



JORDAN GREEN The Blackwell Journal-Tribune

Members of the Wichita Navy Reserve carry the casket of Rex E. Wise toward a hearse at the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport on Tuesday.

After 79 years, World War II veteran’s remains return home

BY JORDAN GREEN
The Blackwell (Okla.)
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Southwest Airlines Flight No. 6590 glistened in the sun as it arrived at the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport at 11:28 a.m. Tuesday.

As the plane pulled up to Gate No. 4, a crowd waved and cheered from inside the airport. Airport firefighters parked their bright, green trucks on the tarmac, spraying the plane down with water as it pulled up to gate.

Helen Weller and her family watched as members of the Wichita Navy Reserve removed a flag-draped coffin from the cargo bay of the plane. “It’s a great feeling,” Weller, 87, said. “I’m just thankful that we got him home.”

Seventy-nine years and 10 months after he was killed during the 1941 attack on the Pearl Harbor Naval Base, World War II veteran Rex E. Wise was brought home to south central Kansas on Tuesday.

His remains were delivered to his family and funeral home workers at the Wichita Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport during a ceremony Tuesday, the 245th birthday of the U.S. Navy – and one day before Wise would have been 100



Rex E. Wise

PERSONNEL WITH THE DEFENSE POW/MIA ACCOUNTING AGENCY IDENTIFIED WISE’S REMAINS ON OCT. 17, 2019, AFTER EXAMINING HIS DENTAL RECORDS AND OBTAINING SALIVA FROM HIS SISTER.

years old. “It’s a great feeling,” Weller, Wise’s niece, said at the ceremony.

Wise was born in Braman, Oklahoma, on Oct. 14, 1920. He later moved to South Haven, Kansas.

He was stationed onboard the USS Oklahoma at Pearl Harbor on the Hawaiian island of Oahu on Dec. 7, 1941, when Japanese aerial forces bombed the harbor, the impetus for the United States to enter World War II. Wise was one of 429 men onboard the USS Oklahoma who died in the attack.

Wise, who was 21 years old at the time, was one of hundreds of sailors at the base whose bodies couldn’t be immediately identified.

Following the attack, the Navy buried the bodies of deceased sailors from the USS Oklahoma in the Halawa and Nu’uanu cemeteries on the island of Oahu. Some sailors, including Wise, were later reburied in an area known as the “Punchbowl” at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu. Wise’s remains were exhumed from the memorial cemetery in 2015 for analysis.

Personnel with the Defense POW/MIA Account-

ing Agency identified Wise’s remains on Oct. 17, 2019, after examining his dental records and obtaining saliva from his sister, Eunice Wittum.

Wise was exhumed three different times before he was identified, his family said.

On Wednesday – which would have been his 100th birthday – he’ll be laid to rest for the last time. He’ll be buried alongside his parents in the Braman Cemetery, just 10 miles away from South Haven.

BRINGING HIM HOME
During the Tuesday ceremony at the airport, members of the Wichita Navy Reserve presented Wise’s flag-draped casket to personnel with Roberts and Sons Funeral Home of Blackwell, Oklahoma, the company overseeing Wise’s burial on Wednesday.

Members of the American Legion Riders escorted his casket from the airport after the ceremony.

Air Force veteran David Ruedy, a member of the American Legion Riders, was one of more than 20 motorcycle-riding Legion members in the escort.

“This is a first for me, and I’m sure it’s a first for most of us,” he said.

“We’ve had the honor of – and it doesn’t sound right when you say the ‘honor’ – but we have had the honor of escorting fallen soldiers from every war when they come into the airport, whether it’s local, whether it’s down in Oklahoma, but World War II? This is a first, and I am amazed that they are finally getting these remains back to the family.”

REMEMBERING REX
Few of Wise’s survivors had the chance to meet him. Weller, the oldest of Rex Wise’s nieces and nephews, was one. “I was 3 years old the last I saw him,” she said at the ceremony.

She remembers when Rex’s mother, Belle Wise, heard the news that Rex had been killed. However, the loss seemed to be doubled. At the time, she thought that both Rex and his brother, Wid Wise, were dead. Both had been stationed at Pearl Harbor.

Weller’s mother got the telegram, too. “That was the first I remember,” she said. “Mom got the telegram, and that’s the first time – I was probably 7 – but that’s the first time I saw my mother cry. That’s what I remember.”

The family didn’t know that Wid left the base for an assignment in Australia just two weeks earlier. And they didn’t find out he was alive for a year.

“During the war, you didn’t get letters,” Weller said. “But he did send a telegram from New York on Mother’s Day to Grandma the next year, and said, ‘I’m in New York. I’m fine. Happy Mother’s Day.’ That was the first we knew he was alive.”

Even though Wid was still living, the family mourned the loss of Rex. They didn’t know where he was.

Now, they do. “Words just can’t describe it,” she said. “I wish we could have known him, but it wasn’t meant to be.”

Wise was originally supposed to be brought home in April, but the family opted to postpone his burial because of the coronavirus pandemic.

“It’s been a long time,” Weller said. “We thought we were going to have this in April, and we decided to cancel it on account of the virus deal. I’m just thankful that we can have it now, and it’s a beautiful day. The people are so nice. Really, everything worked out for the best.”

As the white hearse drove away from the tarmac, Weller smiled.

Rex was home. “It’s just kind of unbelievable,” she said. “We knew it was coming. He’s finally being laid to rest.”

either the orange or red zones.”

The Hutchinson district’s gating criteria is less restrictive than the criteria from the Kansas State Department of Education. Reno County has a two-week case rate of roughly 610 per 100,000, according to data from the Reno County Health Department and using 2010 census data.

Last week, Hutchinson Public Schools switched to a hybrid model because of a “significant increase” in cases, according to a letter sent to guardians and parents. In the hybrid model, students alternate being at school or remote Monday through Thursday. All students will be remote on Fridays.

The Reno County Health Department also issued an order limiting mass gatherings of 100 or more people. The order takes effect Wednesday and has several exemptions, including outdoor stadiums “where large numbers of people are present but are generally not within 6 feet of one another for more than 10 minutes” and are able to socially distance.



JAIME GREEN The Wichita Eagle

For the past several weeks, Kansas Honor Banners has been hanging flags around Wichita that are printed with the names and photographs of veterans who have served the country. This one of former Wichita Mayor Carl Brewer is near the corner of Douglas and McLean.

Banners over Wichita highlight veterans’ service for holiday

BY AMY RENEE LEIKER
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A Kansas organization is offering a unique way to pay tribute to military men and women in time for Veterans Day.

For the past several weeks, Kansas Honor Banners has been hanging flags around Wichita that are printed with the names and photographs of veterans who have served the country.

Families and others can purchase a banner for \$225 that will hang in Old Town, the historic Delano business district or the NoMar International Marketplace district through the end of the year – and then again over the Veterans Day holiday in 2021. After that, the banners will be given to the families to keep at home.

“It’s the first time we’ve done this in Wichita,” said Robert Chavez, project coordinator and member of Veterans Unidos, a local nonprofit dedicated to honoring Hispanic military men and women.

“It’s overwhelming, the power of veterans’ stories. And we’re telling them through banners.”

So far at least 80 banners are hanging around town.

But the group is looking for people to help fund more.

“We have all the poles in Wichita,” Chavez said.

“It’s a matter of respectfully doing this in a dignified way to honor these heroes.”

Chavez said bringing Kansas Honor Banners to Wichita coincides with the 100th anniversary of the state’s oldest Veterans of Foreign Wars post, No. 112, which is located at 1560 S. Topeka, near Harry and Broadway in south Wichita.

“All this stuff is fading away,” said Bob Hernan-

dez, a veteran and member of the VFW Post 112, adding that the wants “to make damn sure” his grandchildren and others “understand the importance of military and veterans.”

Projects like Kansas Honor Banners help, he said.

“This year it’s more meaningful because there is no (Veterans Day) parade,” Chavez said, noting that the annual event has been canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The odds are stacked against us in a COVID year, but we made this happen anyway.”

Anyone who wants to purchase a banner in honor of a family member or who wants to donate a banner for someone else, can do so by visiting www.kansashonorbanners.com or calling 316-302-4893. Companies can also inquire about sponsoring the project over the phone.

The organization is asking family members to provide a high-resolution digital photograph of their loved one in uniform, but it can also help find one.

In addition to photos, the banners will also display veterans’ names, military branches, ranks and years of service.

The order deadline for banners to be hung in time for Veterans Day is Oct. 14. Seventy-five dollars of each banner’s cost will be donated to Sedgwick County veterans organizations.

Originally the banners were only supposed to hang for a month.

But the city agreed to let them fly longer this year, Chavez said.

“You’re going to get veterans over Old Town for the holidays.”

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Newton grades 7-12 moving online; Hutch OKs some sports fans

BY MICHAEL STAVOLA
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Newton Public Schools will move into an orange zone in its gating criteria next week, meaning students in seventh through 12th grade will move to remote learning and sports can continue, but now without fans.

Limited fans will still be allowed at home games this week.

The move is due to the increased spread of COVID-19 in the community, according to school officials. Pre-kindergarten through sixth grade will go from on-site to hybrid next week.

USD 373’s criteria looks at absenteeism and two statistics over the past couple of weeks: percent of positive cases and the rate of new cases. The rate



KELSEY BRUNNER AP file photo

A doctor notes equipment related to COVID-19 case and testing.

of new cases was its worst scoring criteria, with 260.8 new COVID-19 cases per 100,000 residents in Harvey County the last two weeks.

In Hutchinson, the Board of Education approved changing its gating criteria to allow fans despite being on the “high

side of the orange currently, nearing the red zone,” USD 308 said in a news release on Tuesday.

“The (change allows) two spectators per participant at games in both the red and orange zone,” the release says. “The original gating criteria did not allow for spectators in