



Albert Al Wayne Stratton

December 4, 1923 - September 8, 2018

Wayne, as he was known to family and friends in his early years, was born on December 4, 1923. He was the first child and only son born to Bert and Ivy Stratton. Several years later his sisters Betty and Barbara were born, completing the Stratton family.

The family lived in Everson where Wayne's love of the outdoors, hunting, and fishing flourished. He and his dad got to know every fishing lake in the area. On occasion they ventured into the mountains of Canada on horseback for remarkable hunting and fishing adventures.

Wayne attended Mt. Baker High School where he not only excelled academically, but also furthered his love for music. He was a gifted singer and was invited to sing in state competitions. He rarely turned down requests to sing at weddings and in churches.

Family lore has it that at the tender age of 5, Wayne declared that he wanted to be a surgeon when he grew up. And so began that journey.

Wayne went to the University of Washington, majoring in sciences. He continued to sing with his friends in the International House. Then it was on to medical school at Northwestern Medical College. He had joined the Army Reserves and this helped him pay for his schooling.

Wayne was a handsome, smart young man and always had an eye for pretty, smart women. At a dance in Chicago, he met a lovely young woman, Jeanne Wasilewicz. It wasn't long before they fell in love and married. While Wayne finished his studies in med school, Jeanne continued her modeling career to support the couple. When Wayne finished medical school, they drove back to Everson where they made a home. On June 24, 1949 they welcomed their son, Charles Bert. But their happiness was not to last. On January 30, 1950, Jeanne died.

Establishing a career as a young doctor with an infant son to support proved to be a challenge. During one memorably severe winter storm, when electricity was out and roads were blocked, he walked several miles through driving snow to deliver a baby on a kitchen table. A wood stove provided warmth and a candle provided light.

Before too long, however, Wayne was called up from the Army Reserves and was able to again further his medical education. He eventually fulfilled his lifetime desire to become a thoracic surgeon.

It was when he joined the Army that Wayne became known as Al, because as he said, the Army did not recognize middle names. About the time that Al joined the Army he renewed his acquaintance with a girl from Everson, Margie Gritch. Marge was a great counterpart to the serious doctor. She was gorgeous and funny, with a great streak of irreverence. After they wed they moved around to where the Army sent them... Texas, Colorado, Germany, Panama. While living in France, their son Mark was born on October 7, 1959.

Over the years, Big Al, as he was called by some military colleagues due to his commanding and capable presence, was sent to war zones in Korea and Vietnam. In Korea he was in the middle of combat zones and earned a bronze

and a silver star. In one instance, as reported in a newspaper article, he dashed through intense enemy fire more than 10 times to assist casualties. As the tank commander commented, "Maybe he didn't know where he was the first time, but he sure knew he was going deep into enemy territory after that."

Al retired from the Army in 1972 as a Colonel and settled in Bellingham with his family.

But he certainly did not retire from life.

Al turned his interests to wine making and assisted at the Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Unit of Washington State University in Mount Vernon. Among the group there was a general opinion that grapes could not be successfully grown in that corner of the state. He set out to disprove that theory and in 1978 began planning for Mt. Baker Vineyards. The winery, 11th in the state, opened its tasting room in 1983.

Marge and Al tended the vineyards for years, offering interesting wines such as Mueller Thurgau, Madeleine Angevine, and Siegerrebe. They also met some very interesting and memorable people along the way. At the same time, Al renewed his interest in woodworking and cutting semi-precious stones.

His favorite time, however, was with his granddaughters, Realyn and Julie. He taught them to fish, clam, and catch crabs. He supported them with kind, firm advice and listened to their challenges in life and love. With them he found joy and happiness in music once again. He made sure that the girls had a good musical foundation with years of lessons. He encouraged them to practice and play. He joined in by learning to play the organ and piano and even joined the local organ society. He also composed a few tunes of his own.

Al will be mightily missed by his sons Charles (wife Christine) and Mark (wife Belinda) and his beloved granddaughters Realyn and Julie. He is also survived by his sister Betty (husband Blake) and his many nephews and nieces.

Although we will all miss him very much, the Big Al stories will live on.