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## Pilot who flew Buffett enjoys change in latitude



Bill Howell, the son of a former Atlantic Beach mayor, has returned to his hometown after almost 40 years as a pilot, including a nine-year stint as Jimmy Buffett's seaplane pilot. (BOB SELF/FLORIDA TIMES-UNION)

Bill Howell is back home in Atlantic Beach since retiring, and he's just fine with that

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ATLANTIC BEACH — Bill Howell was Jimmy Buffett's seaplane pilot for nine years, flying the singer around the Florida Keys and the Bahamas, from outermost Long Island into New York City, from Nova Scotia to Panama.

Buffett has a laid-back image, but he's not much for lounging in a hammock — he kept Howell on the go.

For the next half decade, Howell was seaplane pilot for married singers Tim McGraw and Faith Hill, shuttling them

between Florida and their island in the Exumas.

Over the years, his passengers included Walter Cronkite, Tom Hanks, Bruce Springsteen, Taylor Swift, Roger Waters of Pink Floyd, Richard Gere, Anjelica Huston and Gwyneth Paltrow and her then-husband, Chris Martin of Coldplay.

His favorite, though, was Harrison Ford, a good friend of Buffett, with whom he explored various bays in Connecticut. "A great guy," Howell said. "Really into airplanes."

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Singer Jimmy Buffett points at his 1939 Grumman Goose, being piloted by Bill Howell, as it lands at a small airstrip near Lake Okeechobee. Howell worked as Buffett's pilot for nine years.

[PROVIDED BY BILL HOWELL]

# PILOT

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All of them, he said, were pleasant people, nice to him.

He chuckled. "I guess you're always friendly to the pilot."

Howell's flying life was more tough than just shuttling celebrities around.

He was in his 20s when he started taking lessons at Craig Field in Jacksonville, but when he said he wanted to learn to spin, they sent him to St. Augustine's airport. There he found a free-spirited, like-minded crew of aerobatics addicts, who would miss no chance to take planes up to put them through loops and rolls and dives.

He learned from the older pilots, including some fighter pilots in their 60s and even 70s. They'd go up and stage mock dogfights—and they could never be beaten. They knew the tricks, the stratagems that had kept them alive.

Howell flew regularly from 1980 until last year. He towed banners, staged aerobatic shows, tested new planes, gave sightseeing tours, taught lessons. He flew for celebrities and other rich people. He flew for Chalk's seaplane service in South Florida and spent nine years in the Bahamas flying 50-seat, four-engine turboprops for Merv Griffin's Paradise Island Airlines.

In the spring of 2018, he left that life—for good, he said.

Oh, he'll read flying websites still, and he watch enjoys watching videos of flying. But he's done. And he said he doesn't miss it all.

Over the years he had some close brushes with death, and lost too many friends, fellow pilots, to flying. Howell began feeling his mortality, wondering if he'd pushed his luck too far. "I'd sit there and think, am I next?"

After every death, people would always say: Well at least he died doing what he wanted to do. That was no comfort to Howell.

"I never wanted to die in an airplane. That's not the way I'd like to go. I'd like to go in my sleep, at a very ripe age," he said. "Nothing spectacular."

So he walked away from flying, after some four decades in the air.

Now, at 67, he's right where he wants to be: Checking the surf from a dune walkover in the beach town where he grew up. "I don't think I'll ever really fly again," he said. "I'd rather ride a 4- to 6-foot wave."

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For Howell, Atlantic Beach was an idyllic place to grow up. He had a pack of friends to hit the beach with, almost every day. His father, Billy Howell, was the mayor for forever, it seemed—27 years—and a volunteer firefighter as well. Sometimes young Bill would hitch a ride with him on the fire engine when a call came in.

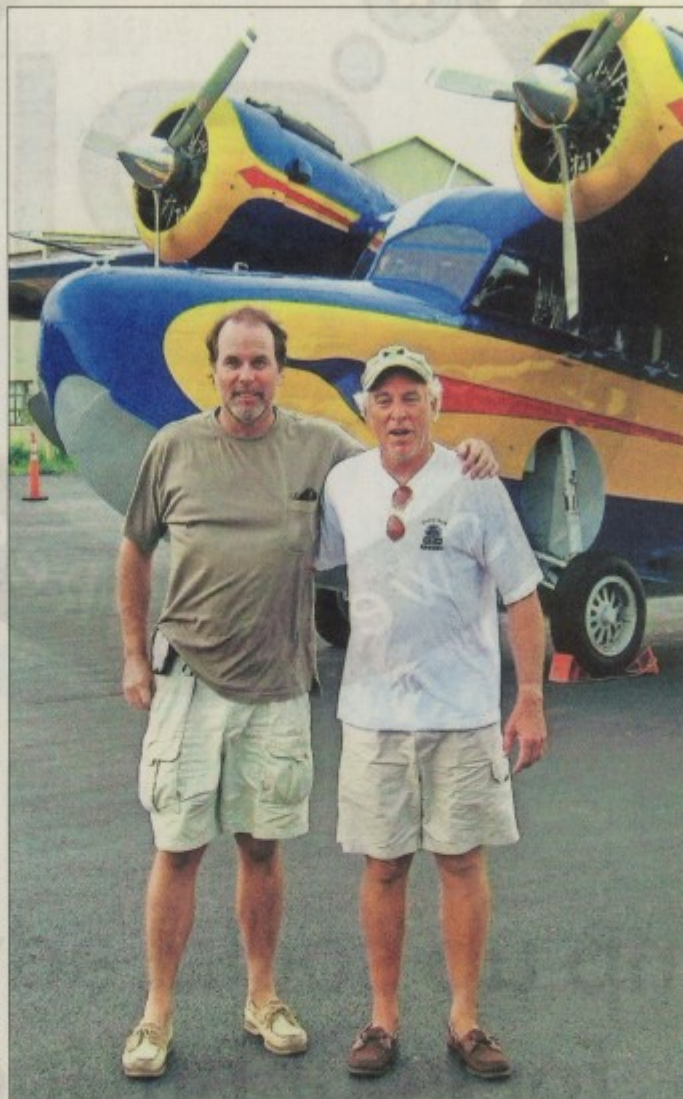
He was part of a big group of friends who grew up together, roaming the streets and going to the beach. And when he discovered surfing, in the early 1960s, that was all he needed, for a while.

Howell went to Florida State University and the University of North Florida, then worked a variety of jobs, at construction sites and dog tracks. But airplanes called to him.

It was a family thing: His father was in the Army Air Corps in the Panama Canal Zone toward the end of World War II. His uncle Jack was shot down and killed in a B-19 while on his first mission, bombing submarine pens in Germany. Other uncles were pilots and instructors.

Howell had a varied life as a pilot, but most people want to know about his time with Buffett, from 2003 to 2012, and the other celebrities. The short answer: "It wasn't as crazy as a lot of people think it is."

Not even Buffett, whose image is famously laid-back and party-loving. Sure, he'd go to New York City business meetings in



**Bill Howell with client Jimmy Buffett in front of Buffett's Grumman Goose seaplane after a three-hour whale-watching flight off Montauk, N.Y. They also saw two giant great white sharks from the plane.** [PROVIDED BY BILL HOWELL]

T-shirts, shorts and flip-flops, but they were still business meetings. "He's not a guy you'll see lying on the beach, sipping a rum drink," Howell said. "He's always on the go."

That's not to say he didn't like having fun.

Buffett had numerous airplanes and a separate crew for his jets. Howell flew his prop planes and sea planes, including an amphibious 1939 Grumman Goose, and often left a day early for Buffett's next destination so he'd been there, ready, when the singer arrived.

He spent summers in New York, often flying from the Hamptons to the East River in the city, pattering up to the seaplane dock at 23rd Street. Most winters were in South Florida and the Caribbean, all the way down to Panama.

"I was full time, and I was on beck and call," he said.

It was hard to plan. Sometimes he'd pack for a week, and they'd be gone for a month. One day, say, Howell would be planning to go to Nantucket the next morning. Then he'd get a message: Nova Scotia

instead.

Buffett might send him on a recon mission to an interesting reef in the Bahamas, 60 miles from anywhere, just to see what was there. Or Howell would drop him off to surf at, say, the Caribbean coast of Panama. They'd toss some boards out of the seaplane toward a waiting boat. Then Howell would fly away and wait for word to pick the singer up after his surf session.

"He was pretty adventurous," Howell said. "We'd roar down the beach at 10 feet—he had no problem

with that."

It was a good life, Howell said, and financially rewarding. But it was far from all-play, all-glamor. For the pilot, there were flight plans to file, a host of logistical issues to deal, and never-ending maintenance issues (seaplanes and salt water are not a good mix).

That traveling life also meant sacrifices in his personal life: He has two children he didn't get to see as much as he wanted as they were growing up. That's one of his regrets.

"Most Christmases, I was gone. I missed a lot of significant things. I can't be there. I'm going to be on a lake in Maine somewhere, or in St. Barts." Howell was divorced shortly after he joined Buffett. "Flying and marriage don't seem to go along very well," he noted.

And there were those thoughts that began nagging at him. As he got older, he said, he started to wonder how long he could fly before something terrible went wrong.

In April 2018, while working for McGraw and Hill, he called his supervisor: "I'm done," he told him. He'd planned to stay a couple more months, maybe longer, but he felt as if he had to get out, right then.

Besides, he was itching to get back to Atlantic Beach, which still felt like home, and take up again one of the consuming passions of his youth.

For decades, he'd flown over many a coastline, but never surfed any of them. "I didn't ride a wave for almost 40 years," Howell said. "I got the flying bug and that was it, for a long time."

In retirement, though, he's back to surfing again, as often as the waves allow, and sometimes when they don't even really allow it: He's not picky, not after all these years away.

He's not flying, but life is still good, Howell said. "My only worry now is waking up and wondering: Are there waves today?" he said. "I couldn't wait to get back."

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