

MORS Heritage

Vance Wanner

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“For the past 14 years, Vance Wanner served as our pilot . . . steering us throughout each voyage, helping to avoid hazards, maintaining our provisions, and constantly searching out the best harbors.”

This was written by the *Phalanx* Editorial Board in their September 1977 issue, following Wanner’s death the previous May. He had served as the MORS Executive Secretary since 1963, before which he supported the organization in less official capacities.

Nearly 45 years later, thanks to his early leadership, the voyage of the figurative MORS ship continues. While he was associated with MORS, meeting attendance grew by over 200%, with more than 800 people attending regularly. Today, more than 1,500 people regularly attend Society events.

If MORS was a ship in the 1970s, then it’s certainly a vessel to behold today, sailing as a flagship among similar societies, it remains unique in its ability to promote a high degree of academic collaboration among operations research analysts within the Department of Defense. Its status today is due in large part to the dedication of its early leaders.

Before helping to build and steer MORS, Wanner served on numerous ships of a more literal, waterproof capacity. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1943 and

subsequently spent time aboard several submarines, including the *USS Mississippi*, *Pollack*, and *Capitaine*. He was also Executive Officer on board the *USS Archerfish* and Commanding Officer of the *USS Manta* and *Picuda*, before retiring in 1962.

An amusing anecdote relating to Wanner’s time at sea is mentioned in the book *Gallant Lady: A Biography of the USS Archerfish*. In 1952, Wanner was the Executive Officer of the boat, and it was underway somewhere near Balboa. During a recess, some sailors jumped overboard in jest, clutching a package containing a uniform as a life preserver. They began “tossing the nice, clean, freshly pressed uniforms into the air.” The book goes on to state, “The uniforms were khaki, officer’s clothes. The two ‘well-oiled’ sailors were making a mess of the laundry belonging to the boat’s Executive Officer, Lieutenant Vance R. Wanner.”

Perhaps due to his time on these submarines, Wanner was attuned to both his people and his surroundings, including those of tidal currents, literal and metaphorical. Computers were becoming increasingly popular within technical fields, as people were coming to realize their vast utility. However, people were not being trained to



use the computers at the same rate. Wanner realized that the growth of technical training opportunities would need to parallel the growth of computers; otherwise, the lack of education could become a rip tide.

In 1961, four years before the first commercially accessible desktop computer would even become available, Wanner worked to coordinate the first-ever Conference on Application of Digital Computers to Automated Instruction. In the forward for the conference, Wanner and his Office of Naval Research colleague Glenn L. Bryan wrote that education was a large motivation behind the event, saying, “The same onrush of technology which produced rapid and astonishing computer developments also created an insatiable requirement for new training. More and more people needed to learn technical information and develop new skills.”

Despite the sensitive nature of some of the data they worked with, they

ensured that this conference was as accessible as possible, adding, “[This] led to the idea of holding a large open meeting. Interested scientists and scholars from three areas—programmed learning, computer use and development, and education—would be invited.”

This shared learning atmosphere benefited not only Wanner’s own colleagues, but also encouraged an investment in the future generation of operations research analysts. His investment in people as crucial provisions shaped an environment of collaboration, certainly a good harbor to dock the MORS ship in.

His wife, Susie Walder Wanner, whom he married in 1952, no doubt agreed with this emphasis on learning. She earned her Master in Education from the University of Virginia and taught students across Virginia and Maryland for 20 years, even working as a school principal in Turkey. All four of their children pursued further education after high school.

Wanner steered his MORS ship with an eye on this horizon, aware of not only the current state of the field of operations research, but also of its potential impacts on many

other fields of research. In a patent application in 1965, Wanner proposed an information retrieval system that would enable the user to quickly find the data they requested.

Wanner wrote, “Mankind in general and industry in particular have been and presently are accumulating knowledge at a prodigious rate.” While he may not have imagined just how quickly technology would increase our access to information today, he was thinking strategically with an eye toward advancement, a mindset that the community still benefits from.

While the information retrieval system patent was related to his thesis work for the master’s degree he earned from George Washington University, Wanner also once filed a patent for a portable bunk tent in 1969. However, that may have had to do more with optimizing sleeping arrangements for his four children than with his operations research career.

The *Phalanx* attempted to summarize Wanner’s relationship with MORS in an “In Memoriam” piece, published in the previously cited September 1977 issue and written by Walter E. Muller. The following is a fragment of this article:

“At the wedding of his oldest daughter, Vance presented a toast which, quite fittingly, with little imagination, describes his relationship with MORS. ‘May they always be useful to each other. May they always be a source of pleasure to each other. But, above all, may each of them be most worthy of the deepest admiration and affection of the other because of what they are and what they do, even if their destiny is among God’s smaller sparrows.’”

It is clear that Vance Wanner was beloved among his colleagues. Months after his death, MORS created the prestigious Vance R. Wanner Memorial Award in his honor. Phillip M. Morse, now considered to be the founder of operations research in the United States, was the first recipient of this award in September 1977.

Each year, the award continues to recognize individuals who “have made outstanding contributions to the progress of this advancing profession,” in honor of the outstanding contributions that Wanner himself made to MORS, as one of the organization’s earliest, most esteemed pilots. 