Alan & Dale Klapmeier

The future is now for the wonder brothers behind Cirrus Design

If it weren’t for the brothers Klapmeier, pilot Albert Kolk likely would have been a goner. Flying above the desolate Monashee Mountains of British Columbia, along came trouble. But Kolk, headed for a crash, turned his emergency into something of a miracle: he pulled his chute. “We came down safe and sound and just stepped out of the airplane,” he says. “With not even a sore muscle or bruise. Amazing.”

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Yes, if it weren’t for the brothers Klapmeier, aviation would be a lot less exciting. After all, masterminds Alan, 43, and Dale, 42 are founders of the Cirrus Design Corp.; based in Duluth, MN; they are manufacturers of the SRV, SR20 and SR22 aircraft, the only planes in all of aviation equipped with a parachute. When deployed by solid-fuel rocket in an emergency, this canopy whose harness straps unzip from each side of the airframe floats the plane and its occupants to the ground in remarkable safety.

“It’s really really cool,” says Alan of the innovation. It’s also the “overnight success” he and Dale have spent 25 years finesting – and fighting for – since the self-professed “airplane nuts” from DeKalb, Ill decided in high school to change the world of aviation with a plane that allowed Ippoliti to meet the ground not in a fiery finale but in a thump roughly equivalent to him jumping off a 10-foot ladder, he is beyond emphatic. “I wouldn’t fly anything else.”

The tinkerer, the genius, Cirrus Design vowed to design and build a plane that would express “the mind of an engineer and the heart of a pilot,” as goes their Cirrus Design code. In comparison to everything else on the market, it “had to have better performance, it had to be more comfortable, it had to be easier to operate, it had to be safer, and it had to do all of it at a better price,” says Alan of the “unbelievably democratizing” process of acquiring backing. “It was unbelievably painful. Worse than hard work. Torture!” How to get that “you can’t really believe what a customer says they want but instead,” says Alan, “you have to listen to what they say and try to interpret from that what they’ll actually buy.” Adds Dale: “So many times we thought, okay, this is it. Close the doors, lock ‘em up. We’ve had a good ride.”

But the ride kept on keeping on – grace of an abiding belief that, “There is nothing more important to the pilot than keeping the blue side up and the brown side down,” says Dale, and that this obsession with safety should inform the brothers’ every design effort “to integrate pilot, not devices” with a plane he or she will thrill to fly. And that the crazy faith their all-glass cockpit (actually 3G roll cage), side control yoke and Avidyne integrated display, among other Cirrus givens, would, says Alan, “make instrument flying easier and safer, so more people will do it, and more often, and therefore get more value from their aircraft, thus keeping them more current, which makes them safer... it all spirals in the right direction.”

Today Alan and his family (wife Sara and daughters Karie, 10, and Sarah, 14) join Dale and his (wife Patty and sons Blake, 12, and Ryan, 14) in seeing their faith well-rewarded. Yet as they fly for work and play (opposite): “It’s really cool to see how the owners use their airplane,” says Alan (to the right of Dale and their 1,000th aircraft). “They fly it a lot because it fits in, no, changes their lifestyle.” (above): A floating approach via rocket-deployed parachute; (inset): One of 105 Cirrus planes delivered in the first quarter ’04, a number the brothers claim beats all other aircraft manufacturers in its class

We just need to get over the complexities.” Sounds like a job for the visionaries Klapmeier. “We really are egomaniacs,” laughs Alan. “We want to have the mostest or the leastest or the fastest or the slowest or the greatest or the smallest...” Considering the brothers already have what various awards have recognized as “the first” in pioneering technology, chances are fine the future will help be designed by Cirrus.

“We are going to change the world,” says Alan. “We really do things that in aviation make sense.” And, of course, there’s this: when it comes to revolutionary projects like their chute-equipped planes, he laughs, “you have to be dumb enough to start and smart enough to finish. That we are.”

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Eliciting an all-Swiss crew, the family’s first homebuilt. “I love to fly!” enthuses Alan. As do I, adds Dale, “It’s a ball!” The innovators Klapmeier are having fun fun fun, all right, now that their ingenious designs are saving lives and proving to them the future of aviation lies in precisely the sort of visions that fill their ever-thinking-and-tinkering minds and hearts and hours. To build small airplanes that ordinary people will find simple and safe enough to fly may be a guiding Cirrus philosophy. But Alan and Dale, as always, have their eye on the horizon. “In 15 years, maybe more,” says Dale, “your first flying lesson will be in a little jet. And it will be almost like your car today – get in, turn the key, and fly off. It could be that simple. It could be as safe as