

# REMEMBERING “MUSTANG WILL”

RECALLING SOME OF THE ADVENTURES IN MY FATHER'S EXTRAORDINARY AVIATION CAREER  
BY SUZANNE MARTIN

It had been an ordinary Saturday afternoon at our house. About 4 pm, the phone rang. It was my father calling to let my mom know there had been a problem with the Mustang. He was okay, though the plane was a bit worse for the wear. The date was 15 March 1975.

My dad had just made a one-wheel landing in his P-51 Mustang at DuPage Airport, an airfield west of Chicago. One landing gear had refused to drop down, and the other could no longer be retracted, meaning the plane couldn't be belled in. The

unusual landing would be on the local six o'clock news that night. Multiple TV stations, having gotten word there was a vintage warplane in trouble, had sent out camera crews to record what was expected to be a crash. However, they captured something else.

After trying every maneuver he could think of to shake down the balky gear without success, my dad burned off most of his remaining fuel and calmly told the tower he was going to bring the plane in. And he did. A local newspaper account quoted a witness as saying, "It looked like an ordinary landing, it was

done so expertly." The damage to the plane was minimal. My father — *El Gato* — had once again justified his nickname as the cat with nine lives.

My dad was Will Martin, and he died this past January at the age of 92. Many knew him as the guy who brought 20-plus Mustangs back to the USA from Nicaragua in the early 1960s, an adventure that became the basis of his book *So I Bought an Air Force*. When Michael O'Leary said he'd like to do an article on my father, I volunteered to share a few of our family stories. I hope readers will find them interesting.

My father did not do things by halves nor necessarily in a customary fashion. For instance, he bought his first plane and then learned to fly.

My parents saw a North American/Ryan Navion while on their honeymoon in August 1957 and by Christmas my father had his license. Although starting as a new pilot in a relatively complex plane — the Navion had a retractable landing gear and a variable pitch propeller — might seem unusual, it made sense to my father. He was a tall man and felt uncomfortable in the smaller trainers typically offered to novices. As he put it, the all-metal Navion was "a real plane." My father successfully completed his check ride that December out of Chicago's Midway Airport. As the flight examiner was completing the paperwork, his brother Glenn drove onto the tarmac with my mother. My dad and uncle began loading suitcases into the Navion's hold. "What are you doing?" asked the startled examiner.

"We're going to Minnesota for Christmas," replied my father. "Why?" "But you, you just got your license!" The examiner shook his head in dismay as my father helped my mother



Will placing the author in the Piper Apache for her first plane ride!

up into the plane. My mother waved at the examiner as dad started the engine and off they went to Minnesota.

That was the first of many flying trips my parents took together over their 63 years of marriage. What the doubtful flight examiner didn't know was how completely my father had thrown himself into flying even at that point. When he bought the Navion, he studied the manual and studied the plane. He easily passed his written exam, but he also followed up in any areas he personally felt he hadn't mastered. He tried to learn everything he could about flying.

He was not one of those "I think

I can make it" guys. It might seem strange to say this about a man who flew surplus fighter planes out of Nicaragua, but he really believed the maxim, "there are old pilots and there are bold pilots." If he took a risk, it was a calculated one. He respected weather. My mother says there was many a time when dad looked at a weather report and even though they were *en route* to some place, left the plane on the ground and rented a car. He continued to of flight life, and deep understanding of flying.



Will Martin ready to blast off on another Mustang adventure. Unfortunately, this one would lead to a belly-landing in a Nicaraguan field. Will would ultimately safely return the majority of the P-51s he purchased.



Bringing the "Nica" Mustangs back to the USA was fraught with danger for Will Martin. First, he had to deal with an incredibly corrupt government and then there were the aircraft themselves. The planes had not been well-maintained and the facilities to get them ready for the flight north were primitive at best. Mustang N6162U went down in the surf following mechanical problems. There was no way of recovering the P-51D.