

# A Fitting Tribute: How to Write an Obituary

By Chet Shaddeau '47

First of all, be aware of the prevailing length limit (presently 400 words).

I generally begin the obit with a flat statement, including full name and title, of the time, place, and cause (if available) of death.

I then proceed to place of birth, date of birth, age, early schooling and parents, as available and appropriate, followed by the source and type of appointment to the Academy. The description of the Midshipman career is usually very short, but may well expand if he was an All American, a six-striper, Rhodes Scholar, or whatever, and I try to include clubs and sports as available. I always indicate which Company he (or she) graduated with, as it is invariably asked for by Classmates.

If married, I try to include wife's maiden name, home, and date of marriage. If there has been more than one spouse—for whatever reason—be as accurate as possible—these can be dangerous rocks and shoals!

I generally follow with his (or her) service career, in as much detail as possible, but keeping it concise. I ignore routine “meritorious” and “attendance” medals, but highlight decorations for valor ships, stations, and aircraft squadrons. I attempt to pinpoint as fully as possible, but exact dates are not usually included—they are too hard to get right.

Civilian careers should be covered in similar detail, and include honors, fraternities, and civic distinctions as appropriate.

Advanced education and degrees are important in both civil and military careers. Fit them in where they occurred.

In retirement, hobbies, charities, and clearly interesting activities should be included. Use judgment about detail in listing survivors—if there are only a few, detail is possible, but if he had 14 grandchildren, don't try to name them all.

Occasional mild humor is not out of place—but pick your subjects carefully!

Finish off with known details about place, date, and manner of final disposal of remains and services. It is probably best to avoid matters regarding memorial donations unless specifically requested by family.

Remember that the family will be extremely attuned to details, so be cautious about making any assumptions as to relationships. Avoid them if unsure. Try to talk with a member of the family other than the widow, in most cases, who will be able to give details without inflicting further pain. I refer here to divorces, estranged family, live-in girlfriends, deceased or disabled children, etc., but it refers equally to all details.

Try to get an obit from the local paper—it usually has much of what you want, but remember that unlike the local *Daily Bugle*, you are writing for a specialized audience of Academy Alumni, who are probably interested in some things that the paper (and the family!) simply do not understand. References by

hometown papers—and widows—to “steering battleships” when he was a DD skipper are not uncommon! Correcting that is your job. Navy acronyms (like COMSUBORDDEVDDET) probably should be avoided if their meaning is not obvious.

If you write the obit, sign it. If the family writes it, credit them, even if you edit. Keep in mind that the family will probably clip and retain the obit, and it will be a keepsake for them. They deserve good work.

And for God's sake, try to get all the names spelled correctly!

The following is a fictionalized example, but you may find other useful ones in previous and subsequent issues of *Shipmate*:

## WATER TIGHT DOOR '47

*Water T. Door died of a stroke at Nowhere, NE, on 31 June 200X. He was 75 years old.*

*A native of Nowhere, “Leaky” attended Enormous State University prior to receiving his congressional appointment to the Academy from Connecticut. He was a varsity fencer, was Fourth Battalion Commander, and graduated with the Class in June of 1946 as a member of the 15th Company.*

*Upon graduation, he served briefly in JONES (BB-96), and decommissioned her, then operated from the Philippines for a year in PCE-871 and another year out of Kwajalein in PC-1186. He served thereafter in NEVERSINK (DD-999) until his resignation in 1949.*

*In 1949 he began his engineering career with Acme Widget Corp. where he was to spend his entire civilian working life. He served as plant superintendent of two widget-producing plants; superintendent of production; assistant chief engineer, then chief engineer; executive vice-president, president in 1970, president and CEO in 1971, then chairman and CEO from 1984 to 1989, when he retired as chairman emeritus.*

*He served on the boards of numerous corporations, as well as on the Robert E. Lee Council of the Boy Scouts of America, the Multiple Numbness Society, the Boards of Trustees of Beauregard College and of Agnes Trundleberg Seminary, was a past president of the Nowhere Chamber of Commerce, and of the Amos Glotz Society of America. He held membership in numerous professional, business, and technical societies, was a member of Sigma Chi and of Rotary, and was particularly active in working to make Nowhere the host city for the 1960 International Widgeting Competition.*

*He is survived by his wife of 53 years, the former Mary Ann McCarthy of Clam Beach, CA; sons, Water Jr. and Airtight; ten grandchildren; and one great-grandchild.*

*Memorial services were conducted on 4 August 200X at the Nowhere Memorial Church, with interment at Serenity Memorial Gardens in Nowhere, and military honors were provided by the American Legion, Nowhere Post 246.*

—Chet Shaddeau '47