

## Professional Airshow Narration

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October 23, 1989

### AIRSHOW INCIDENT

The Fourth Annual Albemarle/Stanly County Airshow was expected to be a good one. The performance line up was outstanding: Kim Pearson, SF-260; Wayne Parrish, Davis Acro Pro; Jeff Davis, Pitts; Bill Johnson, SNJ; Bobby Hester, P-51 acro; Skip Homburg, JARRS Heilo STOL demo; M-1 Abram Tank Demo; an eight person female skydiving team; narration by Hugh & Linda Oldham. The two day airshow lived up to expectations, but a major incident, before the start of Saturday's show, created a potential for catastrophe.

What follows is a chronology of the major events at that show. Times are estimates.

Saturday, 21 October 1989

Stanly County Airport  
Albemarle, North Carolina.

0800: Volunteers, venders, staff, and performers are hard at work preparing for the Fourth Annual Albemarle/Stanly County Airshow planned to start at 1400. Minor SNAFU's but no major problems.

0830: Fire Dept. and EMS units move to staging areas.

0900: The crew of a NCANG C-130, scheduled for static display, phones to report engine problems. Working on problem, will try to make show.

0930: Local vender begins to set-up a "Moon Walk" inflated children attraction in the vender/sponsor display area.

0945: Charlotte Memorial Hospital "Life Flight" helicopter lands in a special controlled access area for static display. Controlled access area necessary due to the state wide "on call" status of helio and crew.

1100: Gates open, spectators begin to filter into airport, PA system up, narrators begin normal pre-show chatter.

1230: Performer briefing begins in airport terminal building. Normal FAA stuff. Emergency plans discussed "**Protect People before Property**". Airshow incident media person introduced,

incident media plan briefed.

1315: C-130 arrives over airport. Airshow director requests fly-by. Crew requests landing and static display. Staff discusses possible staging of C-130 into **alternate static display site outside of spectator area**. Control Tower and narrator informed to prepare to stage C-130 to alternate site.

1320: C-130 lands, taxis toward static display site with aid of wing walkers and security personnel. Narration crew briefs spectators.

1322: C-130 turns tail to spectator/vender/sponsor area. Prop blast blows over vender tents, sponsor displays and then lifts entire "Moon Walk" attraction completely into the air. The Air Traffic Control Tower and others call for engine shut down. The inflated castle like "Moon Walk" structure executes a 180 degree end over end roll while lower portion of structure is 10 to 15 feet above the ground and flies 75 to 100 feet laterally into asphalt parking lot. Unknown number of children fall to ground and asphalt while the structure in flight; adults and children on the ground are injured as the structure falls back to earth.

1322:30: Emergency Plan is self activated. EMS, National Guard, Army Band, security and spectator personnel begin moving to aid victims. Narration team goes into emergency routine to calm, inform, and control spectators. "Life Flight" nurses aid victims while flight crew prepare aircraft for possible transport.

1330: An altercation erupts between an airshow volunteer and a local newspaper photographer over photographing victims. Airport Manager strongly urges the photographer to remain outside of emergency area.

1340: All victims have been triaged, most have minor scrapes and bruises, several suffer major lacerations, and there is one possible serious head injury.

1350: Meeting in Airport Manager's office. Present: Airport Manager, Airport Commission Chairman, County Commissioner, primary airshow narrator. Decision is made to continue with show. Airport Manager and Commissioners briefed by narrator on media questions and techniques. Airport Commission Chairman is appointed spokesperson. Tentative press release prepared.

1410: All victims requiring transport are off the airport. Approximately 12 are transported by ambulance to the local hospital, treated and released. The possible head injury is air lifted to Charlotte Memorial Hospital and held for over night observation, released next morning. Many others with minor injuries elect to remain on site and see show. Incident scene is cleared of debris, tents re-erected, displays repaired.

1415: Airshow Starts.

1430: Major Charlotte network TV stations calls airport for info on "airshow plane crashing into the crowd." Airport Commission members and Manager begin calling ALL media outlets within

a 100 mile radius to relate true facts of incident.

1650: Airshow completed without further incident.

2300: All Charlotte TV stations run item on 11:00 News about "freak accident" at Stanly County Airshow. Report is factual and non sensational.

Sunday, 22 October 1989

0800: Charlotte's Sunday Morning Newspaper as story of incident on page 1 of the "B" section "Local News". Story is factual, non sensational, and reports that the airshow will run through that afternoon.

1100: Second day of the airshow opens with the previous days incident victims as Guests of Honor.

1400: Airshow starts and completed without incident.

#### Lessons Learned:

Handheld FM and VHF communications radios were useless during incidence due to frequency congestion. Everybody was talking at once.

The controlled access area for the "Life Flight" helicopter worked. The aircraft served two rolls, first as a static display and marketing tool for the hospital, second as a valuable asset during the incident.

All emergency and media plans must be discussed with all airshow participants. In an emergency, people will naturally look to the airshow performers for leadership. Make sure they and all airshow staff personnel know how to lead, follow, or get out of the way.

During this incident, the victims aided each other. This has been true in both Hugo and the SFO earthquake. This resource should not be discounted, minimized, or hindered in your emergency plan.

Someone must handle the media people during the incident, at the scene, and at the narrators station. The media people will want information. If you do not provide it, they will find a way to gather that info they feel they need. They will interfere with the narrators duties. All this can cause problems when they get in the way; or later when they fill in the gaps with vivid imaginations.

Get **factual information** distributed to the media outlets as quickly as possible. Media persons have radio scanners tuned to emergency dispatch frequencies. They will hear something has happened at the show site and the lack of factual information can cause a public relations

nightmare.

## COMMENTS

This incident, at a small airshow at a rural airport, demonstrates the necessity for disaster planning. The successful treatment of the injured is evidence that the emergency plans in effect worked. The professionalism of the emergency medical personnel was outstanding. The available resources were used to the maximum benefit of the victims, everyone did their job without panic or heroics. The airshow and airport management team remained in control, kept the priorities in order, and successfully managed a potentially catastrophic situation.

The major area overlooked in the emergency plan was media relations. This incident, if it had received national exposure, would have resulted in a negative blow to the airshow industry's public relations efforts. Quick thinking and reaction of the management team averted both the negative national publicity and blunted the impact on the local level.

The circumstances leading up to the incident will be subjected to investigation by numerous boards and agencies. It can be assumed that the injuries and property damage will result in litigation. But once the events began to unfold, the prior planning and professionalism of the personnel involved minimized the suffering of the victims and the possible serious consequences to the airshow industry.