

## MEET YOUR NEIGHBOR: ROBERT E. FORD

In the depths of the Great Depression, the boy behind the plow looked skyward in the hope of seeing one of those airplanes that occasionally flew over. Some day, he knew, he would fly one of those.

Even in those dark days Bob Ford's family was one of those blessed with a roof over their heads and plenty to eat, thanks to the fertile rented land they lived on near Little River, Texas and the river that shared its name. But when the river flooded or the bugs came or the drouth hit hard they might lose most of their crop, and all their hard work hardly brought in enough to buy seed for the next crop. Life was not easy, yet Bob has good memories of caring parents and a warm, secure home for his older sister, himself and his two younger brothers. His father also earned a few dollars as a carpenter, a barber, or selling insurance.

As farmers the boys had constant chores— care of the animals , clearing, plowing, planting and harvesting the fields, each in their season,. The women kept the home, did the laundry, cooked three substantial meals a day, and cared for the chickens and small animals. Bob's sister helped with all that and went to school in the four room school auspiciously titled Little River Academy. Bob's schooling was sketchy because all three boys were needed for the farm, but he managed to get a high school diploma from Little River Academy at age 16 and set out to earn enough money to go to college. About this time his dad bought his first piece of mechanized equipment, and Bob was able to save some of his meager earnings for his college fund.

He had dreamed of going to Texas A&M but realized that was out of the question, so when a growth spurt put him well north of six feet in height and he was offered a basketball scholarship to San Marcos State

Teachers College (now Texas State University) he took it gladly. His first year there, however, a ruptured appendix ended his sports career and he joined the work crew at the college, serving as everything from ditch digger to lab assistant.

His senior year Bob took flying lessons from a former Army pilot and flew a Piper Cub, then advanced to a 1927 TravelAire, a popular stunt bi-plane.

Graduating in 1941, he went directly into the Navy and applied for cadet training. With his college degree and a pilot's license he had only to pass a stressful Elimination phase , go through Cadet training , and he was commissioned as an Officer!



**Ensign Robert E. Ford, 1942**

Now flying five days a week, Bob Ford was a happy man. His squadron was formed

and sent to the Canal Zone to escort convoys and patrol for enemy subs in those waters. He flew first the OS2U single-engine sea plane and then the SBD dive bomber.



### **Bob and his trusty SBD**

After two years in the Panama Canal Zone, Honduras and Colombia he was sent to BocaChica Naval Base on Key West for multi-engine flight training. Now equipped to fly anything with wings he expected to join the action in the Pacific but was told he had served his offshore duty and would be assigned stateside. He rejoined his squadron in North Carolina and spent the rest of the war flying sub patrol over the North Atlantic.

When WWII ended, Bob was a Lt. Commander and was assigned to the Navy's Ferry Command out of San Pedro, CA.. The rest of his Navy career was spent moving planes worldwide to where the government wanted them for storage or final disposition. In doing so he logged thousands of flight hours in every kind of plane in every state of repair or disrepair.

In 1947 he married a girl he had met in college, and he stayed in the Reserve so he could retain access to Navy planes and fly as often as possible. He took a position with a major oil company as a quality control specialist developing new test methods for their products. He and his wife had a son and a daughter, Wade and Sharon. But successful though he was in both military and business life, Bob faced major disappointment in his marriage. It came to an amicable end in 1970.

A few years later at a party in Houston he spotted a familiar face. His approach was direct: "Didn't you graduate from Little River Academy?" She was Elleen, a Houston bank officer who started life in Little River. In time they found a remarkable commonality of values and interests. They even discovered that Elleen's husband had died on the same day that Bob's divorce had become final. Elleen's daughter Linda was close to the ages of Bob's grown children and became like one of his own. Even now each year he spends Christmas with her family, and they all blend seamlessly with Sharon and Wade's families.

Bob and Elleen were married in 1974. Both had given serious thought to what they wanted do with the rest of their lives and agreed that what they wanted most was to own a pretty piece of acreage on a river, build a nice home on it, and become hobby farmers and frequent hosts to their city-bound children and grandchildren. The search had begun before they were married and they finally found it—forty acres of beautiful riverfront land in Bell County near Belton, not far from their roots.

They planted fruit trees. They created a large garden and gave away its bounty to neighbors and the local senior center. They built a comfortable home, acquired several pets and spent many precious hours bonding with their combined seven grandchildren and enjoying the fresh air, open spaces, and easy pace of the country.

When health considerations led them to a retirement village near Temple, Texas, they built a smaller home, sold the farm, and settled in for the rest of their time together, but after Elleen's death in 2007 Bob's daughter Sharon in Houston begged him to move back here. He moved into Treemont C-3 in August 2010. A tall, pleasant man who enjoys the outdoors, bridge, Bible study and people, he is very much at home in the mainstream of a busy and satisfying life. Glad you came, Bob! You add something special.



