

Peter Ford, A Star's Son

The Hardest Job In The World

by Charles Ziarko

It was the perfect family. Mom was an athletic, beautiful woman who gave up international fame to devote herself to being a mother. Dad was a sexy, charismatic leading man just reemerging in A-list Hollywood, but taking time to shower his family with loving attention. Their son was a blonde, blue-eyed little boy, an only child, photographed endlessly enjoying all the perks of the privileged.

“He’s the luckiest kid in the world”, the fans must have imagined as they pored over the photos of this All-American family appearing regularly in newspapers and movie fan magazines. Looks can be deceiving, however, especially in Hollywood.

The dad was actor Glenn Ford, who conceived his baby boy with dancer-actress Eleanor Powell on his 28th birthday, but 15 years later in 1959, on his 43rd birthday, she

would file for divorce. “I filed on the grounds of mental cruelty, and that’s exactly what I meant,” she reported.

Like many war-time romances, this story really began when the little family moved into a place of their own, composer Max Steiner’s old home, less than a mile from where they were married in a movie-star mansion on Bedford Drive that mom Eleanor Powell had been renting from Mary Pickford. Ironically, when their child was born, the couple were living apart, with their own mothers!

On Cove Way, just off Benedict Canyon and within walking distance of The Beverly Hills Hotel, the new Mrs Ford occupied herself with all the joys of motherhood, to the exclusion of her husband. Meanwhile, he kept busy pursuing a seemingly endless string of affairs on movie locations and elsewhere.

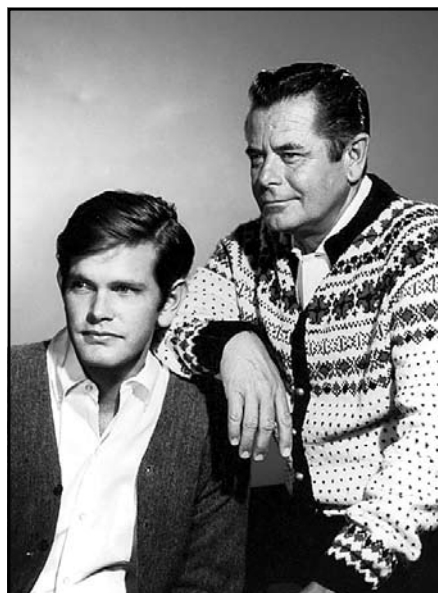
The little family loved music, but as in other matters, their tastes differed. Mom listened to her favorites, Fats Waller and Frank Sinatra, on the state-of-the-art sound system installed by the head of the sound department at MGM, Douglas Shearer. Dad enjoyed the Hawaiian

and Country/Western sounds of the day. And in the 1950s, their 10-year-old son Peter could claim responsibility for beginning the decline of American popular music. When director Richard Brooks began looking into the latest trends in popular music in preparation for his new movie, young Peter handed him three of his favorite rock ‘n’ roll records. One of these was chosen to be the theme song of the influential MGM picture *The Blackboard Jungle*. The film broke new ground with its raucous opening, featuring the Bill Haley and the Comets recording of “Rock Around the Clock”. Peter’s dad was, of course, the film’s star.

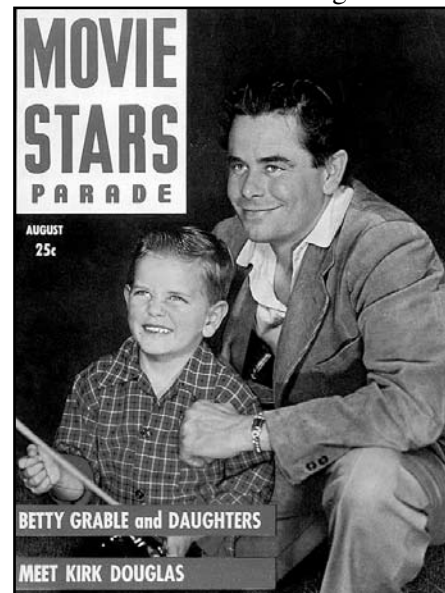
Peter’s childhood home was a 2 1/2-acre estate, staffed with a butler, a maid, and a nurse, as well as a full-time chef, part-time masseuse, and gardening crew. The boy would visit the Pickfair estate of Mary Pickford where the silent star, once “America’s Sweetheart” would hold him on her lap. His friends were the children of his parents’ A-list friends, including Peter Holden, Steve Lovejoy, Jim O’Keefe and Michael Reagan. His first crush was on Gloria May, Ann Rutherford’s daughter from her first marriage. Real-life television “Range Rider”



Peter Ford in 1952 at the ranch with Mom, Eleanor Powell, and Dad, Glenn Ford.



Father and son in 1969.



1949 cover of Movie Stars Parade

The University of Wisconsin Press announces the publication of

Glenn Ford: A Life
by Peter Ford

Join Peter and celebrity guests at the world famous Egyptian Theater
in Hollywood, California
on the evening of April 16th, 2011
for an evening of celebration and memories of one of Hollywood's
most iconic movie stars — Glenn Ford.

The evening will feature a **Tribute to Glenn Ford!**

Double Feature: **Framed** (1947) / **Mr. Soft Touch** (1949).

Part of Noir City: Hollywood, 13th Annual Festival of Film Noir (April 1–20, 2011).

Featuring the book launch and signing of **Glenn Ford: A Life**,
a biography written by his son Peter Ford

The event is presented by American Cinematheque's Egyptian Theatre

www.americancinematheque.com

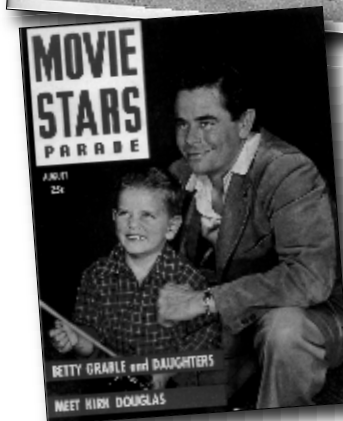
at 6712 Hollywood Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90028.

Connect with Twitter (sidgrauman), Facebook (egyptian theatre, aero theatre), Going & Myspace.

Purchase tickets online at www.fandango.com.



Paper \$24.95, e-book \$14.95



The Cinema Arts Centre (Long Island, New York) presents:

A Tribute to Glenn Ford: An Evening with son and biographer, Peter Ford. Screening of **Blackboard Jungle** (Archival Print) - Interview - Q&A with Foster Hirsch – Reception and book signing of **Glenn Ford: A Life**. For information visit: www.cinemaartscentre.org

May 13, Friday A salute to director Delmer Daves' **3:10 to Yuma**. The opening night screening at **Film Forum** (Greenwich Village, New York) will be introduced by Peter Ford, son of star Glenn Ford and author of a new biography of his father, **Glenn Ford: A Life**. Following the screening, there will be a book signing in the lobby. For information visit: www.FilmForum.org

May 14–15, Saturday and Sunday Peter Ford will appear in midtown Manhattan NYC, (New York), at **Your 2nd Childhood Memorabilia Show**. The show is publicized as "Join us for a Salute to Legendary Actor Glenn Ford with his son Peter Ford and his new bio **Glenn Ford: A Life**." For information visit: www.2cms.webs.com

June 2–4, Thursday–Saturday Peter and Lynda will appear at the **Western Clippings and the Memphis Film Festival A Gathering of Guns 3** - A TV Western Reunion held in Olive Branch, Mississippi. For information visit: www.westernclippings.com and www.memphisfilmfestival.com

July 25, Saturday Peter Ford will appear at Cinema Paradiso, the year-round theater of the **Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival** in Florida for a Glenn Ford film screening followed by a discussion and book signing. For information visit: www.fliff.com

August 18–20, Thursday–Saturday Peter and Lynda will appear at the **Western Legends Roundup** in Kanab, Utah. For information visit: www.westernlegendsroundup.com

If you would like Peter and Lynda to visit your city to share their memories of Hollywood's Golden Age please visit www.GlennFordBio.com or contact publicity@uwpress.wisc.edu

Books are available at your bookseller, or online at <http://uwpress.wisc.edu/books/4293.htm>

Jock Mahoney was a surprise guest at a childhood birthday party, and many weekends were devoted to family photo-ops.

Peter had everything--except the love of his ever-present but always-distant father. Indeed, he remembers going outside his home one night in a rainstorm during the height of the polio scare and lying down on the wet ground, hoping to contract the dread disease "so my father would love me." When the time came to learn the facts of life, he didn't learn from dad (who could have taught him plenty!) but from dad's stunt double, with the aid of an underground stag film! "Being a movie star's child is the hardest job in the world," he says, citing 20 childhood

friends whose lives ended in suicide or were diminished by drugs.

He followed the A-list-kid path from El Rodeo elementary school (to the 5th grade) and The Buckley School (through 9th grade), then on to Beverly Hills High (where he became a problem child in the aftermath of divorce) and The Chadwick School (a destination for Hollywood incorrigibles), then lasted one semester at Lake Forest College near Chicago. For a while he had his own musical group, "The Creations". Then, debilitating arthritis struck and he suffered for five years, until suddenly it subsided at age 21, thanks he believes to his mother's prayerful intervention.

Peter turned his life around and

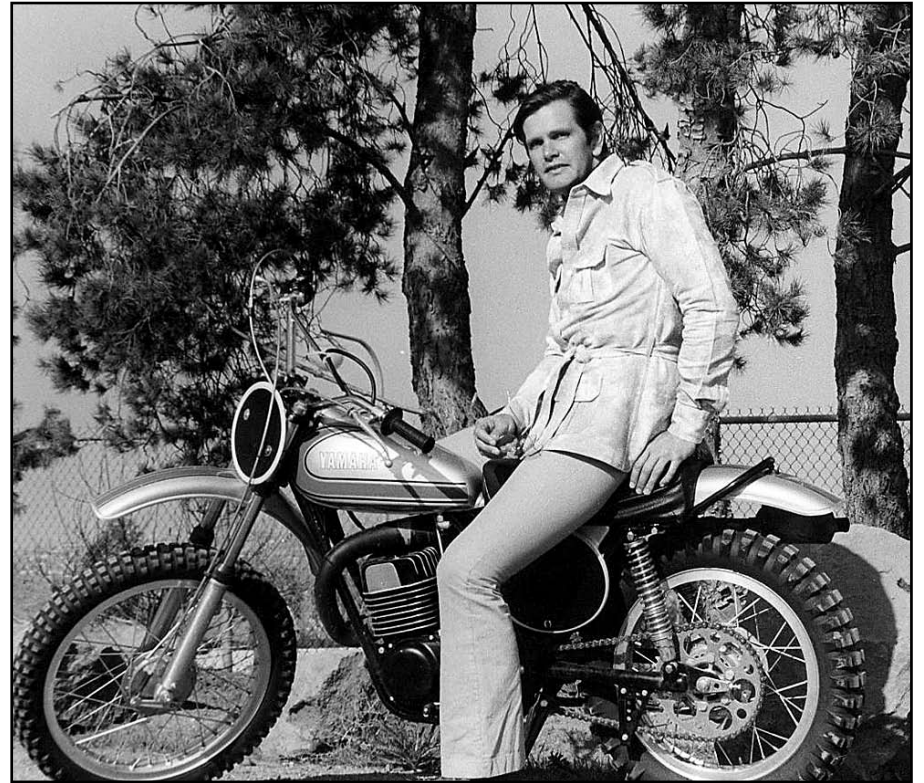


In 1950 on the set of *Redhead and Cowboy*.

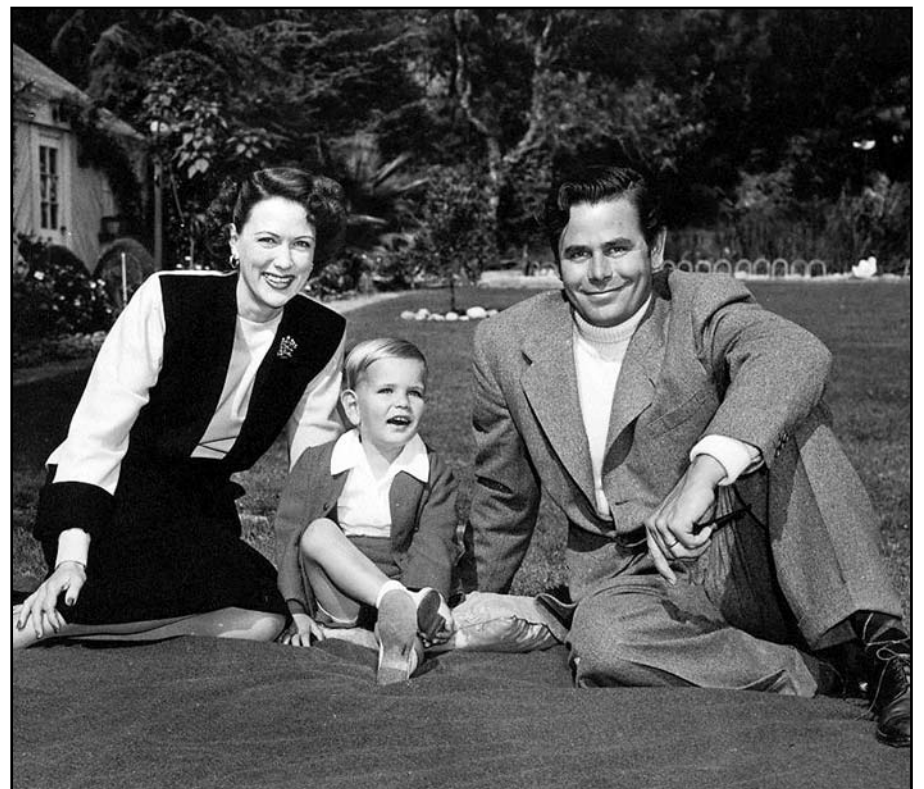
got an AA degree in English from Santa Monica College and a BA with honors, from USC where he met the love of his life, aspiring actress Lynda Gundersen. Next to the Christmas tree in Dad's liv-

ing room in 1970, Peter and Lynda were married. They will celebrate 41 years of marriage this year.

Glenn and Eleanor kept married for the sake of their son, but when it



Peter Ford on motorcycle in 1972.



1948 portrait of the family at home on Cove Way.



ended, mom kept the long-time family home on Cove Way. She also got \$2,500 per month alimony, for life, and collected \$250 monthly child support for Peter. She “felt married to God,” she said of her devotion to the Presbyterian Church, and stayed single up to her death from cancer, in 1982, at the age of 69.

be his home for over 40 years, until September 2006 when a series of minor strokes ended his life. The home is for sale now, and, like a surprising number of Hollywood star homes it’s considered a replaceable “tear-down” at \$7 million, as is Rita’s old house next door, also on the block at \$13.5 million.

Dad moved on, but not very far. His life-long friend (and five-time co-star) Rita Hayworth sold him one of her two adjacent Beverly Hills residential lots, a triangular 2/3-acre only a few blocks from Cove Way. Here, he commissioned for himself the penultimate 1960s one-bedroom bachelor pad. Complete with pool and projection room, and totaling 8800 square feet, it would

A heart operation in the early 1990s spelled the end of Glenn’s career before the cameras, and he was housebound for the last decade of his life, with around-the-clock nursing care, rarely leaving his bed, even after Peter and his wife left their own home in the Hollywood Hills to be his companions, and conservators. They also presented him with three grandchildren, now

The chair Glenn always used on the set between takes late in his career.



Dad gets out the projector and screens some home movies.



1972: Peter and wife, Lynda.

in their twenties, but to the end of Glenn's life, he and his only son were never as close as Peter hoped they could be.

During this time, loyal friends came to visit, including Dean Jones (a born-again Christian, no longer the hellion of his MGM salad days), Debbie Reynolds, Buddy Hackett, Angie Dickinson, Bill Hart (his studio stuntman) and Grace Godino (Rita's stand-in). Another guest was Anne Francis, Glenn's costar in two of his biggest MGM hits of the 1950s, who encouraged Peter to

begin a biography while his father was still alive. And so he did.

At first, it was a daunting task, but not for lack of material. On the contrary, there was an overwhelming amount of information and documentation at hand! Unlike celebrities who leave nothing behind, Glenn Ford was a pack rat who saved everything--including detailed diaries covering every year of his career from 1934 into the 1980s (what other movie star did that?). There are also 200 to 300 hours of tape-recordings of telephone calls made at his home,



Peter co-starred with his father in the series *Cade's County* (CBS-TV, 1972).



Sensitive portrait of Peter's wife, Lynda.



Family, reading the menu at Roy Rogers' Buckaroo Town.



Peter with Glenn on his 1971 TV show *America*.



Fan magazines never seemed to tire of showing the blissful family life of the Fords.

dating back to the 1950s, including a secretly recorded call made by the ultimate phone tapper, Richard Nixon.

Peter had long since grown up and put aside his childhood frustrations with his dysfunctional father, even to working with him and for him on ten films during the last decade of his starring career. If Peter couldn't admire Glenn as a father figure or as a person, he could admire his professional work. As time passed, he became Glenn Ford's greatest fan, and set about creating a comprehensive study of his 100 films (and his 146 documented love affairs) in order to be honest without exploiting his father or being cruel.

Peter found that once Glenn was restored to official bachelorhood in November 1959, he experimented with the new and trendy, including joining neighbors Cary Grant and author Aldous Huxley in exploring Transcendental Meditation, and LSD. And he married three times more (Peter was his best man for #2, to actress Kathryn Hays), the fourth and last a short-lived union with a member of the nursing staff which brought him some unwelcome tabloid publicity in 1994.

What about The Ones That Got Away? (There can't have been many, with a list that includes Marilyn Monroe and Judy Garland!) Of these, Glenn mourned for days when Hope Lange married Alan Pakula (a "one-sided and unrequit-



1957: Glenn and his horse, Tenny.

ed" love, says Peter, though Hope accepted costarring roles with Glenn in two consecutive films early in her career), and he was sorry not to have wed Maria Schell, his Swiss costar in MGM's *Cimarron*.

And there was always Rita, whom he allegedly impregnated in 1948, during the making of *The Loves of Carmen*, the least favorite film of his career. Their five pictures spanned a quarter-century, from *The Lady in Question* at Columbia in 1940 to *The Money Trap* at MGM in 1966, with the iconic *Gilda* and its semi-sequel, *Affair in Trinidad* in between. They were closer to each other, perhaps, than to any of their husbands and wives.

After his starring career peaked, during his decade at MGM, when he was in his forties, it then waned. For another decade, however, Glenn could still command six-figure salaries (sometimes paid with a briefcase full of cash) and first-class travel perks (which delighted him) in return for special billing and a few days of work in an exotic location.

Peter's book refutes some of the untruths promulgated by Columbia publicists. For instance, Glenn was NOT related to President Martin Van Buren, nor to the first Prime Minister of Canada. His father Newton, while affiliated with Canadian National



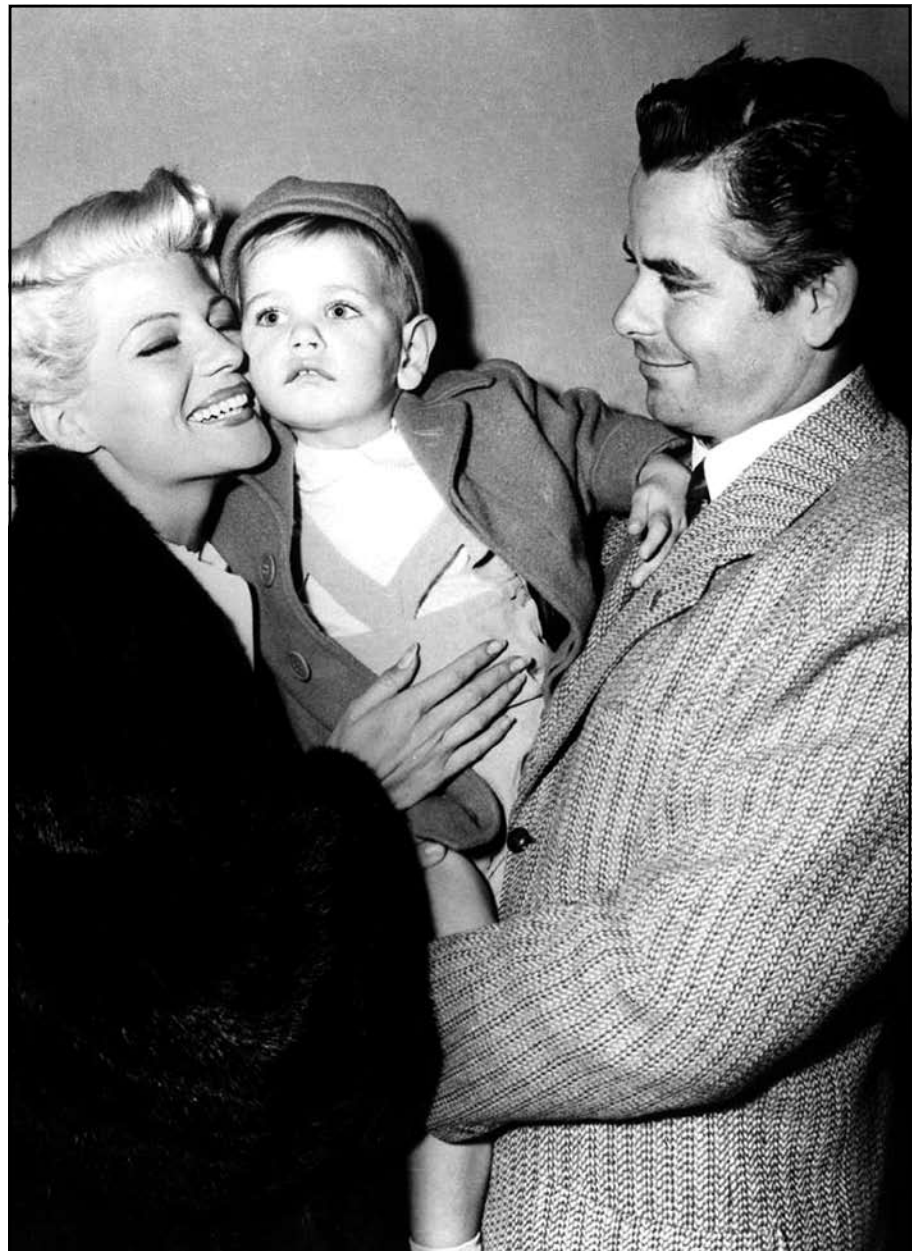
1946, Glenn Ford and son Peter with his supply of Gerber baby food.

Railways, was NOT an executive, but an engineer. The family moved to Santa Monica when Glenn (born Gwyllyn) was eight, and they often fished off the Venice Pier for that night's supper. Because he grew up without money, Glenn always valued the security of the studio contract---first at Columbia, then at MGM---over the independence pursued by some other leading men of his day.

The book reinforces some truths, too. Glenn was "the fastest gun alive", at least in Hollywood, where his draw was clocked at 0.4 seconds, putting him ahead of John Wayne and James Arness. He did favor his left profile (though NOT because

he'd been kicked by a horse, as reported.) He did take up hang-gliding in 1964, and he did successfully quit smoking in 1958.

He flunked his first screen test (at 20th Century-Fox, where he starred a dozen years later, in 1951, in two flops). Then Harry Cohn at Columbia Pictures signed him up along with his future best-friend William Holden---as young bucks who he saw as mutually replaceable rivals. Glenn spent the decade of the 1940s there, and remained loyal to Harry Cohn to his death in 1958, knowing that he would always find work at Columbia---even if it was more likely to be in *The Flying Missile* or *The Violent Men* than the



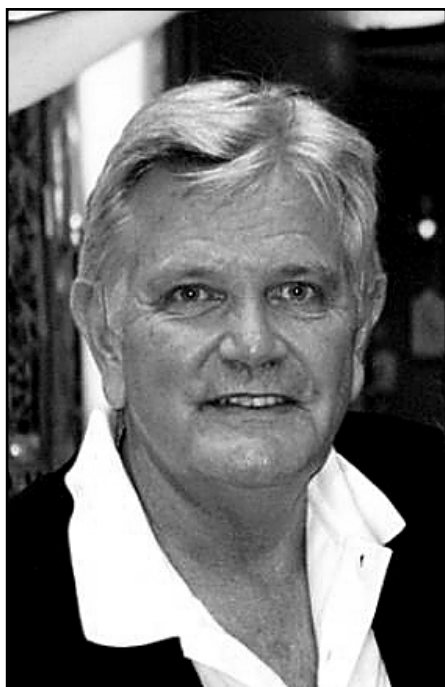
With dear friend Rita Hayworth on the set of *Lady from Shanghai*.

major picture he was promised, then denied, *From Here to Eternity*.

Impressed by a visit with FDR, and First Lady Eleanor, in the White House just before America entered WWII, Glenn was an enthusiastic Democrat, even campaigning for presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson in 1956. Then, under the influence of his first wife and her friends from MGM, he became disenchanted. Like his friend Ronald Reagan, he transformed from ardent Democrat to equally ardent Republican.



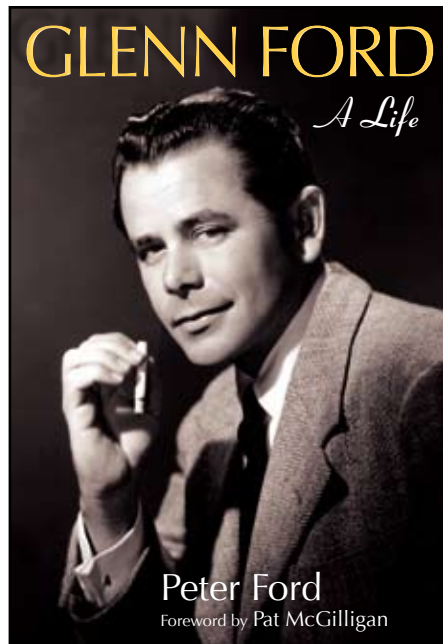
1971 - Peter Ford and Glenn Ford on the *Brotherhood of Bell* set.



Peter Ford today.

Glenn's military career needs some explanation. Before WWII he served a stint in the Coast Guard. Later he enlisted in the Marines, but spent his tour in Oceanside, California, finally mustering out after two years with a bleeding ulcer, which kept him out of officers' candidate school at Quantico, Virginia.

A decade later, influenced by WWII movies he was making for MGM, he became interested in the Navy and rose to the rank of captain in the US Naval Reserve (but did



Cover shot of Peter Ford's book on his father, "Glenn Ford: A Life".



Lynda Ford today.

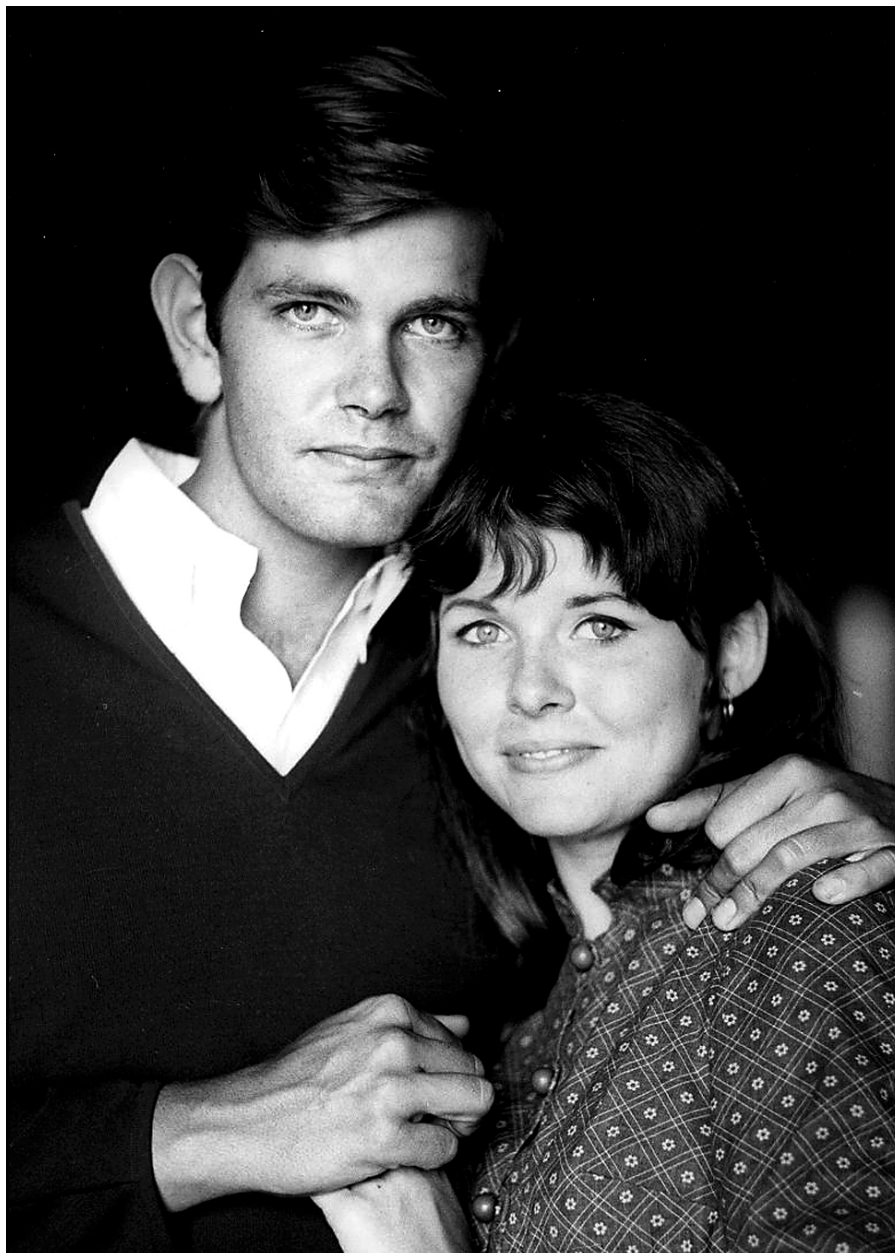
NOT reach "flag-rank", as publicized). Even as late as the mid-Sixties, when he was 50, he requested and went to Vietnam, coming under fire in the Mekong Delta, along with US marines, until being evacuated by helicopter.

Though a long-time Motion Picture Academy member, he was never an Oscar nominee. His own favorite pictures were MGM's *The Rounders* in 1966, and *So Ends Our Night* (at the beginning of his career, when costar Fredric March was especially kind to him). He also prized four of the five pictures he made with Rita Hayworth. His least-favorite was Columbia's 1949 *The Man from Colorado*, playing

a psychotic villain, which his wife thought would enhance his career. (It didn't).

In a 1949 interview, Glenn Ford said: "We are all three people--the person we think we are, the person the world thinks we are, and the person we really are." In Glenn Ford: A Life you will become well-acquainted with all three of them.

Author's Note: Glenn Ford: A Life runs 312 pages and is being published by the University of Wisconsin Press. Further information may be obtained from Peter Ford's own website: www.GlennFordBio.com



1968 photo of Peter and Lynda.