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Canada warms to Ice Pilots

Article

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Special to the Star

YELLOWKNIFE—There's no sound quite like a Curtiss C-46 Commando taking off on a winter morning.

Bangbangbang it sparks, like slow-motion machinegun fire. It takes a while for all 36 plugs to fire the 18 "pots" or cylinders. Flames leap from the cowling as the fuel flows through the system.

That's just one of the 2000-horsepower engines on a C-46. Once both roar to life, the mammoth aircraft lurches forward in the cold and dark, a light snow falling in the -22C air.

The World War II-era plane is part of Buffalo Air, the largest fleet of propliner aircraft operating in the world and featured each week on *Ice Pilots NWT* (Wednesdays at 8 p.m. on History Television).

Season two of the made-in-Canada reality series took off this past week.

"Buffalo" Joe McBryan started his passenger and cargo operation in 1970 with one aircraft. Now he has one of the largest privately owned fleets in Canada. Young pilots-in-training, looking to earn their wings without joining the Air Force, flock to Yellowknife each year to train and fly in the harshest conditions imaginable.

It is the lure of the vintage aircraft that draws them. As McBryan says, "You're not really flying until you strap a DC-3 to your ass and take off into the sky."

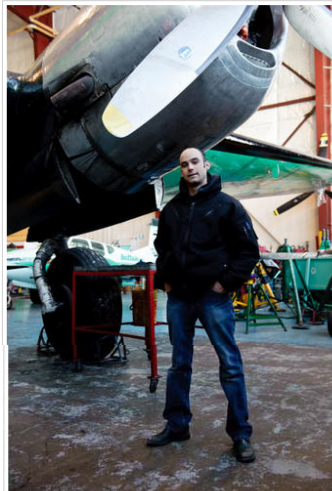
The C-46 taking off this morning is headed north on what is a daily cargo run. Scotty Blue, a friendly, lanky Toronto native, arrived in Yellowknife four years ago looking for air hours and his captain's designation. It was only after he arrived at Buffalo Air that he learned he was too tall (6-foot-6) to fit comfortably in any cockpit other than the blimpy C-46.

The bird takes off with purpose from the Yellowknife runway with a deep, searing drone that can be heard for miles. Blue has flown the three Buffalo Air C-46s all over the north, strapping cargo inside their cavernous ribbed hulls and sailing past the tree line (just 150 km or so north of Yellowknife) to the top of this vast northern world.

Ice Pilots NWT plays up the rivalry between Wood and fellow pilot Justin Simle, but really the two are good friends, both happy to take visitors on a tour of their adopted city of 20,000, which in many ways resembles a typical Ontario town.

The difference is out on the ice on Great Slave Lake, where many houseboats provide shelter from both the elements and property tax assessors. Real estate in the mining town is shockingly pricey, with trailers fetching up to half a million dollars.

A couple of young Buffalo Air trainees live in these slapdash lake retreats, stoking wood



Justin Simle is a slick young pilot in History Television's series *Ice Pilots NWT*.

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fireplaces with pellets or kindling that is carefully rationed. They drive on the lake in cars, trucks or snowmobiles, trusting a solid ice road at a mid-December thickness of 16 inches.

Along the snowy shore, it is not uncommon to spot boxy, big-as-vans Bombardier snowmobiles from the '50s. A few are parked near Ragged Ass Road, a hard-to-find street (people keep stealing the sign) made famous by a Tom Cochrane song. Yellowknife, like Buffalo Air, is a living museum, a place where mechanical things go to sputter out their golden years.

The C-46 is just part of the Buffalo Air fleet. McBryan maintains and operates several Lockheed Electra's and CL-215 water bombers as well as five operating DC-3s. The DC-3s are like giant, flying sculptures, true things of beauty, dotted with thousands of silver rivets that run in rows across their sloping surface. There's never a hint of rust on the thick aluminum shell, only the green-and-white-trim paint that identifies each plane as part of the Buffalo Air fleet. Green is a colour you never see on a commercial jet or even smaller planes for it makes them harder to spot against the surface of the earth — unless you happen to be constantly flying over fields of snow.

Buffalo Air has five of these birds. The one making the passenger run over Great Slave Lake on this night saw action against the Nazis. It was in the 11th wave over Normandy, says Joe's son Mikey McBryan, always happy to sell you T-shirts, hats and even panties emblazoned with the Buffalo Air logo.

His cantankerous dad dismisses Mikey on cue as "silver spoon" or "a Kennedy kid," but we only know that because of the television show, which wouldn't exist if it weren't for McBryan junior.

Mikey took that first call from Vancouver-based producer David Gullison, who had seen a documentary on the family air operation. Gullison saw the family, the planes and the setting and couldn't get cameras turned on everything fast enough. His hunch was sound: *Ice Pilots NWT* soared through its first season as the highest-rated Canadian-made series ever on History.

This season, the gang flies one of their DC-3s down to Oshkosh, Wisc., for an air show celebrating the 75th anniversary of the famed Douglas aircraft. Even though the series does not air yet in the States, they were treated like rock stars, with prop heads from across North America and beyond marvelling at a real, working DC-3 that was not just another hobby plane.

Gullison says the episode is a hoot, with Buffalo Joe loading son Mikey, daughter Kathy, Scotty, Justin and the rest of the gang into the plane the way most families would fill a station wagon on a summer vacation. Buffalo Air is a trip, and so is *Ice Pilots NWT*.