



**STEVE KROG**

COMMENTARY / THE CLASSIC INSTRUCTOR

# Flying — It's in the Blood (and the Genes)

Four generations of flying Slingers

BY STEVE KROG

**SOME OF US WERE** introduced to aviation watching television series like *Sky King*. Others learned about airplanes by building balsa wood models and reading *Mechanix Illustrated*. But for 80-year-old Charles (Charlie) Slinger, EAA Lifetime 128066, it began at age 5.

The Wright brothers introduced the entire world to the wonders of powered flight in 1903, more than 116 years ago. But the Wrights hold nothing over the Slinger family who have been flying airplanes for eight decades.

It all started with David Slinger, Charlie's father and a true adventurer, who decided to follow his dream and learn to fly in 1946. Flying for pleasure only, David first owned a Piper J-3 Cub and then a Piper Vagabond. The interest in flying quickly rubbed off on Charlie, who recalled the fun times of flying in the J-3 Cub with his father. Charlie was truly bitten by the aviation bug, but school, part-time jobs, a stint in the U.S. Army, launching his own business, getting married, starting a family, and building a family life had to be a priority.



The entire flying Slinger family together for Charlie's 80th birthday. From left to right: Kent, Dave, Sherry, Charlie, and Lee.



The Slinger family patriarch, David, giving his father-in-law a ride in the J-3 Cub.

Finally, in 1976, it was time for Charlie to pursue his dream of learning to fly. Through work, he became acquainted with Wisconsin Aviation Hall of Fame inductee Roy Reabe. Roy agreed to teach Charlie. By late March 1976, he had earned his private pilot certificate.



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“Roy was a great instructor who believed in the old school method of instructing,” Charlie said. “Attitude, air-speed, and coordination were key. All types of stalls were practiced nearly every flight. I believe I was the last non-Reabe family member that Roy taught to fly.”

Inheriting his father’s lust for adventure, Charlie was always looking for the next challenge. The private pilot certificate was only the beginning for this driven aviator. Over the next two decades, Charlie acquired additional certificates and ratings including private pilot — glider, private pilot — seaplane, private pilot — multiengine, commercial pilot — single and multiengine, instrument rating — single-engine, and commercial pilot — glider. He also became a highly qualified glider tow pilot.

Charlie has been the owner and caretaker of a number of airplanes over the years, including a Porterfield, an experimental Cub (which he built), a Cessna 150, and several Piper PA-12 Super Cruisers. Always one to help promote aviation to young men and women, Charlie has sometimes offered his airplanes to others to be used to achieve flying goals. Several years ago, a young woman from Hartford, Wisconsin, was ready to solo on her 16th birthday. After she completed solos in five different tailwheel aircraft, Charlie offered his Porterfield to her if she wanted to try for a sixth airplane solo. She was up for the challenge, as was I, her instructor, and we proceeded to fly the Porterfield. Once I found her to be comfortable and safe, I hopped out and she made three beautiful landings in Charlie’s Porterfield.

Charlie and his wife, Sherry, were blessed with two sons, Kent and Dave. Both were bitten by the aviation bug and became pilots. Kent soloed in a Piper PA-12 on his 16th birthday and passed his private pilot checkride on his 17th. He began his working career in finance as a banker, but aviation was still a passion. Kent continued to pursue the required advanced ratings and then made a career change to aviation, quickly rising to captain, flying for Air Wisconsin Airlines. Eventually, the travel and time away from his young family caused him to rethink his career path. Financial interests had

continued to be a high priority, and Kent, with some additional study, left the professional aviation world and became a certified public accountant.

Dave, equally bitten by the aviation bug, recalled some of his early memories of flying. At about the age of 8, he and his brother would sit in the back of a Piper Cherokee watching and riding along while his father was taking flying lessons.

“One distinct memory I have was that Dad’s instructor, Roy Reabe, was a real stickler for understanding and performing every kind of stall imaginable,” Dave said. “Up the nose would go, then pitch downward with Roy saying, ‘Push on the yoke and use the rudder.’ It seemed like that was all they did for an hour at a time!”

Dave was truly enamored with flying airplanes, but school and working in the family business kept him away from flying until he was 19. Once he started, though, he pursued flight with a passion. After three months and instruction in three different airplanes, Dave had a private pilot certificate in his pocket. Soon thereafter, he invited a waitress, Lynnae, to go for a flight and the rest is history. A year or two later, Dave married Lynnae, relocated to Wyoming, and began providing for his family. A son, Lee, joined the couple a year later and life was good. Though the family had grown, Dave never lost his love for airplanes and continued flying whenever he could find the time. Another year passed when Dave learned he was going to become a father a second time. Then, tragedy struck. Just days before giving birth, Lynnae was involved in an automobile accident. Neither Lynnae nor the daughter she was carrying, to be named Rebecca Marie, survived.

Filled with grief and instantly becoming a single father to a then near 2-year-old son, Dave turned to flying as a way to help deal with the loss and clear his mind. He resumed flight lessons and earned advanced ratings, including commercial pilot — airplane and glider, instrument rating, and multiengine rating. He is currently working on earning a certified glider instructor rating. He’s also certified for glider towing. Lee became an “airport bum” at that early age and was soon adopted by the entire airport gang.



Fast-forward a few years and Lee was also bitten by the urge to fly after being a passenger in the Piper Archer that the family owned and flew regularly. Only 13 years old, it seemed that flying gliders was going to be the first step in his aviation career. After all, both his grandfather, Charlie, and his dad, Dave, had learned to fly gliders, so it was only natural that he followed in their footsteps.

Lee began taking glider flight lessons in a homebuilt SGS 2-33. Handling a glider came naturally, and it was quite apparent that as soon as he turned 14, he would be ready to make his first solo flight.

“Being a flying family, my Grandpa Charlie made the trip from Wisconsin to Wyoming to experience my solo flight firsthand,” Lee said.

What made this flight truly special was that Charlie, an experienced glider tow pilot, provided the tow for Lee’s memorable first solo flight.



Lee's first passenger after passing his checkride was his grandmother, Sherry.



Photo proof of reaching an altitude of 24,300 feet.

Grandfather Charlie and Grandson Lee briefing before Lee's first solo flight.



Just a short time later, at age 16, Lee was ready to advance to the next step in his flying career — the private pilot glider checkride. And who again had the honor of providing the tow? Grandpa Charlie! It was a very proud day in the Slinger family with Lee in the glider, Charlie in the tow plane, and Dave and Grandma Sherry proudly observing the entire event. After the checkride and all necessary FAA paperwork were completed, Lee had the pleasure of having his grandmother as his first passenger with Charlie again doing the towing.

The day that Lee was to take his private pilot — glider checkride, the surface wind was quite brisk. When the oral portion of the checkride concluded, the examiner asked Lee if he still wanted to make the flight. Lee answered affirmatively, and the examiner then asked if the tow pilot was willing to make the tow in the wind. Lee replied, “My Grandpa Charlie is my tow pilot and has flown thousands of hours in tailwheel airplanes. I know he’ll want to make the flight!”

Following in the aviation family footsteps, Lee was not satisfied with just earning a private pilot glider certificate. There were challenges to be attempted, and he vigorously pursued them. Most glider pilots strive to earn the Soaring Society of America Silver Badge consisting of three parts: time of flight, distance of flight, and altitude in flight.

Lee has completed and has been officially recognized for completing all three parts, earning the Silver Badge. Achieving two of the three parts was especially memorable because Grandpa Charlie was directly involved. On an Easter Sunday, while Lee was still in high school, Lee and Charlie obtained permission to penetrate Class A airspace (should they be able to get that high), donned warm clothes and supplemental oxygen, and launched in the glider. Lift, updrafts, and wave windows cooperated in the Minden, Nevada, area, and together they achieved reaching an official 24,300 feet. Once there, they descended and rode the wave back up to 24,000 feet again.

“It was really cold, but I was not going to give up as long as Lee was not giving up,” Charlie said. “We were both nearly frozen when we got back on the ground, but what a thrill to accomplish this with my grandson.”

Shortly thereafter, Lee was ready to try for the glider flight distance leg, the last of the three legs of the Silver Badge. Again, Grandpa Charlie played a vital role. With Charlie doing the towing, Lee launched from the Owl Canyon Gliderport in Wellington, Colorado, flew over the mountains, and eventually landed in Laramie, Wyoming. Once the distance leg was accomplished, it was time to fly the glider back to Owl Canyon. However, the winds were not cooperative. Charlie again had the pleasure of making that tow from Laramie.





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STEVE KROG

**Another memorable trip occurred several years ago when Charlie, Dave, and Lee loaded the Archer and flew to Alaska. Each took turns doing the flying both to and from there.**

"One of the memorable flights I made during my glider flight training was on a day when my instructor was going to teach me thermal training," Lee said. "We flew continuously for about 2.5 hours when we received a radio call stating we should head back to the airport as the surface winds had really picked up. By the time we made our way back to the airport, the surface winds were gusting over 30 knots. I managed to get the glider safely on the ground, but with the wind as strong as it was, I could keep the wings in the air and the glider balanced on the center wheel. I just couldn't move without help."

While continuing with his glider flights, Lee began powered flight lessons in the family's Piper Archer, all while going to high school. He progressed rapidly and, at age 17, earned the private pilot — single-engine land certificate. All of this was accomplished before graduating from high school!

Additionally, whenever Lee traveled to Wisconsin to visit his grandparents, he would get dual instruction in his grandfather's experimental Cub, a classic tailwheel airplane. It wasn't long before he mastered tailwheel flying, and I had the distinct pleasure of signing Lee's logbook for the tailwheel endorsement he needed to legally fly solo in tailwheel aircraft.

Now 22 years old, Lee holds the private pilot — glider and single-engine land aircraft certificates. He has also earned the FAA A&P mechanic certificate and is employed by Flying Rhino Aviation in Alliance, Nebraska. Lee is also working on acquiring his instrument rating when time allows.

The Slingers are a true flying family and have made many flying trips together. Charlie and Sherry have flown all over the United States together, first in one of the Piper PA-12s he owned and later in the Piper Cherokee 180.

"There were times when it was so cold when we left Wisconsin to head south that we would put the airplane in a heated hangar overnight," Charlie said. "We'd preflight, load the luggage, and then board the airplane before opening the hangar door. Once it was open, friends would push us out of the hangar. We'd start the airplane, do a pre-takeoff check, and launch before the cabin got too cold. There were times when flying the PA-12 that we would tape the door and windows shut to keep the cold air drafts to a minimum."

Charlie and Dave once flew the Piper Archer to St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, while Sherry and Lee flew commercially.

"It was a fantastic flight with Dad and I sharing the flying duties," Dave said. "We made a very good cockpit flight team."





The flying Slinger family. From left to right: Son Dave, Grandson Lee, and Charlie holding the propeller that was on patriarch David's J-3 Cub.

Another memorable trip occurred several years ago when Charlie, Dave, and Lee loaded the Archer and flew to Alaska. Each took turns doing the flying both to and from there. Once in Alaska, they did a lot of sight-seeing, flying throughout the scenic state to our far north. Charlie, Dave, and Lee all commented that it was “a trip of a lifetime.”

Over the last eight decades, aviation has played a significant role in the Slinger family beginning with the patriarch, David Slinger. Although David is no longer with us, his love of flight and adventure was passed on to three generations of the Slinger family. In memory of the family patriarch, Charlie, Dave, and Lee posed for a photo holding the propeller that flew on David's first airplane, the Piper J-3 Cub that started it all! *EAA*

**Steve Krog**, EAA 173799, has been flying for more than 40 years and giving tailwheel instruction for nearly as long. In 2006 he launched Cub Air Flight, a flight training school using tailwheel aircraft for all primary training.



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