

# 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 be 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."

If it weren't for the brothers Klapmeier, aviator Jeff Ippoliti likely would have joined Kolk in the Great Beyond – that is, if he hadn't deployed his parachute and transformed a disaster about to happen above Ft. Lauderdale into what he describes as "a non-event." Asked later about the plane that allowed Ippoliti to meet the ground not in a fiery finale but in a thump roughly equivalent to his jumping off a 10-foot ladder, he is beyond emphatic. "I wouldn't fly anything else."

Yes, if it weren't for the brothers Klapmeier, aviation would be a lot less exciting. After all, masterminds Alan, 45, and Dale, 42 are founders of the Cirrus Design Corp. based in Duluth, MN; they are manufacturers of the SRV, SR20 and SR22 aircrafts, 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 finessing – and fighting for – since the self-professed "airplane nuts" from DeKalb, Ill decided in college they pretty much were un-hirable and what better way to put their passions to purpose than to change the very world of aviation? With Alan the thinker and Dale

the tinkerer, the geniuses Klapmeier 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, whose physics and economics studies at Ribon University in Wisconsin complemented to perfection his brother's learning in business and finance at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point, as they chased a dream that so many others believed impossible.

What a chase it was. From the first little mock-up done in paper cut-outs to today's second generation SR22, a stylish, all-composite machine of aerodynamic wow, the flyboys of revolutionary mind were beset by what Alan wryly labels many "a good learning experience." How to design, market and take a loss on a homebuilt kit (the plane's wing had a defect that made it necessary to recall the kit from market and replace each and every wing). How to convince "vulture capitalists" the brothers' ideas were worthy of financing. Says Alan

of the "unbelievably demoralizing" 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. That and 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 Katie, 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 through Minnesota, Maine and Montana, not to mention London, Berlin and Brussels – where their SR20 recently received certification for import into the European Union – the happily successful brothers Klapmeier are little changed from the high school airplane nuts who kept their 1947 Cessna 140 in a DeKalb farmer's field and during home-work hours made paper cut-outs of their



first homebuilt. "I love to fly!" enthuses Alan. As do I, adds Dale, "It's a ball!"

The innovators Klapmeier are having 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.

"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 biggest 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." ✕

(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