

BruceAir, LLC

By: MSA Member Bruce Williams

Lots of 'Softies turn or return to hobbies in their LAM (Life After Microsoft). I got the process backward-for about half of my 15-year career at Microsoft, I converted my principle recreation into my job. And so for me, "retirement" is truly a reshuffling of priorities. This year, during my first post-MSFT summer, I've been doing more of what I've done throughout my adult life-flying airplanes, teaching others to fly, and as often as the weather permits, looking at the world from odd angles-inverted; straight-up; straight-down; and, as rapidly as possible, every other angle in quick succession.

I was a pilot long before I joined Microsoft in 1988. My father flew airplanes in the Air Force, so I grew up to the sound of aircraft engines and the smell of fuel lingering in the air. Having scrutinized the operating manuals and checklists stacked by my father's chair, I probably knew more about the emergency procedures for the Douglas C-54 than any fifth-grader on the planet. By the time I left high school, I had a private pilot license, and as soon as time and money allowed, I earned instrument and multiengine ratings and added commercial pilot and flight instructor certificates to my wallet.

But I didn't pursue a full-time career in aviation. I had a degree in English literature, after all, and the airlines weren't hiring in the late 1970s. So I turned to journalism. Then, after 10 years of writing and editing newspapers, magazines, and newsletters, and having taught myself the minutiae of Word for DOS, I moved on to technical editing and writing at Microsoft.

All that time I was flying, I'd edited an aviation newspaper for a couple of years in the mid-1980s, and I'd taken the controls of almost every common type of light general aviation aircraft-and a few unusual models as well-before I signed on to edit the

Printer Handbook for Word version 5.0. (In those days, Microsoft published a separate perfect-bound manual just to describe the capabilities of the drivers included with Word for hundreds of dot-matrix, daisy-wheel, and new-fangled laser printers, not all of which were capable of producing more than one font-to say nothing of bold, italic, and underlining.)

But from my first day at Microsoft I kept an eye on little product called Microsoft Flight Simulator, which at that time the company published, but did not develop. A Flight Simulator team meeting could take place in one office. After a diversion to the multimedia group, which pro-

duced a series of CD-ROM titles in the early and mid-1990s (mind you, this was in the last century, before the Web went mainstream), including "World of Flight," a title I persuaded the division to let me produce, edit, and hustle to publication. I found my way to the now larger Flight Simulator team, which was wrapping up the last DOS-based version of the simulation and preparing to start work on the first edition for Windows 95.

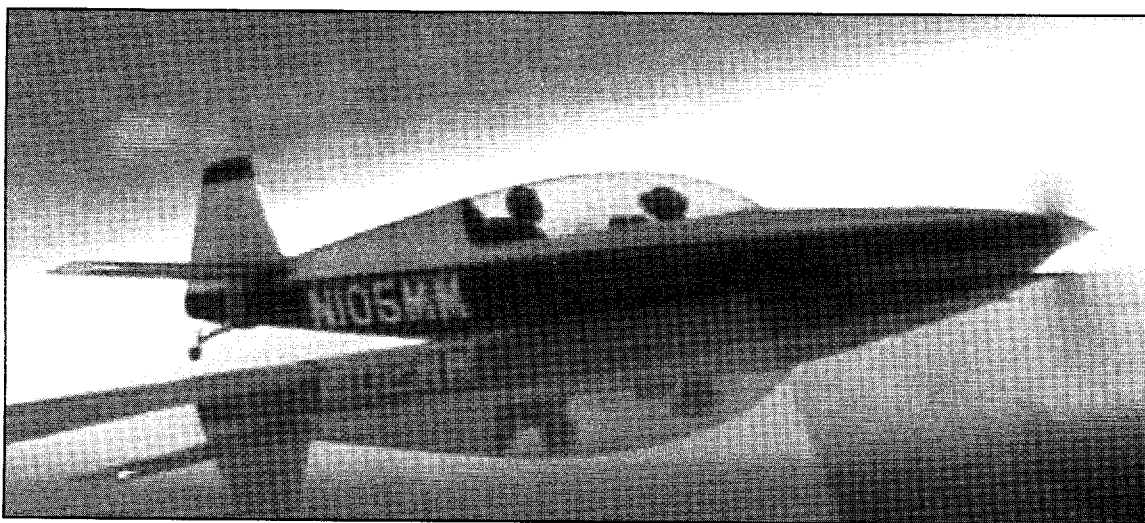
ducers and flying airplanes, all in the pursuit of verisimilitude. But after working on some seven versions of Flight Simulator as a technical editor, product planner, and business development manager, and enduring nonstop travel (usually confined to seat 13B, not the captain's chair) to promote Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004: A Century of Flight (which, despite marketing's typical trouble with annoying details like dates, shipped in 2003 in part to celebrate the centennial of the first powered airplane flights by the Wright brothers in December 1903), I was ready to invert my schedule and spend more time on extra-curricular activities and less

on budgets, status meetings, and contracts.

I'd already set up BruceAir, LLC ("Every seat's a window seat on BruceAir") to accommodate my forays into magazine writing, airplane ferrying, and part-time flight instructing, so when I ejected from Microsoft at the end of February 2004, I slid right back into the pilot's seat. I had also acquired an Extra 300L high-performance aerobatic airplane (by the way, it's blue-not red-and I had, after all, hit 40 sometime during my Microsoft years). Thanks to the tutelage of several top aerobatic pilots and instructors, I'd learned to loop, roll, and Lomcevak (a Czech term for a tumbling, twisting maneuver, not unlike those seen during vault-

ing events at gymnastics competitions). I'd also discovered that a sizeable sample of the normal adult population thinks it would be fun to loop, roll, and Lomcevak, too (about 99 percent of them still hold that opinion after we land). So today I give aerobatic rides (complete with a video shot with the Extra's on-board camera system). I also show other pilots how to return to upright from unusual attitudes and how to avoid spins-and, if entered unintentionally, how to recover from them.

This I do when the sun shines. When more typical Seattle weather prevails, I teach pilots how to fly normal airplanes, like Cessnas



and Beechcraft Bonanzas at Galvin Flying Services at Boeing Field. I also sadistically throw switches in a simulator to create engine and instrument "failures" for pilots learning to fly in the clouds. When I can't fly, I apply some of the skills I learned at Microsoft to create training materials, write a column about aviation technology for that aviation newspaper that I edited long ago, and consult on interesting projects.

And so, like a well-flown loop, I have, so to speak, ended up back where I began, on speed, on altitude, and on heading, but having hollered "whoo-hoo" a lot along the way.

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