenburger had an athletic scholarship offer from Syracuse University. But he opted for the wide-open spaces of Wyoming in 1938, even though it was a far cry from his urban roots.

Three major factors influenced his decision — first, glowing reports of two former teammates who had been at Wyoming; second, the low cost of UW's tuition; and third, the institution's Reserve Officers' Training Corps program. Moving away from New York also held some appeal for the young Witzenburger.

"The idea of going a long way from home was very attractive," he admits.

ROTC prepared him for entry into the Army Air Corps Flying Cadet Training Program. In fact, high recommendations from LTC G. M. Halloran (head of UW ROTC at the time) were instrumental in Witzenburger's appointment to the program. Witzenburger earned his pilot's license while at UW and started advance training prior to entering the Army Air Corps.

UW Experience 'Wonderful'

Witzenburger's two years at UW, particularly his experiences as a Sigma Nu fraternity member, were "wonderful." He met many good friends, including the late George Fowler. He also met an Alpha Chi Omega, Eleanor Thompson of Lusk, whom he would later marry and help rear three children.

Those children, Stephen, Sandra and Bruce, also attended UW. Even though they travelled extensively while growing up, enrollment at UW was virtually a given, according to Witzenburger.

"We were able to instill in them a love for the state and the expectation that, if they were going to college, they would

go to the University of Wyoming," he says.

Dreams of Flying

Witzenburger knew, from the time he was 10, that he wanted to fly. He recalls the awe that airplanes — and his first flight — inspired. Military flying was his chosen field, because of the challenges it offered.

"The idea of being able to fly by oneself, with fighter aircraft, had a great deal more appeal" than other career options, Witzenburger says.

Following graduation from the program in 1941, Witzenburger served as a flying instructor at Moffat Field in Palo Alto, Calif. He served in the Flying Training Command until 1943. In 1944, he joined the 14th Air Force in China. Witzenburger flew P-51 Mustang single engine fighters and was credited with 10 enemy aircraft destroyed while on numerous fighter sweeps.

On a check of a previously successful mission over Hanoi, enemy groundfire hit Witzenburger's plane and forced him to bail out. He ended up in the hands of

French Foreign Legion forces, who eventually helped him join their underground so that he could return to China and provide intelligence target information to Allied leaders. Rather than return home, Witzenburger transferred to the Burma-India Theater to fly P-61 Black Widow Night Fighters until the war ended.

After World War II and a brief trip to the U.S., Witzenburger returned to China as operations adviser to the Chinese Nationalist Air Force. He served in that capacity until 1949, when the Communist Party forced the evacuation of military dependents and Americans.

Witzenburger then was assigned to War Plans at the Pentagon, representing the new U.S. Air Force. He worked there for three years, until 1952, when he moved on for six months at the Armed Forces Staff College.

From 1958-62, Witzenburger returned to Washington as chief Air Force liaison officer to the U.S. Senate and the White House. There, he worked with several

(Continued on page 12)

Witzenburger...

(Continued from page 7)

key lawmakers, which fostered an interest in the political process that later helped him in his own career as a state official.

During the Vietnam war, Witzenburger served as chief of staff of Air Force. Based in Saigon, he arrived in 1965, just before President Lyndon Johnson authorized the introduction of jet fighters and — eventually — ground forces into Vietnam.

Vietnam was “terribly frustrating,” according to Witzenburger. Tight controls over military activities from Washington wasted valuable time and lost many opportunities in the field. Witzenburger didn’t know about public sentiment regarding the war until he returned to the U.S. 1 1/2 years later; he says he wasn’t surprised that Americans eventually lost faith in the country’s efforts.

“It was important that I let people know as much as I possibly could about what was happening,” he says. “As an active member of our armed forces, I tried to do this as tactfully as possible, but it was still difficult to explain to the American people.”

Witzenburger, a four-time recipient of the Legion of Merit and numerous other decorations, retired in March 1970, after 30 years military service. He had contacted then UW President William Carlson about returning to Laramie as the university’s director of development, but that position was not available until the fall. So the Witzenburgers toured Europe for four months and adjusted to civilian life.

When funding problems delayed his return to campus, Witzenburger and his wife, Eleanor, moved to her family’s home in Lusk. There, the couple helped neighbor Jim Griffith with his campaign for state treasurer. When Griffith won

that post, he asked Witzenburger to join him at the capitol in Cheyenne.

As deputy state treasurer, Witzenburger successfully revamped Wyoming’s investment practices. For example, through the use of short-term repurchase agreements, he used the state’s short-term cash reserves more effectively and earned an additional \$750,000 for the state.

Witzenburger turned his energies to the state auditor’s office after two years, when Gov. Stan Hathaway appointed him to fill the unexpired term of Everett Copenhaver. Witzenburger won the state treasurer’s office in 1974 and served a four-year term, during which time income from state investments continued to increase significantly. At the end of that period, he tried his hand at national politics, competing against Dick Cheney and Jack Gage in the Republican primary for Wyoming’s lone House seat. When Cheney won his party’s nomination, Witzenburger took the job of Republican state chairman. He held that post for two years.

Illness forced the Witzenburgers to move in 1986 to California, where Ed could be in a warmer climate. He took a break from political life when he moved. Today, Witzenburger plays “a lot of golf” and works on several philanthropic projects.

Witzenburger is a lifetime member of the Wyoming National Guard and a member of the Wyoming Heritage Society and Order of Deadalians. He served for eight years as campaign chairman of the American Cancer Society, at the city, county and state levels (including three as state chairman). Witzenburger chaired fund-raising projects for the Cheyenne Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) and helped raise funds for the Cheyenne Civic Center.