

After the STORM

Story by Joseph Hanneman

Photos by Charles S. Vallone

Gulf War POW now a civilian

Joe Small has traded his seat in a U.S. Marines OV-10 reconnaissance plane during the Gulf War for a first-officer's chair in the cockpit of a Midwest Express DC-9 — and that's just fine by him.

The 1975 UW-Parkside business graduate and former prisoner of war now flies routes to Denver and Dallas instead of sorties over Kuwait and Iraq. It has been quite a transformation from those turbulent days in the heat over the desert ('EYE OF THE STORM,' spring 1993).

"It's still flying. You still make decisions," Small said, on his first visit to the UW-Parkside campus since graduation. "It's challenging in a different way. ▶"



FIRST OFFICER SMALL — *The former Maj. Small traded his reconnaissance sorties for regular flights to Denver and Dallas with Midwest Express.*

“In the military, precision is important, but it was a little more freewheeling.”

Even though the DC-9s he flies out of Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee are made with older technology, Small said, “I fly a much more complex airplane than I ever did in the military.”

Transition to a civilian

After being shot down in his Marine Corps OV-10 Bronco over Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and held prisoner for nine days, Small returned to the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Fla. He trained other pilots for several years before retiring in 1994 as a combat-decorated officer.

After working flying freight for more than a year across the South, Small in 1996 interviewed with and was hired by

Midwest Express, the highly rated commercial airline based in Milwaukee. Within two weeks, he was moving back to his native Racine County and preparing to be a commercial pilot.

“It’s something I’ve wanted to do since I was a kid,” Small said, recalling his days in 1975 when he flew a single-engine Piper Cherokee at Sylvania Airport in Yorkville, Wis.

At 47, the retired major’s fit looks betray his age. Wearing a tweed jacket and sport shirt during his campus visit, Small now wears a mustache with just a hint of grey. The only clue to his past are the “Former POW” plates on his minivan. He speaks comfortably of his days as a POW and his transformation to a civilian employee.

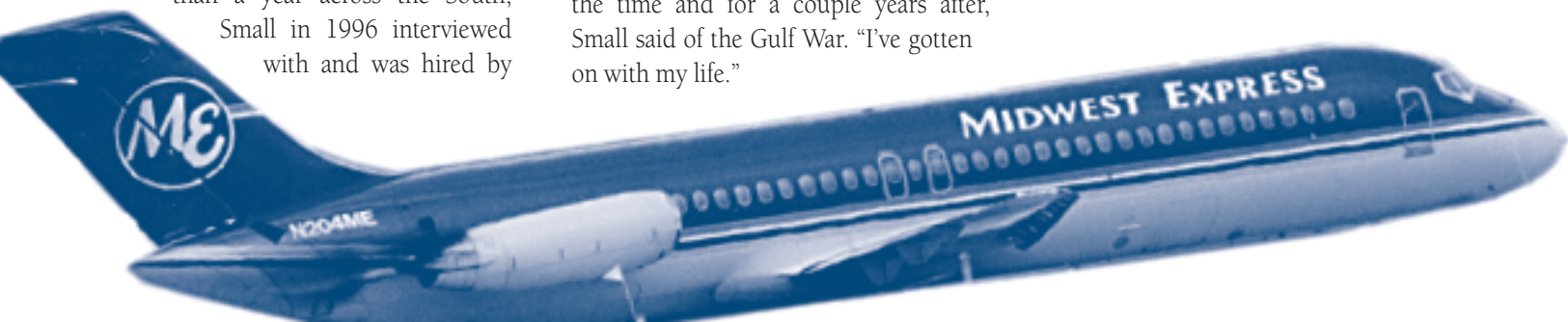
“It was an overwhelming experience at the time and for a couple years after,” Small said of the Gulf War. “I’ve gotten on with my life.”

Gulf War memories

It’s a life Small could have easily lost during the heat of the ground war that drove Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and his army out of vanquished Kuwait in 1991.

Supporting the massive Allied invasion of Kuwait, Small was flying a mission looking for an Iraqi tank column on Feb. 25, 1991. His plane was hit by a surface-to-air missile that ripped into the right wing and killed aerial observer Capt. David Spellacy. Small ejected from the crippled plane but was captured immediately upon hitting the desert floor.

Small endured severe beatings by his captors, who whipped him with a fire hose, cuffed him on the ears and hit him





AT THE HELM — As part of required training, Small spends time every six months on flight simulators facing bad weather and various emergencies.

in the head hard enough to knock him out cold. After successfully lying his way through rounds of interrogation, he ended up in a POW prison in Baghdad, where he stayed until a cease-fire was announced.

From the gloom of an Iraqi prison and

fear of what he believed would be certain death, Small returned to the United States a hero. He and the other prisoners were greeted in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, by Allied Supreme Commander Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, who had tears on his face. After a homecoming at Andrews



“It (the war) is not something I like to wear like a badge.”

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOSEPH SMALL III



HOMECOMING — Small greets family at Andrews Air Force Base in March 1991 after the Gulf War.



The Gulf War “is in a box in my closet. I know where to find it.”

Air Force Base, Small returned to a hero's welcome and parade in Racine.

Decorated soldier at home

Small was decorated with the Distinguished Flying Cross, the Air Medal, Navy Commendation Medal, Purple Heart and POW Medal. “Hero” is a label he scoffs at with a “just-doing-my-job” attitude typical of a good Marine.

“It’s not something I like to wear as a badge,” he said of his experiences. “If somebody’s interested, I’ll talk about it.”

The Gulf War seems distant at times, yet close enough to the surface to make an appearance in his mind.

“It’s in a box in my closet,” Small said. “I know where to find it.”



As a civilian pilot, Small has traded missions looking for the enemy for his role ensuring the comfort and safety of passengers.

It’s a role befitting Midwest Express’s slogan, “The Best Care in the Air.” He takes it seriously. During a round of heavy storms in Texas and Oklahoma, Small and his captain were forced to land their plane in Lubbock to wait clearance to proceed to Dallas. The plane sat in a remote part of the airport, having used its supplies of food.

“The captain and I ordered pizza and Cokes for 70 people from Papa John’s and had it delivered to the airplane,” Small recalled with a chuckle. That did the trick for the tired, hungry passengers.

There is plenty of challenge in being a commercial airline pilot, Small said. Initial training involved intensive time in a flight simulator in Miami. Every six months he undergoes refresher training, simulating virtually every kind of flight emergency from fires to bad weather.

For the most part, he hasn’t called on that training. During one flight, a door on the bottom of a McDonnell Douglas DC-9 blew open just after takeoff, but the crew quickly returned the plane to the airport with no injuries.

It’s just those kinds of challenges that Small says will keep him in the cockpit for 12 more years until the pilot’s mandatory retirement age of 60.

“That’s the beauty of aviation,” he said. “You need to always be learning.” ■

The original Perspective story on Small’s POW experience can be found on the World Wide Web at www.uwp.edu/news/pub/perspective/

