

USS Oklahoma sailor returns home after 80 years

By Jordan Green

The Blackwell Journal-Tribune

WICHITA, Kan. — 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 the 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, Oklahoma-born World War II veteran Rex E. Wise was brought home on Tuesday.

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



Members of the Wichita Navy Reserve carry the casket of Rex E. Wise toward a hearse at the Dwight D. Eisenhower National Airport in Wichita on Tuesday. [JORDAN GREEN/THE BLACKWELL JOURNAL-TRIBUNE]

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 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 Accounting 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, 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, 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. “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.”

EPIC

From Page A1

free virtual school available in all Oklahoma counties. No virtual charter school can operate in Oklahoma without having a contract with the Statewide Virtual Charter School Board.

The board also could reach a settlement agreement with Epic.

“Fairness did not prevail today, but it’s important to understand what did happen,” Epic Superintendent Bart Banfield said in a statement. “The SVCSB (Statewide Virtual Charter School Board) voted to initiate the process to terminate, but it is a process that provides EPIC due process with that Board, as well as other legal options. So far, only one side of the story has been allowed to be told.”

The board can terminate a charter contract if a school fails to meet standards of fiscal management, breaches the contract or violates state law.

The board’s attorney, Marie Schuble, said she found a litany of contract violations in the audit of Epic. She recommended the termination process begin.

The Oklahoma State Auditor and Inspector’s Office reported Epic dodged penalties and falsely reported millions of dollars in

financial reports to the state. On Monday, the Oklahoma State Board of Education demanded Epic repay \$11.2 million of these misidentified funds.

Auditors said Epic wrongfully commingled money between Epic One-on-One and Epic Blended. These are separate school districts and are not allowed to share funds with each other, auditors said.

The company managing Epic, run by Epic’s co-founders, reportedly transferred \$203,000 in taxpayer dollars to a charter school in California, as well. Epic employees in Oklahoma did administrative work for the California school and other in-state school districts, but invoices for that work long went unpaid, according to the audit.

“I have to prove every single one of these facts at a hearing,” Schuble said during the meeting. “They have a chance to refute every single one of these facts at a hearing. The way the board is able to hear both sides is to enter into this process to allow that to happen, and it won’t be immediate.”

The hearing must take place at least 90 days away to give Epic and Schuble enough time to prepare arguments, evidence and witness lists. The earliest it could begin is Jan. 11.

Board member Phyllis Shepherd cast the only vote against starting the termination



Epic Charter Schools Superintendent Bart Banfield addresses the Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board during its meeting Tuesday at the Oklahoma History Center. [DOUG HOKE/THE OKLAHOMAN]

process. Although Schuble assured her Epic could argue its case in a hearing, Shepherd said she didn’t want to start down the path toward ending the contract until the school could defend itself.

“I just think until Epic has a chance to go back and get a chance to prove whatever it is that they need to prove — just because it showed up on the audit doesn’t necessarily mean that it’s Gospel,” Shepherd said after the meeting. “I just feel like it’s way too early to start even talking about that until all the facts are out in the open.”

Some feared the board might

end Epic One-on-One’s contract on Tuesday and close the school immediately.

Banfield pleaded with the board to think of the thousands of students and employees who rely on the virtual school. Epic grew its enrollment dramatically over the summer and now has more students than any school district in Oklahoma.

“An emotional rush to judgment creates more uncertainty for families at the very time they need security and stability from their government,” Banfield said while giving public comment to the board. “It would hurt more than 61,000 students

and their families who have chosen Epic Charter Schools this year. In addition, 2,100 employees who depend on Epic for their livelihoods would be negatively affected.”

One mother said Epic parents were afraid the board would send their children’s education into limbo.

“If you pull the charter on Epic, what are we going to do with our kids?” she said in public comment.

Board members attempted to soothe worries by assuring the termination, if it happens at all, wouldn’t occur on Tuesday. Education at Epic won’t be interrupted for the time being.

Should the board cancel its contract with Epic One-on-One, Epic’s Blended Centers could continue to operate.

The Blended Centers operate in Tulsa County and Oklahoma County. They have a separate charter sponsor, Rose State College, and fuse in-person education and virtual learning at their physical sites.

When reached for comment Monday, Rose State did not commit to considering a termination of its contract with Epic Blended.

“Any statement at this time would be premature before all of the facts are laid out and as entities are still meeting around the issue,” the college said in a statement.

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TODAY’S PRAYER

God of wisdom, it is the detours of life that give us new experiences. Encourage us to embrace the journey. Amen.

ICU

From Page A1

daily new COVID-19 cases increase and hospitalizations continue trending upward, said Heather Yazdanipour, a regional director of the Regional Medical Response System.

She said additional pressure was exerted by patient transfers in from rural areas where people wearing masks “are laughed at.”

The state Health Department reported 1,309 new infections Tuesday. The 760 statewide hospitalizations reported Monday were a record.

In Oklahoma City, the number of COVID-19 ICU

patients had nearly doubled in the past 30 days.

The city of Oklahoma City emergency management office reported 98 metro-area ICU hospitalizations as of Sunday, up from 55 on Sept. 10. Overall hospitalizations hit 267, a nearly 50% increase in a month, the office reported.

“We are definitely feeling a crunch and all of our facilities are well above capacity, they’re functioning at an average of about 110% to 120% capacity,” Yazdanipour said.

Oklahoma Senate Democrats sent Gov. Kevin Stitt a letter Tuesday saying the state “faces a serious public health emergency” and urging implementation of White House Coronavirus Task Force recommendations.

They called on the governor

to rely on the advice of medical experts, provide public schools with resources to prevent spread of COVID-19, and minority and under-served communities have access to affordable health care.

Matt Stacy, special advisor to the state health commissioner, said the department was “closely monitoring hospital capacity and working with hospitals to ensure they have the resources they need to give the best quality care.”

“There are a lot of factors that can influence data on any given day, and we will continue to monitor hospitalizations closely to see if state intervention is required to ensure hospital beds are available to COVID patients who need them,” he said in a written statement.

Stacy said staffed ICU bed availability averaged 5.8% in Oklahoma County in the past seven days.

Yazdanipour said hospital staff was being stretched by patients from the state prison system and patients with mental illnesses. Both classes of patients require “extra hands,” she said.

Mayor David Holt said recently “things would be worse” without the mask ordinance. Yazdanipour called it “our saving grace.”

Dr. Patrick McGough, executive director of the Oklahoma City-County Health Department, offered a hopeful remark, saying there were signs a decline in new Oklahoma County cases could be in the offing after recent daily peaks.

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