EUGENE P. WILKINSON

1918–2013

Elected in 1990

"For outstanding leadership in naval nuclear propulsion programs and improvement in the operation of commercial nuclear power plants."

SUBMITTED BY THE NAE HOME SECRETARY

EUGENE PARKS WILKINSON, one of the US Navy's pioneers, died July 11, 2013, at home in Del Mar, California. He was 94. Vice Admiral Wilkinson was the first officer to command a nuclear-powered submarine and nuclear-powered surface ship.

Dennis, as he was known, was born August 10, 1918, in Long Beach, California, the son of Dennis William and Daisy Parks Wilkinson. His parents died when he was a boy, and he was raised by his grandparents. He attended Holtville High School and San Diego State College, where, having skipped two grades in school, he graduated in 1938 at the age of 19 with a bachelor of arts degree in chemistry. He taught chemistry and math courses for a year at his alma mater and attended the University of Southern California. The following year he had a teaching fellowship in chemistry at USC. During those two years he completed the coursework for a PhD but never did a thesis.

In December 1940 he was commissioned as a Naval Reserve officer through the V-7 program. He graduated from the Naval Submarine School in Groton, Connecticut, in March 1942 and

\Readers may also be interested in a biography of Vice Admiral Wilkinson: Winters AD. 2016. *Underway on Nuclear Power! The Man Behind the Words: Eugene P. "Dennis" Wilkinson, Vice Admiral USN*. La Grange Park IL: American Nuclear Society.

was sent to the Pacific, where he engaged in eight patrols aboard submarines. One of these was on the USS *Darter* at the Battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944, the largest naval battle of World War II. For his leading role in a critical attack, he was awarded the Silver Star. He transferred to the regular US Navy on August 28, 1946.

Admiral Hyman G. Rickover selected Dennis for the nuclear submarine project because he had not attended the US Naval Academy and had a scientific approach to shipbuilding. Dennis received advanced training in nuclear physics at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, worked as an associate engineer at Argonne National Laboratory in Chicago, and was Chief of the Operations Branch and Bureau of Ships Representative at the US Atomic Energy Commission facility near Pittsburgh.

Dennis drafted a schedule to develop the first nuclear submarine and presented it to Admiral Rickover in 1949, anticipating a launch date of January 1955. As first commanding officer of USS *Nautilus* (1955–57), his inaugural cable, sent January 17, 1955, read "Underway on nuclear power." These words are engraved on the US Navy War Memorial in Washington, DC.

He attended the US Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island (1958), and was then appointed the first commanding officer (1959–63) of USS *Long Beach*, America's first nuclear-powered surface ship. As a rear admiral he went on to serve as director (1963–66) of the Submarine Warfare Division (OP-31), chief of staff of the US Forces Japan (1966–69), and commander (1969–70) of Submarine Flotilla Two. He was promoted to vice admiral shortly before being named commander of the Atlantic Submarine Force in February 1970.

In addition to the Silver Star, Vice Admiral Wilkinson received many honors and awards during his career: Navy Unit Commendation (1944); Golden Fleece Award (1955); Legion of Merit (1957); Defense Commendation Medal (1964); Second Order of Sacred Treasure, Japan (1969); Distinguished Service Medal and 2nd and 3rd Awards (1969, 1972, 1974); Navy Meritorious Public Service Citation (1978); George Westinghouse Gold Medal, ASME (1983); Oliver Townsend

Award, Atomic Industrial Forum (1984); Gold Medal Award, Uranium Institute (1989); and election to the NAE (1990).

After his retirement as deputy chief of naval operations for submarine operations in 1974, he worked in private industry and consulted with federal agencies and laboratories. He was executive vice president of Data Design Laboratories (1976–80), and then, in the wake of the Three Mile Island accident, was tapped to serve as president of the newly established Institute of Nuclear Power Operations (1980–84). During his tenure he oversaw the creation of inspection and regulation criteria and protocols for the safe and reliable operation of commercial nuclear power plants.

Salomon Levy (NAE 1974) wrote:

> I had the opportunity to work with E.P. Wilkinson during several safety reviews of boiling water reactors…. He had a special ability to detect plant problems such as seeing water drops leaking and predicting their growth to dangerous levels. Many of the nuclear plants' workers were hired after they left the nuclear Navy and they were proud to mention their previous experience and Wilkinson would ask a few questions about their naval experience, primarily to validate…their claims.
>
> He turned down most opportunities for entertainment and preferred to retire and to get up early to complete his investigations. His favorite food was hamburgers and he preferred to find the nearest hamburger store next to our hotel. He was a thorough investigator and he presented his findings well with the primary purpose to improve the plants. He insisted in discussing and summarizing our findings before their oral presentations to the plant managements in order to avoid surprises. He relied on my participation to handle the more difficult boiling water reactor issues. He was a very fast learner…. It was an honor to have the chance to work with him.

There's no question that Dennis was deeply committed to his work, but he also played tennis and bridge, and he and his wife enjoyed quite a bit of travel, including a three-month vacation in Australia to celebrate their 50th anniversary. They also visited Bali, Borneo, Japan, Peru, Singapore, and the United Kingdom.

He had married Janice Edith Thuli in 1942; she died in 2000. They are survived by their children Dennis Eugene of Nagasaki, Japan; Stephen Jones of Austin; Marian Lynn Cassazza of Del Mar; and Rodney David of Bremerton, Washington; four grandsons; and seven great-grandchildren.