



ANCC FOUNDATION Did You Know?



Fleet Admiral (FADM) William D. Leahy – Member or Not?

While it is universally recognized that four Five-Star officers (King, Marshall, Nimitz, and Bradley) were members of the Army Navy Country Club, some believe that FADM William D. Leahy (FDR's senior military advisor during WWII) belongs on this list. Others do not. This article addresses the circumstances surrounding this controversy.

The following appears in the minutes of the August 18, 1933, ANCC Executive Committee minutes:

“A letter was read from Rear Admiral W. D. Leahy, USN, in which he stated that he had become a member of the Club at the request of Admiral McLean¹ with the understanding that he was entitled to certain privileges (which were contrary to the Constitution) and that he desired that his membership be cancelled and his initiation fee returned unless these privileges were continued in effect. The Committee directed his membership be cancelled without prejudice and that all sums paid on his initiation fee should be returned to him with interest at six percent.”

The question is what privileges “contrary to the Constitution” was Admiral Leahy granted. According to Club records, Leahy applied for membership on September 12, 1929, and was subsequently enrolled as a **non-resident** member.² At this time, he was halfway through his tour as the Commander of the Navy's Bureau of Ordnance (1927-1931) which was headquartered in Washington, D.C. In 1928 he bought a town house on Florida Avenue near Dupont Circle.³ In other words, Leahy was both stationed and resided in Washington, D.C. The Club By-Laws of the time⁴ include the following criteria for Non-Resident membership:

¹ Rear Admiral Ridley McLean, ANCC Planning Committee chairman 1930-1932

² Email from David Broadhurst (ANCC Staff) to CAPT W.D. Stahler, USN (Retired), January 2, 2025

³ Adams, Henry H, 1985, pages 58-61, *Witness to Power, The Life of Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy*, Annapolis, Maryland, Naval Institute Press

⁴ The criteria is quoted from the December 12, 1929, Club By-Laws, i.e., two months after Leahy applied for membership. This edition of the By-Laws is the earliest held in the Club archives. A search of the Board of Governors' and Executive Committee meeting leading up to the December 12, 1929, edition of the By-Laws provides no evidence that there was any change to the Non-Resident membership criteria between the time Leahy applied for membership and this edition of the By-Laws.

“Any person eligible for Resident Membership may be accepted as a Non-Resident member, provided he is stationed, resides, or has a place of business thirty miles or more from the Club House.”



William D. Leahy

Leahy did not qualify for Non-Resident membership according to this criterion. The author suspects that this is the privilege “contrary to the Constitution” referred to in Leahy’s letter. The timing of subsequent events supports this suspicion. With senior Club leadership’s (RADM McLean and probably others) support, Leahy was able to keep this “privilege” under wraps during his last two years at the Bureau of Ordnance.



Ridley McLean

His 1931-1932 sea-duty tour as the

Commander, Destroyer Scouting Force,

based first in Brooklyn and later on the West Coast, made the non-resident status legitimate during this assignment.

The dispute that led to the letter surfaced in 1933, the same year in which he was assigned as the Commander of the Bureau of Navigation in Washington DC. Apparently, RADM Leahy expected his “deal” to continue, but it was apparently denied.⁵

Those who claim Leahy was an ANCC member point to his four-year tenure (1929-1933) on the membership rolls (Leahy is listed on the membership list in the December 12, 1929, ANCC By-Laws). Those who do not consider Leahy to have been a member point to three things:

- 1) He was illegitimately enrolled as a non-resident member.
- 2) He was retroactively refunded his initiation fee (plus six percent interest). Since senior officer memberships required the payment of an initiation fee and his initiation fee was retroactively returned, his membership should be considered to be retroactively canceled.
- 3) His membership was canceled “without prejudice” and he was thus eligible to apply for membership at a later date. He did not choose to join.

Background: Leahy’s reluctance to be a member of ANCC may be found in his interests and finances. This researcher could not find any indication that Leahy played either golf

⁵ By this time RADM McLean was serving as the Battleship Division 3 commander homeported in San Francisco and, therefore, not available to influence resolution of the dispute. On November 12, 1933, RADM McLean passed away as a result of a heart attack while on board his flagship, the USS Nevada, anchored in San Francisco Bay.

or tennis. According to his biography, he developed “lifetime interests in fishing, hunting, and football.”⁶

Like so many others, the Great Depression took a toll on Leahy’s finances. He could not find a tenant for the Florida Avenue property at a rent sufficient to pay for its upkeep;⁷ the price of food had fallen so much that his land in the Sacramento Valley could not generate a profit, and was seized by the government to recover unpaid taxes;⁸ and a run on the bank in January 1933 caused the Colusa County Bank, of which he was a part owner, to close its doors, not only taking with it Leahy's life savings, but leaving him with a large debt that he would not pay off until 1941.^{9,10}

⁶ Phillips Payson O’Brien, *The Second Most Powerful Man in the World, The Life of Admiral William D. Leahy, Roosevelt’s Chief of Staff*, Penguin Random House, LLC, New York, 2019

⁷ O’Brien, page 73

⁸ O’Brien, page 79

⁹ O’Brien, page 82

¹⁰ Note: The description of Leahy’s financial situation borrows freely from the Wikipedia synopsis.