2014 Scholarship Winner
Connor Wallace

The NAVVF Scholarship Committee is pleased to announce that the winner of the 2014 Lambert and Annetje Van Valkenburg Memorial Scholarship Award is Connor Wallace, 18, of South Roy, UT, son of Nancy Jane Van Valkenburg and Brice Lionel Wallace. Connor is a senior at Roy High School and plans to attend Weber State University in Ogden, UT in the fall.

Connor’s winning essay demonstrates the pride he takes in the accomplishments of his world-famous grandfather Mac VV, acknowledging that his grandfather’s legacy in the field of electrical engineering is “a lot to live up to.”

Mac Van Valkenburg,
My Grandfather
By Connor Wallace

My maternal grandfather, Mac Elwyn Van Valkenburg, was born to poor parents, and at age 5 lost his father to an electrical accident. Yet, through his own hard work and drive, Mac went on to become a scientific leader and innovator in the worlds of electrical engineering and higher education.

Mac, born Oct. 5, 1921, was the oldest of five children and the only son of Nora Louise Walker Van Valkenburg and Charles Mc Van Valkenburg. Mac was fascinated by radio as a child, and built his own crystal set so he could listen to broadcasts from his rural home in Union, Utah. As a teenager, Mac was doing farm work to help support his family, and he and some school friends had their own weekly radio show on KSL-AM, advising their fellow ham radio operators.

Mac worked his way through the University of Utah, where he earned his bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering. He married my grandmother, Evelyn Pate Van Valkenburg, and they raised a family while Mac earned his master’s degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and his Ph.D. from Stanford University. As a graduate student, Mac was part of a team of scholars working on the concept of radar and its potential uses in the United States’ World War II effort.

As a professor of electrical engineering at the University of Illinois and at Princeton University, Mac wrote seven textbooks that were considered cutting-edge and were used around the world. My mother remembers answering the phone as a child of 10 or so, and discovering she was talking to a college student from Germany who demanded she fetch her famous father to answer questions about his best known textbook, “Network Analysis.”

Mac traveled to Russia during the Cold War on an education-oriented trip arranged by the United States government. My mother learned just recently, from her older brother, that the real purpose of the trip was for Mac to determine how the Russians were aware of everything that was said in an American Embassy office, despite the lack of electronic listening devices. Mac discovered that, using technology that was then little known by Americans, Russian authorities were bouncing a microwave signal off a metal “dish” mounted on a gift plaque said to be made for the American Embassy by Russian school children.

Mac was a University of Illinois professor from 1955 to 1966, then joined the Princeton University faculty as professor and head of electrical engineering until 1974. He then returned to the University of Illinois as a professor and served as dean of the College of Engineering from 1984 until his retirement in 1988.
Mac received awards and honors for his efforts in engineering education, including the American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) Lamme Medal, the ASEE George Westinghouse Award, the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) Centennial Medal, the Halliburton Engineering Education Leadership Award, and the Guillemin Prize.

IEEE has honored Mac with two awards in his name: the Mac Van Valkenburg Award, the top award of the IEEE Circuits and Systems Society, and the IEEE Education Society's Mac Van Valkenburg Early Career Teaching Award.

Mac died at age 75 on March 13, 1997. During his memorial service, Dr. Steven Samples, a former student of Mac's, remarked, "Mac Van Valkenburg was, first and foremost, a teacher—a teacher par excellence—one of the very best engineering teachers in the world."

I was only one year old when my grandfather died, so I never had the opportunity to know him, but his impact in the field of electrical engineering is undeniable. You might say his legacy is a lot to live up to, and you’d be correct. I don’t know of anyone in my family who has accomplished quite as much as Mac. A new copy of "Network Analysis," a textbook first published in 1955, is selling online for almost $600 today. To me, that is compelling evidence of its groundbreaking nature and continued relevance in the world of electrical engineering.

If you go into the electrical engineering field, you will undoubtedly hear this man’s name, and I am proud to say that Mac Van Valkenburg is my grandfather.