

The Complete Corkscrew Pilot

Plane & Pilot

James Lawrence

Here's the drill: Drill hundreds of students to fly a Pitts, drill on teeth for a living, then drill holes in the sky for the weekend...in a Pitts S2C!

"I imagine that it's something like taking drugs," says Bill Finagin, Pitts Special Pilote Incroyable.



The affable, energetic 68-year-old (who looks and acts 15 years younger) is talking about mounting up in his favorite aerial steed—the Pitts S2C. "It's a difficult relationship to tell somebody about," he says with a chuckle, "but when I get into that airplane, I'm that kid in the big candy store for the first time. I've never had a flight in a Pitts I haven't loved."

Pressed to elaborate, he says simply, "It becomes a part of you when you're in the air."

There's no doubting Finagin's sincerity on the topic of man and machine melding. Earlier, the crowd was wowed at the Warrenton summer air show in Virginia as he cavorted all over the humid skies in his S2C. Minutes later, he led a challenging three-ship formation into the muggy, mildly turbulent conditions for Plane & Pilot's photo shoot.

Nimbly twisting the little red biplane into different positions for the lens, he expertly wrangled two fellow Pitts pilots with little formation flying experience into a difficult three-ship lineup.

Throughout the aerial rigors, Finagin—aerobatic stunt performer and veteran instructor, longtime Pitts dealer, retired dentist and former dental college instructor—gave the lie to the old saw about medical types being poor pilots. This guy can make a Pitts dance! "There's nothing like a Pitts Special. It's why I became a dealer," beams Finagin.

Initially, he had no interest in selling the aerobatic biplane that has carved out an enduring niche in aerobatic lore; he was too busy turning the world upside down for himself and his many students.

"When I was a boy, we didn't have all the diversions kids have today. I grew up on a farm and spent a lot of time looking up at the sky. I was fascinated by airplanes," Finagin recalls.

It didn't hurt that one brother, 12 years his senior, flew combat in the Pacific Theater during World War II, chalking up aerial kills in such immortal fighters as the F4F Hellcat and the F4U Corsair. Another brother was an aviation mechanic on the USS Lexington. "I knew every airplane in the sky. I could have been a spotter for the FBI," says Finagin.

The imprinting took. In 1955, at age 17, he got his flying license at a local FBO. So how many hours since then, Bill? "I've logged probably 10,000 hours," he answers.

Mighty impressive—but wait, there's more! "No," he says, "I mean 10,000 hours as an instructor in the Pitts. I'd estimate total hours at around 18,000 hours."

Wait, 10,000 hours as a Pitts instructor? Shouldn't there be a 12-step program for that? "Hi, I'm Bill, and I'm an acroholiac."

"Hi, Bill."

Even over a 50-year span, that's a ton of flying. During that time, Finagin has owned and flown many other types besides the Pitts. But his heart pumps Pitts-red blood, make no mistake about it. "There's just something about the mystique and nostalgia of flying a biplane, I guess," he quips.

Finagin bought his first Pitts Special, a used model, in 1981 and, forgive the cliché, it was truly love at first flight. He recalls, "It felt like an extension of my body. I started flying competition, then bought a new S1T with a constant-speed propeller in 1986. That made it possible to go faster."

Faster is always better to any corkscrew pilot. "There was a practical reason, too. I bought it to fly to contests in less time," he justifies.

He limited his trophy-hunting grounds to east of the Mississippi, "from New England all the way down to Florida." After all, a dentist has patients to care for. "I've flown at the Sebring Aerobatics Championship since 1982. It's a great life. You create great relationships with people."

A dealer and instructor in the nimble bipes for more than two decades, his current ride is the Pitts S2C. A quick scan of the manufacturer's Website (www.aviataircraft.com) tells you that this latest iteration of Curtis Pitts' 1943 acromite has come a long way. "It's just a better airplane all around," says Finagin.

Computerized design and manufacturing brought lighter, stiffer, stronger wings. The look of the new acro bird changed, too. Wings and tail surfaces are squared off. The old guppy-gut fuselage bottom is leaned up and now transparent. The forward canopy also got a makeover to a leaner, meaner visual and drag profile. But the real uptick is in the performance.

"All the control surfaces were modified for more efficiency and effectiveness at lower and higher speeds," says Finagin, "so it's easier to fly aerobatic patterns because it has a wider performance envelope."

Stress limits are beefed up, too, up to +6 G's/-5 G's. "The top speeds are similar—I've found it to be the same or slightly faster than the S2B. It has a three-blade composite Hartzell propeller [called The Claw] that significantly increases the performance envelope and makes it much smoother," says Finagin.

He finds climb "significantly better, too. Pushing over at the top of a maneuver, it has improved 'tractor' power—pulls you right over and helps you keep your altitude."

"I'd say every aspect of performance has been improved. It's even easier to land," continues Finagin. "The slightly larger wing area gives you slower landings. It just seems to track better than the B model. And the dorsal horns make for more efficient and effective rudder and elevator control."

How does it stand up to other aerobatic aircraft, such as the Edge, Sukhoi and Extra?

"Well, those are all monoplanes, so you'll see them mostly flying in the unlimited aerobatic category, as defined by the IAC [International Aerobatic Club]," explains Finagin.

There are five categories in the IAC's aero competition galaxy: Primary, Sportsman, Intermediate, Advanced and Unlimited.

"The Pitts can fly an Unlimited aerobatic sequence, but it would be a struggle to score as well as monoplanes, given the same quality pilot. But the Pitts is very competitive in the Advanced, Intermediate and Sportsman categories," gloats Finagin.

After many years at the Sportsman level, Finagin moved up to Intermediate. In 1989, he won the Intermediate category at Fond du Lac, Wis., which was where the big IAC competition took place for many years in the week following the EAA AirVenture fly-in convention in Oshkosh, Wis.

"I won that two years in a row. I then felt some pressure and obligation to move up to Advanced." He continues to compete in that category in five to 10 contests per year.

Each acro category begins with compulsory maneuvers, such as specified loops and rolls. "In contest flying, there are inside- and outside-G maneuvers. As you move up in category, you increase your difficulty. Intermediate adds a few outside maneuvers; Advanced adds even more. In competition, all the maneuvers must be done in complete control at all times. The contests are set up to be quite conservative and very safe," assures Finagin.

A typical Advanced routine might include a 45-degree climb up, four quarter rolls right or left, then push over into a negative outside loop, take it three-fourths of the way around, do a half-roll to upright, another half-roll to a 45-degree climb again, then roll inverted to straight and level but upside down.

"That might be the first figure maneuver, and you might have nine or more of those in your program," adds Finagin. Quick, break out the Bonine.

The lively, snappy way the Pitts performs those types of maneuvers is why Finagin and many other pilots love it so much. "It's the ability of the airplane to do whatever you want it to do," affirms Finagin. "I've owned a Cardinal and flown Cessnas and Bonanzas, and they're all wonderful airplanes. I enjoy flying all of them, but I confess it's like driving your car. You can

enjoy a drive, but there's not the passion that's ignited in an aerobatic airplane. Just to know you have the ability to go straight up, roll, go straight down, and virtually at will—in legal airspace, of course—and have that feeling of being an integral part of the airplane is what makes it so special."

Lately, Finagin has helped some airports get on the air-show map. "On my way to Oshkosh 2004, I got weathered in at Martinsburg, West Virginia," he recalls. "I talked to George Smith, owner of the local FBO AeroSmith. They hadn't had an air show for over 10 years and wanted one. 'I'll set it up for you for nothing,' I offered, and they couldn't resist.

"I met with the airport board, laid out an appealing show with civilian jets, military warbirds, static displays, even a wing-walking barnstormer. And they believed in me and said 'yes.'"

The show this past summer drew more than 20,000 people in its two days and was a big success. Says Finagin, "My general philosophy was give the crowd more than they expect, and they'll be repeat patrons next year."

For Bill Finagin, life is just one big happy drill, whether he's drilling holes in the sky, teeth in the chair, students in the cockpit or air-show organizers on how to do it right. "I still consider it just a hobby. If it became a job, I'd quit."