

Fifty Plus Years of Being a Pilot's Pilot

You have probably seen him performing an exacting and perfectly loony stunt routine as the Flying Farmer. Notorious for his antics, Stanley Segalla, flies a 1947 Piper PA-11 Cub at the Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome during summer weekends and teaches aerobatic flight from a Decathlon 180 in Venice Florida during the winters. In 54 years of flying and 83 years of life he has logged over 21,000 hours, instructed more than 10,000 pilots and has owned more than 39 single-engine airplanes.



Stan Segalla as the Flying Farmer Photo: Gail Edwin Fielding

Few people know that Stan started his flying career during a WWII bomber mission. A U.S. Army infantry veteran, he rode with a B-24 bomber crew, his cousin was the pilot. On the return leg, Stan's cousin called him up to the cockpit and after a few minutes of flight instruction asked him to take the controls with a specific course and altitude. As the bomber neared home, the gig was up, Segalla had carefully piloted the B-24 home and as he gave control back to the pilot he learned he had flown with the unknown assistance of the Mr. Auto pilot.

Several years after the war, Segalla surprised his wife when he broke the news he had just bought a used aircraft, his first, a Taylorcraft for \$700. Later flying over what was to become the Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome Segalla saw some odd looking aircraft on the field and landed. It was 1959 and it was his first meeting with the legendary Cole Palen who was working on a WWI SPAD. He immediately put Segalla to work spinning its prop. It was the start of what became a long respected friendship. Over time, a group of weekend pilots starting putting a few dollars in a hat as a prize for the pilot that was closest dropping small bags of lime on a tire at the Aerodrome. That pilot camaraderie and those weekend bombing runs on a tire fueled the development of the Rhinebeck Aerodrome airshow.

In 1963 Segalla made his first investment in aerobatic flying, purchasing a \$1.95 self help paperback book titled, Modern Aerobatics by Howard Kiner. An excellent book of the day, complete with illustrations. After hours of practice in the air, Segalla became a self taught aerobatics pilot. He, like many other flyers of the day found one important error in the book that only patience and experience highlighted. See if you can find the book – then the error.

Most experienced pilots know that a good background in aerobatics is more than just show. It's crucial to survive the unexpected attitudes that a pilot will encounter over a lifetime of flying. Segalla has been thankful for his early learning of aerobatics. Returning from an air show in Pennsylvania, his Tiger Moth blew a cylinder and an forced landing became the plan. He was near the Rhinebeck Aerodrome, scanning the ground he saw many tall hay fields only one good possibility. It was on an upward sloping hillside and also full of Angus cows. Segalla was able to put the Tiger Moth down, avoided the big cows and kept the aircraft in one piece. The following day, a friend supplied a new cylinder while Segalla and Palen rebuilt the engine flying it off the same grass field.

Loops, rolls, spins are all in a days practice for an aerobatic flyer. When bad gas caused Segalla's N₃N's engine to quite at about 100 feet the immediate reactions taught by repeated practices took over naturally. As the engine quit it looked as if the aircraft would go into the hillside but his quick wits prevailed turning the aircraft 1100 and with the loss of air speed, he dropped the nose and dipped the wing as they reached the ground sliding, loosing the gear. The aircraft was repairable and the pilot and passenger walked away.

One day, flying his normal Flying Farmer routine at the Aerodrome he was at about 1,200 feet. Engine off, the Cub suddenly went into a spin. Segalla flies from the backseat and he knew he had to get into the front seat to push forward on the stick and get to the rudder controls. He dropped below the trees before he could straighten out and flew under the power lines while regaining control to land. The tower reported to the audience, "It looks like we lost Stan Segalla," fortunately he was able to land in a field which today is a ball field. He got out, propped it, taxied to the north end of the field and took off again...just as the fire truck and ambulance were coming around the corner. He climbed back up to altitude and shut off the engine to finish the dead stick landing, ending the performance in the standard way. The show must go on!

Experience is a key element to being a pilot's pilot. Often it's the razor's edge difference in surviving unexpected trouble. Trusting your instruments is one rule that can't be broken. Segalla was flying a group in a friend's Cherokee 180 from Connecticut to Florida. The evening portion of the flight took an unexpected turn when a moon lit night turned into serious storms. Vectored to many different altitudes and now at 9,000 feet, Segalla noticed the air speed and rpms were not in sync. Suspecting icing he requested and was granted a lower altitude when suddenly the cockpit went dark and the radio silent. They had lost electric in the black of a stormy night. Turing to the aircraft flashlight they found the batteries long dead. Segalla turned the master off and back on so he could regain radio transmission letting the tower know of their dilemma. Most pilots don't know the aircraft will continue to run with the master off. Low on fuel, flying in dark rainy conditions, not appearing on civilian radar and without electric power he was a dangerous situation.

Shaw Airforce Base was nearby and came to the rescue. They tracked the aircraft and gave verbal instructions. Getting close to the airport, at about 600 ft, Segalla felt the aircraft tipping to the right. He asked a passenger to light a match for illumination and viewed the vacuum gyro which indicated tipping left. Segalla trusted the instrument to get back to level instead of his own feelings. In a few minutes they were landing in 3 inches of runway water. It turned out that the transponder had a loose connection so they could not be seen on civilian radar, the alternator had burned out and they landed with less than 5 minutes of fuel.

Practice, training, and little help from lady luck have kept Segalla flying longer than I've lived. As a 1984 New Yorker Magazine said, he is an aviation acrobat or aerobat, by avocation and he is a natural pilot. The 2008 season is complete at Old Rhinebeck Aerodrome but next year you might see a friendly gentleman walking around in a flightsuit, helping to keep the Rhinebeck Aerodrome the special place that it is. Make a point to talk to this pilot's pilot, you may have to wait in line – he has quite a fan club.



Kathryn Cook met Stan Segalla at the Aerodrome in 2008. She was wearing a special tee shirt not knowing that she would meet the legendary flyer that day. Credit: Gilles Auuard