

Life isn't just about attitude, but altitude too

If I wasn't doing this, I sure would've liked to have tried doing that.

Flying, that is.

And but for a sub-standard set of eyes, maybe I would have.

As you saw in the March 2006 edition of "WNY Life", I had the pleasure of meeting Dan Maloney, a WNY-based ex-fighter jock who now cruises lumbering Northwest Airlines 747s 42,000 feet over the Pacific Ocean to Hawaii and Japan for his day job.



OFF BEAT

MARK WEBSTER

Part of my profile of him included a spin around the skies of WNY in his Akron-based private plane.

I'd almost forgotten just how much I love it.

Once upon a time, I was an airborne traffic reporter for local radio stations. My office was the back of a Cessna, perpetually flying an infinity symbol pattern over the Skyway, the Kensington, the Youngmann and every other main commuter route, mornings and afternoons. And while part of that was admittedly as boring as Hades — because, as any New Yorker or Washingtonian will tell you, there really IS no traffic around here — flying for a living was sort of a fantasy come true for me.

Like Captain Maloney, I was one of those little kids who saw a plane buzz overhead and couldn't take my eyes off of it until it was gone from sight. He and I both knew at an early age what we wanted to do when we grew up.

And now he's at the controls of a 747 headed for exotic places...while I pilot a Honda minivan, landing in the parking lot



Captain Mark at the controls during a recent flight with WNY-based pilot Dan Maloney.

of the nearest Home Depot, ballgame or dance class.

I guess the one little boy knew what he wanted to do...while the other little boy knew exactly what he was going to do.

Like him, I grew up in an aviation-rich environment. My dad, Jay Webster, worked all his life for Link Simulation and its successors, building the airplane simulators that helped the Dan Maloneys of the world learn their lessons without crashing in the process. Dad's last big project before he reluctantly retired was the simulator for the B-2 Stealth Bomber. I have an autographed poster of the B-2 "Spirit of New York", given to him by the grateful pilot.

But as inevitably happens, childhood dreams must yield the right of way to grown-up realities. I found out that, in my circumstances, it was prohibitively expensive to learn to fly via the college route. That left the military, which I was willing to do, but in those pre-laser surgery days, my sub-par visual acuity left me on the outside, looking in, squinting at what might have been.

While I was a traffic reporter, I managed to squeeze in about a dozen hours of flying lessons out at Buffalo Airfield, where, sadly, I hear that they no longer even offer flight instruction.

But at that point, about a third of the way toward my first solo, reality once again

sucked the air from beneath my wings, and the cost got too much for a young dad working a Buffalo radio job to bear.

And so my logbook - and my piloting dreams - began to collect what would be a thick coat of dust.

Fast forward to February of this year.

When I found out I would be flying in Dan's home-built RV-4, which I'd describe as a Porsche with wings - I gulped a Dramamine, blew the dust off of my old logbook, and away we went.

Not long into our flight, just as I'd been not-so-secretly hoping, he asked if I'd like to take the controls for a while.

Does Marv Levy like football?

So there I was, 3,000 feet above it all, Captain Mark, living anew — if only for a few fleeting moments — the dream that had been grounded on a closet shelf for too many years.

Every steep banked turn delivered that familiar, wondrous tummy tickle - like a kid on his first real rollercoaster ride.

As my five-year-old, Noah, is wont to say these days — "sweeeet!"

It was, of course, over much too soon.

Dan graciously invited me to come back out sometime, and I think he meant it. Pilots love to show off their planes — especially to a truly appreciative audience. And that I am.

I hope he meant, anyway, because that's one invitation I'd like to RSVP to.

And who knows? Maybe I'll hit the lottery and be able to swing the time and money I'd need to finally get that elusive license to fly.

Maybe not.

But take it to the bank that any chance I get to take a ride like that again, I'm there.

Some say that life is all about attitude... but for some of us, it's also about altitude.

Get your own copy!

BUFFALO Business First
Western New York's Business Newspaper

854-5822 • buffalo.bizjournals.com