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Promoting Soaring

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My Son is My Copilot

I operate a commercial soaring site. My Dad, Fritz Compton, would visit often to fly the towplane or fly our gliders.

He had just turned 85 years old that spring day in 2000. Dad asked me if our Blanik L-23 sitting by the runway was available. I said "Yes, go fly it, Dad – show those other pilots you can still outclimb them." He didn't respond to my remark, one of a son so proud of his father's decades of soaring accomplishments. Instead Dad asked "Are you available for the next hour?" I replied that I had no more students that day. "Get in the back seat of the Blanik", he commanded. I knew what this meant. He did not need to fly alone anymore. As Dad shuffled slowly to the glider, I realized that the Captain needed a copilot.

Dad had been a Captain with Eastern Air Lines since 1939. He logged over 30,000 hours, from Piper Cubs to DC-3's to the Lockheed L-1011. His most cherished flying time was in gliders and he logged it to the minute. Dad started soaring in the 1940's and built our home on a gliderport near Miami, Florida. He was a competitive soaring pilot through the 1970's and was selected as a pilot on the US Team in 1958 for the World Championships at Lezno, Poland. Dad held a second class medical until he was 83 years old. After 65 years of flying airplanes, he simply let his medical lapse in 1999.

Occasionally I am asked how many dual flights I required as a student glider pilot. I usually respond "about 100, I was in no hurry to solo". The truth is that as a young boy (too young to solo) I was often in the back seat of a glider Dad was flying, soaring for hours as I listened to Dad describe his strategy as he would "read the sky". He taught me to observe, to be patient, to think and be one with the glider. We should all aspire to be such good mentors. As I got into the back seat of the Blanik for that last flight with Dad, I was like a child again, ready for my mentor to share the magic of soaring with me. I saw the back of his head and his full head of silver hair. I felt how beautifully the glider responded to his touch. Yes, that was his – our – last flight.

The Copilot Program. When Dad asked me to accompany him in the Blanik, it occurred me that here was a solution for an older pilot, or any pilot at any age.

A young pilot struggling on the fast-track to a pilot certificate might enjoy going for a flight with a veteran pilot. No pressure to perform. Just fly for the fun of it – just for the magic. Soaring well is like mastering a musical instrument. You must be in tune. You must practice. Seek out the masters and listen carefully.

Seeing our wise and talented mentors grounded is a great loss. Their wonderful soaring stories should not be silenced while others download data and relive their flights as dots on a computer screen. Dad may not be able to remember where he left his car keys, but he can tell you every detail of his 320 mile, 1957 national contest flight from Harris Hill, New York to Plymouth, Massachusetts. He could have soared his modified LK-10A sailplane farther, across the water to Cape Cod, but he had flown off his chart. At 7,000' over Plymouth, he couldn't see across to Provincetown in the sea haze and had to land. Someday I'll finish that flight for him.

We Don't Have To Stop Flying. Soaring clubs and commercial operators should consider a "Copilot Program". You may have members and customers who still fly well, but they can't turn their head easily to see traffic or locate the gliderport. They may need assistance getting in and out of the cockpit. Offer them a hand. Offer a copilot to clear the turns, monitor the drift, suggest a heading to the airport and help find the windsock. The safe outcome of their flight is assured.

Everyone we have offered a "Copilot" has welcomed the idea. We never use the term "Safety Pilot". Our proud mentors may not appreciate that.

I'm grateful Dad asked me to be his copilot. It was a smart choice. I never had to ask him to stop flying solo. Asking him to give up his car keys was another matter.

My message to (us) older pilots: The Copilot Program will be a way to continue to fly gliders. Know when to accept the offer. To our younger pilots and glider flight instructors: Be willing to ride in the backseat as a senior pilot's copilot. Don't talk too much. Listen and watch them fly – you may learn something special.

Fritz Compton is 89 and lives near Dallas. He was the recipient of the Warren Eaton Trophy in 1948, SSA's highest award. Burt Compton is 53 and teaches soaring at "Marfa Gliders" in west Texas.