

**FAA Entrepreneurial Excellence Hall of Fame Recipient**  
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**BIOGRAPHY OF W. R. "BILL" SOWELL**  
**By Dianne Sowell Preston**

W. R. "Bill" Sowell was born in a small town in northwest Florida known as Orange Hill, Florida. He was a quiet boy as a child, and his early ambition in life was to enter the ministry. He was bitten by the "flying bug" at the tender age of six. These two strong ambitions tugged at him during those younger years, but the day he saw his first airplane, he decided to make the sky his "Special Place."

When he was a teenager, he moved to Panama City, Florida – a one-airplane town. Bill Sowell was the promoter, instigator, and part owner of this old crate. He gathered up a group of guys who sold coke bottles to raise the \$600 to buy the old community bi-plane. This was the airplane he soloed in – a Swallow with a Kinner 100 hp engine. His plane sat out on the road in Lynn Haven for the whole town to see. Occasionally the gang was fortunate enough to get the old bi-plane started and airborne.

Bill entered the Army Air Corps when World War II started. He bought a J-3 Cub when he was stationed in Shreveport, Louisiana. While flying it around Louisiana and Texas, he met his future wife, Nadine. He did not have an automobile, so they did their courting in the little red airplane. He married Nadine two years later. She could not drive an automobile nor fly an airplane. He was a civilian flight instructor, so he began teaching her to fly. It was not long before she earned her Private Pilot's license – even before she received a license to drive an automobile.

In December 1945 Bill and Nadine started the company known today as Sowell Aviation Company, Inc. This company has become a world-renowned flight school and FBO (Fixed Base Operation.) Nadine would go up in an Aeronca and do acrobats to attract people to the airport on Sunday afternoons while Bill would encourage all who would listen to learn to fly – from him, of course!

Bill and Nadine had four children, two of whom later became pilots as well. Their son, Don, grew up right in Bill's footsteps. Don was only one when he took his first flight. He soloed at 5:00 a.m. on the morning of his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday before receiving his automobile license that afternoon. Don graduated from Auburn University and is currently the President/Chairman of the Board of Sowell Aviation.

While building the company, Bill also studied accounting and business administration. This training really taught him the art of success in the aviation world. He once stated, "It's good to know that your overhead is something more than the ceiling of a hanger or the overhead cam of an airplane motor. If you are going to work hard hours, it's a good idea to know something about the dollars and cents, not just how to fly an airplane. It's fun to fly, but it is more fun when you make it profitable. I have four children to raise, and I had to get serious about making money!"

Through the years, the Sowells have done much to encourage interest in aviation careers among young people. Over the past 62 years, hundreds of satisfied pilots have graduated from Sowell Aviation's flight school and benefited from the dreams Bill had as a young boy. Bill was a FAA Pilot Examiner, and Bill and Don Sowell were the only father-son FAA examiner team in the United States at one time. Bill Sowell was a creative person. He believed his business success was attributed to being persistent, courteous, and fair. He never lost his religious convictions – he once stated, "I sometimes drive a hard bargain, but I never cheat!"

W. R. "Bill" Sowell was really "Mr. Aviation" to all who knew him. He was active in civic work to include memberships in the Rotary Club, Elks, Shriners, and Quiet Birdman. He was listed in *Who's Who in Aviation in America*; *Who's Who in the World*, 20<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1995; one of the founders of the Florida Aviation Trades Association and served as its president three times; charter member of National Aviation Trade Association; charter member of the Florida Governor's Aviation Committee and served as chairman; member of National Aviation Transportation Association; and member of the Bay County Chamber of Commerce. He served many years on the Florida Governor's Aviation Board from Governor Hayden Burns through Governor Bob Martinez's terms. He was a former chairman of the Bay County/Panama Cit Airport Authority. He met several of the United States Presidents including Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush. A \$2,500 scholarship fund was set up in his name by the Florida Aviation Trades Association after his death.

Bill Sowell was "Daddy" to four children, "Granddaddy" to eight, and "Airplane Granddaddy" to eight. He was a man who truly loved his family. He gave his children wings and made them fly; he taught them that no star was out of reach; he was their hero; he was "The Wind Beneath Their Wings."

According to an African proverb, a person is never dead as long as there is one person alive to call his name. There are many people alive today to call his name, to remember him for what he accomplished in the aviation industry, to remember him as a friend, to remember him as a Granddaddy, and to remember him as a father. Yes, the sky was W. R. "Bill" Sowell's "Special Place," and he never lost sight of that goal.

Just about everyday of his life, W. R. "Bill" Sowell took an airplane ride, and then on May 20, 1995, he took a plain air ride into that "Special Place" that he loved so much. His family has an emptiness that can never be filled, but the memories, the accomplishments, and the love that he shared with them will live on in each of them forever.