

North loses expert pilot

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Northern News Services

Yellowknife (Dec 19/03) - The North lost one of its most distinguished pilots Monday when 48-year-old Jim Smith suffered a fatal heart attack at work.

The husband to Celine Pelletier and father of four was driving a passenger car on the airport tarmac when he collapsed behind the wheel. The vehicle then crashed into two small planes.

The news of Smith's death came as shock to co-workers at Buffalo Airways, where he had been chief pilot for 14 years and was certified on half a dozen different aircraft. "I expected Smitty to live to 100," said Joe McBryan, owner of Buffalo Airways. McBryan described Smith, as an excellent pilot and one of the best instructors the North has ever seen.

"He was always encouraging and people gravitated towards him. He would take young pilots under his wing," McBryan said. Smith taught more than 200 pilots during his time at Buffalo, McBryan said, including several who have ventured to such far away places the Pacific Rim and Antarctica.

"Go anywhere in the world and you'll find pilots who were trained by Jim," McBryan said. "His reputation was known around the world."

Smith began working for Buffalo in 1989, following a move from Winnipeg, MB. He remained Buffalo's chief pilot for 14 years and was responsible for maintaining safety standards at the airline along with training new pilots.

"In all the time he was here, he never looked at it like a job," said McBryan. "He loved to fly and he passed that passion onto his students. I don't know what I'm going to do without him."

Smith and Pelletier have four children, aged seven to 19. One of their sons is currently enrolled in Buffalo's aircraft maintenance engineering program. A celebration of Smith's life will be held on Saturday at the Adlair Aviation hangar.