

# We Are Pilots Forever

*Macsblog*

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I received the notice that I had to renew my driver's license. The good news—if there was any—is that I could do it online and the state would simply reuse the photo from last time.

As I was entering the credit card number to pay for a few more years of driving privileges it crossed my mind that I had never renewed my pilot's license. There is no expiration date on the certificate. I guess it expires when I do, but I can't find that in the FARs anywhere.

Over the 45 years or so of flying I have had a whole bunch of different actual certificates. Every time I added a new certificate level or a new rating, along came a new piece of paper. Each carried a date of when it was issued, but none listed expiration.

Most recently I was issued the plastic card with nearly illegible printing. My friend and aviation writing legend Richard Collins and I joked at the time that the new tiny type was actually an eye test. If you couldn't read that faint small print, you couldn't fly. I'm close.

There are at least two pilot certificates that I can think of that do expire—the CFI and the student pilot. The student pilot certificate limit makes sense. After all, we want people to progress toward the private and not be students forever. I guess the term limit on CFIs also makes sense because the FAA wants to be able to update and change the emphasis of pilot training. Renewing the CFI puts the instructor in contact with the FAA or its approved courses which provides the opportunity to remind instructors of what the FAA now thinks are the most important topics to reinforce during instruction.

But the same case could be made for limiting the duration of any pilot certificate. But the FAA doesn't. I wonder why?

The rules have a wide open backdoor requiring renewal in the form of an FAR 61.56 flight review every two years. All of us, at a minimum, must complete the review to legally fly. But the results of the review, when it happened, what topics were covered and so on are not reported to the FAA. The review is not a pass or fail check but a minimum of an hour of ground and then hour of flight review with a CFI in any airplane you are rated to fly.

The FARs pile on other requirements to keep your license valid to carry passengers or to fly IFR, or to fly in airplanes requiring type ratings. But to fly solo under VFR in a basic airplane a flight review every two years will meet the minimum requirements.

The FAA isn't nearly so lax in wanting to know where we live. You must have on file your current permanent mailing address. If you move you have to report the new address within 30 days. And a P.O. Box or general delivery address won't do. You must report a location. And if your residence doesn't have an assigned address you must provide the FAA with specific directions on how to find the place.

I'm not sure why the FAA is so focused on where we live but doesn't ask or record how much or even if we fly. Is it some morbid leftover from a need to find next of kin? Maybe.

The medical certificate does give the FAA a more or less steady flow of information on pilots, at least enough to know the pilot was still alive at the time of the medical examination. That's how the FAA determines you are still an "active" pilot. And you remain "active" for the duration of your medical certificate's valid period which is two years for we older types and five years for the under 40 crowd.

But even that every two or five year sample of pilot's continued existence is about to change. Already pilots flying to the sport pilot rule don't need a medical. Neither do those flying gliders or balloons. And soon, one way or another, the ability to fly privately using a driver's license instead of medical will be expanded and more "active" pilots will disappear from the rolls.

So here we are in what appears to be the most highly regulated activity in the nation—flying—but the government knows very little about us. On the other hand, the states keep pretty close tabs on us as drivers demanding a new license be issued every couple or three years. Even our dog's license expires every three years. But as pilots we fly on forever. Pretty good deal.

However, real life doesn't work exactly that way. A friend in Florida was recently taking care of the estate of his recently deceased very elderly mother when he came across a new Florida driver's license that was issued and put into the mail to her several days after her death. On paper—now plastic—we can be pilots forever. In Florida, at least, I guess you can be a legal driver for longer than anyone would guess.