Few have exhibited the steady commitment and unflinching devotion to the ideals of Notre Dame Law School that Captain William O. McLean has. As associate dean, he has presided over changes including a major expansion and renovation of the facilities, a marked and rapid increase in applicant numbers, and the acquisition of new computer technology throughout the Law School. Though he has a worthy successor in the new Assistant Dean Patricia Leonard, his presence and spirit will be missed.

Captain McLean holds a bachelor's in school administration from the University of New Mexico, awarded in 1957, an M.S. in international affairs earned in 1969 at George Washington University, and a Notre Dame M.A. in education awarded in 1975. He came to Notre Dame after a distinguished 32-year career in the Navy, first to teach Naval Science and later to become professor and associate dean at the Law School. During his military career he served as a staff officer at the SALT talks in Vienna and Helsinki; he also won the Legion of Merit — one of the nation's highest awards for non-combat service.

The following reflections on Captain McLean and his tenure at the Law School describe his many achievements here at Notre Dame. Fortunately, he retains emeritus status and may still be seen around the Law School.

They Call Him “The Captain”: William O. McLean

David T. Link
Dean of the Law School

Some call him Bill, Dean or even Mr. McLean. But to most, Associate Dean William McLean remains the Captain. To be sure, the designation stems from his many years in a first career, that of United States Naval Officer. But his long service in the Law School gave the term an added dimension, an added emphasis, an added confirmation.

Captain’s tenure in the Law School, first as assistant dean and later as associate dean, encompassed virtually all of my 19 years as dean. Shortly after I became dean in June 1975, I approached the provost asking for some short-term administrative assistance. We had just lost an assistant dean and I had moved up from the associate dean slot, in addition our Law School administrator had resigned. The provost said he could spare Bill McLean who was recently had been in charge of the ROTC program on campus and was now working in the Financial Aid Office. But only for a few months.

So, the Captain joined us at the Law School in the fall of 1975 “on loan” for six months from Financial Aid. I was able to extend his “loan” status until the end of the academic year, and then, like the tool that is constantly borrowed by a neighbor, eventually Captain never returned!

Captain served as my personal accountant in budgetary matters: He could trace, usually from memory, the source and current allocation of any of the funds relating to the Law School. He oversaw our staff with skill and compassion. He served marvelously as the liaison for the Admissions Committee, our Coordinator of Admissions and me, over the years processing literally thousands of thick applicant files. He brought his quiet wisdom to hundreds
of meetings, formal and informal, in my office and elsewhere. He would often refer to the Law School as one of his naval vessels. "The sign of a good command is a happy ship," he would say. Captain saw himself as responsible for ensuring that I ran a "happy ship." That meant an attitude toward administration that focused on ministering to the needs of faculty, staff and students.

Whether providing the minutes for faculty meetings, choreographing the many elections to University and Law School committees, ensuring that our physical plant remained sparkingly beautiful, preparing the Commencement ceremonies, or even arranging for an extra shelf in a faculty office, the Captain's hand was surely felt, though not always seen. And he did all this with a calm confidence. I suppose that a Navy pilot who once made an emergency landing of a burning jet with a nuclear device on board would remain undaunted by whatever passes for a crisis in the Law Building!

Perhaps in part as a result of his military service, the Captain respected the chain of command; he gave his views when asked — as he always was — and, whatever the ultimate decision, supported it as if it were his own. Captain's greatest attribute was his undying loyalty both to the institution and to me personally. We often laughed at the thought that someone like myself, who reached only the rank of Lt. Commander, had a Captain as his Executive Officer. Despite his constant, pervasive impact on the place, he never claimed credit or avoided responsibility. He could make the hard decision and convey it forthrightly to those affected. Indeed, in a movie of the Captain's life, I can imagine Henry Fonda in the title role: gentle but firm — a beacon of leadership, confidence and integrity.

The Captain loved our students. From his first glimpse of them in their application papers, through their graduation and beyond, Captain served as friend, mentor and even surrogate father. He rendered solid advice, emotional support and tireless effort. And the students loved him: They named an award after him and promptly designated him its first recipient!

Despite his steadfast devotion to the Law School, Captain was not married to his job — everyone knows that he is married only to Shirley, his one true love. Seeing Captain and Shirley at lunch in the University Club always reminds one of high-school sweethearts in the neighborhood soda shop. Their children, and their children's children, remain to this day a crucial, dynamic force in their lives. Despite his studied reluctance to discuss his own outstanding accomplishments, he proudly shares with whoever will listen the progress and achievements of his progeny.

The McLeans' lives abound with friendships, many dating from decades ago. Houseguests are a constant feature of their home. The glorious party that Captain and Shirley lovingly hosted each fall trumpeted the beginning of the new school year no less reliably than did Orientation. As family man and as friend, this tough military officer fears nothing — not even displays of warmth and affection.

Perhaps only one serious question remains — after a career in the Navy and another at Notre Dame, how does he deal with the Notre Dame-Navy football game? Even the Captain's great wisdom found no way to protect fully these dual, but colliding loyalties. I hope he won't mind my revealing that he cheers for the Irish but hopes the Navy will "keep it close." Fair enough, Captain!

During my years as dean, I have been blessed with countless colleagues of great talent and service. I will offend none of them by noting that my most important appointment occurred when I designated Captain William McLean as assistant dean. (I took it as a tribute to that appointment when someone joked at a Law School Talent Show that a member of the faculty, pursuing some issue or other,
At right, Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., congratulates Dean McLean on his retirement.

had gone over my head, right to Dean McLean. In many ways, his service has defined my term as dean. For that service, for his example, and for his friendship, I am deeply grateful. More important, the University of Notre Dame, and especially its Law School, have been immeasurably better places because of him. Thanks, Captain!

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Susan Toth '94
Notre Dame Law School

I will always have a particular affinity and affection for those men and women who have served their country in the military. This bias is not so much a result of my own experience as it is a recognition of the sacrifice some people are willing to make for their country. In my mind the person who most clearly demonstrates this willingness is Captain William McLean.

I first came to know the Captain when I was an applicant to Notre Dame. I had returned from the Persian Gulf a wait-listed student, with a husband applying as a transfer student. Both my husband and I pestered Captain McLean until he somehow got us both admitted. Thanks to his respect for the military, Chris and I are proud alumni.

Captain McLean was the guest speaker at the first Military Law Students Association’s Dining Out. During the evening, he reflected on his career in the United States Navy, a career that spanned the years from World War II until after Vietnam. The captain talked about why he had joined the services as a young man in 1944. He said that there was no other option. There was no Oxford or draft deferment. Young men joined because it was the right thing to do. Serving our country was not an imposition, rather it was an honor. That young man who walked into a Navy Recruiting office stayed to serve his country through two more wars and a cold peace. That young man became a member of the SALT negotiations team, trying to ensure the safety of his country. That young man became the helmsman of a great law school. That young man became an example of selflessness and honor for countless law students.

For those who heard the Captain speak that night it was a great lesson in history, and an account of the courage and integrity of a single sailor. The Captain reminded all of us why service is important. I may not ever be the sailor he was, but I know I will always try. If I can demonstrate half the integrity, honor, commitment and courage that is Captain McLean, I know I will have lived a successful life. In the words of an old Navy saying, "Fair winds and following seas," skipper, you will be missed.