

## **"Older pilots crashing in disproportionate numbers" (c)AP**

By: RYAN PEARSON (Fri, Mar/17/2006)

LOS ANGELES - At 50, Philip Semisch learned to fly. He took aerobatic lessons on his 60th birthday. When he turned 70, he flew gliders. Another aviation milestone followed just a few years later: He crashed.

The retired Army officer and manufacturing executive from Skippack, Pa., was alone, piloting a small Decathlon plane in September 2002. It bounced as he tried to land, twice. As he took the plane back up for another landing attempt, he failed to clear a wall of trees and crashed.

Semisch walked away with bruises and a few stitches.

"I feel very comfortable flying, and did immediately after my accident," he said. "I take it very seriously. I don't fly in bad weather. I'm careful."

Despite such confidence, Semisch's Pennsylvania accident was one of hundreds in recent years that illustrate a trend within the general aviation industry: A disproportionate number of crashes among older private pilots.

Following a rash of plane crashes involving older pilots in Southern California, The Associated Press analyzed five years of federal pilot licensing documents and aviation crash data. The analysis showed that pilots in older age groups were in a significantly higher percentage of crashes than they represented among all pilots.

Fatal crashes also are proportionally higher for older pilots, according to AP's examination of Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board data.

The findings come after an FAA rule change in September 2004 made it easier for graying pilots to obtain and keep licenses to fly certain smaller planes. Although they still must pass regular flight tests, the sport pilot rule eases medical restrictions.

It allows pilots to fly using only a driver's license as proof of good health, a change that the FAA and pilots say would be of particular benefit to older pilots. Pilots whose licenses were revoked for health reasons - such as a history of heart problems - may be recertified after a medical exam and are not be required to undergo future checkups.

The general aviation industry is graying; the average age of private pilots rose from 43 in 1995 to 47 at the beginning of last year.

Experts widely acknowledge that about three-quarters of all aviation accidents are caused by some kind of pilot error, including slower reactions that can come with age.

"We don't see too many aviation accidents that are related to a medical cause. The increase in accidents (with age) may be due really to cognitive factors," said Federal Air Surgeon Jon Jordan, the FAA's top doctor.

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The AP reviewed 2000 through 2004 NTSB records related to general aviation, a category that encompasses private, recreational and corporate pilots. Also checked were FAA files covering all pilots.

Among the findings:

- Pilots age 60 and over accounted for 23.6 percent of all general aviation accidents even though they represented just 14.7 percent of all licensed pilots. Those in the 50-59 age group were responsible for 26.4 percent of accidents; they were 22.1 percent of all licensed pilots.

- Pilots 50 and older were involved in 55.8 percent of all general aviation accidents that led to fatalities, although this group comprised just 36.8 percent of all licensed pilots.

- Pilots in other age groups - those in their 40s, 30s, and 20s and teens - had proportionately fewer accidents over the five-year period and in each individual year.

Many pilots interviewed for this story defended aging aviators, saying wisdom and experience more than make up for any age-related forgetfulness or decline in motor skills.

"The statistics don't support planes falling out of the sky," said Phil Boyer, president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, which claims more than 400,000 members.

There has been only one major jetliner accident in the U.S. in the last three years - at Chicago's Midway Airport - but crashes of small airplanes have become nearly routine. On an average day in 2005, there were four general aviation accidents, with at least one accident-related death.

More than 500 people have died in general aviation crashes during each of the past three years. Historically, about 90 percent of all plane accidents involve general aviation. (By contrast, more than 30,000 people die each year in car and truck accidents).

In Southern California, small planes plummeted into apartments or homes four times in 2003 and 2004. Nine people were killed in those crashes, including the four pilots, all of whom were age 50 or older.

Ross Anderson was one of those pilots.

To his friends and fellow pilots, Anderson was the epitome of safety.

The former Naval aviator held commercial and airline transport licenses and was meticulous about maintaining the Harmon Rocket II he spent years assembling. Almost every day, the 62-year-old Rancho Palos Verdes resident beat Southern California's freeway congestion by flying from Torrance Airport to his office in Chino, about 45 miles east.

Anderson's friends remain mystified about why his plane plunged through the living room of a Seal Beach home.

"It just knocks the wind out of you, knocks you to your knees," said David Hallmark, an aircraft services shop manager who helped Anderson build the plane.

Authorities have not determined whether Anderson died during the crash or just before it.

On July 7, 2004, Anderson's plane began its fatal plunge toward Sharon Loe's house as she settled onto her living room couch to read the morning newspaper. Seconds later, the plane crashed through her roof.

"The glass just came at me. It looked like a fireball," she said. "I thought it was a terror attack."

She managed to escape, along with her husband and dog, with only minor cuts and singed hair. The home they bought in 1965 and remodeled lay in ruins once firefighters doused the flames.

Lawsuits have stalled the rebuilding process even as memories of the crash continue to haunt the couple.

"I wake up every night, and it's the first thing you think of," said Donn Loe.

Hallmark believes his friend was somehow incapacitated.

"The way the accident happened, there was no way he was at the controls," he said. "There's no way with his experience that he would've done what the airplane was doing."

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Another crash involving an older pilot is less mysterious.

Bob Loo regularly soared above Michigan's rugged Upper Peninsula, counting wolves for the state natural resources department. But in order to keep flying his Cessna 182, the 78-year-old former World War II pilot concealed from the FAA a long history of ailments that included blocked arteries, gout and congestive heart failure.

The health problems should have grounded Loo long before he suffered an apparent heart attack in mid-flight in June 2002 and crashed in thick woods.

"That's the way he wanted to die, I guess," said his longtime companion, Clarice Arnell of Iron River, Mich.

Loo had turned his love of flying into generosity, founding a volunteer service in the 1970s to airlift people with medical emergencies from remote communities to hospitals in more urban areas. Patients paid him what they could.

As his health suffered, Loo cut back on the lifeline flights but flew for pleasure and conducted surveys of wolves, as well as osprey and eagle nests. Living alone in a small cottage, he was most comfortable in the solitude of the sky.

"That was his love. As long as he could be in a plane, he was happy," Arnell said.

Every year from 1978 to 2002, Loo obtained a Class 2 medical certificate from the FAA.

In the medical history section of each application, he checked "no" when asked if he had been admitted to a hospital or suffered dizziness, fainting or heart trouble.

He was lying, according to the report on his crash prepared by the National Transportation Safety Board. Loo had gout since at least 1980 and was diagnosed with coronary artery disease a year before his death. He underwent bypass surgery in March 2002.

The NTSB investigation found that Loo's aviation medical examiner from 1988 to 1994 - such doctors are certified to determine whether pilots are fit to fly - treated Loo for his gout, heart disease and diabetes. The examiner then signed the FAA applications, the NTSB said in its report. The FAA dropped the medical examiner's certification in 1995 for failure to attend required seminars.

The doctor is not identified by name in the NTSB's public report, and it is unclear who signed Loo's applications after 1994.

In an interview with The Associated Press, a doctor identified by Arnell as having signed the earlier applications denied knowledge of Loo's medical troubles.

Anonymous tipsters twice told the FAA that Loo shouldn't fly.

An unsigned letter in July 1978 prompted an FAA review, but that was dropped in December of that year after Loo insisted that his health was "excellent," according to the NTSB report.

In September 1986, an anonymous caller reported to the FAA that while Loo was transporting a patient on a lifeline flight, "he became very ill and had a difficult landing," the NTSB report said. The tipster said Loo might have had his medical certification "doctored," the report said.

Loo submitted an affidavit denying recent medical treatment. His then-congressman sent a letter questioning the agency's action.

When FAA dropped its inquiry months later, citing Loo's affidavit, according to the NTSB report, an official wrote the lawmaker: "I hope this information will enable you to favorably respond to your constituent."

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>From the 1920s, every pilot, private and commercial, was required to pass a physical exam administered by an FAA-certified doctor - at least once every two years for those age 40 and older.

In 2004, the FAA, charged with both regulating and promoting aviation in the United States, rolled back its medical requirements for those flying certain small airplanes. Pilots of small "low and slow" aircraft now can use driver's licenses as proof they are healthy enough to fly.

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association had pushed for the rule change, saying medical exams were unneeded. "There has been no history that having that medical exam creates a safer environment," said Boyer, the group's president.

The rule change is "an extension of the philosophy that people have a responsibility for their own safety and health," said Jordan, the federal air surgeon.

Some pilots interviewed by AP said even under the old rule, it was common for older pilots to seek doctors who would administer only a rudimentary physical exam.

Fred Austin, a 60-year-old pilot from Sedona, Ariz., said his former medical examiner would have him hop on one foot for a few seconds: "Then he'd stand a few feet away and whisper, 'Fred,' to check your hearing.

... That's all it took."

Many older pilots said they already monitor their health and don't take unnecessary risks.

"Being prepared prevents accidents, and doing proper training prevents accidents," said Semisch, the pilot who learned to fly at 50 and survived a crash two decades later."