



SOARING ASSOCIATION OF CANADA L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DE VOL A VOILE

Flight Training & Safety committee Notes

THE AGING PILOT – problems of recognition

THE AGING PILOT is one who is experiencing the effects of aging, which are not necessarily related to a set age. These can be physical such as arthritis, cardiovascular, diabetes, kidney failure, etc. or mental. The physical problems are usually not difficult to suspect, then assess, and thus quantify with tests such as X-rays, EKG, blood tests, but the mental effects of aging are much more subtle, in that their onset is insidious and the manifestations quite innocuous. Since the physical effects of aging are more obvious and easy to quantify, I will not dwell on them further, but, by doing so, I do not want to diminish their importance.

The mental effects of aging eventually become obvious to those around us and some family members approach the family doctor reporting that Dad's driving is becoming poor, if not risky, and ask for his licence to be suspended. For a pilot this is too late. On the other hand, early recognition is very difficult, as it is difficult to come up with hard facts to confront the pilot with, and quite likely he will defend his position passionately. He will, however, have no trouble identifying other pilots whose capabilities he thinks are suspect.

The earliest we may suspect age-related mental changes, is if a family member expresses concerns, or if fellow pilots notice atypical changes in his situational awareness when flying or in ground operations. Although psychologists have a variety of tests to assess a variety of mental deficiencies, it will be highly unlikely that the pilot will submit to them in the early stages.

So, how do we recognize early onset changes in mental function? I discussed this with Dr. J. Pfaff, the RAMO in Toronto, who recognizes that this is a problem. It is easy to come up with tests for physical problems, as mentioned earlier, but there are no set criteria for decreased mental acuity. Some of the functions that become impaired in the aging process, and which we therefore need to watch for are perception, attention, reaction, orientation, cognition, personality, learning, decision-making and others.

First, we must be aware of the problem. We must be aware of the need to observe ourselves and our peers in this respect, and we must heed the reports that are made to us in the same way that our club Safety Officer does.

It is important to recognize early-onset problems in the aging pilot, because on their own they may be innocuous, but they may be compounded by fatigue, dehydration, and flight stresses in difficult situations, thus putting the pilot and possibly others at risk.

In summary then, early onset decreased mental acuity in the aging pilot will be an increasing problem as our aging pilot population increases. We must be aware of it, look for it, have a small group consensus, and be prudent but firm in our management, always hoping to deal with it by co-operation rather than confrontation.

Peter Perry, SAC Medical committee

WHEN IS IT TIME TO QUIT?

ONE INSTRUCTOR DECIDED THAT 70 was about the right age to give up instructing. He was flying at a rate of 150 hours per year with a total experience, in gliders and power, of 2000 hours in just thirteen years. Despite this decision, he continued to spend a month skiing every year, another month walking, and swam a kilometre every morning.

Another older pilot packed up his gliding at the age of 74, and had this to say:

"We were three veterans of about equal age, pushing 75. After last season's soaring we looked at each other and, almost spontaneously, asked — 'is it time to quit?'"

"But why — when you feel confident and happy about it? Not even an incident between us to worry about; but that is not the whole answer, and certainly not the correct rationale."

"The message came first to me with skiing. I claim that I can keep up very well on cross-country, uphill, in heavy going, over distance and even speed, but I have become a 'sissy' downhill, particularly in the mountains if the light is poor or vision obscured. Translated to flying, I might be slower than the youngsters to tackle awkward situations, but then I console myself that, by experience, I might be more clever at not letting myself get into critical situations."

"But, here is the point — not all situations are predictable. Is it fair then, to strain the system to please your own ambition — among people you like and in a sport you have cherished so long? And for how long anyway? So, we three called it a day. We'll miss it but we are quite pleased about the decision too."

What is your situation if you've become another one of the growing number of seniors in this fine sport?

- How repetitive is your flying; are the flights all much of the same?
- Is your solo flying an hour on the ridge, or thermalling locally — and how much solo flying do you do anyway?
- What is your total experience in hours and launches?
- Are you in a position of responsibility to others, your club and your spouse — is it fair to go on instructing or towing?

Unless we are prepared to give up solo flying at a given age, we should all accept the responsibility to decide for ourselves when enough is enough — before an accident removes our choice.

From Norway, which has an enviable accident record that shows the lowest rate in all gliding countries that report to OSTIV! A healthy soaring safety "culture" has its benefits such as this self-evaluation and decision-making. The pilots above continued to fly some years after with a younger "safety" pilot along for the ride. The narrator was the president of the Norwegian Aero Club.

Ian Oldaker