

Bob Wiplinger

Saving the World from Bad Floats, One Seaplane at a Time

You want a lot of fancy talk, you won't get it out of Bob "Wip" Wiplinger. You want a lot of linguistic somersaults about seaplanes and Minnesota and how his Dad rests in peace beneath a propeller in the old cemetery on the edge of the South St. Paul airport, just a few hundred feet from the company he founded that today holds 90 percent of the world's market in airplane floats...well, you won't get such tricks from Wip. Plain talking he is. Plain as the "Wipaire, Inc." sign on the door of the business he – first with his Dad and now with his kids Nancy, 26, and Charlie, 24 – takes over the top in innovation. Yes, as Wip and his companion, the Border Collie Maggie, go about work as usual around the Wipaire office, you are going to have to listen – hard – for all the reasons why this St. Paul born and bred aviator-cum-visionary has the next big thing in firefighting (the amphibious Fire Boss aircraft), not to mention seaplane floats for all reasons and seasons – \$20 million in annual sales' worth.

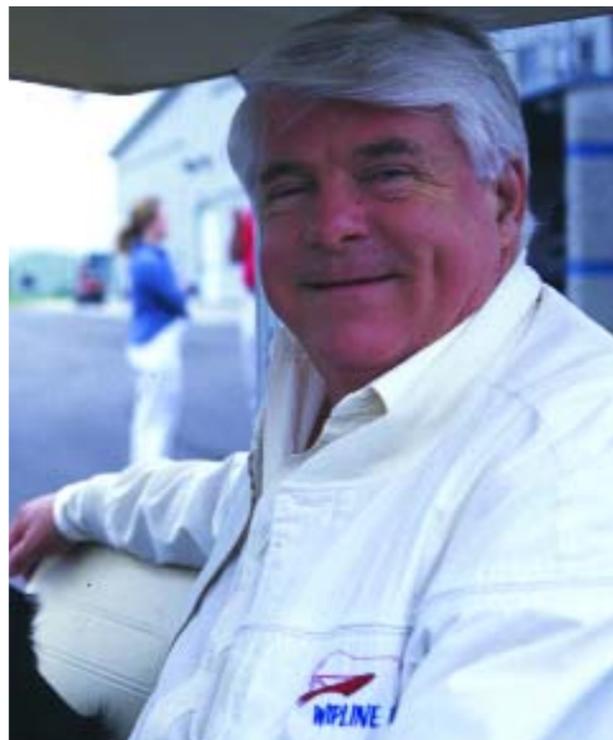
Maybe you can get Wip's pet, Fred, the right-seat-flying parrot (with airsick issues) to tell you everything you won't get from him. Because if it's one thing Bob Wiplinger is, is modest. Horn tooting is just not his style. Loving what he does is more like it.

"I like airplanes," he says simply of his passion, begun as a 13-year-old who solo'd a J-3 Cub across a farmer's field. "They are the only thing I know and do."

This is only partially true, for after earning a degree in aeronautical engineering from the University of Minnesota (class of '68) and joining his father in the float design and manufacturing company he founded in 1960 (then known as

Wipline, Inc.), Wip has been a restless force of research and development. A designer and inventor with a gift, says one friend intimate with his work, "for turning innovative ideas into real life products."

"You are always looking to do something else. You can't sit still," says Wip. *He* can't sit still, he means. So when Wipaire comes out with an assortment of distin-



guished float products and small aircraft parts and modifications, and when it offers its services in avionics, maintenance, aircraft refinishing and interior work, it is no secret who is behind the great idea – whether it is designing floats for a Grand Caravan or doing a "hot rod" re-engineering of an Air Tractor, which are but two hot projects kicked-off by Wip.

Hint: however he might like the credit, it is not Fred.

Take the new Fire Boss. This Air Tractor 802 souped-up with water-bombing floats that in 14 seconds scoops 800

gallons into its belly, thereby helping to revolutionize firefighting by staying on the job for three solid hours before rescoping *and* it sells for one-tenth the price of its closest competitor, is Wip's latest *cause célèbre*.

"I thought it probably was a good idea," says Wip with characteristic understatement. "I figured it would work and it works pretty damn well." Then again, pretty damn well is about how all Wip's projects turn out, just like his flying. Multi-engine rated by age 17; commercially licensed by 18; and by his 20s instrument flying almost everything, including his favorite (and current) flight, the 1987 Caravan 675, Wip and the air have a mutual admiration society. And when he and his wife of 31 years, Linda, zoom off every other weekend to their own private island on Ontario's romantic Rainey Lake, or head south to Florida for their three warm-weather escapes each winter, the more than 6,000-hour pilot will not be caught – you guessed it – sitting still.

Funny thing is, for all Wipaire's success, he won't be caught particularly enamored with business either.

"My Dad was a home-cooked engineer," he says of his father, Ben, who in the '40s converted military aircraft to civilian executive craft at South St. Paul's Fleming Field before being seized by the float-making muse and founding Wipline, Inc. to make and sell his patented designs. "He loved to build and design and tinker. I guess that's typical of engineers. I guess that's typical of me, too." Yes, Wip is more than happy to leave what's *not* "tinkering" to his super-capable daughter, Nancy, the company's business-degree-holding vice president, and turn his visionary talents to such thrilling (to Wip) projects as one of



his latest – working with Cessna to float-equip a Grand Caravan and create a really happening seaplane. Well, says Wip by way of further explanation for his brainchild, "I like to build stuff. If I didn't (build), I don't know what might have happened." What might have happened with his *life*, he means.

He needn't worry. The Spanish company now flying two Fire Boss planes and finding their phenomenal firefighting ability "really overwhelming," in the words of its CEO, will say it. The Canadian company who has sent its Fire Boss out on over 200 hours of firefighting missions will, too – even if Wip, ever-graceful in his retirement, won't: *pretty damn well*, Wip

Wiplinger; whatever you do will work pretty damn well.

What the future holds for Wip, besides more tinkering (he can't help himself) with such projects as making an Eastern block M-28 "Skytruck" amphibious in an effort to discover more commercial uses for floats, may include expanding Wipaire's operation to Canada, Alaska, the west coast. "I just want to save the world from bad floats," he laughs.

From his home at Inver Grove Heights, the spectacular 120-acre farm on the bluffs above the backwaters of the Mississippi River where he keeps a Wipaire factory, grass airstrip, and seaplane base, the view of this dream looks mighty clear indeed. ✕

For (left to right) Maggie, Wip, Charlie and Nancy, floats are a family affair; (opposite): Wip as he preps for a fly.