

A man of three trades

A hoist operator, custom framer and musician, Michael Bruhn isn't afraid of a little risk

By DWIGHT CASWELL

Aircraft mechanic, art framer and musician. These three pursuits meet in one person, Michael Bruhn — and did I mention that he's the one who operates the hoist that lowers Columbia River bar pilots from the helicopter to a ship pitching its way across the bar?

Bruhn is a man who seeks new challenges.

It all began over three decades ago. Bruhn was fresh out of high school and enrolling in Lane Community College in Eugene. He looked at the lines leading to tables for various programs and, having no idea what he wanted to do in life, he chose the shortest line. That's how he became an aircraft mechanic, and he's pursued that career in Louisiana, the San Francisco Bay area, Puget Sound and Portland. It was while working for Alaska Airlines in Portland that Bruhn and his wife, Mary Ann, moved to Astoria. Then in 2004 the part-time position for the bar pilots became available, and Bruhn began maintaining the helicopter and — the exciting part of the job — operating the hoist.

Bruhn had spent almost all of his adult life maintaining aircraft, but he had never been part of a flight crew; he became a hoist operator in Astoria. "Being in a helicopter at 2 a.m. in a storm can be dicey," he says. "When the ship is rolling and the cranes are coming your way, it used to scare the heck out of me. Now, after 10,000 ships, it doesn't intimidate me like it did at first."



PHOTO BY DWIGHT CASWELL

Mike Bruhn operates Astoria's Best Frame Shop, located inside Dots 'N Doodles Art Supplies.

He worried most about the possibility of hurting someone, but over the years he learned, "what to avoid, and the best plan of attack to mitigate danger. You can't be too cautious, and you get to know your strengths and weaknesses." Bruhn also says, "If it's too rough, if you can't do it safely, you can call it off. It's not like the Coast Guard search and rescue."

Bruhn has always had a wide range of interests, and when the opportunity came to take over the framing shop located in the back of Dots 'N Doodles Art Supplies in Astoria, he jumped at it, and audaciously named his new store Astoria's Best Frame Shop.

Wait a minute, you're saying to yourself, never

been a framer and now he calls himself the best?

As it turns out, Bruhn has a background that prepared him for framing. His sister and brother-in-law were successful framers, and he was an artist himself, a woodworker who specialized in custom boxes, primarily jewelry boxes. "Framing is a natural extension of my woodworking," he says.

You may ask how, doing these two jobs, he manages to sleep. He's arranged things pretty well: He flies with the bar pilots one week out of every month, and for that week the frame shop is opened fewer hours.

Of course, he still has to make time to make music, mostly with the banjo, although he's been known to play the mandolin and

guitar as well. With a father as a music teacher, Bruhn's background in music goes back to childhood. His work schedule makes playing in a band impossible, but you may have caught him at a contra dance or providing ambiance with Rob Stevens at T. Paul's Supper Club. When you listen to KMUN's "Talk of the Town," you hear Bruhn's music; he composed and plays the theme.

"I play primarily for my own enjoyment," he says, but he's good enough to sit in with professional musicians and, "fake my way through and make it sound okay."

Mike Bruhn's life has taught him not to be averse to risk. "I've lost my fear of the unknown," he says, "I'm not intimidated any more."



PHOTO BY DWIGHT CASWELL

Mike Bruhn sits at the hoist controls inside the Columbia River Bar Pilot helicopter.



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Mike Bruhn, who operates the hoist that lowers Columbia River bar pilots from the helicopter onto ships so they can navigate them across the river bar, works on his preflight checklist.