



JOSEPH A. AHEARN

1936–2018

Elected in 2010

“For contributions to improving the environment and transportation infrastructure through engineering and construction projects.”

BY JOHN NAGY

SUBMITTED BY THE NAE HOME SECRETARY

JOSEPH AUGUST AHEARN was a warm-hearted Cold Warrior and gregarious grand marshal of others' gifts who, as a senior officer in the US Air Force and senior executive at CH2M Hill, taught generations of engineers by principle and example how to lead by one's "inner compass." He died July 11, 2018, at his home in Greenwood Village, Colorado, at age 81.

A man of innumerable and instantaneous friendships who wanted everyone in the room to feel welcome and respected, he was called Bud from early childhood because, in the words of his son, "he was everybody's buddy." That single, attractive personal quality contributed as much to his choices of college and profession as did his work ethic, good grades, and heroics as a football and baseball standout at St. Louis University High School.

Once, when his habit of choosing the least athletic boy for his sandlot team nearly caused a fight among better players impatient with Bud's altruism, the commotion caught the attention of the boy's father, the chief engineer of a major bridge design firm. The grateful man took Bud aside and, after confirming his interest in science and math, invited him to see what he did for a living. From that office visit, Bud's sense of vocation—all-important for a young man with a Jesuit education—was immediate and permanent.

Soon he was on his way to the University of Notre Dame, where he played center field for the freshman and varsity baseball teams, practiced with the football team, trained with the Air Force ROTC, chaired the senior class Lenten retreat, and spent most of his time studying. Having befriended the janitor of his residence hall, he often defied the Catholic college's strict lights-out policy by using the hall's supply closet as a study carrel. He graduated with his BS in civil engineering in 1958.

Bud was born in Galesburg, Illinois, on September 5, 1936, and grew up on the south side of St. Louis, where his father, Joseph, a doughboy injured in a World War I chemical attack, worked as an attorney for the US Veterans Administration and his mother, Mary Ethel, raised him alongside his twin Janice and their older sister Marcia.

Pragmatic, fair-minded, and irrepressible, Bud followed his father into military service, starting with an officer's commission in 1958 and a first assignment to the space program management team at California's Vandenberg Air Force Base. There he would build missile assembly and launch facilities as well as the infrastructure for a community of several thousand military families.

What followed over the next 34 years was a series of assignments that increased in breadth, complexity, and importance to the United States' emergence as a global superpower—and to its ultimate victory in the 45-year showdown with the Soviet Union. Bud worked as chief engineer at a refueling base for long-range nuclear bombers in Goose Bay, Labrador, Canada; construction program manager for the Titan, Atlas, and Minuteman missile launch facilities at the Eighth Air Force headquarters, Westover Field, Massachusetts; a lead designer of support systems for US intelligence efforts in NATO countries from Western Europe to Pakistan while stationed in Frankfurt; commander of a combat engineering squadron that built and repaired airfields in Vietnam; a Pentagon-based director of finance overseeing all Air Force civil engineering programs; and in increasingly sensitive positions of leadership both in the Department of Defense and in liaison with NATO

allies that culminated in his promotion to the two-star rank of major general, the highest available to an engineer in the US Air Force. He retired from service in 1992 as the branch's senior civil engineer.

The citation for Bud's Air Force Distinguished Service Medal noted that his work in Europe during the Reagan era "greatly enhanced our readiness and warfighting capabilities." It further described his base-housing modernization initiative as "the largest housing program in the history of the United States Air Force in Europe," which had fortified "our readiness posture." Bud is also credited with nearly \$1 billion in taxpayer savings secondary to his efforts to streamline air-base civil engineering in the era of post-Cold War drawdown.

Along a military career path that spanned three continents, Bud married Nona Maria Fallon, a teacher and scholar of Spanish literature, and together they raised three daughters—Stacia, Gianna, and Trienel—and a son, Fallon, teaching them the value of "heroic aspiration" and of lives lived in service to others. "He didn't care what you did as long as you were in service to others and living the best version of yourself," Gianna said. "He was a hero in so many people's eyes, but he did not envision himself as that."

Bud continued his own education, earning a master's degree in public policy and engineering administration from Syracuse University in 1967 and completing programs in military strategy at National Defense University in 1979 and in national security policy at Harvard University in 1988.

At 55, when others might have chosen to double down on their golf game, Bud embarked on what would be a second professional life. His rise through the corporate ranks at CH2M Hill as the company undertook a dramatic expansion of its reach and scope was as meteoric as his military career. After starting as Northeast regional manager, he retired in 2011–12 as vice chair of the company's board, having overseen its strategic planning and communications, government affairs, environmental remediation, and leadership development programs while serving in a range of senior executive positions. Among the more significant projects of his tenure were the

firm's work on the Panama Canal expansion, a pair of major transportation corridor projects in California, a multibillion-dollar military base in South Korea, and athletic venues for the 2012 Summer Olympics in London.

A religious man, Bud learned from his Catholic faith the principles of servant leadership and of the equal dignity of all people, and he found one outlet for their expression in service to his profession. He was a member of the NAE, president of the National Academy of Construction and Society of American Military Engineers, and distinguished member of the American Society of Civil Engineers and a participant in its Industry Leaders Council. In 2002 he became a cofounder of Engineers Without Borders USA, which by the time of his death boasted some 14,000 members and volunteers making life better for disadvantaged people in 45 countries.

Adding to his numerous military honors, several industry organizations recognized Bud's professional contributions by presenting him with lifetime achievement awards. He also received Notre Dame's College of Engineering Honor Award and an honorary membership in the American Institute of Architects. But no gesture of appreciation meant more to him than his 1991 induction into the Order of the Sword, the highest honor bestowed by the Noncommissioned Officer Corps of the Air Force. It was another mark of his heartfelt respect for the contributions of all, regardless of their rank or station.

In retirement Bud was a regular on the speakers' circuit at universities and corporations around the country. He wanted younger engineers to think not just about how to build something but about how building it would affect people's lives. He took particular pleasure in giving back to the institution he felt had set him most firmly on the best career and life track: in 2012 the family endowed Notre Dame's Joseph and Nona Ahearn Professorship in Computational Science and Engineering. Bud later perpetuated his personal commitment to mentoring by establishing the Ahearn Family Directorship of the Grand Challenges Scholars Program at Notre Dame.

Addressing a group of students at his alma mater, he credited its legendary former president, Rev. Theodore Hesburgh,

CSC, with setting the “inner compass” by which he had navigated his own life—the principles of character, commitment, and caring, as well as the cultivation of his talent, vision, ingenuity, and positive worldview. “The inner compass definition is that you own it,” he said. “Nobody else owns it. It’s yours, and it’s what you bring to market, and it’s the offering of how you can multiply the force of you the person.”

Nona Ahearn preceded her husband in death by 3 years. Bud leaves behind a beloved family—four children, their spouses, and eight grandchildren—and a legion of former colleagues who remember him as an enthusiastic mentor, motivator, and innovator; as a man who led with a huge heart, a keen intellect, and a ready smile; as their friend.