

A Life Lived for God

--edited from remarks given by his daughter Mary Lou Estelle Martin at his memorial, March 10, 2019

Forest Erwin Estelle grew up as the fifth of seven children in an Indiana farmhouse with no electricity or running water. A hand-crank Victrola, however, often played "The Old Rugged Cross," setting the stage for a life lived in view of that very cross.

Forest's father, Claude, was a hardworking, loyal and devoted family man. But when Claude's three-year-old son, and then his young wife, Roxie, passed away, it was more than he could handle. He had a complete breakdown, abandoned the family, and then committed suicide. Though baby Claude had already been taken in by friends, the remaining five children (14, 13, 8, 7, and 6) were left to fend for themselves for six months.

Eventually the siblings were farmed out to whoever would take them, whether out of the charity in their hearts or the work they could get out of them. Forest experienced both types of situations, and he eventually became a ward of the state due to complaints from neighbors about his treatment. One neighboring family became a surrogate family to him until high school graduation.

After various post high school jobs, Forest was drafted into the United States Army in February of 1943 at the age of 20. He was assigned to the Army Corps of Engineers, sent to truck maintenance school after basic training, and assigned to the 172nd Combat Engineers Battalion. The Army's combat engineers were regarded as the "pick and shovel infantry." They not only did road and bridge building but also ran sawmills, rock crushers, water supply points, and when needed, doubled as regular infantry units. After much training, Forest's battalion landed on Utah Beach in France in September of 1944 and remained in Europe until after the war's end a year later. At least twice, Forest's life was miraculously spared, once when an artillery shell landed just a few feet from him – but didn't explode – and once when a woman fired a pistol at him from ten or twelve feet away – and somehow missed!

After the war, friends introduced Forest to Ava Myers. They were married in October of 1946, and baby Phil was born the next year. Though Forest worked various jobs, he deeply desired to learn to fly. Forest and Ava decided together that he would re-enlist in the Army for three years, with the goal of getting into the flying cadet program. If he didn't get into the program within that timeframe, he would forget flying and do something else. But he did get into the cadet program and was commissioned to the Air Force in October of 1950. He was assigned to the 343rd Electronic Reconnaissance Squadron of the 55th Strategic Reconnaissance Wing, for a time based out of Ramey Air Force Base in Puerto Rico. Forest was assigned to a 16-man flight crew trained as combat ready under the Strategic Air Command, flying B-29's and B-50's with Forest as co-pilot. The crew flew 16 combat missions over Korea, as well as many other information-gathering flights. At the end of 1951, when the squadron commander was transferred, Forest assumed command of the crew as a second lieutenant, though usually lieutenant colonels occupied that position. It was apparent to his superior officers that he was a skilled and talented pilot and leader of men.

Being in the Air Force meant that Forest spent much time away from his family, which now included sons Dave and Steve. In August of 1953, Forest and Ava decided he should leave the Air Force when his commitment was up in October. This was not an easy decision for Forest. He enjoyed flying in the Strategic Air Command, having all the latest equipment and recognition available in the Air Force. The

top-secret mission of his squadron presented an exciting assignment during those Korean War and Cold War days. But he knew couldn't expect his wife to raise their boys by herself, and he wanted to be a part of their lives. Responsibility and care for his family held priority over having a job that he enjoyed immensely.

After leaving the Air Force, Forest pursued self-employment so he would be free to bring his boys along as he chose. He started with buying a milk delivery route, later went into a trucking business with his friend, then moved on to a newspaper dealership/distribution business. He eventually bought Sugar Creek Nurseries, a fledgling business just outside of Indianapolis. He also bought the previous owner's new red-brick, four-bedroom, two-bathroom, full basement home on an acre lot with established trees.

When he moved in with his family, now including daughter Becky, he at last felt like he was home. "This is my last move," he said at the time. "The next time I move is when the sheriff sets me out for non-payment of the mortgage or when they carry me out feet first." And he meant it. But later he said, "This was before I had given the Lord any place in my life. When I finally saw my need, as a sinner, to put my trust in what Jesus did for me on the cross in payment for my sins, then there was a change in my life, my speech, my goals, and ambitions."

That change came when he saw an elderly relative of Ava, who, as she lay dying, expressed great anticipation at the thought of seeing the Lord. That got Forest's attention. He realized that he did not have the assurance of going to be with the Lord when he died, and that motivated him to seek out the truth in Scripture. He was puzzled and challenged by Matthew 5:20: "For I say unto you that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." He came to realize that only by exchanging his righteousness for Christ's righteousness would he have any standing before God and that it was by grace through faith! The song "Saved by Grace" became a favorite of his as he now too anticipated seeing the Lord when he died: "And I shall see Him face to face, and tell the story – saved by grace!" He felt that the song "At Calvary" captured his own testimony in a nutshell. And "Mansion Over the Hill Top" showed him that no earthly home – not even his new red-brick one – could compare to the place God was preparing for him in Heaven!

Forest's older sons testify firsthand to the changes that salvation brought to their father. He had put his family first in deciding to leave the Air Force, but after he came to know the Lord, he became an even more devoted father. And when his beloved Ava died suddenly in 1964, it was concern and care for his children that motivated him to keep going despite his grief, determined to keep his family together and be there for them. He did not want his kids to experience what he had as a child -- did not want them left as orphans if something were to happen to him. In His grace, God provided another wife and helpmeet for him: Nora Louise Hollearn, a single former missionary to Ethiopia. Though she was planning to return to the mission field, God impressed upon her heart that He had a different mission field for her now, in the form of becoming Forest's wife and mother to his children. God blessed Forest and Nora with two more children – Mary Lou and John Mark -- to keep Forest young, he always said!

During that time, Forest began attending evening classes at Indiana Bible College, and he started entertaining the idea that he and Nora could be co-laborers with the Lord Jesus Christ to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth. And for that reason, he and his family would, after ten years of living there, leave the red-brick home. "[And] I have never been sorry," he was known to say.

Together, Forest and Nora entered New Tribes Mission Training in Jersey Shore, PA. Though they never moved to a foreign field, Forest had many opportunities to travel overseas, first accompanying NTM representative Dick Sanford and later as part of his responsibilities with the aviation service of NTM (later called Tribal Air/Communications, then NTM Aviation, now Ethnos360 Aviation). Forest counted it a privilege to serve the Lord and to be a part of what God was doing all around the world, even if it was “behind the scenes.”

In his retirement years, Forest and Nora enjoyed their home in Arizona, tending a beautiful yard and robust garden, and enjoying their children and grandchildren as much as they could. By the time God took Forest home, He had graciously given Forest and Nora over 50 years of marriage and service to the Lord together.

Forest was preceded in death by his parents, six siblings, his first wife Ava (Myers) who died in 1964, and his son-in-law John Sheffield. He is survived by his second wife, Nora, and his six children: Phil (Linda), Dave (Linda), Steve (Betsy), Becky Sheffield West, John Mark (Christy), and Mary Lou (John) Martin, as well as 13 grandchildren and 18 great grandchildren.