WALTER R. HIBBARD, JR.

1918–2010

Elected in 1966

“For metallurgy.”

BY PAUL TORGERSEN

WALTER R. HIBBARD, JR., of St. Augustine, Florida, and formerly of Blacksburg, Virginia, died on February 24, 2010, at his home at the age of 92. He was born on January 20, 1918, in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Retired from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University as a university distinguished professor of engineering in 1988, he was world renowned for his scholarship in metallurgy.

When Dr. Hibbard received the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers Mineral Economics Award in 1983, he was cited for understanding and effectively communicating “the importance of mineral economics to the nation” throughout “his outstanding career in industrial research and management.”

Walter received his bachelor’s degree in chemistry from Wesleyan University in 1939. Three years later he was awarded his doctorate in metallurgy from Yale University. During World War II, he served as a lieutenant in the metallurgical section of the Bureau of Ships, Navy Department, Washington, D.C.

During his last year with the Navy, he also became an assistant professor of metallurgy at Yale University. Within five years he was elevated to associate professor. Simultaneously, Walter served as director of the engineering division of the New Haven YMCA Junior College.
In 1951 Walter left Yale to become a research associate in materials processes with the General Electric Research Laboratory in Schenectady, New York. He decided he still wanted to keep a relationship with academia and joined the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute as an adjunct professor of metallurgical engineering, a position he held from 1952 until 1965. At General Electric, Walter was promoted within two years to manager of alloy studies, a position he retained for seven years. In 1960 he became the manager of GE’s metallurgy and ceramic research.

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson asked Walter to head the U.S. Bureau of Mines, and he remained in Washington, D.C., for three years. Prior to leaving this post in 1968, Walter provided testimony about the threats of the adequacy of the nation’s mineral supplies. His forecast at that time was that the United States would find it increasingly difficult to compete with foreign ores unless technology improved, access to the world’s supply of minerals was continually sought through mutually advantageous agreements with friendly nations, and the United States developed effective techniques for recognizing events that foretell significant changes in demand patterns. Walter was quoted as saying, “The successful application of technology to meet the mineral demands of the future is the most recurring theme in the appraisals of the projected supply-demand relationship.” He concluded by asking for a minerals policy for the United States.

When Walter left that post in 1968, he joined Owens-Corning Fiberglass Corporation as its vice president for research and development. After a year he became the company’s vice president for technical service, based in Toledo, Ohio.

He moved back to Washington, D.C., in 1974 to become the deputy director and specialist on fossil fuels with the Energy Research and Development Office of the Federal Energy Office/Administration. His stint with the federal government was short lived, though, as he accepted an invitation within the year from Paul E. Torgersen to join the faculty at Virginia Tech.

Walter spent the last 14 years of his working career at
Virginia Tech, appointed as a university distinguished professor of engineering in 1974. In 1977 he was named the first director of Virginia Coal and Energy Research, created by the Virginia General Assembly on March 30, 1977. The interdisciplinary study and research facility for the state was, and remains, housed at Virginia Tech. In April 1990, “Virginia Coal—An Abridged History,” written and compiled by Walter was released.

Governor Gerald L. Baliles of Virginia cited Walter’s importance to the state’s energy policy, noting his “research and analysis of Virginia’s energy situation,” his “numerous in-depth studies of the Virginia coal industry,” and his promotion of the “expanded use of Virginia coal” as major contributions to the economic vitality of the coal industry and the state.

Walter was a registered professional engineer in three states: Connecticut, Ohio, and Virginia. He held the distinction of being named a fellow by five different societies: American Ceramic Society, American Academy of Arts and Sciences, American Association for the Advancement of Science, American Society of Metals, and Metallurgical Society of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers. He was also a member of the American Society for Engineering Education, the National Society of Professional Engineers, Cosmos Club, Virginia Academy of Science, and the National Institute of Ceramic Engineers.

He received a host of honors throughout his career, including the Rossiter W. Raymond Award of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical, and Petroleum Engineers (AIME) in 1950; the James Douglas Gold Medal of AIME in 1967; and the Henry Krumb Lecturer of AIME in 1971. He was awarded an honorary doctor of law from Michigan Tech in 1966 and an honorary doctorate of engineering from the Montana School of Mineral Science and Technology in 1968.

In 1967, Walter served as president of the AIME, one of the first national engineering societies established in the United States, known as an Engineering Founder Society. During his presidency, AIME appointed a Ten-Year Outlook Committee. In 1966 he was elected to the National Academy of
Engineering, and his primary section was materials, with a secondary interest in earth resources engineering. Walters served as co-chairman of the National Academy of Sciences “Forum on Coal as an Energy Resource: Conflicts and Consensus” in 1977. He served on the AIME Council of Economics Meetings in the 1970s. He was a participant at the Oak Ridge meeting of Future Strategies for Energy Development in 1976. He served on the Engineering Manpower Commission (EMC) of the Engineers Joint Council, and he chaired the EMC’s Conference on Measuring and Forecasting Engineering Personnel Requirements in 1978. He was also part of the organizing committee for the 1978 Conference on National Materials Policy.

For the National Academy of Engineering, he served on its council from 1968 until 1971, was a member of its Panel on Community Systems from 1979 until 1983, and was a member of its Committee on Industrial Energy Conservation from 1980 until 1986. He chaired both the Materials Advisory Board and the Building Research Advisory Board of the National Research Council and served on the National Academy of Sciences Committee on the Survey of Materials Science and Engineering.

Walter authored more than 125 technical and economic policy reports related to materials, minerals, energy, and the environment.

His son, Doug, remembers that when he and his siblings were young, “My Dad would sit at the top of the stairs and play a ukulele and sing us songs to help us go to sleep.” Doug noted that this father was very proud of his football letter from Wesleyan, especially because he was a chemistry major and due to the lab work he needed to complete, he could not practice as much as nonscience majors. He worked his way through college and sent money home. He was also proud of the key blocks he made in 1938 against the University of Rochester and the U.S. Coast Guard Academy.

Walter was active as a vestry member in an Episcopal Church in Schenectady and an Anglican Church in Blacksburg and taught Sunday School in Schenectady and New Haven.
He was also a coach and leader in the Little League and Babe Ruth League.

His son also shared that his father was a good tennis player in Waterbury, Connecticut, and played against Rosalind Russell before she was famous.

Walter was preceded in death in 1970 by his first wife, Charlotte. He is survived by his second wife, Louise; his daughter, Diana H. Bitz, of Gainesville, Florida; sons Douglas T. Hibbard of St. Augustine and Lawrence R. Hibbard of Toledo, Ohio; and two grandchildren, Anthony H. Bitz of Brooklyn, New York, and Elizabeth J. Hibbard of Gainesville, Florida.