

Appreciation: An English "P" Remembered, 50 Years Later

"Major Wickert" Left His Mark on the Class of 1958

By Alan B. Salisbury, '58

It was "just another" obituary in the newspaper. But as I was reading the Washington Post with a leisurely cup of coffee on that Sunday morning in April, my eye caught the small headline, "Howard T. Wickert, Army Officer, College Professor."

The name rang a bell immediately in my mind so I read further into the item to learn that LTC (Ret) Wickert was a member of the USMA Class of 1943. A quick check in the Register confirmed that Howard T. Wickert was, indeed, the English professor ("P" in cadet slang) that I remembered from my Plebe year, 1954-1955. Memories flooded back. Then Major Wickert had used his red pen to inscribe on one of my first papers in his class "You're Mad!" to inform me that my entry of "Bibliography: None" was inappropriate in view of my citing several sources in the paper. On another paper I had misspelled "Massachusetts" causing him to deduct the traditional "one tenth" on the 3.0 grading scale for a spelling error, adding the note: "Poor choice of words. Almost no one can spell... (there followed three equally incorrect spellings of MA, all crossed out)... that state!"

Like most West Point classes today, the Class of 1958 has an active e-mail net that we use to share information of all kinds. So with newspaper in hand, I went to my PC and dashed off an e-mail on our net to inform my classmates that Major Wickert had passed away, adding my recollections of his remarks on my papers to see if that might spark others to recall this teacher who had taught many of us some fifty years earlier. I was not prepared for the response.

For the next two days and beyond, our net was swamped with "Major Wickert" stories. Each one triggered a few more. But what I quickly found was that most of them were not simply brief mentions of passing memories of just another professor. Many of them were, in fact, substantive anecdotes reflecting indelible memories of learning experiences with long term impact. All of them made clear that Major Wickert had earned a great deal of admiration and, indeed, genuine affection from those who were fortunate enough to be assigned to his classes. Most teachers only dream of leaving such a life-long mark on their students.

The more I read these stories, the more it became clear to me that they should be shared with the Wickert family. With that thought in mind, I culled through the many e-mails and selected the following to be given to Howard's brother, Thomas, in advance of the planned memorial service.

Ah yes, MAJ Wickert. I remember him well. On more than one occasion he brought me to my literary knees as I tried in vain to retain my first-section ranking in English. I recall one paper in particular. The subject was: The Sickness in American Prose (or something to that effect). He returned the paper to

me, dripping with red ink, and on the cover sheet he had written the following salutation: "Physician, cure thyself!" On yet another paper he had drawn a cadet jumping off a diving board into a pool of water appropriately labeled: "The Second Section." I have retained these papers all these many years just to keep myself humble. He was a great teacher..... **Paul Bons**

Major Wickert waxed eloquent on a couple of West Point topics: buglers at Reveille and Retreat (playing when it was so cold their lips froze to the instrument) and the Area. The latter he said was perfect punishment – far better than digging six by six holes or other work details. From the work details one could feel a sense of accomplishment (best six by six ever dug or some meaningful work done). Meanwhile, there was no possible sense of accomplishment from Area tours – complete waste of time. But that was time for cadets to think with a rifle wrapped around one's neck – he cited myriad cadets who made it through West Point because of the Area tours – time to reflect, repent and change one's behaviour. His language about Buglers and Area tours was poetic, dramatic, etc. A truly wonderful and memorable P.....**George Sibert**

As was the case with so many of our classmates, I was a member of the Major Wickert Fan Club from the get-go. He wrote on the cover page of one of my submissions, "You have labored mightily and brought forth a louse!" My ego was hammered at first as I really had labored. I then cracked up in laughter and subsequently redeemed myself with a piece written after our study of Moby Dick. It was titled "Cadet Ahab and the System." The good Major liked that one. How fortunate we all were to have been his students!.....**Tom Claffey**

I had MAJ Wickert as an English "P" Yearling year. One very quotable Wickertism came after he had reviewed our section's first attempt at the short theme papers that seemed to be the primary English workload for that year. His comment was: "After reviewing your writing efforts I am now convinced that the primary means of communication among you in the barracks must consist of long series of grunts interspersed with stomps on the floor." He was unique.....**Dick Reidy**

Major Wickert was the first "P" I had in English. I had written almost nothing in high school, so when I was told of the many papers we would have to write, I was sure that I was doomed. Major Wickert gave us one simple formula for writing. "Tell them what you are going to tell them. Tell them. And, tell them what you told them." I took that to heart and was quite pleased at finishing fairly high in English, something I could not say about too many other subjects.....**Paul Vanture**

I, too, learned the 3 "tell 'ems" from Maj. Wickert and use them to this very day with adult students who are studying for the GED exams. I have previously shared with Chuck Cabell that he was one of very few bright spots in my plebe year. A truly fine fellow and good teacher as well.....**Toby Kevin**

*I remember hearing him expound on how walking the area was the perfect punishment, because there was absolutely no way to turn it into fun. One of our classmates disagreed, saying that he and a classmate had entertained themselves by passing messages one word at a time as they passed each other (headed in opposite directions, of course). Wickert commented dryly, "Mr. _____, you are easily amused".....***Glenn Hall**

*I shall always remember him and have told a story illustrative of his unique personality several times. Short version: He gave me the only 6.0 I ever received in Plebe English on a 'critical theme' (it was very "BJ" for a Plebe) - a paper which began with three sentence fragments, titled "The Corn Flakes Die" - parodying a short story by Jean Giorno which we had to read. He wrote on the theme when returning it: "'How painful are the pangs of rearing a toothless Plebe.' Hamlet, Act II, Scene 2. Congratulations, you have risked all on a chance that tomorrow might prove wrong, which is the quintessence of courage. BUT DON'T EVER TRY IT AGAIN!" What a sense of how to instruct and inspire while chastening.....***Sam Myers**

*I recall Maj Wickert very well. I think it was during one of our classes when we were reading poetry that someone asked him about how one knew when one was in love. He said that you'd know you were in love when you wanted to be with that person all of the time, at every waking moment, even "when they took out the garbage!" He also used to reminisce about his days in occupied Japan when, to him, the height of comfort was to sit and read in the lobby of the (old) Imperial Hotel in Tokyo.....***Nick Carlson**

*I had only two brief consecutive opportunities when our regular P was sick for a couple of days and our section was disbursed among the other sections. Several of us went to MAJ Wickert's 1st section. Heady stuff that! The subject was J. Alfred Prufrock. And among the many pearls he dropped was, "Have you ever noticed how those who go by their first initial and middle name tend to be sinister characters?" He then cited J. Edgar Hoover and a number of literary and contemporary figures as examples. So years later when G. Gordon Liddy and H. Howard Hunt hit the headlines, my sense of envy and loss immediately reemerged. I occasionally remind H. Glenn Hall, one of our own classmate English P's, of that prescient observation by a giant of a forerunner who set the standard for those aspiring to make effective learning a joy to their students.....***Stan Bacon**

There are not many profs at West Point who left memorable impressions on so many of us -- but Major Wickert was one among the very best. He was an iconoclast, but unlike other iconoclasts that I met in the military who often tended to be morose, Wickert was a free spirit who relished his role as a prof in the English department. Wickert, unlike so many of the other profs at the time, seemed to enjoy the role of provocateur, goading us into breaking the paradigm and thinking outside the academy's approved solutions. His frequently casual approach to military bearing was exemplified by his outrageous classroom posture -- I recall

*him lying on his desk in the posture of the nude in Goya's painting of the reclining Maja. With his head propped on one hand, he used his swagger stick to massage his insoles with the other.....***Jim Seltzer**

*Absolutely top notch fellow with a great sense of being. One afternoon class we arrived and he appeared to have failed to zip his fly.... After some amount of sniggering and hoots from the class he realized his error.... and without a single hint of concern he promptly removed his pants to assure us he was still properly clad!! Few others would have provided such a response, and it did tend to state that he was still fully in charge of the class and the situation. (I do note he replaced them thereafter, however.) I share with others who remember him as truly exceptional while other instructors have been lost to time.....***Terry Connell**

*He was the first to talk to us plebes as people. There were a lot of posturers among the "P's," but he was the genuine article. In one class just before Christmas, we were able just to chat for awhile with Major Wickert and during the session somebody complained about the fact that we weren't going home like the upper classes. Major Wickert said that not going home was actually an advantage, because "our class would be born over Plebe Christmas." He was right. After being treated like know-nothing worms since day 1 of Beast--not allowed to gaze around; not allowed to talk to classmates outside of rigid circumscriptions; being told what (and where, and when--rarely why) to do--suddenly the whole place was in our hands. We ran it just fine by ourselves, and we saw the place in a whole new light. For the first time, I felt a true part of the Class of 1958 and of the Long Gray Line. Makes me wonder how class-birthing goes today.....***Chuck Cabell**

*May God Bless and have mercy on the soul of Howard T. Wickert. He was my first plebe English P, and set the bar so high that no one after that could even come close. The cherished details of memories in his classes have faded, but not the esteem in which I hold, to this day, this wonderful, bright, humorous, and totally engaging human being. I am sure he would find some spelling errors in this post, as he always did in my papers. I won't run spell check on this.....***T. K. Smith** [ed note: T.K. misspelled "cherished" above. Sorry, MAJ Wickert...]

*He was a riot in class. A truly memorable character. Irreverent, to say the least. And obviously not afraid to poke fun at himself. I seem to recall that he claimed some sort of unofficial record for most hours spent on the area.....***Glenn Hall**
I do not remember any of his comments on my papers, probably because they were all so unremarkable. But I do remember Shimmelfenning (sp-10?). This was a concoction he directed we Plebes were to prepare and send to the Table Commandant the next time we were served corned beef hash for breakfast. He waxed poetic for fifteen minutes describing how the Worcestershire sauce was to be added to plain old yellow mustard until it was a certain shade of light tan, pointing at an appropriate part of a desk top to illustrate. Then the A-1 sauce would be added to bring the mixture to a darker brown, again with a visual comparison. Last was the ketchup, and it all turned rosy. There may have been more ingredients that I cannot recollect, but that was a long time ago. It seems we

were to use a little of everything we normally had on the table, except the honey. Then we were to pass it to the head of the table while sonorously intoning "Shimmelfenning for the Table Commandant's corned beef hash, Sir." Well, I did it. A Yearling wanted to know what the heck I was doing as I mixed it, then another one shut him up. The Firstie at the head of the table had the same comment, only louder, and again another one told him to try it. He did, and liked it. I even got to fall out and try it myself. I told my wife about it the other day and she turned up her nose. I think I'll try it again the next time we have corned beef hash and eggs for breakfast. I just hope I haven't forgotten a key ingredient....By the way, Major Wickert was one of the most enjoyable 'P's I had at West Point. He was the first instructor anywhere that succeeded in getting me to stay awake in an English class....**Dick McManigell**

I would not have passed the Plebe English finals without his sincere and capable help. I've always put him in my memory bank as "Churchillian." I somehow remember that at one time, we had to describe a yellow No. 2 pencil in detail in so many words. I found it difficult, but his guidance was to describe the pencil from my mind to words on paper so that anyone reading the words on the paper would acquire in his mind what I had described...or something like that. I think I missed the turn out exam, by less than .002.....**Jae Stanton**

This one was long after cadet days. At a West Point Society of DC Founders Day dinner, circa 1977 as I recall, two officers from cadet days were having an excited conversation: LTC Wickert (better known to me as "Major Wickert") and COL Sandy Oliver '50 former G2 Tac firstie year. "Major Wickert" called to me, George come over here to resolve our argument, or words to that effect. The question was which subject was more important for an officer's career: mathematics or English. I promptly replied, "English, sirs." COL Oliver was stunned. He asked how I could say that especially given my being in the Corps of Engineers (as he was). I said that was easy, an officer must be able to communicate (orders, ideas, staff papers, etc) and English at West Point was the best preparation we had for written and oral communicative skills. Major Wickert made the sign of the cross on my forehead and said, "Bless you my son!".....**George Sibert**

And there you have a snapshot of the mark that one professor of English made on one Academy class, as viewed through the filter of a half century of time. Jim Seltzer concluded his note to me with the following words: "Such people as these are the things that our memories are woven from and our lives are molded by. May we all hope that our own tracks through life are as fondly remembered." To that sentiment, I can only add: Well done, Major Wickert. Be thou at peace!

Alan Salisbury