



Be an Airshow **AMBASSADOR**



This season, we have been plagued with far too many aviation accidents, many associated with our airshow family. All were a painful loss of fellow aviators. Although no accident has taken place during an actual airshow performance, the mass media has, once again, quickly associated airshows with these unfortunate events.

The most visible coverage has been an ABC "Good Morning America" segment aired after Scott Manning's crash while practicing for the Ottawa, Canada show, and a mid-air collision four-hours prior to the start of the Peru, Illinois show. I was surprised at ABC's coverage. It was fair, factual, and balanced. Very much unlike the sensationalized coverage offered up in the early '90's by the major networks and tabloid television shows like "Inside Edition."

I still have a clip of "Inside Edition" with Bill O'Reilly (currently of FOX fame) solemnly intoning, "Airshows – Death from the Skies!" as a lead-in to a segment on airshow fatalities. Each of these "reports" repeatedly ran film clips of the August 28, 1988 Ramstein AFB crash of the Italian Freccia Tricolori jet team, one of the most dramatic and sad airshow crashes in history. Not one talking head informed the American public that the "Pierced Heart" maneuver that led to the Ramstein accident had been prohibited by the FAA in 1986 when the Italian team performed at Oshkosh.

As an industry, we have come a long way in the intervening 20 years. As despised as it was when implemented, the ICAS ACE program has raised the level of professionalism within the ranks of airshow performers and has lowered the number of accidents.

I must remind our readers that, just like any motor sport, airshows are not inherently dangerous, "but to a greater degree than the sea, airshow flying is terribly unforgiving of any carelessness, incapacity, or neglect."

That is paraphrased from a yellowed plaque on my office wall, placed there by my late wife to remind me of my responsibilities as a pilot. The current string of accidents, no matter what the cause, should remind us of our responsibilities to the fragile airshow industry. Fragile? Perhaps a history lesson is in order.

September 15, 1951. Flagler, Colorado. "Soon after 2 p.m., after a glider exhibition, a stunt plane piloted by Air Force 1st Lt. Norman Jones of Denver, flew in low over the crowd and attempted a

loop. Jones arrived late and had missed the safety briefing that prohibited flying less than 500 feet above the ground and banned any stunts near the crowd. The plane crashed into the stunned mass of spectators from an altitude of less than 200 feet, cutting a bloody swath and strewn gasoline-drenched wreckage over a 150-yard area," wrote Denver Post reporter William Barker, who was in town to cover the airshow.

Twenty men, women, and children from the Colorado high plains died that day.

Now you know the source of the "no spectator has been injured at a US airshow since 1952" statement. What you might not know is that airshows ended in the United States that day, too. It took the efforts of many people, most importantly the Cole Brothers who testified before Congressional hearings, to get airshows reinstated in the United States.

Again, due to a rash of airshow performer fatalities in the late 1980's, the FAA, under Congressional pressure, was on the verge of shutting down all airshows. It was the intervention of a young ICAS and performers like T.J. Brown, aided by the political courage of FAA people like Mike Sacrey, Roger Baker, and Ed Robinson, that allowed the airshow industry to find a solution (the ACE program) that again saved airshows.

So, yes, the airshow industry is fragile. Twice in our history we were almost eliminated by accidents. Twice, dedicated airshow people saved our place in the sky.

The balanced reporting by ABC is to be commended. It also must be acknowledged that the on-going work of ICAS and many others in the airshow industry, has built a level of respect and credibility within government and the media that prevented what could have been another "Death from the Skies" report.

You – every one of the readers of this magazine – are part of that team needed to maintain our industry's credibility. Your friends, neighbors, and even your local media outlets look to you as experts on the subject of airshows. Do your homework. Know your facts. Don't sensationalize. If you are a pilot, remember that yellowed plaque in my office and found in FBO's around the country. Avoid "carelessness, incapacity, and neglect." If you are a fan, talk positively about airshows and aviation. Every one of us must be ready to provide accurate information – and be an Ambassador for all airshows. 🌐