



'Ice' cold

Drama served on 'Ice'

By Greg David

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Deconstructing the innermost workings of the TV industry

David Gullason has a cool job, and there's none more so than his latest creation, *Ice Pilots NWT*. The Canadian producer behind *Stunt Dawgs*, *Wild at Heart*, *Icebound* and *Storm Warning* scored a major hit with the Omni Film Productions Ltd. project, which bowed to a record-breaking 459,000 viewers on Nov. 19, the biggest-ever debut for a Canadian specialty series.

Ice Pilots is a mix of men (pilots), machinery (Second World War planes) and the elements (the Northwest Territories in winter) that has proved addictive to TV addicts like me.

So how did Gullason dream up the idea to document these ice pilots? Simple: he read a story about German and British tourists who were seeking out "Buffalo" Joe McBryan and his crew, who are the only ones in the world to use wartime planes for everyday use. He knew it would make for good TV.

TVGuide.ca: How did you pitch your idea for *Ice Pilots* to Buffalo Joe McBryan, and then to Canwest?

David Gullason: I called Buffalo Airways and spoke to [Joe's son] Mikey McBryan, and he's pretty savvy. He knows about television and what a show needs – the storylines, the characters – so right from the start he was saying, 'You could do this, you could do that.'

I worked with him on who the people were, what they do, and what happens when things go wrong. I wanted to get an idea of what the stories would be and what the characters would be. It started there. Mikey spoke to Joe and pitched him the idea because Mikey got it right from the start.



TVG: And what about History? What was the pitch to them?

DG: I wrote the treatment for it, and went to some TV markets and everyone said that they were interested, but wanted to see some tape. So we went up there about three months later and shot for about five or six days. I sent a director up there with a camera and said, 'See what stories you get.' And he brought that back and we turned it into a three-minute demo of a couple of stories.

Michael Kot [Canwest's vice-president of factual content] was one of those people who wanted to see some tape, and we went into the boardroom, and he watched it. I remember that I had three or four meetings that day — we were going to show it to CBC and CTV — and it just happened that History was our first meeting. And Michael just looked at me and said, 'We'll take it.'

TVG: Wow.

DG: [Laughs.] And I had thought we would pitch it as a six- or seven-part series, and he goes, 'No, 13 [episodes].' [Laughs.]

TVG: And not only that, but 13 one-hour episodes.

DG: Yeah! And I was like, 'OK, we better get started!' It was extremely unusual to get that because now any time you pitch anything to a network they are so cautious and timid about things. They will order a half-hour, one hour, maybe two hours, and see how the ratings are. It's very unusual for a network executive to have the guts to say 'We'll take it, and lots of it.'

TVG: Why do you think people are so fascinated with seeing people working in sub-zero conditions like that?

DG: It's just so extreme. We shot for nine months up there, from November until the end of July. There is no question that the best stories came out of the winter months. The real excitement for the crew and for everyone was to shoot in the extreme conditions. Seeing people trying to accomplish things and do their jobs in a place that looks like another world to people living in the south is good TV.

TVG: What logistical challenges did you have to face because of the conditions?

DG: Cameras, especially disc-based ones and memory stick cameras, the plastic parts don't do well at minus-40. Microphone mounts were breaking off. And going in and out of hot and cold temperatures is bad because you get condensation issues.

What they actually started to do was roll film before they went outside because the shutter would stick closed. So, once we got out there, we couldn't stop rolling. If we didn't roll inside, the shutter wouldn't open, and we couldn't shoot anything.



TVG: Did you know ahead of time what your Season 1 storylines would be, or did they come about organically?

DG: We had an idea of the kind of stories we wanted, but we didn't know exactly what would happen. I was adamant that we wouldn't do a reality show where everybody had a script; today, Joe's mad because they didn't make coffee, and everyone starts jumping around like amateur actors. I hate that kind of stuff, and wanted to do a verité doc about what really happens.

You can tell when it's real and when it's something the producer dreamed up. Most series go and shoot for a short amount of time and try to make something out of nothing. We wanted to go up and shoot for a long time

and get embedded in the place and when something happens, we will follow that story.

TVG: Is there anything about the first season that surprised you?

DG: There were incidents that were pretty riveting and truly dangerous. Not *Ice Road Truckers*-dangerous, where it really isn't, but landings that shook up the pilots and you can tell that they were shaken up. And there was one incident where a cameraman was at the end of a runway and had to bail. We were shocked that we got it on tape, and Buffalo was shocked that it happened.

TVG: As a show creator and producer, do you accept outside pitches from people?

DG: I accept outside pitches, but what I find is that a lot of times you have to do it yourself because you have some inside stuff on what the broadcaster wants. And the odds of a pitch working are so long that sometimes you have to do it yourself. But yeah, I look at pitches from the outside all the time and I've seen good ones and have tried to follow up on them.

TVG: What do you look for in a pitch?

DG: I look for something that fits with what the broadcaster wants. And at the other extreme, I look for something that is so unique that no one could have come up with it by just copying an idea. Like, Buffalo is the prototype of a good idea because nobody can go and say 'OK, I'll do a show just like that,' because there is nothing like this somewhere else. That's gold for us.

Got a TV show pitch for me? Shoot it my way: greg@tvguide.ca

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Ice Pilots NWT airs Wednesdays, 7 p.m. and 10 p.m. ET/PT on History.