Obituary for Walt Donovan '74

Captain Walter J. Donovan, Jr., a career naval officer whose life centered on family, service, and friendships forged around the world, died peacefully at his Virginia Beach home on October 26, 2026. He was 74.

Walter Joseph Donovan, Jr., was born March 19, 1952, in Quonset Point, Rhode Island, to Walter Joseph Donovan, Sr., a naval aviator, and Elma Helen (Suomi) Donovan. The family settled in Annapolis, Maryland, while his father served as a battalion officer at the United States Naval Academy, his alma mater. Boyhood revolved around the Academy grounds, Saint Mary's Parish, where he served as an altar boy, and northern Wisconsin, where he spent summers on the lake with Uncle Roy and his Suomi cousins. After grade school at Saint Mary's, his father sent him to the Jesuits at Gonzaga College High School in Washington, D.C., beginning an Eye Street legacy that continues to this day.

Following graduation in 1970, Walter entered the Naval Academy, where he was a member of the lightweight crew team. One June night in 1973, in need of a date to the "N" Dance for varsity letter winners, he was set up with the younger sister of a friend, whose father happened to be the Academy's head rowing coach. That date with Kathleen Rebecca Ullrich began a love affair that would define the next four decades of his life. Walter graduated a newly minted ensign in June of 1974 with a degree in general engineering and orders to flight school. The two were married at the Naval Academy Chapel on August 31 of that year, and after a temporary assignment at Patuxent River, they began their new life in Pensacola.

In July 1976, he earned his wings of gold as a Naval Flight Officer and reported to NAS Whidbey Island, Washington, as an electronic countermeasures officer aboard the EA-6B Prowler. Carrier deployments with the VAQ-135 Black Ravens on the USS Nimitz and Kitty Hawk followed, with port calls that doubled as rendezvous for the couple. A tour as a company officer at the Naval Academy coincided with the birth of their son, Liam, in 1982. Back in Whidbey, a series of squadron tours followed: as a department head with the VAQ-139 Cougars aboard the USS Constellation, with a no-notice stint on the Coral Sea in the Gulf of Sidra backing up the Black Ravens; as executive officer of the VAQ-129 Vikings ashore; and as XO and later commanding officer of the VAQ-138 Yellowjackets aboard the USS Nimitz. It was toward the end of this 1991 deployment to the Persian Gulf that his daughter, Courtney, was born; they would meet a month later on the Whidbey tarmac.

Post-command duty followed as a plankowner aboard the USS George Washington; at U.S. European Command in Stuttgart, Germany, as chief of the Joint Reconnaissance Center; at the National War College at Fort McNair, where he earned a master's degree in 1998; and as a senior military advisor at the State Department, where he served as a member of the U.S. diplomatic mission to the OSCE in Vienna, Austria.

In 2001, he returned to Hampton Roads as chief of staff to Commander, Cruiser-Destroyer Group Eight, later the Theodore Roosevelt Strike Group, a unit comprised of seven ships, upwards of 70 aircraft, and more than 7,000 sailors. Operating from the eastern Mediterranean Sea in the spring of 2003, the group helped launch the "shock and awe" strikes that opened Operation Iraqi Freedom.

Walter retired from active duty in 2004 after 30 years and more than 3,000 flight hours in the Prowler. His decorations included the Defense Superior Service Medal and the Legion of Merit. He was an enthusiastic member of the Martin-Baker Tie Club, Class of 1984. He spent another decade as a civilian contractor with Northrop Grumman, managing the Navy's Combined Tactical Training Range out of NAS Oceana until 2014.

After the death of his beloved wife of 36 years, Kathy, in 2011, Walter's energy was devoted to the community. He was a longtime officer and past president of the Broad Bay Island Civic League, a parishioner and Eucharistic minister at the Church of the Holy Family, a member of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and president of the Men's Golf Association at Broad Bay Country Club. In his final years, surrounded by friends, family, and Finnegan, his Spanish water dog, he was always on the go: exploring Europe and the Middle East with Courtney; visiting his grandkids in Northern Virginia; spending deer season on the Brule River; or planning golf trips with his MGA buddies.

Walter was preceded in death by his wife, Kathleen; his parents, Walter Sr. and Elma; his sister, Barbara Ann; and his brother, Thomas. He is survived by his son, Liam Patrick Donovan, and his wife, Sarah, of Alexandria; his daughter, Courtney Helen Donovan, of Virginia Beach; four grandchildren, Liam (Patrick) Jr., Katherine, Michael Walter, and Caroline; and his mother-in-law, Rebecca Ullrich, of Virginia Beach.

A funeral Mass will be held at 11 a.m. on Wednesday, November 11, at the Church of the Holy Family, 1279 N. Great Neck Road, Virginia Beach. Military honors and interment at Arlington National Cemetery—where he will be laid to rest beside Kathy, and where his parents and sister also rest—will take place at a later date. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made in his memory to Gonzaga College High School.