



Profile: Bob Ingram

Never a dull moment for veteran trial lawyer

BY STEPHEN ELLISON

Very little about Bob Ingram's law career can be called routine or conventional. He's been at it for more than 40 years: working for and against the top names in the profession; traveling the country and the world to work cases; and, along the way, setting precedents and winning landmark decisions.

Ingram, currently a sole practitioner based in Novato, started out working for the state of California's Employment Development Department. He was negotiating contracts for the Board of Education, "bored out of my skull," he recalled, when a colleague approached first with a statement then with a question, an exchange that would prove to be *the* pivotal moment in his career.

"She told me I wasn't the typical state lawyer, which I took as a compliment," Ingram said. "Then she asked, 'Would you like to own a private practice?' I said, 'Yes, that's my plan.' And then she told me she knew somebody at this particular office in San Francisco, and asked would I mind if she made an inquiry for me. I said, 'Go right ahead.'

"Next thing I know, I get a letter from Vasilios Choulos, who was Melvin Belli's partner, and then I had an appointment with (Belli's firm)," he continued. Ingram went in for a meeting with one of Belli's associates, "and it just so happened he needed someone that day, and I went to work for Melvin Belli in March 1971. It was pretty crazy."

Not "all sugar and roses"

In a short span, Ingram had gone from toiling in the throes of state bureaucracy to working at the side of perhaps the most famous litigator in the country at the time. But, as it turned out, it wasn't all sugar and roses for Ingram.



Ingram

Initially, Ingram served as "sort of a buffer between (Belli) and his partners – so he wouldn't pick on his partners, he would pick on me," he recalled. In-

gram would write Belli's columns and accompany him to trial, but it wasn't long before the fickle Belli began to think Ingram's duties and efforts were basically unnecessary.

So Ingram was given a caseload. "One Saturday, I was in the office trying to get caught up, and he was there and told me he wanted me to start writing columns again," Ingram remembered. "Bob Lief was there, too, and I said, 'I'm quitting; I'm not doing this anymore.' Lief said we would work something out. So we hired two guys to write (Belli's) columns. They'd hand them to me, and I'd hand them to Belli as my work product, and Belli got off my back."

The door opens

Ingram said he believes he was the first to get a million-dollar verdict for the Belli firm – against a doctor in San Jose – though that still wasn't enough to retain Belli's affection. A short time later, Ingram had received word that Belli wanted to get rid of him, "and I was ready to go," Ingram said. He had been working a case for Belli in Detroit when he quit, and the lawyer who had hired Belli immediately hired Ingram to try the case. "So, after I

left Belli, I tried the case and got a \$2.6 million verdict," he said.

That same lawyer hired Ingram again for a case against the Michigan Department of Transportation, for which he won a \$5.5 million decision. The door had opened for Ingram to go out on his own, and he put up a shingle in San Rafael. Some years later, Ingram opened a second office in Honolulu, where he teamed with Gerry Sterns mostly on asbestos cases. That firm grew to about 35 employees, he said, but the partnership dissolved after about 10 years. He still is licensed to practice in Hawaii.

Today, Ingram is flying solo, specializing in aviation cases as well as catastrophic injury, wrongful death and insurance bad faith. He's based in his home office in Novato. "I've got a mother-in-law unit, and my staff is in the mother-in-law unit," he said. "And my commute is five minutes – unless I fall down the stairs."

The Iowa-New York route

Ingram grew up in Des Moines, Iowa, with five brothers. Prompted somewhat by his father's affinity for the law profession, he gravitated toward law school – but not before a four-year stint in the military. Ingram joined the Air Force in 1964. "I was stationed in upstate New York," he recalled. "I was a base procurement officer and a contracting officer, and when I left, they could have moved me back to Iowa, but I wanted to go somewhere else. I picked William and Mary law school."

During his last year at William and Mary, Ingram and his then-wife took a trip out west to visit her sister in Sacramento for spring break. But before their stay in the state capital, they spent time in San Francisco, "and that's all it took," Ingram said, for him to fall in love with



the Bay Area. After graduating from law school, he returned to California to take that first law job with the state government.

Flying high

The first plaintiff's case he tried after leaving the Belli firm – the \$2.6 million victory in Detroit – was his initial leap into aviation law. It involved a Lear jet crash that killed two pilots. He followed that with another Detroit case in which a young man had been dead-heading on a Lockheed Electra, and the crew put the airplane on its back because they were messing around with the instruments, Ingram said. "They didn't realize there was a defective instrument," he said, "and as a result, the airplane picked up so much speed that when they tried to pull out, the aerodynamic pressure tore the wings off. And my guy was tossed out at 24,000 feet." Ingram got a \$2 million verdict for the 23-year-old whose only surviving family were his parents.

Ingram expanded his work in the area, and it eventually took him overseas. One such case involved a victim of the Egypt Air Flight 990 crash off the East Coast in 1999. Ingram had to travel to Cairo to depose the attorneys who drafted his client's will. He decided to combine a vacation with the business trip, taking his father along and leaving a week early to spend some time in Florence, Italy. On the day they started packing for Cairo, Ingram overheard a buzz in the hotel lobby, talk of people jumping out of buildings. "So I get on my computer, and my legal assistant says, 'Scary isn't it?' We were

using instant messaging," he recalled. "And I say, 'What's scary?' And that's how we found out about 9/11.

"So here we were, getting ready to go to an Islamic country the next day, and I'm trying to figure out how I can turn this around," Ingram continued. "Eventually, we had to go and finish the deposition. When we were driving from the airport to the hotel, the cab driver asked if we were Americans. I wasn't sure whether I could work any Canadian expressions into my response. Then I thought, what the hell. I said, 'Yeah, we're American.' He said, 'We love the Americans, and we're very sorry about what happened.' And that's how all the people in Egypt were. It was pretty amazing."

Ingram also has handled cases and achieved significant results in a number of states outside of California, including in Michigan for a negligently designed highway (\$5.6 million verdict); in Pennsylvania, for the Three-Mile Island nuclear disaster; in Hawaii, for the Aloha Flight 241 crash; in Iowa, for another wrongful death Lear Jet accident; and in North Dakota, for a farm equipment accident in which the victim lost both his legs.

Business and pleasure

On the business side, Ingram hasn't run into too many problems managing his own firm. He has his staff to thank for that, he said. "My legal assistant has been with me for over 26 years, and I had an assistant who was extremely competent, but she left; moved back to Kansas," he said. "Between the two of them, I've been able to kind of keep the balls in the air. It's a problem once in a while when the

defense tries to run you through a wringer on a lot of cases, but I've been able to hang in there.

"I can usually outwork just about any law firm," he added, "always could."

When he's not tending to business, Ingram usually can be found at one ballpark or another. He owns season tickets to the San Francisco 49ers' and San Francisco Giants' games. He also enjoys reading, taking his dogs on long walks and visiting the wineries in Napa and Sonoma counties.

Ingram has been a member of the American Board of Trial Advocates since 1994 and has served as a Judge Pro Tem and Judicial Arbitrator for San Francisco and Marin County Superior Courts since 1990. He's also served on the boards for Consumer Attorneys of California and the San Francisco Trial Lawyers Association.

With all his experience and all his years in the profession, one might expect Ingram would be harboring at least a small amount of cynicism or nursing a minor case of burnout. But Ingram seems to break the mold on that front.

"Of all the things you could do as a lawyer, I think (being a trial lawyer) is the best because you get a tremendous amount of variety, a tremendous opportunity to learn a lot about a lot of different things," he said. "It's like a continuing, ongoing post-graduate course. It certainly has been a very pleasurable way to earn a living over the years."

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