

# SOARING SALUTE



Through their P-51 Mustang, known as *Swamp Fox*, father-and-son pilots Robert and RT Dickson honor the memory of a World War II fighter pilot who — like so many service members — flew under the radar.

*written by* BRAD CAMPBELL

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAUL BOWEN

For a decade, pilot RT Dickson has flown his restored P-51 Mustang — a legendary World War II fighter plane — at air shows around the country, including the 2013 EAA AirVenture Oshkosh in Wisconsin.



**R**T DICKSON COMES BY HIS LOVE of flying honestly. When he was 3, his dad, Robert, took him flying in the family's sleek two-passenger Globe Swift. After his dad handed him the controls, the youngster promptly hauled back on the yoke and started to roll the plane. "He was *very* eager to get going," Robert says with a laugh.

Though his dad quickly thwarted the attempted aerobatic maneuver, the hook had been set. RT soloed his first airplane at age 16 and earned his private pilot's license the following year. Father and son never had to travel far to scratch their aviation itch. Robert and his friends spent 16 years rebuilding a rare warbird — a TEMCO T-35 Buckaroo — in the basement of the Dicksons' home in Charlotte while RT was growing up, completing it during his freshman year of college.

The Dicksons' passion for vintage warbirds blossomed after Robert sold his successful heating and cooling parts distributorship in 2011. RT had spent several years in banking in the Queen City before opening his own investment advisory firm. Along the way, he developed a love for aerobatic and formation flying. "We were just noodling around," Robert recalls. "And we said, 'Wouldn't it be cool to have something *really* special?'"

As luck would have it, after returning from a lunch flight to Hickory with several other planes and pilots — including NASCAR legend Jack Roush in his P-51 Mustang, *Gentleman Jim* — the Dicksons were invited back to Roush's hangar at Concord Regional Airport, where the Mustang was stabled at the time. Roush spent several hours with the Dicksons, answering their questions about the legendary fighter plane. "Jack was just so wonderful and generous with his time," Robert says.

It's easy to understand how the Dicksons became fascinated with the Mustang and, ultimately, decided to purchase one. Somehow both sinuous and angular, its aluminum surfaces polished to a mirror finish, the P-51 is a wonder to behold. On the ground, with its tail low and nose pointed skyward, the plane still appears poised to vault into the air, ready to defend the skies at the slightest hint of danger.

Roush helped them locate a P-51 undergoing a complete restoration — one of only 170 or so airworthy examples left in the world out of the more than 15,000-plus that were originally built.

Since naming their P-51 *Swamp Fox* to honor a veteran pilot, RT Dickson (left) and his dad, Robert, have grown passionate about preserving this chapter of aviation history.





First Lt. Will Foard (pictured, right, in 1944) flew the original *Swamp Fox* toward the end of World War II. As a 20-year-old pilot stationed in England in 1945 (left), Foard named his P-51 with a sly nod to the famously elusive Revolutionary War general.

Before taking delivery, the Dicksons had one last task to complete. The Mustang had not yet been painted. Many vintage warbirds are done up in the livery of a specific fighter pilot, using the fighter group markings and nose art, and the nickname given to that airplane by the pilot. But which nickname? And which pilot?

Instead of picking the livery of a famous ace like most Mustang owners do, the Dicksons decided that they wanted to honor some of the unsung fighter pilots who had served with distinction and valor but had previously been overlooked. As it turns out, they didn't have to look far to find one.

**TWENTY-YEAR-OLD FIRST LT. WILL FOARD FLEW HIS** first combat mission in the twilight of World War II, his squadron of P-51 Mustang fighters escorting more than 1,000 bombers as they attacked the Nuremberg rail yards. He summarized that mission this way: "Flew Red #2 position on Captain Murphy's wing. ... only a little flak. Mostly I saw only the side of Captain Murphy's plane 'cause I didn't want to goof up and lose him."

His description of the mission is brief, funny, and self-effacing, a refreshing contrast to the stereotype of the swaggering fighter pilot. Born in East Orange, New Jersey, Foard grew up in both Wilmington and Marion, South Carolina. He loved to draw, played trombone in a swing band, and could jitterbug with the best of them. He also didn't smoke and rarely drank — hardly the qualities most people would

## Foard dubbed his plane *Swamp Fox* after the Revolutionary War general Francis Marion.

identify as those of an aviator with the "right stuff."

Allied escort pilots faced more than enemy fighters when conducting their missions. They also had to deal with deadly flak, stormy weather, close formation flying, and mechanical failures. Returning from a mission to Munich on April 16, 1945, Lieutenant Foard was forced down in France after his engine quit. When he returned to base, he was given a Mustang with a new engine — and the opportunity to name it.

Thinking that it would be fun to needle his British hosts in Leiston, England, where his squadron was based, Foard puckishly dubbed his new Mustang *Swamp Fox*, the name given to Revolutionary War general Francis Marion for his daring escapes from the British through the swamps along the Pee Dee River. At one inspection, Foard's superiors didn't know if visiting dignitaries would appreciate the young lieutenant's sense of humor. On orders from the military brass, Foard's plane was pulled off the presentation line — concealing *Swamp Fox* from the eyes of the British as effectively as its namesake had done 165 years earlier.



Foard's contributions as a fighter pilot with the Eighth Air Force (above) helped ensure victory for the Allies. Decades later, wartime photographs remind his eldest daughter, Julie Toffaletti (below), of her father's bravery and sense of duty.

Foard went on to complete 25 missions, totaling more than 122 combat hours of flying. Unfortunately, he and his family could not escape the manifold tragedies of the global conflict. His older brother, Gilbert, a tail gunner in a B-17 bomber — with whom Foard had roomed since childhood — was killed when his plane crashed in Yugoslavia, just two weeks before the end of the war in Europe.

Following Germany's surrender, Foard was given a choice: return home to safety or transfer to the Pacific theater and continue fighting. He volunteered to go on serving his country, one of the few in his squadron to do so. He was on a ship headed west when atomic bombs fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

**AFTER FOARD RETURNED** stateside, he earned a degree from Clemson University and began building a career first at Bethlehem Steel, then as an HVAC engineer in the textile industry. He and his wife, Kat, raised their five children while living in Baltimore, South Carolina, Greensboro, and Atlanta.

## Modest to a fault, Foard downplayed his wartime exploits, yet he continued to serve.

“Daddy was such a funny, warm, friendly person,” his eldest daughter, Julie Toffaletti, remembers. “He just had this down-home quality. If you met him, you would never know he was a fighter pilot.”

Modest to a fault, Foard downplayed his wartime exploits, often expressing disappointment that he hadn't done more. Yet he continued to serve. Foard remained in the Air Force Reserve, eventually retiring in 1972 with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He was also an avid sailor, and he passed along that passion to his kids. Together, they built sailboats and created indelible family memories during summers spent on the coast and along the sounds of North Carolina.

For Toffaletti, another memory sticks out: Her father regularly donated blood. “He had seen the need in the war, and it's something that just stayed with him,” she says.

In 2010, her parents moved to Hendersonville, receding into the comfortable anonymity of a small retirement community. There, Foard's combat service in World War II was a distant memory, known only to a small circle of family and friends.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY TIM ROBISON, HISTORICAL IMAGES COURTESY OF JULIE TOFFALETTI, MIFLIPO/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES PLUS



**“We had an opportunity to honor every unsung hero who did their part to win the war.”**

FOARD HAD ALWAYS BEEN A TINKERER AND A BUILDER, with a workshop full of tools wherever the family lived. But the couple’s new place didn’t have room for his hobbies. In the closing chapter of his life, Toffaletti says, her father felt that he “didn’t have a purpose.”

Enter Robert and RT Dickson. At one point in the search for a name for their Mustang, RT came across a picture of *Swamp Fox*. Both he and his father liked the name’s connection to the Revolutionary War history of the Carolinas. And most providential of all, the pilot who had named and flown the plane lived less than two hours away.

In 2012, the Dicksons traveled to Hendersonville to meet the Foards and discuss naming their P-51 Mustang in honor of *Swamp Fox*. After getting to know Foard and learning about his wartime experiences, Robert realized, “We had a special opportunity to honor not only Will but also every unsung hero who did their part to win the war.”

“They told my mother, ‘We want to name our airplane after a good man,’” Toffaletti says. “That meant more to her than anything.”

On December 2, 2012, Foard was honored in a ceremony held in the Dicksons’ hangar, where the new *Swamp Fox* was unveiled. The guest list included family and friends, three Air Force generals, and other veteran World War II pilots. Later, they all watched as Foard took to the skies again, this time in the jump seat of *Swamp Fox* as RT flew in formation with two other Mustangs. As special as that moment was, it was just the beginning of a final dance between Foard and *Swamp Fox*.

At a ceremony to unveil the new *Swamp Fox* in 2012, the Dicksons presented Foard (below) with a replica of his old flight jacket (right), complete with a 364th Fighter Squadron patch. The original had worn out years before, so the Dicksons had three new ones made — one for each of them.



For the next several years, Foard accompanied RT to many air shows. Audiences got to see *Swamp Fox* in action in the air and meet Foard on the ground. Young and old alike learned that you don’t have to be an ace with a row of “kills” painted on the side of your plane to deserve honor and respect. It’s more than enough to have put your life on the line for others and performed your duty — as Foard and millions of American veterans have done since our nation’s founding.

“The Dicksons made the last years of my dad’s life so special,” Toffaletti says. “They could not have been more wonderful.” In 2016, a few days shy of his 92nd birthday, Foard passed away.

**ROBERT AND RT DICKSON ALWAYS KNEW THAT THEY** were buying their P-51 for the right reasons: To honor veterans. To keep a vital piece of aviation



## SEE SWAMP FOX FLY

RT Dickson will fly *Swamp Fox* as part of *Wings Over Wayne*, the largest free air show in North Carolina. The biennial event, held at Seymour Johnson Air Force Base in Goldsboro, will take place on May 20 and 21 this year. Gates open at 8 a.m., and the show begins at 10. For more information, call (919) 722-0027 or visit [wingsoverwaynearshow.com](http://wingsoverwaynearshow.com).

history alive. To inspire future generations of pilots. But what they could not have known is how profound the experience would be for them personally.

When asked about the best part of owning *Swamp Fox*, RT could go on and on about the thrill of pushing the throttle forward and unleashing the plane’s 1,495-horsepower Packard Merlin engine. Or the sublime feel of the airplane’s controls as he pirouettes through the sky. But when pressed, he simply says: “The people. *Swamp Fox* has allowed us to meet the most amazing people.”

Of course he means Will and Kat Foard and their children. But he’s also talking about the many remarkable individuals whom they’ve met thanks to their stewardship of *Swamp Fox*. Veterans like Tuskegee Airmen Charles McGee and Hiram Mann, and countless pilots and crew members who served during World War II.

“You don’t know what you’re going to trigger in somebody,” RT says. “I’ve had Mustang crew chiefs come up to me in tears, thanking me for taking such good care of the plane they had worked so hard to keep in the air.”

Today, the Dicksons continue honoring unsung veterans like Will Foard through special appearances and aerial demonstrations with *Swamp Fox*. Yet perhaps their most poignant flights are those made to offer a final salute to World War II aviators who have died. On those occasions, they fire up *Swamp Fox* and perform a graveside flyover, so that when the families of the departed look to the sky, they can find comfort in the knowledge that their loved one is being escorted safely home. **Os**

*Brad Campbell lives and writes in Fairview.*

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF RT DICKSON, PAUL BOWEN, TIM ROBISON