

Glenn Phillips Interview

by John Heiney 2009

Hang glider pilot? Airline pilot? Jet-fighter pilot? How many can claim all of these in their flying career? Founding Hawk member Glenn Phillips can. Learning to fly airplanes would be considered fun by most teenagers. But imagine the work it takes to qualify to fly fighters for the Navy, and then jumbo-jets for an airline. I was fortunate to catch up with Glenn and I asked him these questions:



Glenn Phillips (left) – Jet Fighter Pilot

JH: How did your flying career begin?

GP: My dad was a pilot in the Navy, and later he flew for Eastern Airlines. I think my dad was having a mid-life crisis in the late seventies, so we took up hang gliding.

JH: We?

GP: The whole family, my dad, my older brother and myself. My dad decided that we would learn to hang glide together as a family activity. We started taking vacations down to Nags Head NC, and we got involved with Kitty Hawk Kites. We took lessons over the summer for a couple of years and got our H-I and H-II ratings. We never really progressed beyond the sand dunes. My brother went

back several summers as an instructor. My dad was an aviation nut and that was all we would talk about. All things airplane.

JH: How old were you when you started hang gliding?

GP: Fourteen.

JH: Who was your instructor?

GP: Jim Johns.

JH: Was that before you learned to fly airplanes?

GP: Yes. My dad had tried to teach me to fly. He owned an Aeronca Champ. I was close to soloing, but you just don't solo a twelve-year-old boy.

JH: Where did you live then?

GP: Northern Virginia.

JH: When did you get your private pilot license?



Glenn Phillips at Torrey – April of 2009



Glenn Phillips Launching at Otay Mesa – February of 2005

GP: In 1982 I went to VMI and the next summer got my certificate at a local FBO in Manassas, Virginia. I'm 19 and my instructor was this cute little blonde, 21 years old. Her name was Laura Moran, then. Her married name is Laura Logan. Today she is a captain for United Airlines. She was voted "Captain of the Year" in 2006.

JH: How did you get back to flying hang gliders?

GP: I'd been out of the Navy for a while in 2003. A furloughed buddy of mine from United was flying at Dockweiler with Greblo. He got me interested, so I did the beach lessons and a couple high-altitudes with Greblo, the rest is history. I can appreciate it so much more today. I couldn't appreciate it as a 15 year-old.

JH: What are all the types of aircraft you have flown?



Glenn waits on Launch at Torrey – August 2005



Glenn prepares his DoodleBug - New Year's Day 2005

GP: Born in the Naval hospital in Jacksonville Florida. My dad was based at Cecil Field.

JH: Where do you live?

GP: San Diego.

JH: Have you had any serious injuries?

GP: No.

JH: Have you done any cross country flying?

GP: I have done some XC with Mike Branger, Bill Helliwell, and John Burke, but I am not into it the way they are.

GP: Not that much general aviation stuff. The light training planes of course, but most of my flying has been with the Navy and the airlines. The T-34 and the T-2 (an intermediate jet trainer), the TA-4J. The F-14 while in the Navy. The FA-18 while at North Island Naval Air Station. I got to fly several planes off the ship as a midshipman on summer training. The A-6, the S-3, the E-2.

JH: What are you flying for United now?

GP: The 757 and 767, and I was on the 737 for five years, type-rated in all of them. Also type-rated in the DC-9.

JH: How old are you?

GP: I'm Forty five.

JH: Where were you born?



Glenn and Crew

JH: Have you logged your hang gliding hours?

GP: Yes. About 250.

JH: Do you have a most memorable flight?

GP: I consider them all memorable. Launching early on a Sunday morning at Torrey, with nobody else out there in strong winds. Flying continuously for an hour and 45 minutes at Dockweiler. Having black birds join up with you at Torrey while doing S-turns. Being at ten grand out at Laguna and having red-tail hawks fifteen feet away all turning with you in the same thermal. It's all memorable. Makapuu. Being right at the boundary where the air is flashing into cloud. Feeling the air get cold and wet on your face, and then watch it go by and flash over into a cloud. How many people can say they have felt a cloud as it's forming. Where else can you get to do that?



Just another day at the office...

GP: Lots of memories in the F-18. Every time I'd do a functional check flight, if there were no discrepancies on the jet I'd come back to North Island and, "put on the show". The show constituted an overhead break with lots of smack on the airplane, you'd have the intakes producing a harmonic buzzing sound, and a big vape would be coming off the top of the airplane in the humid coastal air. A hard 270 degree break, then a touch-n-go on runway two-seven. Military power, gear up, flaps up, a low transition...then burner. Set the turn and then a rolling pull over the building where everybody was watching and squat the airplane and pull into the vertical, in full afterburner. The goal was to see how many car alarms you could set off in the parking lot. People were very proud of what they did at the Naval Air Rework Facility at North Island and so was I. Just an amazing airplane and a joy to fly.



Glenn poses for a photo at the Torrey Pines Gulls (RC Club) Christmas Party in the Balboa Park Aerospace Museum in December, 2006.

GP: Mildred, an older lady who was a receptionist/secretary had a large plate-glass window she could look out towards runway 27. She would always tell me that it looked like the airplane was going fly through the window. You've got this F-18 in full-burner accelerating through 250 knots 5-10 feet off the runway, you'd squat the airplane over the building. People would stand there in the parking lot and say they could see right up the tail-pipe, and feel the heat from the afterburner. People would use scorecards to grade the show!

GP: We did this for the crews who worked on the airplanes, so they could experience their handiwork up close. I was very proud of what we did every day. That was very memorable and fun, and I got to do it just about every day for three years. (smiles)

JH: Do you have a favorite flying site?

GP: Not really. I like them all when they are good. Makapuu. Torrey, when its good it's great.

JH: If you could change anything in your life, what would you change?

GP: I feel I'm at that "is this all there is" moment in my life, but I know people who've spent their life chasing dollars or whatever they thought was important at the time and are looking back now and saying "I wish I was a pilot". I don't really have any regrets. It's more of, what could I have

done better. I think as you get older you try to treat people better. I don't know, it's learning how to be a better human being. I've learned a few things from the great people I've met hang gliding. How you treat people is important, trying not to get nasty right back when you are not being treated that well.

JH: What does hang gliding mean to you?

GP: I think hang gliding covers a broader cross-section of people, and that makes it very interesting and fulfilling. Most people in aviation are not there to get rich. For the most part, everybody wants to spread their wings, lift off and go play with the birds. I always wanted to be a bird. This is the purest form of aviation, and hang gliding has been the fulfillment of that dream. It is as basic as it gets, but is as challenging and fulfilling as any other kind of flying. It's the same thought processes but a different skill set, it requires practice, patience and discipline, focus and attention to detail. You know, very few people get to go beyond 50,000 feet or twice the speed of sound; but really, very few people get to turn with a red-tail hawk at 10,000 feet in a thermal, or have black birds fall in formation on you, or get to watch a cloud actually become a cloud and feel it on your face. I think I can appreciate it much more now than I ever could when I was younger.

JH: What do you do for fun or reward besides hang gliding?

GP: Not enough. (laughs)

JH: What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you?

GP: Losing my mom. It's losing your biggest fan and main cheering section of your life. It is losing the one person who knows everything there is to know about you, been there for every important event. Losing someone priceless is very difficult. Time is limited so don't miss an opportunity to...



Glenn launches Oahu in May of 2007



Glenn adjusts an improvised "weather station" at Otay Mesa before a flight – February of 2005

JH: What is the most rewarding thing you have ever done?

GP: Getting winged in the Navy, flying the F-14 off the ship. It is rewarding. It's challenging and it's always different. It's scary and sometimes takes 3 or 4 hours to get to sleep afterwards 'cause you're so hopped up on adrenalin. It's exciting, you feel like you've accomplished something important; even though, when it's over all you really have is a logbook and some memories, maybe some photos to show for it. There is nothing else to prove that it even happened. When you're in the company of others who got to do this there is a shared respect.

GP: That thing was a handful. You always felt you were doing something good, doing it right. Of course it's also very competitive, so nobody will allow you feel too good about yourself. We were always giving each other a hard time. It's just how things work.

GP: One night the fantail of the ship USS Ranger was moving plus or minus 12 feet, so about 24 feet of vertical movement. When you consider that the hook is in a "box" of about three feet as you're touching down there isn't 24 feet for error available. Fortunately we had a great Landing Safety Officer named "Bug" Roach (a Vietnam era F-8 pilot and great guy) working the LSO platform. He wouldn't let me get close for the first two or three passes, there was so much deck movement. Finally on the fourth or fifth pass he let me touch down, the F14 looked like it was doing a wheelie as it touched down. Every day there was something going on. Every day was like a check-ride. It was fun.

JH: What is the wildest thing that has happened to you while flying?

GP: The F-14 was just a series of mechanical problems. We had a small fire in the cockpit. More engine failures than we have room to write about. We just considered that normal.

GP: I had an engine quit on a "catapult shot" at night. The accessory gear box shifted and sheared the PTO shaft that drives the generator and fuel pump and starter. I was able to recover the airplane on one engine. That night the commanding officer Ernie Christianson came down from the bridge to shake my hand and say "nice job". That's what leadership looks like. I'm not sure I'd do it again though.

GP: I had an engine quit in the day pattern at about 275 feet on the turn to final. I ended up going around, single-engine. Instead of finishing the turn I leveled the wings and eventually got the sink rate stopped. I ended up flying up the right-hand side of the ship with one engine in full compressor stall, one engine in full after-burner with the gear down at about a 60 degree bank angle flying past the "island". (laughs) That was exciting.

GP: You asked "do I have any regrets?" I wish I were more mature when I was flying for the Navy. It's like my hang gliding. I think I can appreciate it more now than I could back then. I wish I had done something outside the Navy first, so when I got to the Navy I wouldn't have been so competitive and immature. I was basically trying to prove to everybody that I could do this. Not seeing it for what it really is; which is a bunch of guys out to have some fun, and not kill themselves, and serve their country, yada, yada, yada.



Glenn Phillips at Torrey – August 15th, 2006

JH: What is the craziest thing you have ever witnessed in your flying career?

GP: We had a guy who had an in-flight engagement. He got a wave-off, in close and ended up catching a wire as he was then lifting off. So, we watched an F-14 fifteen feet in the air, climbing out, in the wire just stop flying and drop on the deck. The plane was un-damaged.

GP: We had an airplane do a 360 on the ship. They taxied him behind an airplane that was running up. So you had an F-14 doing a 360 on the flight-deck and getting blown over the edge, ending up in the cat-walk. Fortunately, they did not eject out of the airplane, but that was something to see a 60,000 pound object doing 360s like a tricycle.

JH: Of all the types of flying machines, which is the most fun?

GP: I would have to say the hang glider. The Hornet was fun, and I definitely had fun. In the hang glider, I've witnessed a cloud being formed, and in the F-18 I've formed a cloud. Normally, I had extra gas and extra time, and one day the atmospheric conditions were just perfect, I was out looping the airplane. I just happened to be in a piece of sky where the temperature and humidity were just right. I am on the back side of the loop and there's a vapor trail coming off the top of the airplane. After I finished the loop I looked back, and that entire vape had turned into a banana-shaped cloud. How amazing to be able to say you've formed a cloud, but it really is true.

JH: What is your philosophy of Life?

GP: I think I am still developing it. The golden rule is important. When you are young you are trying to set the World on fire, and what you are doing is so damned important. As you get older you realize there are very few things that are very important and just a few things that are very important.



Glenn Phillips Launching at Horse Canyon east of San Diego, California – May 31, 2004

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