



Knowing When

by Phil Klauder

We don't like to think about it, but sooner or later, a pilot reaches the point when he needs to stop flying as pilot in command. If I'm very lucky, it will happen to me. If I keep my cholesterol low and I look both ways before crossing the street, then maybe I'll be faced with that decision myself. Hopefully, that day is several decades away, but an injury or unexpected illness could bring any of us to that point at any age. We have all met feeble 60 year olds and razor sharp 85 year olds.

I hope that when I reach that point, I'll recognize it. I've known pilots who quietly made the personal decision when the time had come. Some stopped flying. Others just started sharing their flying with friends. Most of what I know about thermaling, I learned on a beautiful afternoon spent soaring with a friend who asked me to act as his safety pilot. I admire the judgment of anyone who can recognize his changing physical or mental limitations and make that kind of decision.

The problem is that I might not realize when the time has come for me. Denial is a very powerful instinct. I have a very healthy ego. Then again, so do you. I've never met a glider pilot

who wasn't overflowing with self-confidence. After all, we are willing to climb into an aircraft and fly away without even the aid of an engine. If we didn't have faith in our own abilities, we'd be spending our Saturday afternoons in front of the television set, watching professional golf.

We've all seen people on the roads who shouldn't be driving. Maybe we've even had to talk our parents into selling their cars. It's not easy, but over the years we've also seen the pilot who shouldn't be flying. He just isn't sharp anymore. His landings may be sloppy, but more importantly, he makes poor decisions. Maybe we ask him to take a flight with an instructor, but when he does, his basic flying skills are acceptable. We're just afraid that he's going to get hurt eventually. If he flies at a commercial operation, the owner can refuse to let him fly, but in many cases he will just get angry and go fly somewhere else. That doesn't really solve the problem. In a soaring club, the situation can be even more complicated. Our fellow club members are our friends and we all hesitate to hurt their feelings. Often, some club members recognize that a friend's flying has deteriorated,

Pictured above is author Phil Klauder (rear seat) and his friend Joe in the Grob G103

while other members just don't see it. This can lead to bitter arguments. Even the FAA has very little power to stop a licensed pilot from flying until after they have been involved in an accident or incident.

Power pilots have to pass a medical exam every few years, so they have an unbiased professional who is occasionally responsible for judging their physical and mental capabilities. As glider pilots, we don't have that. Even worse, many pilots become attracted to our sport when they can no longer pass the medical. Some medical examiners will even try to lessen the blow of a failed medical by suggesting that their patient take up soaring.

It's hard to tell a friend that the time has come. We put it off, hoping that he'll get better, that he'll give up flying on his own, or that someone else will talk to him. We're afraid our friend will become angry and defensive. We all define ourselves as pilots. That's part of who we are. Giving up that self-image can be crushing.

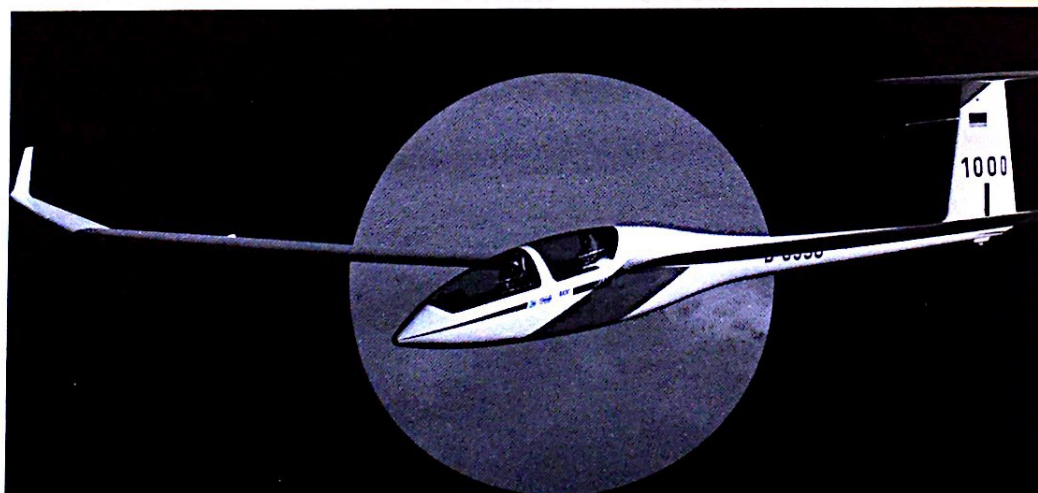
I don't want my fading health to be a burden on my friends. I don't want them to feel uncomfortable about asking me to give up my license. I don't want to hurt someone else. I don't want to put my club members through the trauma of pulling me out of a broken cockpit, and I don't want my friends to have to make THE visit to my wife. I don't want an accident to crush my club by endangering our insurance coverage, or scaring our neighbors into rallying against our airport. I don't want to scare new people away from our wonderful sport.

So, what am I going to do about it? Well today, I went to the

bank and picked up a brand new \$100.00 bill. It's one of the new ones that looks more like Monopoly money than anything else. I stapled that bill to my pilot's license, and I placed it in my wallet. Now I'm making a promise to all of you. If you come to me and say, "Phil, I think the time has come for you to stop acting as pilot in command." I will smile, pull out my wallet and hand you my license with the \$100.00 bill attached. No arguments. No excuses. No bitterness. I promise that I will not be insulted. I will not go off and fly somewhere else. That \$100.00 bill is my gift to the friend who has the compassion to step forward and point out what I should have already recognized myself. I hope that friend will use the money to take me out for a steak dinner. I'll have some great stories to tell about all of my adventures and all of the wonderful people I've met through soaring over the years. The next weekend? I'll be back at the field ready to fly, but I'll be asking a friend to come along to act as my pilot in command. After all, with so many years as an instructor, I need someone to talk to when I'm flying.



About the author: Phil Klauder has been flying for 30 years, and is currently the Chief Flight Instructor for the Philadelphia Glider Council.



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