NEWS · OCT 13, 2026 · MARK DEVON

Don Wackford - One of the greats - Obituary



WPA and PGI member Donald Eugene Wackford passed away at age 87 on August 16, 2026 at Mercy General Hospital in Sacramento, CA.

If there is one thing most people here know about Don, it is that he loved fireworks. He fell in love with fireworks as a teenager and began putting on shows for family and friends at Elk Grove Park during the 1950s and 1960s.



By 1973, he had connected with Max P. Vander Horck and other fireworks enthusiasts who gathered in Grand Haven, Michigan, for the first convention of the Pyrotechnics Guild International, or PGI. Don was a charter member and its first Vice President. Over the years, he attended 50 PGI conventions throughout the United States and served as a fireworks competition judge for more than 35 years. On nights when he was not judging Don would teach those near him in the audience correct pyrotechnic nomenclature and what judges look for in a competitor's device. In overseeing elections at PGI Don's integrity insured that outcomes would be respected without question. Don's wife Barbara also volunteered at the PGI, helping with the Art Show for many years.



Don was a retired California Public Display Operator. Working with Don on a display was a lesson in how to do things correctly with safety always as the first priority. Don followed the law and did not take shortcuts. Don always had enough crew to do the job properly. This was especially important in the days of hand fired shows when magazine tenders, shell re-loaders and shell lighters all had to work in tight coordination under Don's watchful supervision. To have learned from Don was a privilege as he wasn't motivated by ego or greed, just the correct and safe presentation of the pyrotechnic art.



His passion even took him to Hong Kong and Macau, where he continued exploring the world of fireworks. Don developed a system for age-dating fireworks that is now accepted internationally.



And, perhaps most importantly, he shared his passion with his family. Barbara, Jenci, and his grandsons joined him at numerous conventions—from Wyoming to Pennsylvania. Every summer, a weeklong convention brought three or four hours of fireworks each night, filling their lives with wonder, excitement, and joy.





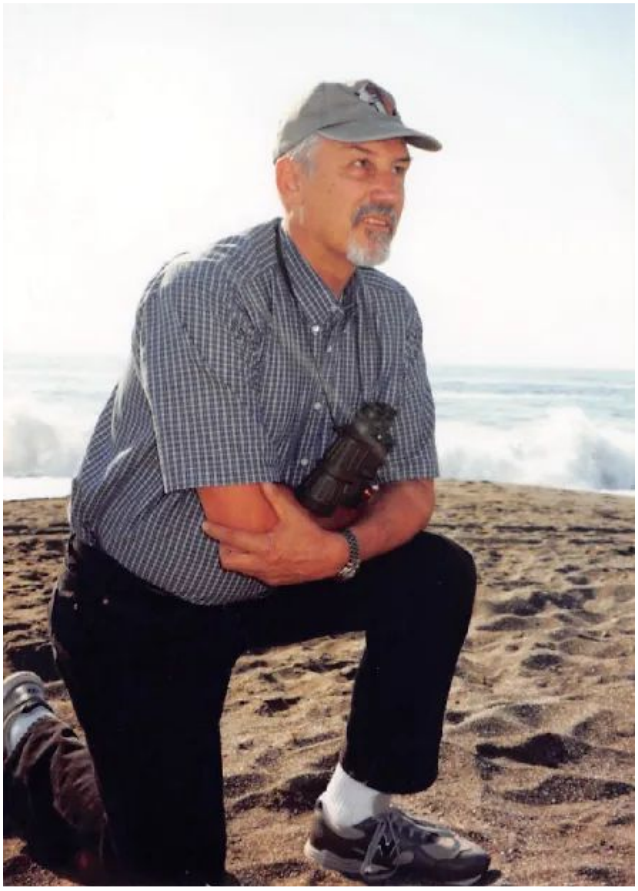
In 2022, Don received the Vander Horck Circle of Excellence Award for his outstanding dedication and service to the PGI. Through the PGI and the Western Pyrotechnic Association, Don developed friendships that lasted a lifetime.

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While Don’s accomplishments in the field of pyrotechnics are impeccable, he will also be remembered as a Navy veteran; civil engineer for the County of Sacramento in the Water Resources Department; co-founder of Sacramento Valley Shooting Center; Board member, President and licensed pyrotechnic operator of the Elk Grove Strauss Festival; husband, father, grandfather and owner of the beagle DeNiro.

Don’s was truly a full life. He will be missed.



BLOG

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