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Tribute to Charles Alford Tarpley

Don G. Rushing
Morrison & Foerster LLP

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TRIBUTE TO CHARLES ALFORD TARPLEY

DON G. RUSHING*

CHARLES ALFORD TARPLEY passed away on April 12, 2020, after many years of service to the Southern Methodist University community as a distinguished alumnus and Chairman of the Board of Advisors for the SMU Air Law Symposium. He will be deeply missed.

What to say about an old friend and much-admired professional colleague in a page or two? Charles was a big personality, as big as his beloved home state of Texas. He was multifaceted—like a well-cut jewel—in pursuing careers as an electrical engineer, Air Force officer and pilot, commercial airline pilot, aviation trial lawyer, and aviation insurance executive. Charles successfully melded the various aspects of his professional life into a wonderfully coherent whole. He was a vigorous advocate for the SMU Air Law Symposium, a symposium that he proudly described as the “biggest, one of the oldest, and the finest.”

Charles was a leader. He served as the Chairman of the Board of Advisors for the symposium for thirty-eight years. In this role, Charles was responsible for assembling and leading a six-person board that annually put together a program of speakers and papers for the Air Law Symposium and oversaw the conduct of the program with invaluable assistance from SMU law students. He was the master of the boardroom. He possessed the ability to forcefully advocate for the approach he believed was right, carefully solicit the views of all board members, and effectively guide the group to a consensus. He played a critical role in establishing and maintaining the symposium as the thought leader in aviation law. He was not reluctant to roll up his sleeves and handle the details—venue contracts, event publicity, copyright agreements, and speaker contacts—necessary to put on a suc-

* Don G. Rushing, Former Member, SMU Air Law Symposium Board of Advisors; Retired Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP.

cessful program. And successful it was, through good times and bad, for the aviation industry and aviation law practice.

Charles was a wonderful ambassador for the Air Law Symposium, SMU Dedman School of Law, and his alma mater. He possessed a remarkable memory for names, faces, and the history of the institution he served. While having past program and attendee lists available in board meetings was helpful, it was always easiest to first ask Charles. He was a man of elegance, charm, and grace—a southern gentleman in the best sense of the term. Every year, he greeted symposium attendees by name with a warm smile and a handshake. A native Texan, Charles prided himself on overcoming the harshest features of his Texas accent, although endearing remnants remained.

Charles was a raconteur extraordinaire. He was a natural storyteller who could spin a yarn with the best of them, whether the topic was airplanes, flying, or “life its ownself.” His stories flowed better over his favorite drink, a Canadian Club Manhattan with two cherries, and best in the presence of his much-loved wife, Mary Ellen. He was remarkably articulate and possessed a vast vocabulary, which he colorfully deployed in his storytelling. He laughed easily and often, particularly enjoying when a joke was on him. He was not a man of pretenses. One of his Air Force commanding officers once described Charles as “the least military” of any Air Force officer the commanding officer had ever known. Charles and I agreed that this was indeed a low bar that he had failed to hurdle.

The SMU Air Law Symposium and the Southern Methodist University community lost a great man last year. His leadership, loyalty, and passion for all things SMU will be missed. Rest in peace, Charles.