



# BERKS COUNTY GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY

# JOURNAL

Fall 2021

## 3 generations of Heisers buried at Arlington



*Photo courtesy of Sabine Sophia Henze, worldwideontour.de*



**George William Heiser**  
1915-1959



**Gary George Heiser**  
1937-2008



**Michael George Heiser**  
1960-1996

*see full article – page 3*

***“The Mission of the Berks County Genealogical Society is to promote genealogical research and education by collecting, preserving, and sharing information and knowledge with our members and others.”***

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## **JOURNAL – Official Publication of the Society**

The JOURNAL is published four times per year and is included with your membership. The Journal is distributed to members as a pdf file sent to your e-mail address. Paper subscriptions are available for \$12 per year in addition to your membership fee.  
Editor, Laurel Miller – laurelmlr@gmail.com

### *A note from the Editor*

In addition to publishing family histories written by members, we would like to include original reference material, genealogical finding aids and helps, and other tidbits of useful information, especially for Berks County genealogy. Please send any and all submissions to the Journal editor at the address listed above. Deadline for submissions for the next issue will be November 10.

### *Cover Photo Credits:*

Wedding photo of George William and his wife Anita courtesy of his son, George William (Bill) Heiser II, who also provided scans of the maps included in the article. Photo of Gary Heiser from his obituary in the *Daytona Beach News-Journal*, 1/23/2008. Military photo of Michael Heiser courtesy of his mother Fran (Neri) Heiser, who also provided the tombstone photos on page five.

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# Three Generations of Heisers Buried At Arlington

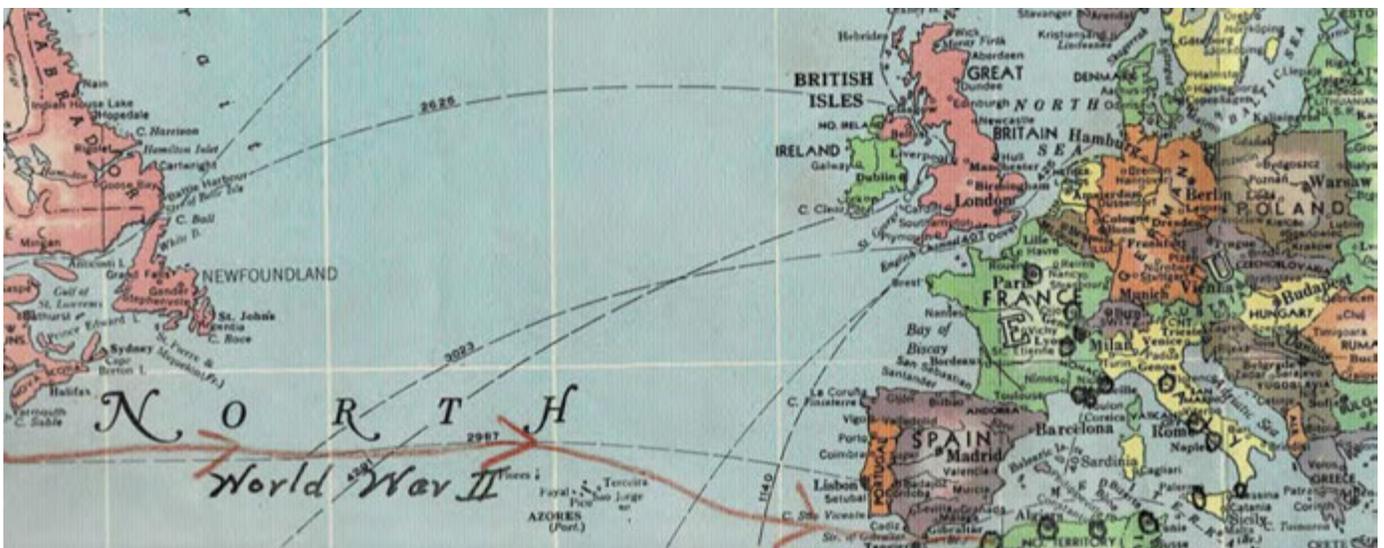
by Jeff Heiser

Like most folks who research their family tree, I've uncovered some unique characters. I am part of the 8<sup>th</sup> generation of Heisers born in America. Instead of telling you about my 6<sup>th</sup> great-grandfather, Johann Adam Heiser, coming to America or family members from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, I want to share the story of the Heiser family member born around the same time as me. Michael George Heiser was born September 20, 1960, in Sanford, Florida. His father, Gary George Heiser, is my eldest cousin. Michael's grandfather, George William Heiser, died just 17 months prior to Michael's birth. He was just 44 years old.

All three are buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Eligibility for in-ground burial at Arlington National Cemetery is the most stringent of all U.S. national cemeteries. According to the Arlington National Cemetery website, eligibility is determined at the time of need and includes:

- active duty or retired members of the Armed Forces (excluding those who served on active duty for training only), their spouses, minor children, or dependent adult children.
- Recipients of Medal of Honor, Distinguished Service Cross, Navy Cross, Air Force Cross, Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, or Purple Heart.
- Any former Prisoner of War whose service terminated honorably and died on or after November 30, 1993.

Let's start with my uncle, George William Heiser (24 Feb 1915 - 14 Apr 1959). He died when I was just 14 months old, so I have no memory of him. George was born in Reading and graduated from Reading High School. My genealogy research shows him living just two blocks away from my family in West Reading in the 1950s. Like many young men, he joined the Army in 1942. After graduating from the officer candidate course of the infantry school at Fort Benning, GA, he was commissioned a second lieutenant in the infantry in 1943 and was honorably discharged as a captain of the 7<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion in early 1954. During World War II, his unit traveled through the Strait of Gibraltar to North Africa (Oran, Algiers, Constantine, Bizerte), Sicily (Palermo and Messina), Italy (Naples,



Rome, Florence), and southern France (Nice, Toulon, Marseille, Lyon, Dijon, and Paris). He served in Korea as a special service and operations officer with the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. He helped organize the USO shows in over 30 places in South and North Korea to boost the soldiers' morale. During his military career, George received the Purple Heart and a special commendation medal for his work in operating a leadership school at the Indiantown Gap Military Reservation. A few months after being discharged, he re-enlisted to be an Army recruiter for the Reading area, a position he held for approximately 2 years. Next, he was stationed at the US Military Hospital in Valley Forge. While there, he was diagnosed with stomach cancer and died in that hospital. On April 20, 1959, George William Heiser was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.



My cousin, Gary George Heiser (22 Mar 1937 - 18 Jan 2008), is 21 years older than me. After graduation from West Reading High School in 1955, he was sworn into the U.S. Army by his father. Gary and his family moved from base to base. He married Francis Maria (Fran) Neri (23 Dec 1941 - 25 Apr 2018) on Valentine's Day in 1970 in Monmouth, NJ where he was stationed at that time. Gary's 22 years of active service were mostly with the Army Security Agency (ASA), the United States Army's signals intelligence branch. This job made him proud and took him to many places around the world including Korea, Japan, two tours in Vietnam, and Augsburg and West Berlin, Germany. After acquiring the rank of E-9 Sergeant Major, he retired from his military career in 1977. The family settled in Palm Coast, FL.



Michael George Heiser (20 Sep 1960 - 25 Jun 1996) continued the family military tradition by enlisting in the Air Force right after graduation. He served in the Air Force for 17 years, including several tours of duty during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. He had been stationed overseas for many years and helped coordinate a security detail for President Bill Clinton's visit to an air base in Germany. He rose to the rank of Master Sergeant. As a communications engineer, he flew aboard F-15 and F-16 fighter-bombers. He went to Dhahran from Patrick Air Force Base near Cocoa Beach, where he served with the 71st Rescue Squadron of the 1st Rescue Group, according to a base spokesman.

Michael was serving his third tour of duty during the 1991 Persian Gulf War. At the beginning of June 1996, Michael was posted at the Khobar Towers housing compound at King Abdul Aziz Air Base in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, supporting Operation Southern Watch. Around 10 pm on the night of June 25, 1996, a large gas truck, followed by a car, made its way to the building. The truck then parked beside the northern building. Two men got out and hurried into the car, which sped off. Guards on duty sensed danger, sounded the alarm, and people began



evacuating the 8-story building. A short time later, the truck exploded. The explosion killed 19 Airmen, including Michael, and injured more than 350 service members and civilians. It was so powerful that all the windows in a 2-mile radius were blown out.

During his 17 years of outstanding service in the Air Force, Michael was awarded the following: the Purple Heart, the Meritorious Service Medal, the Air Medal, the Aerial Achievement Medal, the Air Force Commendation Medal, the Air Force Achievement Medal, the Joint Meritorious Unit Award, the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award, the Navy Meritorious Unit Commendations, the Combat Readiness Medal, the Air Force Good Conduct Medal, the National Defense Service Medal, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal, the Southwest Asia Service Medal, the Humanitarian Service Medal, the Air Force Overseas Long Tour Ribbon, the Air Force Longevity Service Award Ribbon, the NCO Professional Military Education Graduation, the Small Arms Expert Marksmanship Ribbon, the Air Force Training Ribbon and the Kuwait Liberation Medal from the Saudi Arabian government and Kuwait.

Michael was buried at Arlington National Cemetery on September 20, 1996. Unlike most gravestones at Arlington, Michael's includes an inscription on the back side: EVERYONES BEST FRIEND HIGHLY DECORATED AND DEDICATED TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE. When his father, Gary, passed away in 2008, he became the third Heiser from this family to be buried at Arlington. George's wife, Kathryn Anderson (29 Mar 1920 - 22 Sep 1983), and Gary's wife, Francis Maria Neri, are buried at Arlington as well.



After Michael's death, Gary and Fran established the HEISER FOUNDATION to support and fight for the rights of the surviving service member's families. To help her cope with the loss of their only child, Fran built the website, MICHAELHEISER.NET, a memorial to him and the 18 other airmen who lost their lives in the Khobar Towers bombing in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. On June 25, 1997, one year after the bombing, the Khobar Towers eternal flame monument and memorial wall at Eglin Air Force Base, FL, were dedicated. June 25, 2021, marks the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of this horrific event.