



Aerial director and pilot JASON TOTH tweaks the camera on a drone prior to take off.

Drones Strike BC

DOES NEW TECH MEAN GOODBYE DOLLY?

WRITTEN BY JOHN THOMSON

Drones, or unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV's), are a boon and a bane as far as Jason Toth and his business partner Derek Heidt are concerned. Toth and Heidt are the principals behind Revered Cinema (RVRD), a BC company that rents out custom-made drones, with cameras and crew, to local and visiting production companies. They shoot aerials for a living and don't like the bad press drones have been attracting.

"Everybody wants to fly a camera," says Toth "but with the explosion of drone popularity, you have tens of thousands of people operating with no rules or regulations or disregarding the laws that are in place. It's like the Wild West in some parts of the world and it's extremely dangerous in the wrong hands."

There are now hundreds of flying cameras across Canada. They do everything from surveying right-of-ways, to searching for lost hikers, and photographing real estate. Their prime function is gathering information. Film and TV work is a close second. Stories about drones flying too close to airplanes or flying through fireworks don't help matters and this kind of behavior, he feels, tarnishes the industry. And in the TV and film industry, drones are now a critical part of the business.

"We just treat them like a dolly or crane," says Toth. Except, of course, a dolly or crane can't go where a drone can. Earlier this year, RVRD was contracted to service the Disney musical *Descendants*. The set-up was at the bottom of North Vancouver's Lynn Canyon and wrestling a crane over rough terrain would have been physically impossible.

"It started out as a tight shot on the actress and we just travelled up to about 100 to 150 feet and back about 150 feet," says Toth. "As it pulls up you see the expanse of Lynn Canyon with the waterfall and a beautiful pool."

And this is while the actress is lip-syncing to playback.

In another shoot, *The Age of Adaline*, with Blake Lively and Harrison Ford, Toth's drone cruised two feet off the ground, emulating a traditional dolly shot, before rising to a height of 125 feet.

"This is where drones truly rule," says Toth, "They're not limited to the ground. The shot would have been impossible to capture any other way."

RVRD's drones can fly up to a maximum of 150 feet at 40 mph for about 15 minutes of flight time. Producers still need helicopters for those windy, high speed sweeps through mountain passes. Drones don't replace helicopters; they're just another tool in the toolbox enabling the camera to get closer to the action without worrying about rotor downwash and other

safety concerns. And safety is everybody's primary concern.

Toth knows all about safety. Originally from Newport Beach, California, he used to be a professional snowboarder, risking life and limb in those Warren Miller extreme sports films. His business partner, Derek Heidt, was also a snowboarder.

"Better than me," Toth says of the Calgary native who competed for Canada in the 1998 winter Olympics. Although hired as a performer, Toth fell in love with the film-making process and started shooting stills and videos on his own.

Toth attended Vancouver Film School and got a job as a compositor with Rainmaker. It was a job in the industry, but it wasn't camera work, so after awhile he left Vancouver to snowboard in Alaska before the lure of production brought him back to BC.

He and Heidt established Reverend Cinema in 2012 and now offer two fully-equipped crews and nine custom-made drones that can travel anywhere in Canada. The inventory includes Red and Blackmagic cameras, Freesly MOVI gimbals and Tomahawk HD transmitters. Four of the drones can lift Reds for high-end commercials and feature work.

Mike Dinsmore is a freelance Vancouver DP with *Yukon Gold*, *Ice Pilots* and *Highway Thru Hell* among his credits. He would like to do what Jason Toth does, but first he's cutting his teeth on documentaries and reality television. He researched drones on the net. It piqued his interest and he bought the most expensive machine he could find.

"With no RC [radio control] knowledge whatsoever," Dinsmore adds. "It's a steep learning curve. I got dejected and then quickly real-



Flying the Reverend Cinema Drone.

ized what I had to do, which was to assemble a professional team."

Assembling that team took two years of planning and preparation as he learned the mechanics of the business while continuing his DP work. He taught himself the intricacies of radio control and hired two

small plane pilots accustomed to flying Cessnas and Piper Cubs as part of his team.

"My philosophy is to hire over-qualified individuals to pilot," says Dinsmore.

His inventory includes four custom designed drones and four cus-

tom-designed MOVI gimbal clones. He's lined up some jobs, applied for a Transport Canada SFOC permit, and is ready to add his company, Halo Cine, to the mix. "Over the next few years my company will be making a complete transition into drone work," Dinsmore says.

Vancouver's IATSE Local 669 represents 26 BC drone operators - pilots, camera operators and assistants or spotters. The pay scale is the same as equivalent positions in the non-drone world. The union is very concerned about safety and is working with Transport Canada to develop a set of safe site practices specific to drones, such as limiting the number of non-essential production people allowed on set or increasing the spectrum, or safety area, the higher up you go.

"At the end of the day we want people to understand the difference between shooting real estate and shooting a movie. Just having the UAV experience doesn't quite get you there," says IATSE Business Representative Marcus Handman. "It's a piece of equipment in the air and it can be dangerous. We don't want anybody hurt."

Transport Canada acknowledges that it's working with IATSE and other movie stakeholders to carve out industry specific guidelines, but any overall regulations that affect UAVs will impact production companies as well.

For industry professionals like Mike Dinsmore about to enter the marketplace and trained to do it properly, regulation is the price of doing business. Drones are now used in commercials, industrials, documentaries, episodic television, reality and features. The demand is there and it's only going to get busier. ■

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