

Colonel Rich Waldner and the Redfish Spoon

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At a recent estate sale, I purchased a cache of fishing gear, mostly lures and flies. The gear belonged to someone whose home waters were the coastal marshes of south Louisiana. The sum of the fly gear was hundreds of flies in patterns and sizes to cover everywhere from Alaska to the Caribbean. Sorting the many flies became a quest, trying to figure out how each box of flies was used and if anyone knew anything about the more special flies.

One such fly, a beautiful spoon with a Fleur-de-lis pattern, prompted the reply "that's a Rich Waldner fly". A few phone calls, a couple emails, and a quick Google search put me on the path to meet Rich, who I quickly learned, had a reputation among fly fishermen for his fishing and his spoons.

As serendipity would have it, the search led me just thirty minutes down the coast from our home in Bay St. Louis, MS. Rich is retired and lives in nearby Biloxi, MS. This essay is from a recent visit David Buckner, and I had with Rich. We talked about his life story, fly fishing, retirement, and his spoons. He gave us a complete view as to how the current version evolved and then tied a couple.

Rich is originally from California, and the eastern Sierras is where he learned to fly fish. His career as a Phantom aviator in the Marines took him on tours to southeast Asia and Vietnam, and on occasion to New Orleans. He retired as a Colonel.

After retiring to the New Orleans area in the 1970's, he joined a fishing club in Westwego, LA. At the time, the members mostly fished for nothing bigger than bass and inshore fishing had not yet begun its rise to national popularity. He recalls the local guides thought landing redfish took too long and limited their time at catching more fish. However, for Rich, his life's trajectory changed the day he landed his first redfish on the fly. The fight was as adrenalin filled as flying in a fighter jet. He quickly focused upon fly fishing for redfish and became very good at the sport.

For more than twenty years he was a fly-fishing guide; which if you think about it, earns him the title of Captain Colonel Rich. He developed many fly patterns and as many ways to fish them. It was a spoon, however, that would become his best bait.

After decades of fishing and redesigning his spoons, his current pattern has earned him an elite reputation. He and his spoons were the subject of an article in Tail Magazine (Issue 62, Nov/Dec 2022) and again in a Tail Magazine article in December 2022 featuring "10 Must Have Flies for Saltwater Fly Fishing". Additionally, his flies were included in a 2018 Louisiana Sportsman article focused upon spoons used for inshore redfish fishing. He still ties commercially, and his spoons are found in several fly shops along the Gulf Coast.

Rich loves to share stories, whether it's about life lessons or fishing, but most fishing stories serve as life lessons! He is just fun to talk to. His stories are his memories of trout streams, friends, and fishing. The walls at his home are decorated with photos depicting a life of fly fishing. One picture is him perched upon a poling platform, leaning heavily into the pole and not showing any sign of the age of a retired Marine Colonel.

Rich recalls that he first began seeing spoons patterned for fly fishing coming over from Florida in the 1970's. As a youth, he fished with spoons and appreciated their ability to entice fish. Perhaps it

was only natural that he would transfer his experience with freshwater spoons to making spoons for inshore Reds. We discussed the Cave Wobbler and Dupre spoons, but Rich prefers his design, which sinks at 1 foot/second.

His routine is to complete six flies a day. He describes himself as a "morning tyer". However, the process requires about 4 to 5 hours for each layer of epoxy to cure. So, each fly is a two-day build.

The tying process begins with Mustad S71SNP-DT 2x/1XL hooks in sizes 2 and 1/0. He favors the Duratin covered hooks over stainless steel. He bends the shank using only a pair of needle-nose pliers. The bend will give the spoon its concave shape. He uses 23-gauge copper wire and clear Devcon epoxy. Each morning (and yes at 80 he still ties almost every day) he attaches the copper wire spars to the hook with red Danville 210 denier flat waxed thread and applies a thin coat of epoxy (... thin is in.). He winds a base of copper wire around the hook shank, extending from 3/8" behind the hook eye (leaving room for a tie in and weed guard) to beyond the hook bend and colors it red. He then cuts 3 each pieces of 5" copper wire and ties the middle in at the hook bend.

Using only his fingers and thumb, he then molds the wire into the recognizable "spoon" or "teardrop" shape. The result is 3 oval spars on each side of the hook. His aviation days seep through as he refers to the shape of the spoon as wings, spars, and aerodynamics. The final layers are to apply glitter as a veneer of colors to the top. The bottom always receives gold. His favorite glitter colors are copper, gold, purple, chartreuse, and magenta.

The signature Fleur-de-lis is then applied before the last epoxy coat. We asked where he gets the Fleur-de-lis graphics and he quickly stopped the conversation, as if he would have to kill us to tell us. Altogether, he applies 3 coats of epoxy, applying the glitter after the second coat. He insists every spoon has a 40 lb. Mason hard Monofilament weed guard. Oyster beds and grass are needless problems.

With every strip the spoon will "flutter", brightly reflecting its shiny glittery sides. "If they don't see it, they won't eat it". He insists on tying a spoon to the leader with a loop knot to get the appropriate effect.

The outcome is a beautiful spoon that catches both the eye and redfish.

His bench is small, and he can't recall how long he has had his vintage Thompson vise. His only tools are a pair of pliers, fingernail clippers, an X-acto knife, and a couple of wooden dowels shaped to apply epoxy, glitter, and paint. On the surface of his bench below the vise is a large mound of hardened epoxy drips mixed with glitter dust, a testament to thousands of spoons. Glitter spreads throughout his condo, emanating from his tying bench.

When I contacted Rich, he insisted we meet and hear him tell the of evolution of his spoons and that I relate his story to others. Without question there is a need to retain these stories.

And all of this was just down the road. Small world, huh?

