

# Pilot's ideas take flight

*Palm Coast man reflects on flying, planning air show*

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Bill Mills is flying toward the frothy blue and white line where the ocean meets the sand in Flagler Beach.

He is aiming his Chinese war plane at a spot off the Flagler Beach pier.

Mills comes in high but when his plane crosses over the water he dives down low, heading toward the waves. Mills seems to pilot the aircraft so close to the ocean that you'd think the plane's propeller would slice any leaping mullet into instant sushi.

The plane zooms off the waves about 150 yards from the pier's end. The anglers are visible but not recognizable as they stand watching the plane with the red star emblazoned on its side. Mills then aims for the sky, the engine roaring, powering the plane up high again in the scant seconds before it crosses over land.

Mills, 48, has a name for the maneuver.

"I call that the banana, because it looks like a banana," Mills' voice crackles over the headset.

And, no, Mills is not bananas. He is careful to check that no other planes are around when he performs the "banana." And he knows something about planes and flying. He is a 1986 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and has flown F-18 fighter jets off the decks of aircraft carriers. He flew fighter jets during Desert Storm. Flying has been a big part of Mills' life, and he intends to make it a big part of Flagler County's life.

Mills and his wife, Kim, who live in Palm Coast, were lead organizers of the Wings Over Flagler air show this year. The couple, along with Flagler County Airport Director Roy Sieger, are the driving force behind the growing event. They are already planning the third annual Wings Over Flagler in 2012.

"People are starting to know we're not a hot wing eating contest," Bill Mills said.

Mills said next year's Wings Over Flagler show will be dedicated to the memory of his friend William "Wild Bill" Walker, who died when his plane crashed while performing at this year's show. The National Transportation Safety Board's investigation into the crash probably won't be finished until next year. But some aviation experts have said it appears Walker may have lost consciousness or been incapacitated in some other way before his plane crashed at the Flagler County Airport.



Bill Mills pilots his Chinese-made military trainer along the coast of Flagler and St. Johns counties recently. (N-J | Frank Fernandez)



Bill Mills prepares his Nanchang CJ-6A trainer to take to the skies on Sunday at the Flagler County Airport. Mills is the owner of Yakrobatics Inc., one of the organizers of the Wings over Flagler air show this year. (Photo provided)

Mills renamed the air show scholarships in honor of Walker, who lived in Cookeville, Tenn. This year two high school students interested in aviation careers each received a \$1,000 Wings Over Flagler William "Wild Bill" Walker Memorial Scholarship.

"I've flown with Wild Bill many times, a good friend of ours, just a wonderful gentleman, Southern gentleman," Mills said. "And we wanted to do something for him and his family."

Mills said that pilots are aware of the chances they take in pursuing their life's passion.

"Aviators, we understand what the risks are in what we do," Mills said. "But we also understand the value of celebrating the life of that individual and it was very interesting how quickly everybody got back together and we started to celebrate."

The tragedy will not keep any aviators away from next year's show. All the pilots who flew at this year's show have agreed to bring their planes back next year. And a few new planes already have been added to the lineup: a B-25 bomber and an F-4U Corsair.

About 3,000 people attended the show its first year in 2010 and about 7,000 attended this year, Mills said. Mills is hoping for 10,000 people at next year's Wings Over Flagler.

Bill Mills said he has been interested in flying since he was a 6- or 8-years-old kid building models of aircraft carriers. He grew up in Maryland just outside of Annapolis, site of the U.S. Naval Academy.

After leaving the Navy, Mills moved to Arizona and took a civilian job. He said he found it difficult at first, leaving the structured environment of the Navy and entering the "dog eat dog" business world.

"Getting out of the Navy was a pretty traumatic thing for me, because I really loved doing it and to this day I still bleed Navy blood," Mills said.

He didn't fly for about four years. Then he started flying Cessnas and other civilian planes for fun. But he found those planes didn't have the right stuff for an ex-fighter jock.

"I really felt the need to get back into high performance," Mills said. "You know flying F-18s and A-4 Skyhawks and things like that and then coming back and flying these things that go straight and slow: Oh my God, it was killing me."

About 10 years ago, he said he found the solution at a reasonable price: the Chinese-built CJ6-A Nanchang. The propeller-driven, two-seat military plane is capable of aerobatics and can be flown hard and fast. It was first used by the Chinese during the Korean War, he said.

Mills, whose radio call sign is Pirate, christened the plane "Pirate 86," the year he graduated from Annapolis. He gave the plane other personal touches, the blue and gold paint signifies the Naval Academy. Plus the yellow on the wing tips looks cool as the plane spins through the air, he said. The word "privateers" is written on the plane in a nod to his old Navy squadron.

Mills uses female pronouns to refer to the plane. About five or six years ago Mills met another important woman in life, his wife Kim, who was a flight attendant for United Airlines and had

always been fascinated by flying. She said she was impressed by the daring pilot when she first met him, but she didn't let him know it. About two months in the relationship Mills took her into the sky and flew the loops and rolls of aerobatics.

"I loved it," Kim wrote in an e-mail. "It really is pretty thrilling; it's the smell, the sound, the strapping on the parachute. It's cool - and a great way to travel!" She said she has never worried about flying with her husband.

"I have never been uncomfortable in the airplane flying with Bill, I know his background and the type of person he is so he would never put us in harm's way," Kim wrote. "The only time I ever get nervous is when I am not flying with him - if something were to go wrong and I'm on the ground--- the waiting and not knowing anything scares me! So when I'm not in the airplane--- I'm happy when he lands."

Kim Mills' call sign, by the way, is "heels" because she is usually wearing 4-inch heels and brings along five or six pairs of shoes when she travels. Bill Mills points to a compartment behind the planes back seat which used to contain about 250 pounds of vacuum tubes.

"So we pulled all that out and I replaced it with a nice Garmin out front and now I can put all my wife's shoes and stuff like that in there," Mills said.

Bill Mills said his wife does a tremendous amount of work to help put together Wings over Flagler.

Mills said the strategy is to catch pilots as they fly toward Sun and Fun, a huge air show in Lakeland. He said they offer pilots hotel rooms, food and gas in exchange for participating in Wings over Flagler. He added he knows many of the pilots from his own flying in air shows along the east coast.

"Flagler is getting a very good reputation very fast for putting on a good show," Mills said. "And, like I said, Roy has been a tremendous supporter in that for us. We could not do this without him."

And while planning for the next Wings Over Flagler, Bill Mills and his wife, Kim, are also flying to other air shows. This weekend they flew Pirate 86 to Andrews Air Force Base for a show.

The return to Andrews Air Force Base is a homecoming of sorts for Mills. He remembers going to the air show when he was a kid and being in awe of the aviators. A pilot noticed the wide-eyed kid and put him in the front seat of his T-6 Texan and let him try on his helmet.

"That was the moment where I said 'I have to do this; this is what I want to do' from 8 years old," Mills recalled. "And so it was, about six or seven years ago ... I was at Andrews and there was an opportunity. I was climbing out of my cockpit. And I looked down and there's this 6-year-old kid looking up at me. I put him in the cockpit and put my helmet on him. And you could just see the look.

"It's, like, full circle."