

BUFFALO AIRWAYS YELLOWKNIFE, NORTHWEST TERRITORIES, CANADA

© Lauran Paine Jr.

I am a member, in reasonably good standing, of a loosely organized band of Hangar Trash at my home airport in Salem, Oregon. As such, if I am going to be away for awhile, I am loosely required to report my whereabouts to Doug, the current titular Chief of the Hangar Trash. Dutifully, I sent him an e-mail: “Will be unavailable next week for stimulating airport conversation. Will be at an undisclosed location.” Then I signed it, “Lauran N62.4705 W114.4366.” Chief Doug is then loosely required to decipher the “undisclosed location” using the lat/long coordinates and to report my whereabouts to the Hangar Trash, as required, during the random weekly meetings held at random hangars. (Sound like any airports you know?) It’s a reasonably foolproof system important because, in our own minds, we think our opinions are valuable, even if no one else does.

All was according to Hoyle until Doug wrote back with, “Cannot find undisclosed location. Map doesn’t go that high. And even if it did, I couldn’t reach that high on the wall. Suspect a ruse on your part. However, a conditional absence is granted pursuant to an explanation upon your return.” It wasn’t pretty, but I now had a clearance for the next few days.

It wasn’t a ruse but Doug was right, it *is* way up there! N62.4705 W114.4366 is Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada. What brings me to Yellowknife? The last scheduled DC-3 passenger service on planet Earth, that’s what. I’ll get back to that in a bit but first I have to paint you a picture of the land, for the land shapes all who come into contact with it. It’s pretty simple, really: Respect it and be strong or it will break you. Think -35C and forty knot winds and blowing snow. Day after day after day. Okay, that’s worst case (except for the days when the winds are seventy knots) just to get your attention. Better case, there is much to love about Yellowknife.

Born of ancient Aboriginal cultures (archeological evidence dates them back thousands of years...oh, they must have been a hardy bunch!), Yellowknife is located 512 km south of the Arctic Circle. It derives its name from the knives used by the Dene (de-nay) people whose knives were forged from naturally occurring copper. Later, these knives were used to open the dynamite cases used in mining, since steel knives could cause a spark. Yellowknife borders Great Slave Lake, that name, explained the nice lady at the Visitor Center, taken from the Slavey (slah-vie) ancestors of the Dene.

Jumping way ahead now, Yellowknife was named the Capitol of the Northwest Territories in 1967. In 1970 it was incorporated as the first city in the Northwest Territories. It’s also the *only* city in the Northwest Territories. Population: 20,000. The second largest *town* in the Northwest

Territories is Hay River, towards the south end of the lake. Population: 3600. (Remember Hay River. We're going to come back to it...in a DC-3). So let me tie this together for you: Northwest Territories is twice the size of Texas with a total population of 45,000. They wouldn't fill half of the big new football stadium in Dallas. But ya know what? They're just fine with that, preferring it that way, actually.

What else? Yellowknife advertises the midnight sun and the aurora borealis. And they have diamond mines, which I learned a lot about. It's quite an extensive process, requiring a lot of skilled people, from mining them to getting one on your finger. And they mine gold and uranium. And they have the Caribou Festival, a spring festival featuring Dene games, snowmobile races, beard growing contests, and the ugly-truck-and-dog contest. (Presumably you have to have *both* to win.) And lots of restaurants and interesting taverns-- all the taverns have hockey on the TV.

Into this mix throw one Joe McBryan (aka Buffalo Joe), the founder and patriarch of Buffalo Airways, the only operator of the last scheduled DC-3 service on planet Earth.

But first you have to get to Yellowknife. I traveled from Calgary to Edmonton and then the last leg via Canadian North 737 to Yellowknife. In the terminal, the baggage carousel rotates around a stuffed polar bear. Canadian North also serves Inuvik, Kugluktuk, Kugaaruk, Iqaluit, Oikiqtarjuag, and some other places. Those are just the ones I could spell from memory.

The nice lady at Budget Rent-A-Car walked me out to my car. She was wearing shorts. It was 10:30 PM-- still light --and -4C. I asked, "Does your mom know you're outside in those shorts?" She replied, "This isn't bad." Okay, I'm starting to get the picture: I'm a cold weather wimp. The license plate on the car was in the shape of a polar bear. Where do the stickers go? On the feet.

At 6:30 AM the next morning, while still in bed, I heard the unmistakable sound of radial engines. I sprang from the bed, tore open the sash and what to my wondering eyes should appear but....the unmistakable silhouette of a Buffalo Airways DC-3 in its trademark green livery. (Okay, so I stumbled to the window and peeked out the curtain...you get the picture.) I was in the right place.

Listening to the lady on the radio while getting dressed, she said, "-1C outside, light winds, chill factor -4C, flurries this afternoon, tonight -10C and tomorrow a high of 0C." She was as matter of fact as a weather forecaster in Phoenix, "90F today and the rest of the week." Growing up on the ranch, my dad used to say of the cows standing in the snow, "They can take a lot as long as their bellies are full." So I filled my belly at the Latitude Restaurant. (Clever name, I thought, until I saw it was "L'attitude".....ah, yes, the French connection). I was then ready to drive to Buffalo Airways to meet the people there. I was excited: I knew there would be much that was good. I wasn't wrong.

Enroute to the airport I saw two joggers, one bicycle rider, a motorcycle rider and a lady in a sweater walking her dog. Just like in Florida. Except it was -4C outside. I blurted to myself, 'C'mon people! You're killin' me here!'

At the entrance to the airport, on display, is a Bristol Freighter. (I had to look it up; I didn't know what it was.) It was donated by Max Ward, a Canadian aviation pioneer. It made the very first skied landing at the North Pole in 1967. It is representative of the pioneer spirit that's in the air in Yellowknife.

On the right side of Bristol Road is the Buffalo Airways freight office. On the left side is everything else. Turning left, first thing I noticed was the back of a panel van that said, "Radial Engine Response Team." Yup, right place! Then more buildings, lots of other stuff like engine mounts, wheels, tires, you name it, with some DC-4's and a couple C-46's thrown in. Nothin' not to like about all that! And then a big ol' hangar proclaiming itself, in large green letters, "Buffalo Airways." I parked in the gravel parking lot, not knowing where to begin. Getting out of the car I spotted two DC-3's, parked outside, at the other end of the hangar. Somehow they looked ready-- doors open, stairs in place, that sort of thing. Clean and green.

I was to meet Mikey McBryan (good Irish name, eh?), General Manager. Mikey is Joe's son. (Get ready for more genealogy later; this is a family operation.) Another sign proclaimed, "Buffalo Airways Passenger Terminal." Ah, they have their own terminal. Around the corner a sign said "Operations." I went there first. In my mind, that's where "stuff happens."

I opened a steel door and walked in, the door clanging behind me. Nothing. Nobody. There were stairs. I walked up them, turned right down a hallway, then left. I heard voices. I walked by an open class room door and overheard the instructor saying, "Here it is, the first week of May, and the ice is getting pretty bad, eh?" He wasn't talking about in-flight ice; he was talking about pond and lake ice. "Bad" meaning it's pretty risky to land on this time of year. I found out later it was an "Egress Training Class," where you learn how to get out of an airplane that has had to make a forced landing on water or ice. Lots of lakes in the Northwest Territories, ya know. "Brad The Dunker Guy" teaches the class and teaches from personal experience (www.dunkyou.com).

I walked around in "Operations" a little more. Still nothing and nobody. I went back downstairs and headed towards the door marked "Terminal." Inside, there was a wooden prop hung high on one wall and a bunch of benches and chairs-- all green --arranged about the room. My steel-trap mind figured this must be the terminal waiting area. Still no people. On the back wall was a hand painted sign: "Monday through Friday, depart Yellowknife, 5:00 PM, arrive Hay River, 5:45 PM. Depart Hay River, 7:30 AM, arrive Yellowknife, 8:15 AM. Saturday, depart Yellowknife, 8:00 AM, arrive Hay River, 8:45 AM. Sunday, depart Hay River, 4:30 PM, arrive Yellowknife, 5:15 PM." Pretty self-explanatory: fly down in the evening, come back in the morning. Type aircraft? You guessed it: DC-3. The last scheduled DC-3 service on the planet.

I then walked past the waiting area, down a hallway adorned with pictures of Canadian aviation history. One picture was of Wop May (love that name), standing in front of a single radial engine, high wing airplane of some genre, on a frozen lake handing over diphtheria vaccine that the typewritten note below said "essentially saved a village." Another wall hanging was an essay/ballad written by a pilot in 1942, lamenting the many discomforts of flying the Fairchild

and the Junkers and how he dreamed of someday flying the latest and greatest and most comfortable...the DC-3.

Further down the hallway I ran into my first people: Peter and Maria. Maria a kindly lady with a nice smile and Peter (an intern, I found out later) in charge of the Buffalo Airways clothing store. The store has hats, t-shirts, sweat shirts, belt buckles and Buffalo Airways...briefs. (Yeah, you read that right; don't make me say it again.) Check it out at www.buffaloairwear.com. And on the wall in the store a picture of the Buffalo Airways hockey team, the "Buffa 'Low' Riderz." I asked for Mikey. Maria said, "He's around." Peter paged him. (Funny, when someone asked who I was with, I'd say, "EAA." That generally got me blank stares. So I'd say, "Heard of the big airshow at Oshkosh?" That they all knew of.) A little while later, Mikey walked in. Let the journey into the heart and soul of Buffalo Airways begin.

Picture Mikey: twenty-seven years old, dressed in a Buffalo Airways sweatshirt. Picture him walking around juggling five balls with one hand, keeping all in the air at the same time, while walking about with a cell phone in the other hand, answering one of the forty-five phone calls he gets a day. And picture him calm and smiling in the face of it all. That's Mikey.

Mikey says, "C'mon, I'll show ya around." We walk into the big hangar. Holy stimulus! Let your eyes gaze around: prominent a Lockheed Electra, currently the only concession on the property towards turbine engines and, I think, a hedge for the day the avgas supply becomes a problem. In one corner a CL-215, red and yellow, in vivid contrast to the otherwise green motif. (We'll come back to the CL-215 a little later; there's a story there, too.) And there were some Barons, three, I think, and a Cessna 185 (Joe's airplane) and a customized 1951 Mercury...car. Oh, and hanging from the ceiling, a Fleet Cannuck. Mikey saw me looking at it and said, "I don't know. Dad got it somewhere. He never sells anything." Don't think eclectic here; think function. Everything works. Well, except maybe the Fleet. But know this: If Joe wanted the Fleet to work, it would be working.

I asked Mikey about the "Buffa 'Low' Riderz." He said, "Yeah, we play Polar Pond hockey on the Hay River. And we try to drink \$10,000.00 in beer."

While walking across the hangar floor we ran into Sophie. Sophie's a dog. I don't know, big dog, long hair, brown eyes, blond-ish. Hangar dog. (That's a breed, isn't it?) Thirteen years old. Very friendly. Mikey says, "She's got about twenty-five hundred hours of DC-3 time. Knows the schedule. Meets the airplane. Figures somebody might feed her." I like Sophie. Look closely at Mikey's business card and you'll see a DC-3 with Sophie sticking her head out the left front window, Captain Sophie-like.

Mikey starts talking of his father, the ol' man, the legend. Joe was born in Yellowknife in 1944. Joe's father had a gold mine so he lived "in the bush" until he was eight or nine years old. A Fairchild once crashed on a nearby lake. Joe's father brought it to shore. The Fairchild became Joe's playhouse. They sent Joe to Edmonton to go to school. The nuns called from Edmonton, "This boy can't be taught. Every time an airplane flies over he runs to the window and tells me what it is." They brought Joe back to Yellowknife where he finished school, got his drivers license and then his pilot license, becoming the first in the family to fly.

Jump forward now to 1970 (the year Yellowknife became a city, remember?). Joe started Buffalo Airways.....with one airplane. Mikey added, "I don't think he really had a plan, just sort of built it one airplane at a time." Forty years later, "one airplane at a time" has become many airplanes. How many DC-3's? Mikey says, "Thirteen, I think. Three here for passenger service, four for freight and some up at Red Deer." It's a fluid situation, adjustable according to need. Joe flew the first scheduled DC-3 flight to Hay River the year Mikey was born. He's since made the trip, oh, seven-thousand-five hundred times. He knows most of the passengers, their kids and their grandkids. Now put two-and-two together: Joe lives in Hay River; Buffalo Airways is in Yellowknife. After work, Joe flies the 5:00 PM departure from Yellowknife to Hay River....aka home. In the morning, Joe flies the 7:30 AM departure from Hay River to Yellowknife...to work. He flies to and from work in a DC-3 and his customers buy the gas. Heck of a deal! Okay, it's not quite so simplistic as all that, but you get the picture. And he doesn't fly every day; he has other pilots that fly the route, too. But he flies most days and manages to max out his time every month.....still.

Buffalo Joe has lots of working airplanes but make no mistake, the DC-3 is his baby. And he has a particular one he prefers above all the rest. Why? Don't know; doesn't matter. It's a "pilot thing." It should be abundantly clear by now that Joe likes old airplanes. And that, my friends, is an *essential* ingredient for him to do what he does, and to *keep* doing what he does.

I asked about the name "Buffalo." Mikey explained, "One of dad's early flying jobs was counting buffalo at Wood Buffalo State Park." Okay, got it. And the green paint? That's a little more complicated...or muddled. Mikey says, "My grandmother was very Irish, liked green. Dad says green is easier to see in the air and against the snow and often says 'If I had it to do over again I'd paint 'em green *and* orange.' Another theory is that green paint is cheap. Another is that all the steel bridges in Canada are...or were....painted green." Take your pick. Justin, one of the pilots, told me, "I ask Joe about the green color every year to see if I can get the same answer. I don't." Whatever...green it is. Everywhere. Brand recognition, eh?

Let me tell you about some of the McBryan/Buffalo Airways genealogy. We know about Joe, the patriarch. We know about Mikey, the juggler. Brother Rob is Director of Maintenance, even has his name painted on the door...in green. When asked what it takes to keep it all going, he says, "Don't know what it takes....ya just keep goin', eh?" Daughter Kathy works for Buffalo in Hay River. Kathy's son, Joe's grandson, works for Buffalo, too. Joe's wife, the mom, the matriarch? Sharon's worked for Buffalo, also, and knows most any job they have. Justin says, "She's a wonderful lady." I'm quite sure she is; she raised a strong and productive brood. I'm confident that family reunions are, well, lively.

Mikey will also tell you that old airplanes come with "travelers." Travelers are people who have an expertise with the old airplane that no body else has. They're part of the package. And they bring their families. More family. One big happy family.

Mikey walks me out to a DC-3. It's the one that's going to be used for today's 5:00 PM departure. Passenger seats installed, it's ready. I clomp up the fuselage, gawking all the while, and make my way to the cockpit and plop myself in the left front seat. Holy flashback! It's been

forty years since I last flew a DC-3 but, wow, does the “feel” ever come back! Mikey spots and summons a person up to the cockpit and introduces her, “This is Audrey. She’s a pilot.”

I ask Audrey where she’s from and about her flying background. She’s from Quebec, has two-hundred-twenty hours and got her multi-engine rating in a Cessna 310. I pointed to the yoke on the DC-3 and asked a question I already knew the answer to, “Heavy?” She answered, emphatically, “Oh, yes!” Audrey then told me about how she heard Buffalo might be hiring so she called them. They said, “It’s hard work.” She said, “I can do it!” They said, “It’s cold.” She said, “I can do it!” They said, “It’s an apprenticeship. You have to work your way up.” She said, “I can do it!” They hired her.

While talking to Audrey, I glanced over at the seatbelt in the right seat. It said “Beech Aircraft Corporation.”

Now picture Audrey: She’s twenty-four, maybe 5’ 3”, unfailingly polite, and strong as steel. I asked what her parents thought of her being way up here in Yellowknife. She said, “My dad’s proud of me. My mom would like to have me closer but says, ‘If that’s what you want to do then I support you.’” Brothers or sisters? “Three sisters. One’s a nurse, the other a designer and one is six months old.” Any pilots in the family? “Nope.” How long you going to do this? “As long as I keep waking up with a smile.” Then she added, “They take care of those who deserve to be taken care of.” Wise young lady, this Audrey.

(Note to Audrey’s parents: Yes, you can be very proud of her.)

Now, back to a word I used two paragraphs ago: apprenticeship. You don’t come to Buffalo Airways as a pilot and just be a pilot. You work your way up, job by job. First job? You’re what they call a “rampie.” What does a rampie do? Anything and everything they’re told to do, anytime, in any weather. Work hard and you might get to fly. “Might” being the operative word. You want it? Earn it! They affectionately call it “Buffalo Boot Camp.” And, like a lot of boot camps (the military comes to mind), it’s not for everybody. Mikey casually says, “We have about a 95% turnover rate.” That made your eyebrows rise, didn’t it? He adds, “Some can do it. Some can’t. And you can’t tell who will and who won’t by talking to them. It comes from within. They have to re-invent themselves.”

“Re-invent themselves?” It goes like this: Come to Buffalo, fly the historic DC-3, work 8-to-5, write home and tell your friends how cool it is, how neat you are. Wrong! Here’s how it really goes down: Come to Buffalo. You a pilot? Great! You start out as a rampie. Work your way up. Sounds reasonable, eh? But you’re going to be doing it when it’s -30C. Get the airplane ready by sweeping the snow off. Get the last of it off by brushing on glycol. Oh, and the winds are blowing twenty, gusting to thirty. And be sure the bags are loaded and tied down. And maybe get yelled at by Joe because the departure’s five minutes late. And, of course, it’s pitch black dark outside. And you get to do the same thing tomorrow. And the day after that. And the day after that. And someday, you *might* get to fly.

How you holding up? Only *you* know the answer to that question. But you can’t keep it a secret for long. The Northwest Territories winter will call you out...and find you out. The faux veneer

of pretense, self-importance and braggadocio will be laid bare...in short order. One guy arrived Saturday; he left Sunday. No, it's not just a job around neat old airplanes. It's a way of life: your work is your life; your work is your fun. That's how you re-invent yourself.

What kind of person survives the Buffalo Boot camp? The kind you want with you in a foxhole; the kind you want on your wing when the bullets start flying; the kind you can *count on* when you need to count on someone. This climate demands courage and character and mental toughness. If you have it, you can fly a DC-3 here. But only if you have it. It's the unofficial law of the land.

The pilots? Shaun, Ian, Andrew, Gordon, Graham, Justin...and others. Most all under thirty. Mikey says, "That way you don't have to train backwards, get rid of old habits. The guys who flew these airplanes in WWII were in their twenties." Which airplanes do they fly, DC-3, C-46, DC-4, Electra? One or all. The ones they earn the honor to fly. (The 'money thing' just never came up. These guys are here because they want to be here.) Arnie is the Chief Pilot. Thirty-four thousand hours in the North, much of it on gravel, ice, snow and water. You gotta like and respect a guy like that. When Arnie talks, people listen.

Okay, it's time to let you in on a little secret. (It's not a secret in Canada.) You all know the TV shows "Orange Country Choppers" and "Deadliest Catch" and, more recently, "Ice Road Truckers," reality TV shows about real people doing real things. On the History Channel in Canada the show is called "Ice Pilots." And these guys at Buffalo Airways are them! Should the show be on in the US? Of course it should (in my humble opinion). It depicts the *adventure* in aviation, the very thing that drew many of us into it. It depicts the challenges, the honor and the purpose of aviation. And it beats any video game ever invented (in my humble opinion...again). It seems we've unwittingly engineered a lot of the adventure out of aviation. Is aviation safer now? For sure. But, in life and in cookies, more vanilla doesn't always make the recipe better.

"Ice Pilots" is the #1 ranked specialty channel TV show in Canada. 459,000 viewers watched the show's debut. Omni Films in Victoria, BC, films the series, which also shows on Discovery Quest in England and National Geographic in Australia. What do the people at Buffalo think of the notoriety? They're bemused by it but it doesn't change who they are or what they do one whit. They remain non-plussed and go out and do what they do, haul people and freight every day, dutifully and efficiently. Do they 'duke it out' from time to time? Sure, stuff happens in the heat of battle. And, of course, the camera crews love it. But at the end of the day, Buffalo is still family. Check 'em out at www.icepilots.com.

Okay, you're starting to paint a picture in your mind of Buffalo Airways: old airplanes-- the DC-3 being the darling --flown regularly in demanding weather by people with.....skill, character and passion. But you also know that somebody has to keep 'em flying and busy, as in "maintenance" and "the freight office."

Mikey walked us into the parts room. What a goldmine! Generators, carburetors, gaskets, nuts-and-bolts and you-name-it, all neatly organized. We hadn't even spoken yet when the guy at the desk in the parts room said, "Americans!" Brady, EAA photographer, asked, "Do we smell bad or something?" The guy said, "No. Green. Americans wear green flight jackets. (Brady was

wearing his EAA B-17 flight jacket.) Canadians wear blue.” Okay, then. Glad we got that straightened out. The guy at the desk was named Ron, good guy and a bit of a character. And proud of his parts room. As well he should be. I asked Ron about the sign above his door that says: “If you don’t know where it belongs, it does not belong in this room.” He said, “They don’t read it.” I asked him about maintenance in general. He said, “We’re working on some of the planes most all the time. The DC-3, not so much. They just keep going and going.” Energizer Bunny, my foot! Energizer DC-3 is more like it! You need a DC-3 part? Think trade. Got a C-46 windscreen? Ron will talk to you.

Then Mikey walked us to another building, way in the back corner of the property. It had lots of color from lots of different colors of tin. Mikey called it, “Red neck camouflage.” Inside? Equipment and machinery. Lots of equipment and machinery. And a 1940 Ford, dusty but pristine. Looked like new. Mikey said, “Dad found it. Original paint and original upholstery.” (Don’t even think about it: Joe doesn’t sell stuff, remember?) And up on a shelf, way off the floor, a ’69 Volkswagen convertible. Mikey again knew what we were thinking and said, “That was my sister Kathy’s sixteenth birthday present.” In the back room of the building, I heard pounding. That’s where we met Dean.

Dean was pounding on an exhaust manifold. He looked up and, after introductions, said, “C-46...exhaust manifold. They don’t make ‘em at the corner store any more. Gotta fix ‘em. They need this one tomorrow. I’ll work ‘till I get ‘er done.” Imagine angles and compound curves and pounding flat-stock steel into shape, *exact* shape, one hammer blow at a time. Then welding the piece where it needs to go so you can have a C-46 exhaust manifold ready to go back to work...tomorrow. That’s Dean. That’s talent. That’s work. And that’s pride. Dean’s work is art form. As we walked out of his shop area I heard him go back to pounding....and *singing*.

I’m just scratching the surface of the aviation maintenance work taking place here. All about, people were walking and talking and wielding wrenches in many locations under many different cowlings on many different airplanes. These people are the cogs in the big wheel that keeps these airplanes operating. I admired their work, one and all.

Okay, Buffalo Airways is the last operator of scheduled DC-3 passenger service but, make no mistake, freight is their bread-and-butter. By boat or by air, that’s how most people in these parts obtain their sustenance and the wares necessary for commerce. The freight office is where we met Kelly. She said, “They call me the Cargo Momma. I hate that name but whaddya gonna do?” She manages all the freight-- *lots* of it --that’s what she does. She said, “Couple weeks ago we hauled twenty-two dogs and a couple mushers. And we got to haul The Stanley Cup. *That* was a big deal.” Around her, everywhere, were stacks and stacks of pallets and boxes. Kelly sees to it that they all go where they’re supposed to go. She brushed her hand over her very short hair and said, “I shaved my head for the cancer thing.” The cancer thing? “Yeah, Arnie’s daughter has cancer. She had to shave her head so I shaved mine.” You know what they call that, right? Family. And Kelly is the poster child for it. She’s building a Harmon Rocket in her spare time.

It was a smidge after 4:00 PM. It was time to think about getting ready to fly on the last scheduled DC-3 service on Earth, the 5:00 PM departure from Yellowknife, going to Hay River.

In the small terminal room with the green chairs, people were milling about, some sitting and some standing by the ticket counter. There was small talk of jobs and families and some “hi’s” and “how are ya’s.” It was obvious that most of them knew or knew about each other. Audrey had told me that from one-third to one-half of the passengers are repeat customers. And Mikey told me, “DC-3 passengers are the most understanding passengers in the world.” I saw Canadian money being passed over the counter but I didn’t see any tickets or boarding passes being handed back. Instead, I saw names being written or checked-off on a handwritten passenger manifest. Baggage and carry-ons were being placed in the back of a van outside, to go to the airplane later.

Outside, rampies were loading freight, removing engine covers, and otherwise doing what has to be done to make the airplane ready. It was cold and windy. Inside, the ticket agent stepped from behind the ticket counter and asked, “Everybody ready to go?” With that, they all stood, stepped outside and walked beside the terminal building to the ramp to the airplane. The ticket agent, Audrey, grabbed a coffee jug and walked out with them. She and Graham then loaded the last of the bags. With that, Audrey became the Flight Attendant and Graham the co-pilot. Justin, the captain, was up in the cockpit. (Joe usually flies the flight but was weathered-out with freezing rain with another airplane at another location.) Passengers picked their seats and fastened their seat belts. With no APU running, the only sound is that of the passengers settling in. The magazine in the front of the magazine holder on the forward bulkhead is “Motor Trend.” Justin gives a twirl of two fingers to the rampies outside and orchestrates the right sequence of starter, prime, blade count, throttle and mixture and starts the #2 engine. (Starting a radial is like building a house: It has to be done in just the right sequence, by hand, by feel and by sound. Starting a turbine is push a button and move one lever. How pathetic is that?) Right then and there, you are transported back in time: the sound, the rumble, the vibration, the history, the legacy. The feeling of a time gone by but...blessedly...still very alive and well in Yellowknife today. Bags loaded and doors closed, Graham now walks up the fuselage, by the passengers, and slides into the right seat, his apprenticeship on track.

Justin and Graham commence the professional staccato that is an airline checklist. Challenge and response. Crisp. Complete. On the money. To the point. Switches positioned where they need to be. Justin starts the #1 engine. While waiting for the oil temperatures to warm, Graham glances out his window and says, “Man, I gotta clean those cowl flaps before Joe gets back.” How many times over the years has this scenario played out in DC-3 cockpits? Boggles the mind.

Temperatures ‘in the green,’ Justin adds a little power and the DC-3 eases out of its parking place and into scheduled service. Once again! Like it has for seventy years. How does it feel being a part of it? Surreal and good at the same time. The airplane in taxi softly rocks along, the radial engines loafing in comfortable idle, seemingly eager to reach the symphonic crescendo that is takeoff power.

We roll out onto the runway and the engines come to full life, like they always have before. They’re in low roar. It’s not noise; it’s sound, beautiful sound. I hear, “Forty-six inches!” The airplane lumbers, then the tail comes up. (How many airliners in scheduled service in the USA did that today?) Then the airplane gets light on its wheels. You don’t rotate-and-leap like a

stupid jetliner; in a DC-3 you *lift off*. Big difference! Positive rate, gear up, climb power setting, 120 knots, gentle turn out of traffic to on-course. *This* is flying as it was meant to be.

Enroute, a relaxed and rumbling peace envelopes you. Take it in. Absorb it. Appreciate it. The crew (not computers) tend to the engines. There is a Garmin 296 fastened to the top of the glare shield, a begrudging allowance of technology. I don't see the crew use it much. They know where they're going and how to get there. A left over data plate on a bulkhead says "C-47 42-2359." (And that's a little secret: Most of these DC-3's are C-47's, the big rear cargo doors being necessary in this freight hauling environment. No big deal.)

Cruise power is set at 28" and 2100 RPM. The airplane is loafing. You get the feeling it could fly forever...and it just might. It is one with the air. You are cocooned in nirvana. You don't ever want to have to land. I'm having forty-year old flashbacks. How can it be forty years ago since I last flew this airplane? Landing on the beach at P-Y Do during low tide in Korea. Landing on the grass at Cheju Do. Island hopping across the Pacific from Korea to Hawaii. All to the very same sound I was listening to now. How is it that some things you *never* forget?

Forty-five minutes to Hay River. Graham, the human auto-pilot, gets to fly the straight-and-level portion of the flight. The passengers? Most are asleep. Sleeping! This is the way it was and, with them, still is. The DC-3 to them is as matter of fact as the sun and the moon. It is, after all, their lifeline. They count on it and it delivers. Always has. So they sleep.

Justin radios Hay River operations, call sign "Buffalo 168," with an ETA, passenger and freight info. Shortly thereafter he enters the airport traffic pattern, flies it seamlessly while configuring the airplane, rolls out on final and touches down on the mains like a feather on new fallen snow, followed by the tailwheel. We then taxi to the terminal and shut down the engines. The round-motor music stops. Until tomorrow. Graham and Audrey become rampies and unload bags and freight while the passengers deplane. Then Graham and Audrey and the local rampies proceed to 'put the airplane to bed:' engine covers installed, engine heaters plugged in, and close all the doors. Next scheduled service? 7:30 AM tomorrow morning.

Justin sees Brady and me standing about, comes up and asks, "You guys need a ride?" We say, "Well, yeah. But we don't want to bother you." He says, "No bother. Let me get a van." He gets a van and drives us, across a green steel bridge, into town to our motel, the Ptarmigan Inn. (I think it's a bird; there was a picture of a bird on the motel door.) Justin then says, "I'll show you a place to eat." He walks us across the street and we all walk in and sit down. Hockey is on the TV. We order adult beverages and steaks. Justin knows everybody in the place. We fall easily into 'aviation conversation.' Justin's been at Buffalo for nine years. Is he a white shirt and necktie kinda guy? Not a chance. Remember the CL-215 I mentioned earlier? It's a high wing, twin radial engine, seaplane. Through a Buffalo contract, CL-215's were sold to Turkey. Justin was one of the pilots who ferried one there. They call the airplane "The Scooper." Why? Because it's designed to skim lakes, scooping up water, which it then drops on fires. Justin does that. I threw in a couple lies and new Sport Pilot Brady Lane even chimed into the conversation. He once had a loose or cracked canopy, something like that. That's aviation, right? Whether you've been flying one year or forty, you have a story for the tavern.

Justin excused himself. We thought he had to leave, after all, he had a DC-3 schedule to fly in the morning. But here's what he did: He went to the cashier and bought our dinners! Now, name me one passenger today, in the entire United States of America, whose scheduled airline captain drove them to their motel, walked with them to dinner and then *bought* their dinners. Were Brady and I in good company? Yeah, of the very best kind. Obviously a graduate of the Buffalo Boot Camp.

We were up early the next morning. I notice there was a window air conditioner in my room. Didn't need it. It was -8C outside. Graham picked us up in a van full of boxes as the sun was just peeking over on another DC-3 day. Off to the Hay River airport we went, crossing the green steel bridge again. On the visor of the van, in felt tip pen, several phone numbers were written. Handy. I asked Graham if Hay River had an ILS. He said, "Yeah, but it's out of service right now. They take it out when the ice comes up."

At the terminal, Graham and Audrey and the other rampies sprung into action getting the airplane ready: removing engine covers, sweeping frost, loading freight, and warming the passenger cabin. A little later, Justin came out, started engines, taxied off to do the run-up, then taxied back and parked in front of the terminal.

In the terminal, I met Kathy, Joe's daughter. I noticed she knew most of the passengers by name. I told her I saw her Volkswagen. She said, "Yeah, I gotta get that back one of these days. My family just outgrew it." Passengers came up and dropped off their bags and carry-ons: suitcases, a couple tires, boxes with the word "baggage" written on them and some sacks of something. Kathy said, "I actually got a kitchen sink once, so I can't say 'I've hauled everything but the kitchen sink,' anymore." Audrey sees a passenger she knows standing in another line and chides him for flying on "them." He mumbles something about a schedule change and then hangs his head apologetically.

Kathy mentions that they have a family cabin. I asked, "Can you get Joe to go there?" She knew what I was saying. She said, "He's a hard guy to get to relax. What happens is, mom goes, calls him, and says, 'If you want to get fed, I'm at the cabin.'" The kids love their father. They tell jokes about him but they do love him.

The night before, a customer in Hay River called and said they had ten-thousand pounds of freight they needed to ship. Mikey says, "Fine. We'll fly a C-46 down early morning to pick it up." I watch that C-46 land. On the ramp now, a DC-3 and a C-46. Time warp. Until a DH-8 taxied up, making turbine sounds. Arrrrgh! And the pilots are wearing white shirts with neckties! Good grief! If I were Mayor of Hay River, I think I'd have to outlaw turbine engines and neckties. But soon the turbine engine intruder left and all was right, once again, with the world. Except the freight customer showed up with *fourteen* thousand pounds of cargo.

Now is when the Buffalo Airways 'can-do' camaraderie and spirit leapt into action. Load what freight you can on the C-46, then, let's see, seats for twenty eight are installed in the DC-3. Have twenty-two passengers in the terminal. Okay, pull out three of the seats (double seats) and use that space for the overflow freight. Ready, set, go!

Audrey comes out of the airplane with one of the seats over her shoulder. Graham gets a forklift and drives the extra freight from the C-46 to the DC-3. Then Graham, Audrey, Justin, Kathy, the crew from the C-46 and the other rampies *all* take part in loading boxes, daisy-chain style, into the DC-3. And, just like that, problem solved. Weight and balance done, load the passengers and go.....*maybe* five minutes late. (Don't tell Joe.) You get the feeling the DC-3 is sitting there saying, 'Bring it on. This is what I do.' And you love what you just saw: teamwork without boundaries. Passengers loaded, I walk up the fuselage by many strapped-in boxes, several of them advertising 'Harlan's Popcorn,' (comfort food for the cold, eh?) and to my seat. I'd just witnessed another efficient day in paradise. The takeoff, north to Yellowknife, like yesterday, was magic, set to the background music of Pratt and Whitney surround-sound. Except this time, skipping along the ice below was the shadow of a DC-3, us, a gift from the morning sun.

At that moment I had to wonder, when they drew the first line on the drawing board for the DC-3 some seventy-six years ago, did they *know* what they were creating? How could they? Their design has transcended time.

I'm in a philosophical mood this morning, being aloft in the DC-3. How can an airplane be old if it's still doing today what it was designed to do seventy-five years ago? What if everything in life was as good and honest and strong as the DC-3? How long will it fly? This wing has carried the world on its back. Think of the world this wing has seen. Who set the rivet I'm looking at? When? How many times has that engine cowling been on and off? How many different engines have been on that mount? How many people have heard the Pratt and Whitney roar? In a jet I ask, 'How much longer?' In a DC-3 I don't want to land. Think of paratroopers being in this fuselage, with helmet, rifle and parachute, headed for Normandy. They heard the sound you're hearing....but their sound was muted by fear. They endured that fear so others might be free. The DC-3 transports you to a time you want to be in, want to stay in. The passengers are asleep again, ho-hum in the arms of their faithful friend. *Everybody's* faithful friend.

A power reduction jolts my random thoughts. Justin is beginning the descent for Yellowknife. Oh yeah, the stupid ground. Too soon, we land softly once again and amble to parking. Once again, Graham and Audrey and the other rampies spring into action, doing what they do. But it's not a sad moment because at 5:00 PM this afternoon, this airplane will meet the schedule once again. And again the next day. And the one after that. And I'm going to leave it at that. I simply do not want to think otherwise.

I see Graham walking across the ramp. I catch up to him and say, "Ya know, wherever you go in life, whatever you do, you will never forget about what you're doing right now." He says, "I know."

(Note to Graham's parents: You can very proud of your son.)

Oh, I know, I'm told that nothing is forever. I suppose I have to begrudgingly accept that fact. But, ya know, you get the feeling that the DC-3, combined with the Buffalo spirit, is darn near forever. So I'm going to narrow it down to this: If I had to bet on which was going to last longer, the pyramids or the DC-3, my money's on the DC-3. An avgas shortage may ground it,

bureaucracy may ground it, but gravity will not. And gravity's already grounded the pyramids. How's that for twisted aviation logic? Works for me.

A few loose ends: I didn't get to meet Buffalo Joe. He was weathered-out during my stay. So I'll just have to go with the legend. And I'm comfortable with that. I've met his family and I've seen what he built....and both are good. I imagine him good, too.

How long can Buffalo Joe fly? In Canada, since Buffalo Airways is a privately owned company, Buffalo Joe can fly as long as he can maintain a license and a medical. Longer than the pyramids, in other words.

You all know of "The Last Time," the mass flyover of forty DC-3's scheduled for AirVenture, right? Mikey had this to say about that: "We did that at EXPO '86 in Vancouver, for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the DC-3. Got twenty-three to show up. They said then that it was 'the last time.'" Funny, I had to go to Yellowknife to get that perspective. Maybe the last time isn't the last time. In other words, don't count the DC-3 out, just yet. Maybe never.

Is Buffalo Airways coming to Oshkosh this year? Don't know. Maybe. They're *talking* about it. If they do, they'll be unmistakably green. They'll be bemused by all the attention. (I've told them: "Have no fear. It's *airplane* people.") And amazed by all the hats and t-shirts they'll sell. And they'll be as real as the day is long. And Buffalo Joe, if he comes, will be thinking about getting back to work. But the schedule will still be flown at home. Brady and I owe Justin a dinner. And, please, thank them for coming and wish them well: they are the last of something very special. But don't count them out. Meet them and you will know: their spirit is forever. As is that of their airplane, the DC-3.