

Retired police chief old pro at drone videos

October 29, 2019



After Bob West retired from a 30-year career in law enforcement, including six as Crescent City's chief of police, he wondered what to do with that free time on his hands.

"I was goofing around, and noticed drones were just coming out. I thought it would be fun to fly around, so I started out with a little cheapy, \$79 job. They were terrible," West said.

He upgraded to a \$200 model and thought that was pretty cool — it had a camera but no built-in GPS, and was pretty tough to fly.

"Then I ran into Mike Cuthbertson (of Gasquet) and Bern Zorn. They had some really fancy ones. I watched them fly theirs and thought, I gotta get me one of those," West said.

Now 71, West has translated an interest in the growing trend of piloting drones, to taking photos and videos to help sell property for real estate agents from Crescent City to Gold Beach. But to legally get aerial footage, he had to become an actual licensed commercial pilot.

“So I had to go get a license to fly, become an (Federal Aviation Administration)-certified pilot,” West said. “It was a crazy test. I had to go to Roseburg to take the exam. It was the closest place.

“They test you on weather patterns, airports, air space safety, just a bunch of different things. It was almost like testing to be an airplane pilot.”

Pursuing a new career in piloting drones somewhat mirrors his entry into law enforcement. West said he was taking a civics class at Allan Hancock College in Santa Maria, California. One of the course’s requirements was to participate in a ride-along with the local police department.

During his ride, there was an armed robbery in progress and the officers chased down a stolen car. “I was just blown away. I thought it was kind of exciting,” West recalled.

“So I went down there a couple more times on my own, to goof around and ride along.” After chatting with a couple of the officers, they talked West, an Air Force veteran of the Vietnam war, into becoming a reserve police officer.

When he was just about to graduate with a degree in accounting and business administration, he received a call from the police department letting him know they had an opening for a full-time officer.

“I told my wife, ‘You know, I think I’ll take this police job. It’s just part-time until I can find a real job.’ Thirty years later, I retire as a cop,” West said.

Once Cuthbertson peaked his interest in flying higher-end drones, West is currently on his fifth model — a DGI Phantom 4 Professional. “You get addicted to them. They’re just fun to fly,” he said.

After getting his license, West said, he has since worked with just about every real estate agency in town. “Just about every time I drive through town, I can look, point and say, ‘I flew that place, and flew that place...’”

The production is fairly simple. He takes photos and two- to three-minute videos, edits in some background music, fades in and out of scene transitions, and posts the finished product on YouTube for the agent.

His videos can be found by searching “Bob West Crescent City” on YouTube.

“I’ve had several agents tell me their clients saw the video and bought the property from just watching the video,” West said.

He added he also gets the occasional request to fly friends’ houses just for the heck of it. “I did my house one time, from 300 feet straight up, just to see what it looked like, posted on Facebook and asked, ‘Ever wonder what your house looked like from 300 feet up?’ Several people got a hold of me and said, ‘Hey, come down and do that for me.’”

He’s also flown over Crescent City for the Downtown Diva’s “It’s First Friday” and the 2019 “Sea Cruise” Show and Shine events.

And there were offers to fly for people who thought their neighbors were growing marijuana, and for a band that wanted him to film a music video.

“But that was right next to the airport. They wouldn’t even let me start my motors up,” West said.

That’s where the limitations kick in when you have a commercial license. West said you can still get permission to fly, but he’s not supposed to fly near the airport, the Pelican Bay State Prison, schools and similar locations.

“Usually, I just let the airport know that I’m going to fly. I don’t need permission. Usually, they ... let pilots know that I’m in air (so) to keep watch,” he said.

“We’re only allowed to fly at 400 feet, so I’m pretty low compared to aircraft. Whenever there’s a plane or helicopter in the air, I get out of their space.”

West said having the drone technology would have been a boon to his days in law enforcement. “It’s amazing. A lot of agencies are using them now to track people, look for stolen vehicles.

“The technology is cool, some with infrared. Some take two to fly - one flies the drone, the other operates the camera,” he said.

As successful as he’s been flying commercially, West said he also enjoys flying just as a hobby. “It’s a lot more relaxing, less stress. I can do whatever I want to do. Flying commercially, you’re stuck in this little box, taking certain pictures they want, things like that. It’s more fun to just take off and fly,” he said.

West said he often flies with Cuthbertson. “Mike’s more a mountain and rivers guy, and I’m more a coastal guy. But Mike’s a character. I just really like that guy. He’s a nice guy to be around, he’s fun to fly with.

“But I’ll never forgive him for getting me involved in this. It’s all his fault,” West joked.