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Buffalo rides again

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Hit 'Ice Pilots' returns for Season 2



'Ice Pilots' returns for its sophomore season



"I want to get away ... I want to fly away." Those words, uttered by Lenny Kravitz in his song "Fly Away," kick off every episode of *Ice Pilots NWT*. They couldn't be more perfect. Not only do they convey the literal sense of flying, which is precisely what the hit History Television series is all about, but they refer to getting away from it all, which to a Toronto boy like me, means the Northwest Territories themselves.

So to find myself standing on the sub-zero tarmac outside Buffalo Airways this past December, on a junket for Season 2, was truly a "fly away" moment. With snow the consistency of sand swirling around me and a minus-24 degree wind buffeting my face, the weather made its presence immediately known. It cemented home how tough you need to be to not only live in the Northwest Territories, but to work at Buffalo. The wind

and frostbite aren't the only dangers lurking in and around the Yellowknife terminal; "Buffalo" Joe McBryan is the 66-year-old owner of Buffalo, and he takes no crap from anyone. Though he ensures us soft media types from Toronto and Calgary have got everything we need with regards to food and interviews with his staff, he abruptly excuses himself when one writer tries to record the impromptu media scrum with Joe.



The elder McBryan is an enigma. It's clear he's wary of reporters walking around on his turf, yet he knows the stories and press *Ice Pilots* garners means more business for his airline. And no one knows the power of the media more than youngest son Mikey. The gregarious and hilarious general manager and primary mouthpiece for Buffalo and *Ice Pilots* clearly loves being in the media spotlight, regaling us with stories of pilots water bombing forest fires in a lemon yellow monstrosity squatting at the back of Buffalo's (thankfully) heated hanger. When partnered with pilots Scott Blue and Justin Simle the trio become a modern-day Three Stooges, mugging for video and still cameras, while talking shop about past flights and ribbing each other about how much airtime they've gotten in Season 1 and how much they'll get in Season 2. (*Ice Pilots* is currently shooting Season 3 for air sometime next year.)

Simle, in particular, is taken to task for being the "star" of Episode 1 of this second season. "Frozen Four" finds the Vancouver native shipping an 8,000-lb. generator to a remote northern town. With just enough room in the DC-4's bay for one more item, Justin has to choose between extra fuel or a high-powered engine heater to take along for support. His pick, fuel, comes back to bite him in the butt, as plummeting temperatures and faulty heaters leave his engines frozen solid at a mid-trip airstrip. Simle and his crew get the big plane's engines warmed enough to start, but the delivery time is missed, meaning the young pilot has to face the music: a meeting with Joe.

Standing inside the empty fuselage of the DC-4, Simle explains to me that while he understood Joe's rationale of taking a heater on-board, he himself stands by his decision. He never wants to be anywhere without enough fuel to get back home again. I can see his point. The ruggedly beautiful desolation surrounding Yellowknife is nothing to trifle with, something that is stated in every episode of *Ice Pilots*. If something goes wrong that far north, it's going to take people a while to find you. Better to be safe than sorry.

That said, the drama is played up a bit when it comes to the editing of *Ice Pilots*. Everyday, run of the mill issues like frozen engines, snow storms, ice fog and late deliveries are par for the course and not as dire as *Ice Pilots*' narrator would have you believe.

Even without the drama, *Ice Pilots* is a highly entertaining show. To stand next to a DC-3 (the workhorse of the Second World War), a DC-4 or a C-46 is to be in the presence of a rare bird. These planes simply aren't being made any more, and a precious few of them are even flying. To see a C-46 blatting down the runway as the sun comes up, with one of the wily Buffalo pilots at the controls, is to

see a piece of history shooting aloft.

It makes you reflect on the years gone by, the passengers these planes have held, the cities and countries and oceans they've flown over, and what the future holds for them. It makes you — or me, anyway — want to just fly away.

Check out my exclusive behind-the-scenes *Ice Pilots NWT* photo gallery next week.

Ice Pilots returns Wednesday, Jan. 12 at 8 p. m. ET/PT on History Television.

Thoughts? greg@tvguide.ca or comment below.

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