

President's Position

Presidential pilot

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Phil Boyer, AOPA's president since 1991, has been flying for more than 30 years.

If you are like me, you place those pilots with lots of category and class ratings on a pedestal. Frequently, when I meet members in person and ask about their flying, they almost apologize by stating, "I'm only a private pilot." Then, as the conversation turns to what they fly, the response is generally "nothing more than a Skyhawk." Expecting AOPA's president to be in the airline transport pilot category of pilots with lots of ratings, I take pleasure in answering them with the fact I too am only a private pilot and own only a Cessna 172 — and am proud of it. My profession has never required more than a private certificate, and my personal finance and transportation needs are best served by owning a four-place, fixed-gear, single-engine airplane.

When in awe of the ratings and certificates held by others, consider your needs, your finances, and the flying challenges before you. Yes, I added an instrument rating to my private certificate a few years after being caught in California coastal fog, when I was unable to return home with the kids after a day at the beach. Yes, in a past life I obtained a multiengine rating when I owned a twin. Critical to all of this discussion is that no matter how many ratings one holds, almost all of us start out equal, from student to private pilot, renting and flying small, piston-powered airplanes. Also common to all pilots are the benefits of membership in the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association — but you expected me to say that, didn't you?

About three weeks ago, I received an e-mail from somebody who indicated that he was a long-time AOPA member. He congratulated the association for its lobbying work, and went on to state that he regularly uses some of our services in his flying. Hopefully, this member's reactions are much the same as the other 370,000-plus members of AOPA. However, the note went on to say that he was "the Air Force One chief pilot for the past four years." U.S. Air Force Col. Mark S. Donnelly, AOPA 674546, and I subsequently met on one of my frequent visits to Washington, D.C., and talked about his flying career.

Like almost all of us, the eleventh presidential pilot started his student pilot days flying a Cessna 150. He soloed a week after turning 16 — because the weather was too bad to fly on his birthday — and became a private pilot at 17. As he reflected on those days, it was obvious to me that it wasn't career or military that prompted his flying, but the challenge, thrill, and romance of flight that motivates all of us.

Donnelly broke ranks with most of us with his acceptance to the Air Force Academy. But he also joined the ranks of flight instructors when his military career took him in that direction after graduation. More than 50,000 AOPA members are flight instructors, out of the slightly more than 70,000 in the United States. How pleasantly surprised I was when he proudly stated that he keeps his FAA CFI renewed, every other year, by regular attendance at the AOPA Air Safety Foundation Flight Instructor Refresher Clinics. Each year almost 8,000 CFIs attend these programs — which, in partnership with Jeppesen, will go online next month.

When I asked him why he joined AOPA, he said that it was the purchase of a Citabria in 1979 that began more than 22 years of continuous membership. Like many of you, Donnelly received his 20-year recognition pin from us this past December.

Occasionally, pilots and members will tell me that they have had to stop flying. Often they cite financial pressures or the responsibilities of raising a young family as the reasons. What is interesting is that Donnelly, career Air Force, also stopped for some five years. Imagine going from instructor to operations — and no flying — in this branch of the service. For various reasons all of us, at some time or another, have had to put our love of flying on hold. When he returned to the cockpit, it was with the military transport side. The rest is history, and since 1997 Col. Donnelly has been in the left seat for all Air Force One flights when the president is on board.

One expects that the president's flight crew has almost every planning aid possible. To my surprise, Donnelly went behind his desk and pulled out a copy of *AOPA's Airport Directory*, which he and other members of the Presidential Airlift Group use regularly. Thank goodness I had come with our latest printed copy, since the ones I spotted around the office were all outdated.

The Boeing 747 that Donnelly flies was delivered in the early 1990s. He indicated that taxi operations at the many unfamiliar airports they visit are of the most concern to him and his crew. Shades of our current concern with runway incursions and surface deviations, I thought. But much of his concern regards operating at airports that don't normally see aircraft as large as 747s. He then turned to his office computer and called up the AOPA Air Safety Foundation taxi diagrams. Donnelly said that he prints these out before a flight, and uses them for planning exactly the route they will follow while on the ground.

It's always enjoyable meeting members of the association and having them compliment AOPA on our lobbying efforts for general aviation. Col. Donnelly was no exception in this regard, but he shocked me

with his active use of and appreciation for many of our other services. As pilots we share a common bond for the love of flying, and this particular member pointed out that we all have many of the same aviation roots and attributes — even if one among us is the presidential pilot of Air Force One.