William Wesselhoft

William WESSELHOFT I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life, To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife; And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over. - From "Sea Fever," by John Masefield

Born in Boston, MA, on May 1, 1920, Bill attended Milton Academy and Harvard College. A Naval ROTC student, he was commissioned ensign upon graduating from Harvard in June, 1942. The next month, he reported for duty aboard the destroyer, Russell in Pearl Harbor. He served on that vessel for the rest of the war, rising to the rank of full lieutenant. Of the eight destroyers in Bill's squadron, only two, including the Russell, survived the war unscathed. The other six were either sunk or severely damaged by enemy action. In the spring of 1944, while the Russell was undergoing repairs at Bremerton Naval Shipyard, Bill visited Seattle and liked it immensely, both its beautiful setting and sense of future. After the war, he attended Harvard Law School, graduating in October 1948. Bill teamed with law-school friends, Frank Kitchell and Lew Johnson, and the trio drove west in an old Ford, intent on establishing themselves as lawyers. They arrived in Seattle on Oct. 21, 1948, a date they celebrated 50 years later with 300 friends and relatives at a gala celebration at Seattle's Sunset Club. Bill became a member of the Washington Bar Association in 1949 and practiced law with the firm of Ferguson & Burdell until 1992, when that firm merged with Schwabe, Williamson & Wyatt. He practiced with the latter firm until his retirement in 2001. Bill specialized in litigation and was an active member of the American College of Trial Lawyers. In 1974, he was elected president of the Seattle-King County Bar Association. In 1978, he was elected to the state bar's Board of Governors, a three-year position. Later, he served a term with the American Bar Association's House of Delegates. He devoted the final phase of his 53-year law practice to pro bono cases. Bill had a special place in his heart for Cape Cod, MA, where he spent boyhood summers sailing beetle cats and playing baseball, and to which he repaired nearly every summer of his life for a week or two. There he had a home, "The Offshoot," and a wide circle of life-long friends. Though he loved sports, Bill considered himself an exceptional athlete. He never earned a letter in any sport, and several times barely avoided serious skiing accidents. In 30 years of golf, he never saw his handicap drop below 26. On long road trips or during infrequent lulls in conversation, Bill was apt to recite from a treasury of memorized poems, especially from Kipling's "If," which he felt "said it all" about why a person should pursue a life of excellence tempered with modesty. Bill loved the sea, the law, friends and family. He was a superb raconteur, a wise counselor, a devoted father and a proud grandfather. He leaves a loving (and more athletic) wife, Margaret; children, Louise McConkey, Conrad Wesselhoft and Emily Kelly; a brother, Conrad "Pete" Wesselhoft of Tuscaloosa, AL; grandchildren, Will, Patrick and Jack Kelly, and Claire, Kit and Jen Wesselhoft. The family wishes to thank the staff at Park Shore for its devoted service during the past 18 months, Providence Hospice for the compassion it showed during the final days, and Dr. Bob Kitchell for his superb care and loyal friendship. A Service will be held at 2:00 p.m., Wednesday at Plymouth Congregational Church in Seattle. Remembrances may be made to Plymouth Congregational Church, or a charity of your choice.

Published in The Seattle Times from July 22 to July 24, 2007