



PASS Member Is a Part of Drone History

In late April, the first authorized commercial drone flight took off in downtown Cleveland. The drone pilot chosen for this groundbreaking venture? None other than PASS Chapter OH3 member of approximately 20 years, Thom Beller.

About a decade ago, Beller started developing his passion for remote control aircraft, including helicopters, airplanes and, most recently, multi-rotors/drones. “My first drone was the QAV500,” stated Beller. “It was a four-motor/prop combo quad copter kit that I built. It was a great learning experience as it exposed me to the newest technology at the time.” Since then, Beller’s interests in the drone industry have expanded to focusing on the commercial applications of drone technology.

In 2013, Beller received an email from his local Remote Control (RC) club that contained information about an RC drone class being offered at Lorain County Community College in Elyria, Ohio. The instructor of the class was Matt Mishak, the owner of a local drone company in Ohio called Dronewerx. Beller and Mishak formed a close working relationship that allowed Beller to periodically consult Dronewerx on RC and aviation technology as years progressed.

As it turns out, Mishak’s Dronewerx would ultimately be the contracted and commissioning company for the Cleveland drone flight. Typically, subcontracted pilots or observers are not made aware of the commissioning company; however, fortunately for Beller, he was selected because of his past relationship with Dronewerx and because he holds a private pilot’s license.

“For the downtown Cleveland flight, I was the Pilot in Command (PIC) and Matt Mishak was the observer,” said Beller. “I provided my Inspire 1, multi-rotor drone for this flight. The Inspire 1 is an entry-level aerial photography platform, manufactured by DJI. It has an HD video downlink that is streamed to a tablet device and is capable of performing autonomous flight. In order to comply with the Certificate of Authorization (COA) and Letter of Agreement (LOA) issued by the FAA, we were required to have a minimum of a licensed pilot and an observer.”

Typically, commercial drone flying is only allowable in the airspace outside a five-mile radius around an airport. But, the location of downtown Cleveland’s Burke Lakefront Airport precludes drones from flying in that airspace. Dronewerx had to secure a COA and LOA to fly within that circle, which made it the first authorized commercial drone flight for Cleveland. “Moving forward, as confidence and relationships are built with the FAA, I think this will become more common,” expressed Beller.

The process to be able to perform this flight took nearly a year. In Beller’s opinion, the significance of this flight proved that if you work within the framework of the FAA regulations, you can legally do commercial work within Class D airspace. He believes that the FAA is truly interested in drones and aircrafts operating safely together in the National Airspace System and that the Cleveland flight in particular proved that it can be done. “Personally, I was very excited to be part of this,” said



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Beller. “Moving forward, I want to be part of a community that develops and promotes drones.”