

# The Write Stuff

The past is personal for writer Dan Ford '54

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Writers deal with criticism in different ways, but Dan Ford '54 is likely one of the few to have responded by becoming a pilot. When his 1991 book, *The Flying Tigers*, about a band of American mercenary fighter pilots based in Burma in the early days of World War II, was released, a member of an online aviation newsgroup lashed out with complaints. "He would always end [his posts] with, 'Ford is not a pilot, what does he

know?' It annoyed me so much that in 1999, I started taking lessons," Ford says. He received his pilot's certification at the age of 69 and flew a Piper Cub for 11 years.

Ford is the sort of writer for whom the past is personal. "History happens to one person at a time," he writes in his new book, *Poland's Daughter*, and that statement doubles as the guiding principle behind all his work, which spans a dozen novels and works of nonfiction. He sold his first novel, *Now Comes Theodora*, in 1965, and used the advance to travel to Vietnam. There, he wrote for *The Nation*, covering the early days of America's involvement in the war, and those dispatches formed the basis for his next novel, *Incident at Muc Wa*, which made it to the big screen as "Go Tell the Spartans," starring Burt Lancaster, in 1978.

Ford studied political science, then called simply "government," at UNH, but his true passion was writing. Although there was no journalism major, he took as many writing courses as he could. His fondest memories are of working at *The New Hampshire*, where he began as a staff writer and worked his way up to editor.

"It was a big deal for me," he says. "I was a hillbilly. I came down from Pine Hill Road in Wolfeboro. To me, Durham was Paris, it was Cambridge. It was great."

Ford's time at UNH eventually led him to Europe, where, as a young Fulbright scholar studying modern European history at England's University of Manchester in 1954, he met Basia Deszberg and fell madly in love. That love story forms the core of *Poland's Daughter*, which weaves together the story of Deszberg's family—forced out of their home in Poland in 1940 and sent to a gulag and Kazakhstan—and the tale of her travels across Europe with Ford in the summer of 1955. Published earlier this year, it is his most personal story yet.

"We went to Paris, and we hitchhiked, and we went to Italy. We lived in a castle for a while on the Mediterranean coast. It was just a great adventure," Ford says. He was in love; Deszberg wasn't. They parted ways, eventually, on the steps of that castle, and that was the end of their story—until 2011, when they reconnected, first through email and then in person. In 2012, Ford and his wife, Sally, ventured to England to meet Deszberg, and they began collaborating. "Sally was the first one who said this should be a book," he says. "She was a very good sport about it, and still is."

Ford's latest project is a return to military aviation history. *Rising Sun Over Burma* examines the Flying Tigers from the Japanese Imperial Army's perspective. He writes every day and prefers self-publishing and e-books. "As you get older, you have much less patience," he says. "I don't want to wait for gratification, so I self-publish them."

His work has garnered praise and a faithful readership. As for that angry aviation newsgroup member? "We became good friends in the end," Ford says.

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