

Virtual Fly Boys

A shared passion sparks a neighbourly flypast

by John Thomson, Vancouver

Just taking 'er out to the runway," shouts Gibsons, B.C., resident Mike Hendricks. "Yeah, okay. Wind at ten knots," comes the reply from his flying buddy, Sam Jay. It's hard to make out Sam's instructions over the radio static and the airplane noise.

I'm sitting in the passenger seat of Mike's Cessna as he prepares for takeoff. Except it's not a real airplane and it's not a real cockpit, but rather a home-built replica outfitted with \$5,000 worth of computer gear and aircraft parts. The windscreen is a 46-inch LED television monitor that offers the pilot's point of view, as well as exterior elevations. The graphics are outstanding.

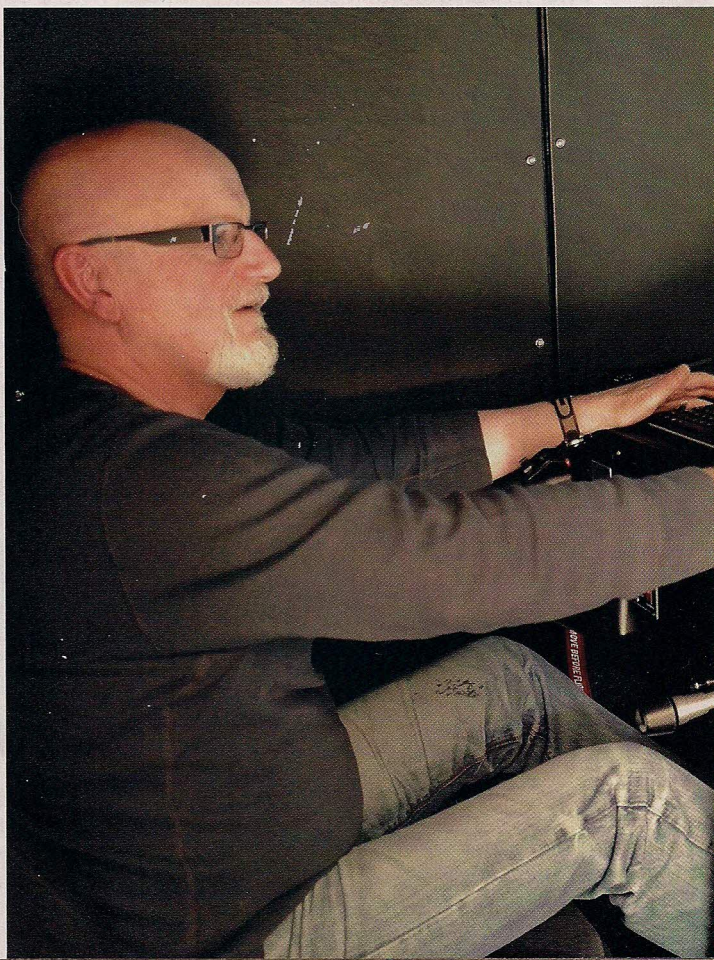
Mike calls his cockpit a simulator. His wife Susan calls it a "stimulator."

"It eats up a lot of his time, indeed," she says.

"Aviation has always interested me," says the retired heavy-equipment operator. At first Mike thought he'd just get a computer program for his desktop and let it go at that, but when he heard his neighbour Sam had built a simulator and he went over to check it out, well, things just escalated from there.

"I never really knew Mike before this project started, but we've become really good friends," Sam says. Having built his own simulator, Sam helped Mike build his. Today, the families share dinners and outings, and when he isn't flying solo, Sam's on the phone to his neighbour.

"He'll go downstairs; I'll go downstairs," says Mike. "We've got walkie-talkies because we live



across the street from each other and we'll figure out our route. We can fly two airplanes at the same time and they'll both show up on the screen."

The duo has more than 100 aircraft and 200 flight plans from which to choose. Professional modellers have travelled these routes themselves, and have digitally replicated them in high-end programs that Mike and Sam have purchased.

Today, we're flying from a tiny virtual airfield in Seldovia, Alaska, to nearby Port Graham. To add to the realism, Sam has programmed in a weather overlay—low-hanging clouds that will hamper visibility.

"We like to play reality," Sam says. "You could learn to fly on this thing," which of course is the whole point.

Big toys for big boys? Sure, but Mike is unapologetic. The simulator is just one of his many retirement hobbies. Besides, he says; it keeps him out of Susan's hair.

Mike touches down at Port Graham, simulated of course, and taxis onto the apron.

I'm tempted to scoff at the flypast. How difficult can it be? Mike programs a virtual run, in and out

of Nanaimo Airport, and hands me the controls. I take off, ease back on the throttle once airborne and ratchet the trim wheel to keep the plane's nose in the air. After a couple of turns around the field, I come in for the landing, but I'm losing altitude, about to clip the virtual high-tension wires I can see below me on the television screen.

"You'll put Nanaimo out of power," Mike laughs. I come in too low and too fast.

"Easy, easy. Pull back. Oh, no." The screen momentarily turns black; when it refreshes, I'm presented with an exterior view of the aircraft, its crumpled nose buried in the grass.

"Sorry I wrecked your plane, Mike," I say.

"No worries, there are plenty more where that came from," he laughs.

I exit the cockpit, thankful it was just a simulation. Mike says he and Sam are going crabbing next summer. Me? I'm going to read up on aerodynamics. ■

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Mike (from left) stepping into his homemade cockpit simulator; flying solo and operating the controls of his "Cessna."