

# NATIONAL POST

Monday, November 16, 2009

## Like airborne biker gangs

### Ice Pilots NWT

**Alex Strachan, Canwest News Service**

The story may be apocryphal, but that doesn't stop the devil-may-care Buffalo Airways ice pilots in Hay River, N.W.T., from repeating it.

Airline founder Joe Mc-Bryan, or "Buffalo Joe" as he's better known, was flying a planeload of out-of-control hockey players, so the story goes. They wouldn't settle down -- any NHL coach can relate -- so Buffalo Joe pointed the nose of the 1940s-era plane skyward and flew it to 14,000 feet, where the boys passed out in the thinner air.

And a legend was born.

Mikey McBryan, Buffalo Joe's son and one of the onscreen stars of Vancouver filmmaker David Gullason's new docu-reality series, *Ice Pilots NWT*, is a chip off the old ice block.

The younger McBryan is the airline's general manager, the brains of the outfit and the wrangler of some dozen Douglas DC-3s, DC-4s and Curtiss C-46s, the kind of plane that would only appeal to "prop-heads" -- aviation buffs to whom the sound of a jet engine is akin to nails being scratched down a blackboard.

McBryan admits to feeling the occasional disquiet, over the weather, mainly. The weather in Canada's North is "unpredictable," McBryan says.

"You get good at reading the weather," McBryan added, not that the point needs embellishment.

Nothing gets McBryan juiced in the morning, though, quite like the sound of a throaty, big-bellied prop plane going through an engine check.

"It's like riding a big Harley. You just feel it in your bones, where you live. There's no sound like it. Modern planes don't have the same sound, or lines."

Here's the thing about these planes: They were built in an age before jet engines, fancy-schmancy fibre metals and on-board flight computers and navigation systems made flying for sissies. DC-3s were built

to take a beating, literally, and nothing is quite so bracing putting a plane down on a frozen lake -- hard -- when the circumstances call for it. Older truly is better, where flying the Arctic flats is concerned.

It's not the kind of job anyone can do.

"We're short-handed," Mc-Bryan said on a cold November morning. "I'm missing a guy this week. We almost didn't fly last week. This takes a special breed of person."

The crazy success of the twin docu-reality series *Deadliest Catch* and *Ice Road Truckers* has prompted a flood of job applicants for those outfits -- so much so, the company websites are asking job seekers to please, please, just stop: They're full up.

Buffalo Airways has no such worry. If *Ice Pilots NWT* takes off, McBryan said, being flooded with job applications "would be a good problem to have."

The toughest part of the job --freaky weather aside--is uncertainty and never being able to plan ahead.

The cameras were no bother, McBryan added.

"I really looked forward to being in this, to be honest with you. I didn't believe it was true, at first. Some people in the hangar didn't care to be on TV. But me, I'm enough of a narcissist to enjoy it."

If *Ice Pilots NWT* achieves one thing, McBryan hopes it will be to give families and friends of Buffalo Airways' flyers a glimpse of what it is to live the life.

"We're scattered all across the North," McBryan said. "I hope this will let families see what their sons and daughters are doing."

As for average, everyday viewers -- flatlanders, soft-shoes, city slickers, couch potatoes, docu-reality buffs, hospital patients and shut-ins, those who can't get out to Canada's great white North -- McBryan hopes *Ice Pilots NWT* will introduce them to a host of new, ornery characters like Buffalo Joe (stubborn, unconventional and unpredictable, much like the weather); Scotty Too Tall, the pilot whose freakish height (he's six-foot-seven) makes the cockpit a tight fit; and Sophie the Dog, who is, in fact, a dog and Buffalo Airways' official mascot.

Sophie doesn't fly a plane yet, though. The company isn't that short-handed.

- *Ice Pilots NWT* premieres Wednesday on History Television at 10 p.m.