

SPORT Aerobatics

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**Your 2008 IAC
Hall of Fame
Inductee:
Bill Finagin**

**Basic Aerobatics Part IV
IAC Life Insurance
The Last Air Show**

Bill Finagin

*Inducted
into the*

IAC Hall *of* Fame

*Reggie Paulk with Bill Finagin
Photos by Jim Lawrence*

William "Bill" Finagin was inducted into the IAC Hall of Fame at a ceremony in Oshkosh, Wisconsin, on October 24, 2008. Anyone who's spent any time speaking with Bill will immediately understand why he was chosen for this prestigious award, but he humbly admits that he "... just doesn't want to lower the esteem of previous Hall-of-Famers." After all he's accomplished, that may be impossible.





Bill was born just outside of Washington, D.C., in Prince George's County, Maryland, in 1937. He grew up on a farm with horses, cows, and pigs, grew vegetables, played in the dirt, and got dirty. His two older brothers joined the Navy during World War II, and one was a fighter pilot—something Bill obviously looked up to. Bill remembers a day when he was in school and his brother flew over:

"I remember very vividly being in the second grade and hearing this monstrous noise," says Finagin. "Somebody said, 'What was that?' and I said, 'Oh nothing, it's probably my brother flying over in the Corsair.' He'd come down from Wildwood, New Jersey, so of course I was the big man in school for the rest of the day."

Bill's father fell ill and passed away when Bill was 16, limiting his opportunities.

"I went through the local system until the University of Maryland on scholarship," says Finagin, "because I didn't have any other choice."

Bill worked his way through school and started flying as soon as he got to College Park.

"I spent too much time at the airport," says Finagin. "It was one of my extracurricular loves."

He traded time working on UMD flying club airplanes for flight time and eventually earned his ticket in a 65-hp Aeronca Champion 7AC.

"You had to hand-prop it," says Finagin. "You only used the brakes when you did the run-up because they wouldn't hold otherwise."

One time, while flying the Champ back from an annual at another field, the engine began to sputter. A mechanic had replaced the vented fuel cap with a nonventing type, and the negative pressure starved the engine of fuel.

"So I'm flying back over D.C. at about 2,000 feet and the plane starts to sputter," says Finagin. "As I'd come down, the atmospheric pressure would change a little and I kept flying for a bit, but it just wasn't enough fuel to make the airport, so I had to make an off-airport landing on the median strip of a dual-lane highway about 2 miles from the airport."



Within minutes, there were quite a few cops on the scene. After figuring out the problem, replacing the fuel cap, and having the police stop traffic, Bill took off and headed back home.

Aviation stories are inevitably interrupted by the demands of life, and such was the case for Bill. After obtaining his bachelor's degree, Bill entered dental school and then attended special training as part of a Navy internship in Mayport, Florida. Moving on, Bill entered the United States Naval Academy and taught midshipmen sailing in his spare time.

Leaving active duty in 1967 to teach dental school and enter private practice, Bill remained in the Naval Reserve, eventually becoming a two-star admiral—the highest rank possible for a dentist—before his retirement in 1991. It was in 1974, during his time at dental school, that the flying bug finally bit again.

"As I was teaching in the dental school, a couple other professors wanted to get into flying," recalls Finagin. "So the first time I entered into aircraft ownership, there were three of us. We bought an airplane called a Spezio Tuholer—an open-cockpit sport plane. Of course, neither owner had their license, so I basically had an airplane to fly whenever I wanted."

The Tuholer was a homebuilt airplane with a single, low, strut-braced wing. The wings could be folded back 90 degrees and conveniently placed into a fitting in the tail for towing.

"We actually went to Pennsylvania," says Finagin, "saw the airplane and towed it home about 100 miles. It was exciting, with three idiots and a plane trailing along behind."

Because it was called a sports plane, aerobatics were obviously part of its repertoire.

"Today, I'd never fly aerobatics in it," says Finagin. "But at that time, I was like the typical idiot. I went out and flew loops and rolls."

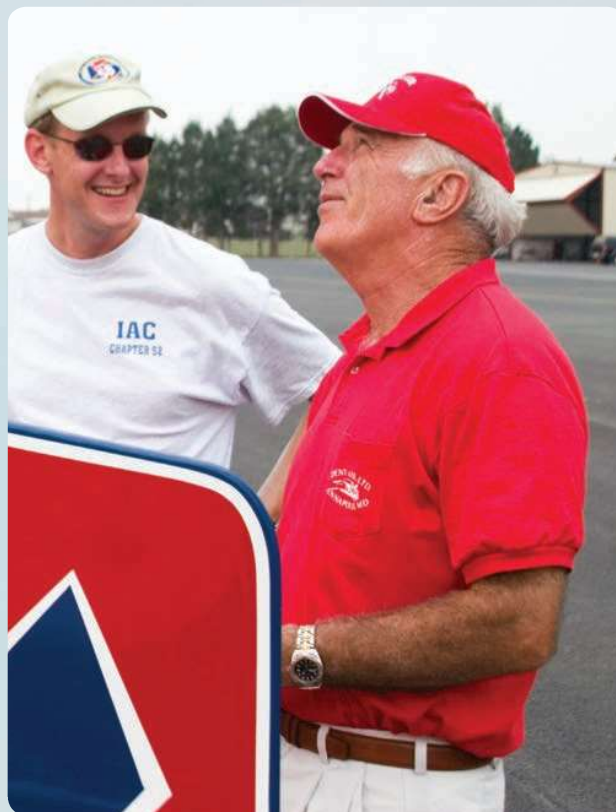
Knowing that he couldn't be competitive in aerobatics with the Spezio, Bill set his sights on the airplane that has become synonymous with him—the Pitts.

"I'd heard about the Pitts and there was one on the field," says Finagin. "I admired the guy flying it. I don't know if I admired him or the airplane more than the other, but they looked pretty sharp and spiffy, so I decided that's what I'd start looking for."

As seemed to happen often to Bill, the airplane came to him in an unusual fashion.

"The good Lord smiled upon me," Finagin recalls, "and I ended up finding an absolutely beautiful one in the showroom of a Cadillac dealer in Butler, Pennsylvania."

The Pitts had outwitted a couple of naïve victims, and Bill would be the benefactor.



"I guess these guys' father was a World War II pilot," says Finagin. "They had flown some T-6s and other warbirds and decided to buy a Pitts. The one son told me, and I don't know if it's true, that after about 14 passes, he finally got it on the ground. After landing, he got out, kissed the ground, towed it to his Cadillac showroom, and put it up for sale. He said, 'I'll never fly that again!' It was an absolutely gorgeous S-1S."

Bill flew the single-seat Pitts for four years, beginning in 1981. In 1985, it was time to move up, so Bill bought a factory-new '86 S-1T and put his S-1S up for sale.

"I sold my first plane to a guy from Germany who came over," says Finagin. "The moment he looked at it, he opened up a little satchel and paid me on the spot in cash. Then we shipped it to Germany for him."

Bill became a Pitts dealer about the same time he purchased the S-1T. In order to teach students the finer points of flying the Pitts, Bill purchased a two-seat S-2B.

"That started my long and somewhat colorful teaching career, I guess some might say," says Finagin.

So what kinds of things happen to a pilot with more than 18,000 flight hours—10,000 in the Pitts alone?

"I've had a few incidents," says Finagin. "I dead-sticked a T-34 one time as a passenger. I started out as a passenger and ended up being the pilot."

"Today, I'd never fly aerobatics in it, but at that time, I was like the typical idiot. I went out and flew loops and rolls."

Competition may be fierce, but it's not every man for himself.

"To show you how nice your fellow competitors are," he says, "at a competition a few years ago, my airplane developed an oil leak. While the plane was down waiting for a new oil cooler, I went up in a borrowed S-2C I just sold a few months before to a new customer. We had the single cockpit on it, and coming straight down with a snap roll, I happened to have the cockpit blast open on me. So here I am going straight down, the cockpit opens, my helmet flies off, and I'm reeling in the headset. It's a little noisy and a little unusual, so I decide I better pull the stick back because I'm still heading straight toward the ground. Fortunately, I ended up not zeroing anything. After pulling out of the dive, I was able to tell them I had a little problem. I landed, cleaned up the inside and outside of the airplane, and went back up and finished the flight. That one got my attention a little bit. Otherwise, it's been pretty routine flying. I've had more fun than should be allowed."

Because he has his seaplane rating, it should come as no surprise that Bill has made a few water landings. But one landing in particular was a one-off deal, never to be repeated again—hopefully:

"I was up flying with a new student. It was his first time in the back seat, and maybe his fourth or fifth lesson. He was a very accomplished private pilot, and he had become smitten with aerobatics. We were coming back from the eastern shore of Maryland, which requires us to fly over the Chesapeake Bay, and we checked off the normal

items—fuel remaining and da-da-da. About 5 or 6 miles from the airport, I'm in the front seat and he's in back with all the master controls, and the engine just quit as though we had turned the key off.

"So I asked, 'What did you do?' And he said, 'Nothing!' I said, 'Okay, we'll just go through all of the emergency procedures,' and so we did.

"Nothing worked and nothing happened. So he put it in a glide, and, as we were gliding down, I said, 'You know, there's just no place to land that we're not going to have a problem, because it's a very densely populated area.'

"There was one field that happens to be a vineyard, which is about 400 feet long, so obviously we weren't going to be able to get stopped.

"I said, 'At 500 feet, I'll take the airplane, and we'll try to look for two big trees. We'll try to go right between those trees, and hopefully that'll take the wings off at the same rate and slow us down.' He seemed to go along with it, as preposterous as it might sound now.

"At about 100 feet off the ground, the plane—just as mysteriously as it stopped running—started running again. It sounded strong, so I decided to pull up to try to make





the airport. It flew for another four or five minutes, so we made a turn and started climbing up....It wasn't a sputter; it wasn't a cough; it was like someone just turned the key off. It was instantly silent—again.

"The second time the engine quit, we didn't have any choice but to put it into the river, or else we could hurt somebody. We just made sure our belts and everything were tight. It was very uneventful. We hit the water where I'd water-skied before, so I planned about 20 feet of depth in case we dove into the water or turned upside down, we wouldn't have the canopy locked closed. I didn't want to open

"You know, there's just no place to land that we're not going to have a problem..."

the canopy beforehand—think of falling off of water skis at 90 miles an hour. That's what it feels like. Of course, the plane hit, and it turned over, which we expected. We unbuckled, and I made sure he was all right, and then told him I'd meet him at the surface. We held our breath and opened the canopy. When we got to the top, we watched the plane right itself and sit there at the surface. I thought, 'What an idiot!' Those things we call wings were actually water wings. It eventually sank, so they brought in a diver, put some airbags under it, and floated it up the river to what used to be an old seaplane ramp at the airport. I washed it down that night, but the saltwater corroded it, and I insisted the insurance company total it, which they did."

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The very next day, there was an air show scheduled at the airport, so Bill pulled an identical plane he had for sale out of the hangar.

"Most people, including one from the FAA, thought I flew a plane that landed in the water the night before."

Due to corrosion, the problem was never pinpointed, but a faulty ignition cluster switch was suspected.

Today, if you'd like to buy a factory-new Pitts, you'll need to call Bill Finagin—currently the only Pitts dealer in the United States. The reason for his success in 22 years of Pitts sales lies in the fact that he doesn't consider it his vocation.

"[Selling airplanes] has always been a hobby with me, and we stay very busy," says Finagin. "We've just finished up two very successful years. They rank among just about the best years we've ever had in all the years I've been doing it. I think there are still people out there who want to fly a Pitts bad enough, and they'll find a way. It's all a question of priorities."

One person has been instrumental in allowing aerobatics to remain a priority for Bill.

"One of the major factors of me being involved in aerobatics," he says, "is I've had a very understanding wife. A lot of us are very lucky that way."

This fall, during the Cape May contest, IAC president Vicki Cruse asked Bill to come up to the front to help her present an award. None the wiser, he just thought he was going up to help her hand an award to someone else, like he'd done many times before.

"So I'm standing up there and she starts this speech," says Finagin. "I can't really tell you to this day exactly what she said, but I remember when she said something to the effect of, 'You're our newest inductee into the Aerobatics Hall of Fame.' I guess my brain went dead for

a little bit; it was a total surprise. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think about the Hall of Fame, let alone think I'd be a candidate for it. As Vicki says, I was speechless. I really don't remember about an hour of that time after she told me I was inducted. Like a bumbling idiot, I had to ask her the next day what I said after she told me. I'm still awed by it; it's just a tremendous honor."

Bill Finagin has put "150 percent" into his flying over the years. Unable to do something just partway, he puts his all into whatever he takes on. He believes that when the time's over, the time's over. In keeping with that philosophy, Bill announced at the Hall of Fame banquet that he was retiring from competitive flying. His last flight as a contestant turned out to be idyllic.

"I won a contest at Farmville just a week before the Hall of Fame banquet," he says. "At that contest, amazingly enough, Pitts aircraft won all five categories. It's sort of unheard of, but they won Primary, Sportsman, Intermediate, Advanced, and Unlimited. What better contest can I use as a swan song?"

Bill may be giving up competitive aerobatics, but that doesn't mean he's leaving the sport entirely.

"I'll sure keep instructing, and I plan to show up at contests and be a judge if they'll have me. I still have all the vigor and interest in IAC that I've ever had in my life—that's not diminished a bit."

So what does Bill think of the IAC after all these years?

"I think the IAC is a fabulous organization. I just try to recruit people for it all the time. There's never a student who gets in my airplane who I don't encourage to become a member of the IAC if they're not already."

If anyone exemplifies the heart and spirit of the IAC, who better than Bill Finagin? Congratulations, Bill. You are more than worthy of the honor you've received. **SA**





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