

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

» Getting to Know COPA Pilots

Bill King with the SR20L he co-owns with several friends, most being former Cirrus employees like him. They plan to move up to a 2014 normally aspirated G5 SR22 to give them a longer flying season.



LAURIE EINSTEIN KOSZUTA has been a freelance writer for many years and along with her husband, John, now owns a Cirrus SR22. With John as the pilot-in-command and Laurie as the partner, they regularly travel to see family, visit friends and enjoy our beautiful country. You can read more of Laurie's work on her website: www.laurieeinsteinkoszuta.com.



A man with a white beard and glasses, wearing an orange puffer jacket and black pants, stands in front of a small white airplane. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows an airfield with other planes and a building under a blue sky with light clouds.

After Retiring from a Storied 30-year Career at Cirrus, Bill King Hasn't Quite Landed

by Laurie Einstein Koszuta

Bill King oozes passion about Cirrus aircraft. You can hear it in the excited timbre of his voice as he talks about his 30-year tenure working at Cirrus Aircraft (previously Cirrus Design Corporation). His passion is still evident two years after retiring in 2022 from the “best job in the world.”

“I loved working at Cirrus so much,” Bill said, “that I used to tell people that Monday was my favorite day of the week. After the weekend, I could hardly wait to return because I worked with smart people in a challenging and highly charged environment. I love that Cirrus is credited with re-energizing the entire general aviation market by bringing safety and new technology to the marketplace, including a parachute and electronic cockpits. In fact, the first GA airplane ever produced with all electronic instrumentation was the SR22, which is hanging in the Smithsonian today. Working at Cirrus was one of my greatest blessings.”

Bill began his career in public administration, but his true interest was business development. In the early 1990s, he was hired by a business development company in the Minneapolis metro area and was able to attract Alan and Dale Klapmeier/ Cirrus as clients.

“I met the brothers through a mutual friend,” Bill said, “flying to Baraboo, Wisconsin, to meet them and learn about their business. They needed help raising money and were looking to relocate their business to a larger community with a bigger airport. I consulted with them for several months until they offered me a full-time job working directly for them. I was thrilled because it was the project I wanted to spend all my time on, so I immediately said yes.”

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Bill's fascination with aviation didn't start with the Klapmeier brothers or his job at Cirrus but expanded on an already fervent love of anything to do with flight. "As a kid, I lived in Richfield, a suburb south of Minneapolis," he reminisced. "I used to ride my bicycle to Minneapolis International Airport (KMSP), sit at the end of Runway 29 (now Runway 30), and watch the airplanes fly overhead at 100 feet. Of course, that was when you could do such things. I'd also ride my bike to Flying Cloud (KFCM), a popular small reliever airport southwest of where I lived. At the time, it was one of the busiest small airports in the nation."

Bill's roots were modest, and the family could not afford to pay for him to learn to fly. "I just never had the opportunity," he recalled. But his trajectory toward becoming a pilot changed soon after taking the job at Cirrus.

"Part of my job in the early days," he said, "was traveling to meet with investors or community leaders with whom the company was looking to do business. I lived in Minneapolis at the time and commuted to and from Baraboo for two years. We needed to raise money, but there was a limited financial base in the population of the Baraboo Dells community compared to the Minneapolis and St. Paul area. So, as the company expanded, it became my job to look outside of Baraboo for possible places for the company to relocate. Initially, we were seriously looking at Grand Forks, North Dakota."

"Every time I went to Grand Forks," Bill said with a hearty laugh, "they had to pull a pilot away from whatever he was doing just to fly me around. One day, one of the Klapmeier brothers looked at me and said, 'This is silly. We're spending a ton of money flying you around. Get busy and get your license.'"



Bill was more than happy to comply. After relocating Cirrus to Duluth, Minnesota, he immediately began taking flying lessons anytime he could, even during his lunch hour, after work or whenever he had a free 45 minutes. "All I had to do was find an instructor," he said, "get in the airplane and go. Finding an instructor was easy because there were instructors all over the place, and it wasn't like I had to take time to drive to the airport. I worked at the airport."

At the time, however, the company was diligently working on certifying the SR20 and only had prototypes. As a result, Bill learned to fly in a Piper Cherokee. As soon as he received his private certificate in 1987, he began working on his instrument rating and later obtained his commercial ticket. "It wasn't long after that our first SR20 was fully certified by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). It was a great time for the company, and we were flying that airplane like no tomorrow. It was so terrific."

Bill remembered sitting in the main conference room in Duluth with Alan Klapmeier, looking down at the ramp at the only SR20 in existence. "I looked at Alan and asked, 'Doesn't it look cool to see one of our airplanes instead of somebody else's product?' He looked at me, shook his head and said, 'Yeah, but one airplane is only a prototype ... two is a fleet! We'll feel a lot better when we have more than one of our own planes.' He was right. Look at us now. It



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« **Flying allows Bill King and his wife, Mary,** to stay more connected to their two married daughters and their families. Living in the Twin Cities area it only takes a 45-minute flight compared to three hours of driving from Duluth.

doesn't matter what airport you go to anywhere in the world, there are always multiple Cirrus airplanes on the ramp. It's the most sought-after plane in the world.”

Bill noted that the early days at Cirrus were filled with many stories, one of which was a favorite of his career. It was about 2003, during the reelection campaign, when Vice President Dick Cheney came to Duluth for a town hall meeting. The White House advance team had asked to use one of the company's production buildings to host this community event. “We were totally non-partisan,” Bill said, “and didn't care about the political leanings; we were honored to host a vice president. When the advance team was there, we had an obvious and severe miscommunication between them, the Secret Service and the Cirrus facility team, which I was responsible for. There was a large parking lot where the Secret Service had expressly ordered that no cars be allowed during this event. In response, we engaged Lucky's Towing (a local company) to remove every single vehicle within that area. The next morning, when the advance team showed

up, they asked where their cars were. We were confused. Apparently, we had towed the vice president's entire motorcade to an impound lot. Although the Secret Service thought it was funny, the White House did not. These are stories you can't make up on your own.”

Since becoming a pilot, Bill has purchased and owned only Cirrus aircraft because he sincerely believes in the product. “I started an aircraft leasing business on the side in 2004 with my first SR20. Through an odd series of events, I purchased my SR20 that year. That plane became the third aircraft in the Cirrus Employee Flying Club. We were committed to helping as many of our employees learn to fly as were interested. Our concept at that time was to lease it back to Cirrus for their flying club, and that's how the business (Skyking Investments) started.”

Currently, Bill and his wife, Mary, are partial owners of an SR20L (powered by the new Lycoming engine) with several good friends who are primarily former Cirrus employees. “It is a very, very capable SR20L with NXi avionics. It is fast, comfortable, efficient and safe, all of which Cirrus is known



The aviation bug has already bitten Bill's 14-year-old grandson, who has grown up flying with him and dreams of one day being a pilot himself. Bill says when they fly together his grandson manages the radio which he has been doing since he was 8 years old.

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for,” he explained. “The only downside to an SR20 when you live in Minnesota is that the SR20s are not ice-protected. With the lake and the extremely cold temperatures, the Duluth region has so much icing weather that it creates limitations on safe flight for half of the year. Those conditions severely limit your flying starting in late September or early October. We plan on moving into a 2014 normally aspirated G5 SR22, ice-protected with built-in oxygen. It is a game changer for the market in this part of the country.”

The Kings enjoy staying connected with family (two married daughters and four grandchildren) by flying often to the Twin Cities area where they reside. “It is easier to fly 45 minutes to a granddaughter’s dance recital where her part lasts four minutes than driving three hours to get there and three more hours to get home.”

Bill is especially proud of his 14-year-old grandson, who dreams of becoming a pilot. “When we fly together,” he said, “he manages the radio, which he has been doing since he was eight. He is very good at it. I have to wonder what the controllers are thinking when they hear a kid’s voice on the radio.”

As a Cirrus owner and former Cirrus employee, Bill avidly supports COPA. “I’ve been a dues-paying member of COPA since Mike Radomsky and a couple of other guys came up with the idea for a Cirrus pilot’s organization. I was all-in with the concept when I bought my first plane in 2004 because I believed strongly in a type club dedicated to fun flying and consistent safety. I also liked the idea since I was responsible for air safety (also known as the accident investigation team) at my job at Cirrus. We always asked how we can make flight better, safer and more efficient with every iteration for everyone that touches this airplane. This was, and remains, the ‘yardstick’ by which Cirrus measured everything we do. ‘Will what I’m doing today increase the value of our aircraft to our customer?’ That sentiment drove us to work closely with COPA.”

The forums and the annual migrations are of interest to Bill as he now has more free time. “There is always something new to learn,” he said, “whether it is about runway incursions, engine incidents, maintenance or a variety of other things.”

Now that he is retired, Bill wants to spend more time on other interests, such as camping and fishing. He’ll have to work those between his duties as a new COPA board member. Recently, a close friend and COPA board member advised him that a COPA board position had opened up. “I grabbed the opportunity to get involved and submitted my letter of interest,” he said. “I’m excited and honored to be involved on this side of the table because I’ve lived a career on the other side. Our best days are still ahead, and there are things we can keep doing to make flying more enjoyable and efficient and make it a safer experience for all of us.” ☺