

Flying High Again

Canada's top guns return in Ice Pilots NWT

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Spotlight

The Ice Pilots NWT premieres Wednesday on History Television

Fly with the Ice Pilots in our online video.

It's nearing the end of a dinner party on a frosty December night in Hay River, N.W.T., when Buffalo Joe McBryan addresses a small group of journalists sitting at his family's table.

After an evening of storytelling, bad jokes, reminiscing and general pontificating about the nature of the north, the former bush pilot turned millionaire airline owner turned reluctant reality-TV star is looking for some straight answers.

"You never did answer my question," he says, looking us all over. "What are you going to write?"

Awkward silence, or any sort of silence, is rare at gatherings of the McBryan clan, the lively family at the centre of History Television's The Ice Pilots NWT.

But "Buffalo Joe's" query leads to a brief spell of dead air, followed by some stumbling responses from the gathered TV scribes about how we plan to shape the day's whirlwind tour of his Buffalo Airways hangar and its fleet of vintage Second World War planes into a preview for Season 2.

By mid-December, a six-person crew was already deep into capturing some swashbuckling adventures at Buffalo Airways for Season 3. The show's tag line -- "the last of the true Arctic aviators, flying vintage airplanes on impossible jobs in a merciless place" -- may sound borderline hyperbolic, but it's a more or less accurate description.

The Ice Pilots' depiction of airline owner and family patriarch Joe as gruff, stubborn, controlling and not one to suffer fools gladly also seems more or less accurate. But his query about how we are going to cover his show doesn't seem to be about control. It seems based on legitimate confusion about why this small team of journalists would want to travel to Yellowknife and spend time with his family. Buffalo Joe may arguably be the star ice pilot, but he seems refreshingly oblivious to the publicity machinery used to promote TV shows. Press tours seem particularly alien to him. When congratulated about Ice Pilots being picked up for a third season, he's quick to deflect any praise

"It's got nothing to do with me," he says.

This, of course, is not true.

But as integral as he is to the show, he comes off as little more than mildly amused by its success.

"He watches it," says Mikey McBryan, Joe's entrepreneurial youngest son and Buffalo's general manager. "He picks out the stupidest things: 'Why was the frost fighter left outside . . .?' He's such a stress junkie, everything is so normal to him. It's just like watching your aunt's slide show of her vacation. That's what it is to him. That's what makes it real, too, is that he really doesn't care all that much about the show."

Making it real is key to the success of *The Ice Pilots*. Executive producer and show creator David Gullason, in fact, dislikes the term "reality TV" because of its association with the American strain of the genre, which often offers shows that bear little resemblance to reality

In 2007, the Vancouver-based producer was reading a newspaper article over breakfast about the McBryan clan and their adventures in the north when it occurred to him that he had stumbled onto a winning premise

"I thought 'Why hasn't anyone done this already?' " he says. "It just had the ingredients for a great TV series and a great story. Here's a small, family-run airline that runs Second World War planes in the toughest conditions in the country. It's run by a bunch of northerners who are eclectic and interesting. And I thought it was ready-made for a great TV show."

So ready-made, in fact, that it never requires embellishment. Nothing about the show is manufactured, Gullason says. Watching the young pilots battle the elements while delivering essential supplies to remote communities has delighted aviation buffs, while other viewers appear to delight in witnessing the day-to-day misadventures and dynamics of the McBryan family and their airline staff. The show's 2009 debut attracted 459,000 viewers. This was the highest ratings ever for a Canadian series debut on the History Television.

The second season will again mix family dynamics with aviation adventure. On Wednesday night's season opener, the drama revolves around Buffalo's hotshot pilot Justin Simle's less-than-triumphant mission to deliver a 3,636-kilogram generator to a remote arctic outpost.

He chooses to carry extra fuel rather than appropriate heating equipment. This eventually leaves the engines on the massive DC-4 frozen solid and it's crew stranded on an icy runway. It also puts the mission, not to mention any chance of profit, at risk.

As with most documentaries, the subjects do not get to choose what does or doesn't go to air. But Simle says having Canada watch his disastrous mission, and its withering post-mortem overseen by his cantankerous boss, is all part of the reality TV experience.

The everything-that-can-go-wrong-does-go-wrong element of the season opener might lead some to suspect that the drama had been artificially heightened. Not so, says Simle.

"It all went down like that," says the 30-year-old Vancouver native, chatting with journalists in the cockpit of that same DC-4, which is now

safely stored in Buffalo's massive Yellowknife hangar.

"That's just the way it goes. It's reality TV and you have to respect that. If they only showed the good stuff, it wouldn't be much of a reality show. It's the way it is. The airline is a little dysfunctional at times, but we make a living and we do our thing and everybody has a good time."

As for the celebrity that has come with the success of the show, it tends to be more than a little muted in Yellowknife. McBryan founded his company in 1970, making him, his family, the planes and his rugged gang of pilots common sights in the northern town for the past 40 years

"Airplanes are so commonplace up here," Simle says. "You're basically a bus driver. People need airplanes to function up here, it's not a luxury, it's a necessity."

But in other parts of Canada, and in Europe, the McBryans, Simle and others are treated like rock stars. They were mobbed by fans in Edmonton. Gangly pilot Scotty Blue -- who acted as an amiable tour guy for our press tour -- was a hit on talk radio stations in Toronto recently.

Buffalo Joe, Mikey, Blue and others from the show took a DC-3 into Oshkosh in Wisconsin for its renowned air show. They spent hours talking to fans.

Certainly part of the appeal of the show is its exploration of the north, something the good folks at Omni TV were hoping to recreate for our press tour.

In mid-December, it's almost always dark in Yellowknife. Temperatures hovered around the -30 C mark, although cast and crew suggested it felt downright balmy compared to weeks earlier when it had dipped below -40 C.

The press tour included, among other novelties, a ride on a dog sled. More importantly, the journalists lifted off into the darkness over Great Slave Lake in a DC-3.

Buffalo Joe explains that the aircraft we're riding in -- alongside a regular group of passengers -- took part in the 11th wave of Normandy in the Second World War. Joe lifts off and lands with decidedly more grace than the commercial flight we all took from Edmonton to Yellowknife. The plane is packed full of passengers, including a high-school sports team and shoppers who travelled from Hay River to Yellowknife and back again to hit the Wal-Mart and other stores.

A rugged but courteous "flight attendant" -- sporting a tuque -- wanders up and down the aisle handing out cups of coffee in Styrofoam cups. On the trip back to Yellowknife from Hay River, the sky is pitch black at 8 a.m. Sitting just behind the cockpit, I watch Joe in his element as he sets the DC-3 down on the Yellowknife runway.

"How was that?" he asks me after the landing.

He doesn't wait for a response.

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