

# Tom Wathen

## A lifelong love affair with aviation.

For a young boy growing up in Vincennes, Ind., the sight of an airplane overhead was a treat.

"I've always been lucky," Tom Wathen remembers. Just across the river from his home was O'Neal Airport, a small general-aviation strip where he did odd jobs in trade for a taste of flight time. When he was old enough, Wathen charged off to Purdue University to become an aeronautical engineer, with the ultimate chance to design real airplanes. One instructor told him to please go back and learn how to add and subtract before attempting engineering. Wathen didn't know it then, but that one moment would change his life forever. He enrolled in a state school and soon graduated with a degree in Police Administration.

"I never looked back," Wathen muses. "It was security from then on."

The word "security" probably doesn't adequately describe Wathen's career, nor does it hint at the continuing role aviation would play in his life and his commitment to find ways to merge the two. He worked his way through assignments at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, then North American Aviation while they developed the X-15 Rocket Plane and the otherworldly XB-70 Valkyrie.

"We called the XB-70 the 'Savior,'" Wathen remembers. When he took high-level visitors for a look at the big bomber, the first thing out of their mouths typically was, "Jesus Christ!"

Ultimately, Wathen bought California Plant Protection, a small security company with only a handful of clients. By 1987, that small security company had grown enough that it did the unthinkable — it swallowed its largest competitor, the world-famous Pinkertons. That acquisition made Wathen the head of the largest security company in the United States.

While his security company continued growing across the U.S. and Canada, Wathen had been continually buying and restoring aircraft. The first was a Piper PT, now on full-time display at the Piper Aviation Museum in Lock Haven, Pa. A Volmer Jensen VJ21 that Wathen restored is on display at the Planes of Fame Air Museum in Chino, Calif. In recent years, he's proud of a string of classic "forgotten racers" he has commissioned — the Caudron Model C-460, which won the Thompson Trophy in 1936, the 1934 Schoenfeldt



Firecracker, Roscoe Turner's Meteor and a 1930s DH88 Comet. "They all won important races," Wathen says factually.

In 1999, Wathen was ready for a change. The sale of his now-billion-dollar company, the Pinkertons, allowed him a change in focus: the Thomas W. Wathen Foundation.

Tom Wathen always knew he wanted to do something for kids and education. As the idea began to breathe on its own, the thought of using aviation to motivate kids to learn math, science, technology and engineering became hard to ignore. Wathen decided he would buy an airport and make it the headquarters for his new foundation. The only problem was that there weren't any airports immediately available in his current hometown in Southern California. One aerodrome, the historic 1925 Flabob Airport, was in escrow and scheduled to be razed by real-estate developers. Wathen approached Flabob Airport's owners at the 11th hour and purchased the airport outright. It's now home to the Wathen Foundation and a legion of remarkable, if not singular accomplishments:

- Flabob Airport boasts the only high school set on the grounds of an active general-aviation airport in the U.S. The high school is so successful that there's a waiting list.
- Kids restored an Aeronca Chief and flew

it to AirVenture and back. Two similar aircraft refurbishment projects are currently underway at Flabob.

- Wathen Foundation staff operates after-school programs, elderhostels for grandchildren and grandparents, outreach programs to local schools, field trips for all grade levels, aviation "academies" for middle and high-school students, *pro bono* flight instruction and an ever-increasing number of youth aviation programs.

Despite these remarkable achievements, Wathen is developing plans to enhance Flabob with a multimillion-dollar aviation high school (complete with dormitories for visiting students and professors), a unique historical aviation library and museum, and even an onsite aviation business park where kids can have hands-on learning experiences. Before Tom Wathen is done, his foundation will own and operate one of, if not *the* most, remarkable youth aviation education facilities in the world. All because of an Indiana kid who was lucky enough to grow up next to an airport.

"I think I told you, I'm lucky," Wathen says with a smile. "I'm very, very lucky."

To learn more about the Thomas W. Wathen Foundation and historic Flabob Airport, go to [Flabob.org](http://Flabob.org).