

Time to stop flying?

by Bernald S. Smith, SSF Trustee

Its a great time to be growing older - people are staying active and living longer, which means there are more senior pilots in the air. Are they more likely to be accident-prone? If you look at age-rated highway accident/fatality rates compiled by AMA and NCIPC, the per-mile accident/death rates do go up with age. But, a study by BGA shows age-rated glider accidents lower for older pilots. Statistics from the SSA Glider Insurance program also support that, in that there are far fewer accidents with older pilots, but of course the population of older pilots is unknown within SSA as we don't have those kinds of statistics like BGA has. Are old pilots superior to the spectrum of old car drivers?

Some years ago, I filed a lawsuit which I eventually took to the Supreme Court, trying to overturn the FAA ruling that would stop me from flying airline Captain at age 60. The Supreme Court refused to hear the case, remanding it back to the lower court that had affirmed the FAA's age 60 ruling. So, I couldn't fly anymore as a pilot for my airline. A few years later, at an OSTIV Training and Safety Panel meeting in Norway, a gentleman gave a paper on why he decided to stop flying solo at age 70. Since I had a few years to go to 70, I wondered about it and thought to myself, I don't want to stop at age 70? So now I'm 78 as of this writing (79 if I make it to when you read this), still flying and a part owner of a 2-33. Am I too old to fly?

A retired airline pilot peer is in his early 90s, still flying his twin Beech, which a lot of folks had trouble with when they were in their 20s! My point is that age is not the criteria so much as mental/physical/psychological capability. A short time ago, I thought I'd finally reached the physical limit when I had a terrible time after landing, getting out of the rear cockpit of a DuoDiscus, but was encouraged when I was told everyone has trouble getting out.

Older folks may be taking multiple medications that could interact and have side effects that can affect their flying skills. Aging affects ones vision; the impairment of something so vital to glider flying must seriously be considered. Cognitive skills lessen with age, according to a geriatric psychiatrist, the author of First Aid to Mental Illness.

I do know I'm slower in everything. Nobody ever used to pass me walking in the airline terminals; lots of folks do now. And I wonder if my thought processes are as fast/good as they used to be; I allow for that, I think, in the way I fly. At least, I passed my last BFR, hopefully not thanks to a Santa Claus instructor. What I wish is that if anyone who sees me getting ready for flying, or while I'm flying, observes something that concerns them about my flying, will have the courage to say, hey, you're really losing it fella, in case I haven't recognized that myself. Actually, they should have told me that if they noticed it, well before I even start to fly.

It isn't easy to tell your spouse, parent, friend that you're worried about his/her abilities,

nor is it easy to be told such. Start early, before it becomes a problem.

What's the point of all this, you say? As we age, which by the way starts with birth, we change. The trouble is, that change is usually gradual, making it easy to overlook any change. It is up to us to know that, take it into account, and share such with others. Don't be afraid to ask if folks think you've lost it. And importantly, don't be afraid to discuss such with others who are aging- you may save a life. Also, take note of what my ownership is; it's not a Nimbus4 or ASW20!

I expect when next I fly, I'll hear from many who've read this, warning me that I've lost it. One person has already mentioned that, yes, it was in 1997!

Appendix A: Acronyms

AMA - American Medical Association

BGA - British Gliding Association

NCIPC - National Center for Injury Prevention and Control

SSF - Soaring Safety Foundation