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## MetLife blimp captain at John Deere Classic finds peace in the open skies

Matt Dahlseid mdahlseid@qctimes.com Aug 14, 2016

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MetLife Snoopy Two captain Allan Judd points out a landmark while gliding above the Mississippi River on Sunday prior to taking the blimp to TPC Deere Run to help provide aerial coverage of the John Deere Classic.

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When Allan Judd looks at the world below from his floating perch high in the sky, an infinite stream of questions flows through the longtime blimp captain's mind.

Spending John Deere Classic week 1,000 to 2,000 feet above the Quad-Cities piloting the MetLife Snoopy Two airship, Judd figured out some of those questions, such as how large barges pass through Lock and Dam 15 at Arsenal Island on their way up or down the Mississippi River.

Some questions Judd will never get the answer to, like when he wonders where the driver of that white van on River Drive is coming from and who will be there to greet him/her upon arriving home.

"I look at life from a third dimension, try to figure out what people are doing with their lives," said the 63-year-old Judd.

A world traveler who has captained various airships since 1984, Judd's home has become mostly a mix of hotel rooms and the 8-foot by 5-foot gondola that he occupies beneath the 128-foot Snoopy Two blimp's inflated balloon, called an envelope. The father of four's extended family is the dozen or so people who travel with the blimp as it crisscrosses the country to various PGA Tour events and high-profile football games 50 weeks out of the year.

It's not a lifestyle for everyone, but Judd says he never gets tired of the job he's had for more than half his life.



MetLife Snoopy Two blimp captain Allan Judd has been piloting blimps since 1984.

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## Born to soar

Judd doesn't give a straight answer when asked where he's from. He can't, really.

He was born in Geneva, Switzerland, to a French mother and a father from Kansas who was a TWA captain. His family moved to the United States when he was 12 and he's lived all over the country and the world, including Australia. He makes his current home in Virginia, though he's only able to be there about four weeks a year.

"When people ask me where I'm from, I like to say I'm from earth," Judd says.

Judd first learned to fly an aircraft at age 16 in Trenton, New Jersey. He grew up around boats and planes and was fascinated with how the planet works. He studied geology at Nevada and later got a degree in oceanography.

After college, Judd relearned to fly and was a flight instructor for 3 ½ years. He first stepped on an airship in 1984 and learned to pilot blimps over the next two years. He's been doing it ever since.

It's a rare job. There are two MetLife blimps among six total blimps that occupy the skies in the U.S. and MetLife also has a Snoopy blimp in Japan. Judd is quick to note that there are more astronauts on the planet than licensed blimp pilots.

When his "anti-gravity machine" is illuminated at night, Judd says people three-plus miles away sometimes think his airship is a UFO.

Judd likes to think of his blimp more like an upside-down submarine. A submarine displaces water, while a blimp displaces air — two tons in the case of the Snoopy Two, which holds 69,000 cubic feet of helium in its envelope.

"It's like I'm out on the ocean all day," Judd says.





The MetLife Snoopy Two blimp is moored down by its crew Sunday at the Davenport Municipal Airport prior to the final round of the John Deere Classic.

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## A traveling family

It takes more than a captain to get Snoopy Two into the air and back on the ground. The blimp is handled by a crew that fluctuates in size but is normally around a dozen people.

As the blimp glides in to land, handlers form a small landing strip of sorts and get ready to grab mooring lines that hang off the blimp and direct it to a mooring mast where it is docked. Snoopy Two rested at the Davenport Municipal Airport this week when it wasn't in the sky over TPC Deere Run.

When the blimp, which travels up to 35 miles per hour, has to venture across the country to its next event, its crew follows along on the road to help bring it down in case of bad weather or for maintenance. Other than rare vacations, the crew sticks together for basically 50 weeks a year.





The landing gear of the MetLife Snoopy Two blimp is checked after landing at the Davenport Municipal Airport on Sunday before taking off again to head to the final round of the John Deere Classic.

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“This is such a dedicated team, and we have to be. ... We basically are a family, an alternative family,” said Judd, who will next guide the blimp to New York to cover the Barclays August 23-28.

None of the members of the current crew are married. It’s a real challenge maintaining relationships when you’re gone from home for so long. Judd has two children who live in Florida and two in Australia who he communicates with via phone or video chat. He says he’s had three wives, the third being the blimp.

“It’s a great job if you’re single and want to travel and see different places,” said crew member Bobby Lunsford of Niceville, Florida.

## Eye in the sky



Snoopy Two has a couple different jobs when it arrives at its destination. One is to serve as an aerial billboard for MetLife. The other is to help provide video coverage of the event it's at, whether it's a golf tournament or football game.

Judd has been working with cameraman Bob Mikkelson since 1990 to provide birds-eye television coverage. Sometimes they're in the air together up to eight hours a day.



A view of TPC Deere Run in Silvis, Illinois, on Sunday prior to the final round of the John Deere Classic.

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Mikkelson operates a camera on the blimp that has a 40-times zoom lens that he can use to follow the flight of a golf shot from a golfer's club to the green. Judd and Mikkelson need to be on the same page to create the ideal composition, with Judd situating the blimp in the right spot to get the best lighting or to make sure the camera can see the action through a grove of trees.

While patrons see a slow-moving blimp gliding lazily overhead, there's actually a lot going on in the cabin. Judd has to keep close tabs on weather conditions, he and Mikkelson are in constant communication with the television director to see what shots are needed, and Judd even needs to be mindful of where the blimp's shadow covers the course so as not to distract the golfers.

"It's the most challenging aircraft piloting there is," Judd said.

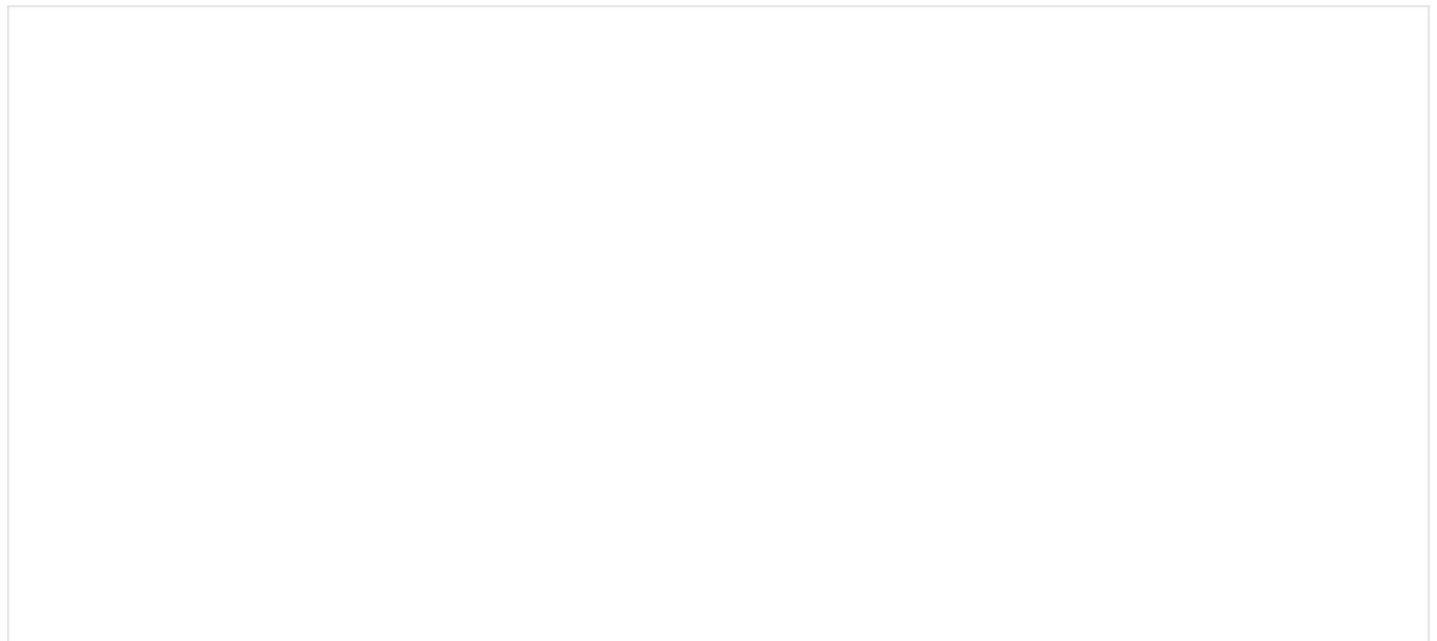
## At peace in the air

While the Federal Aviation Administration has a mandatory retirement age of 65 for airline pilots, Judd says there's no such regulation for blimp captains. He's glad of that. After all his time in the air, he's never gotten tired of his work.

"It's a chance to get away from it all and use your imagination while you observe things. It's so peaceful. I feel very, very fortunate," Judd said.

Judd's most vivid memory is from a 1990 flight he had over the ocean near Jacksonville Beach, Florida. He was hovering just 75 feet above the water watching a right whale swim the sea flanked by dolphins. At one point during the two hours he was hovering over the whale, it turned on its side and scanned the airship with its softball-sized eye. Judd said it appeared as if the whale was looking right at him.

"We live on a little blue marble that's absolutely amazing," Judd said.







Photos: MetLife Snoopy Two blimp  
Aug 14, 2016