Sequestration and its impact

Has our future arrived and are we ready for it?
ON THE AIR SHOW BUSINESS:

By Mike Berriechoa

To borrow from author and playwright Graham Greene, there is always a moment in time when a door opens and lets in the future. For better or worse, that may be what has happened to our air show business as a result of sequestration and the loss of military participation that has wreaked havoc on so much of our industry this year. Not only have we been faced with loss of military support, we have been hammered by an unsupportive news media that chooses to focus on what won’t be there rather than what will be there. This isn’t the case with every air show, but negative headlines have appeared far more frequently than we would like, further compounding our problem. But, as bad as it is, it is just possible that the door that is opening before us is the dawning of a new generation of air show that offers a broader range of entertainment and depends less on the military for its success.

There is no doubt this business loves the military. All branches of the service have made a significant contribution to the success of air shows, and many of our performers were popular at military bases across the country. We know that at least some money for the military is being reprogrammed, and more will likely be restored in future budget cycles. But there is no guarantee that funding will return to pre-sequestration levels, meaning that our industry may have to get used to doing more with less. It also means we have the challenge — as well as the opportunity — to be more innovative, more creative, and change our business models so that we can weather or avoid similar storms in the future.

Rick Grissom has probably organized more air shows than almost anyone else in ICAS today. He’s getting his shows back to the roots from whence this industry came. “We are replacing our military static displays with a carnival at our show in Memphis later this year, and we expect the carnival to become an annual profit center for us,” he said. He called carnivals a win-win because shows get a share of the carnival proceeds, and don’t have to shell out money to provide rooms and cars like they do for static display pilots. He also gave us a reminder about why we are here. “People forget that we are not in the aviation business. We are in the entertainment business and we always have been. It’s about entertaining our customers for the time they are with us,” he said.

A number of air show acts that were once considered staples of the industry are gone, giving way to the modern composite aircraft doing gyroscopic maneuvers. Where once our industry was dominated by the Pitts Specials, we now see the Extra, Edge, MX and others of similar design, making it hard for audiences to tell one from another. Gone are the car-to-plane transfer acts, firewall crashes, and motorcycle-to-plane transfers. And where are acts like the once-popular Acme Duck and Air Show Company that included a flock of live ducks rounded up by Ace the Wonder Dog? “Our industry changed a few years ago and these acts have disappeared, but I think there are new opportunities to revive these acts if performers are willing to try them,” Grissom said.

Grissom also thinks there are opportunities for turnkey air show operations where organizers can hire a single package with a mix of aerial and ground acts, similar to the old days of the flying circus. And, he said there are opportunities for night pyro shows. “All of our studies show that night shows can be an important profit center and be very successful,” he said. Several shows across the country incorporate a Friday or Saturday night pyro show, including the EAA’s AirVenture this year.

Grissom predicts more will give it a try. “All other forms of entertainment, from NASCAR to concerts to baseball and football games have changed with the times, and we need to change, too,” Grissom said. He notes that, even if the jet teams come back to fly full schedules as before, there is no guarantee that military bases will be doing as many shows. That may be good for civilian shows because the jet teams will be looking for more civilian venues. And, he said, if civilian shows take the bull by the horns, they can do a lot to remove the uncertainty that has haunted the air show community this year. “Right now, there is simply too much repetition in our shows and we should be looking at ways to do something about that.”

Grissom’s views are shared by long-time announcer Sonny Everett. “In the old days, ride hoppers followed the carnivals, made a few low passes over the crowd, and landed in the field beside the carnivals to hop rides. We
can’t buzz carnivals any more, but we can sure include them in our shows,” said Everett. “I’ve watched this industry gradually become more and more dependent on the military. Many of today’s show organizers don’t realize where we began and don’t see the opportunity we have to go back there,” he said.

Everett is also a strong advocate of performers taking a lead to create more air show venues. “There was a time when performers used to drum up air shows at their local airports, and I think there are many opportunities to do that again,” he said.

Rather than adapt to the consequences of sequestration, a considerable number of civilian shows decided to cancel this year when they could not get a jet team, and most military bases cancelled their events, as well. This left quite a few performers, air bosses, and concessionaires with big holes in their schedules and corresponding holes in their bank accounts. And no one has a crystal ball that can predict with any accuracy what will happen in 2014 and beyond. All we know is that sequestration cut the federal budget by about 5 percent, but it hit nearly 100 percent of the air show industry.

“Sequestration has taken a serious toll on our industry this year. But it hasn’t put us out of business. While some shows were put on hold, we are seeing others successfully shift their emphasis to that of a community celebration rather than just an air show, showcasing a wider variety of entertainment than ever before,” said ICAS President John Cudahy. And the trend appears to be gaining traction.

Air shows that have been able to go forward without military support have done so with great enthusiasm. As was noted in an earlier issue of Air Shows Magazine, several shows have worked hard to expand what they offer: They’re featuring more ground activities, ground-based performers, and hiring more civilian acts to fill their schedules. And, for the most part, this has worked. In addition to more performers being hired, there is an increase in the use of warbirds, and civilian jet acts are more in demand than ever.

“I’m finding that shows have accepted the fact that they can’t change the situation, so they have moved on. Sequestration is reality, so they are making the best of it,” said performer Kirby Chambliss. Just off the Red Bull Air Race circuit, Chambliss said most of the shows that he lost have been filled by others needing to fill gaps in their lineup.

Bob Carlton, who flies the jet-powered Salto glider, says he is seeing shows beef up their advertising and promotions to keep the crowd excited. “Most shows who get jet teams regularly already know how to promote during the years when they don’t get the teams, so they have a lot of experience in how to do it,” Carlton said. “I’ve gotten calls from shows that wouldn’t have called me otherwise. This is good for me and it’s good for the audience because they get to see aircraft that otherwise wouldn’t be performing.” Crowds where he has flown are still enthusiastic about what they see. Carlton said the show organizers he is working with are keeping their spirits up for next year.

Announcer Danny Clisham doesn’t do a lot of military shows, so he hasn’t been impacted too severely by sequestration. “I’m finding that shows that I’m doing are using innovation and showmanship to the best of their ability with what they have been given,” he says. “They are coping on the performance end by going stronger on pyro, on warbirds, acts like Robosaurus, and augmenting with the talented civilian jet pilots to give the audience the jet sound they expect.”

A truism in this industry is that shows that are successful year after year are constantly looking for more entertainment options. This means a good mix of planes, ground acts, an expanded variety of ramp displays, etc. And, as more shows are learning, new and different is not confined to aviation. It can be a tennis clinic for kids, the popular Dock Dogs competition, expanded use of sky divers, especially those using wing suits, or it could be any of a variety of other activities that expose people to things they would only see on television. It all adds up to a better experience for the air show audience.

Often, timing is everything, and our industry got a big boost with all the hype that has been generated in advance of Disney’s new animated movie Planes. A premiere showing was held at the EAA’s 2013 AirVenture in Oshkosh, and the movie was released nationwide on August 9. Some air shows featured Disney displays on their ramps to promote
the movie and Clisham is all smiles about this. “God bless the movie industry for giving us a boost like they did with Top Gun. Kids want to see planes that are in the movies. Any time we get this kind of help from the movie industry, we’ll take it,” he said. A tremendous buzz has also been generated in the media and on You Tube about Jet Man. Yves Rossy made his American debut at Oshkosh, and — in the minds of many — he was the hit of the show.

To fill ramp space once occupied by C-17s, C-130s and the usual mix of helicopters, more and more shows are using the old trick of turning performer aircraft into static displays. This is done by putting the hot pit area on the ramp adjacent to a taxiway entrance, so people can walk around the outside of the pit, see the planes, see the pilots and crew, and yet it affords the aircraft direct and safe access to a taxiway.

Warbirds are also getting greater attention. ICAS surveys have consistently shown that — after the contemporary military aircraft — warbirds are high on the list of fan favorites. That should make warbirds the stars of the shows if the military isn’t available. After all, few other venues offer fans the unique opportunity to see and hear these wonderful old birds.

As we reported in the second quarter issue, the Commemorative Air Force had alerted its squadrons nationwide to be prepared for increased demand for warbirds to help fill the gaps, both in the air and on the ground. No statistics are available yet to demonstrate that demand has increased, but CAF CEO Steve Brown says that, anecdotally, it appears more planes are going out each weekend. And, as shows do their long-range planning, warbirds are moving up on priority lists, including at the U.S. Air Force Academy. When the Thunderbirds were grounded, the Air Force turned to warbirds to fly over this year’s Academy graduation ceremonies.

There is no doubt that jet noise is part of the air show experience for most venues. And, while there is no substitute for the sight and sound of an F-16 or F-18, civilian jet acts are seeing increasing demand, as was highlighted in the August 2013 issue of the Smithsonian’s Air and Space magazine. Dean Wright, lead pilot for The Patriots Jet Team, said they normally fly from 10 to 12 shows a year, but he told Air and Space “…we were just barraged by calls. If I accepted them all, we would be flying 30 to 40 shows this year.”

The Patriots are the only civilian six-ship jet act in the country right now and they were willing to add two more shows to their schedule: the Oregon International Air Show in Hillsboro, and SeaFair in Seattle, filling gaps created by the loss of the Blue Angels.

European air shows have an easier time getting military assets than most American shows, simply because there are more countries close by with aviation assets. England, especially, has a rich aviation heritage and also has a large number of flying museum pieces. Is there a lesson to be learned here? Gilbert Buekenberghs is chairman of the European Airshow Council based in Belgium. Similar to ICAS, the Council holds an annual convention attended by countries from all over Europe and the Middle East. “We are smaller than ICAS, but very important to our air show industry because we all have to speak the same language of air shows,” he said.

The European Airshow Council represents roughly 250 air shows and, he said, vintage military aircraft are an important part of nearly every event. “In Europe, we feel it is very important to demonstrate the history of aviation, especially because of the role that some of these aircraft have played in keeping our nations safe and secure.” The desire to tell the vintage aircraft story is so strong that Europe is borrowing from America the idea of heritage flights. “We pay respect to the people who have gone before and you can’t tell the modern aviation story without explaining what came before. Everyone feels a connection to these historic aircraft. We owe our
freedom to the people who flew them, so they are very important,” he said.

Wings Over Houston has mostly been a warbird show since its inception. They augment with involvement from NASA, static drone displays, and some military and Coast Guard static displays, but — since it is a Commemorative Air Force event — they have available just about any kind of warbird still flying. Executive Director Bill Roach says, year after year, people still want to see them. “It’s nostalgia. It’s history. It’s remembering the men and women who defended our country and our allies,” he said.

Roach said warbird shows just how far aviation has come. “We entered World War II with biplanes. As a result of the war, technology advanced rapidly in just four years, including development of the P-51 in just 18 months. Prior to the war, Italy had more aircraft than the U.S. By the end of the war, America was turning out more airplanes than any other nation. That is a remarkable achievement,” Roach said.

Thunder Over Michigan in Ypsilanti is another warbird show that has never relied on the modern military for its success. In fact, for its first five years, they were exclusively a vintage aircraft show with no modern military assets at all. Event Director Kevin Walsh said they have used a limited number of civilian performers and have occasionally hosted the Blue Angels and some single-ship demos, but he said those are not the standard. He emphasizes that his show is military-based, but he notes it is “vintage” military and that’s the way they market it.

“Most shows that depend on jet teams have down years without them. We trained our fans to come to shows with no jet teams. We don’t have down years without them. We have up years when we do get them, turning our event into an air show on steroids,” Walsh said.

When sequestration hit, he said they realized that they had unwittingly prepared themselves for it, so this year was business as usual. “We stayed true to our original concept, which is a lesson that the entire industry may need to learn,” he said. Walsh believes that, even if jet teams return to a normal schedule next year, the industry will still be going through a period of adjustment. “We are going through a learning curve right now. If shows don’t get that message, they will be going in the wrong direction.”

One of the keys to their success has been wrapping their shows around themes. “We trained our fans to come to shows with no jet teams. We don’t have down years without them,” Walsh said. “Motorcycles and jet cars are not as weather dependent as airplanes. They appeal to a different demographic as well, expanding our audience base. We have been hired mostly for our airplane, but a number of show organizers have taken a leap of faith on the cars and motorcycles,” he said. Newburg shares the belief that air shows have become too one-dimensional and ought to work on developing a new outlook.

And it’s not just the shows that are becoming more creative. Look for at least two new airplanes to join the circuit next year, as performers seek to bring a new dimension to our industry. They are keeping details under wraps, but announcements are expected prior to the 2013 ICAS Convention.

Another benefit to shows weaning themselves away from dependence on the military jet teams is no longer being tied to DoD and jet team schedules. Shows will have greater flexibility to make long-range plans by setting dates well into the future. This can help in attracting new or larger sponsorships, and in avoiding conflicts with other events in a given community.

As painful as sequestration has been to our industry, there is a segment that has remained untouched. It’s the small towns with little airports, a few dedicated volunteers and a commitment to do something worthwhile for their community.

One such example is the tiny town of Ennis, Montana, population 1,100... a com-
How Will Our Industry Respond?

ICAS asked a broad cross section of its members: “If the U.S. military does not support the North American air show business in the same manner that it has during the past 30 years, what direction do you think the industry should take to preserve air shows as attractive family entertainment venues?”

“Without military support at air shows, the industry, in my opinion, should push for stronger support of flying museums and private owners of vintage aircraft, new and exciting prospects in civilian aerobatic performances, and continue to work with the military leaders to at least get the approvals of cross-country training flight participation in air shows so that military aircraft can resume static displays and limited flybys. With vintage aircraft, ICAS must continue to support the removal of obstacles from the FAA in order to keep these aircraft available for air shows.”

— David Schultz, David Schultz Airshows

“A number of years ago, jet cars/trucks proved that partnering with other industries makes sense. Are the next partnering opportunities lying in aerospace and unmanned vehicles? The Rocky Mountain Airshow is working towards a day when air shows are the ‘go to place’ for the general public to connect with space travel technology and the new frontier of unmanned aircraft. It’s never been more important for all of us to engage the next generations of pilots. That’s where their eyes will be focused.”

— Jim Cimiluca, Rocky Mountain Airshow

“Turn to the basic ‘General Admission Only, Day-of-Show event.’ No frills. Necessities only. Keep it simple. Design an event budget goal to be 30 percent of your current (with military munity more known for its fly fishing opportunities on the Madison River than for anything related to aviation. In late July, the FBO, Choice Aviation, decided to host an air fair at the Ennis Big Sky Airport. They had never heard of ICAS, never done anything like this before, but wanted to do something for their community. Nothing is more grass roots than that.

Troy Hunter is Line Operations Manager for Choice Aviation. He is also the airport manager. “Our goal was to bring people to the airport. The community is not as familiar with aviation as they could be, so we want to give them a good experience.” No one had ever done this in Ennis before, so he thought the opportunity was there, and he was right, Hunter said.

The day started as you might expect, with a fly-in breakfast and the Lions Club cooking breakfast burritos, followed by aviation seminars, fly-bys, an Iron Pilot watermelon drop and spot landing contest, and more than 40 airplanes on display, ranging from a BT-13 to a T-34 to a Long EZ, a medevac helicopter, and a T-6.

They also had a focus on youngsters from the community. “We did free rides for kids, using local pilots, similar to the EAA’s Young Eagle program, then we did a ping pong ball drop. One of our pilots flew over a part of the airport away from the runway and dropped over 100 ping pong balls. The child who collected the most was given a nice prize,” he said.

What else did they offer? A car show-and-shine competition, a barbeque lunch, skydivers, and a flour bomb drop. “It was an awesome turnout. We had 60 pilots for breakfast, had 40-60 airplanes come and go through the day, gave rides to 40 kids, and fed 350 people for lunch. For a town of 1,100, that’s great. We will absolutely do it again,” Hunter said. And next time, he said they may get a waiver and offer up some aerobatics.

While some of the things that took place in Ennis obviously won’t work at larger airports due to a variety of constraints, Hunter and his team are a great example of what a little innovative thinking can accomplish. They had no prior experience that can sometimes become burdensome baggage. They just wanted to have fun, so they did it. They learned from it, and much of what they did can be replicated and scaled up as desired.

Whatever the future holds for our industry, the constant is change, and success will be based on how creatively that change is managed. The door is open. It’s up to us to walk through it.

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air shows 3Q 2013

We all hope and pray the U.S. military ICAS surveys have consistently shown that the "LOCAL" air show is a valuable part of aviation — give that aviation spark to the next generation. And, finally, one that all walks of life will enjoy.

— Chuck Newcomb, Cleveland National Air Show

“We all hope and pray the U.S. military remains committed to the air show industry. But, in the case it does not, then the air show industry will have to work harder to demonstrate to the community that our local air show is a valuable part of the quality of life offered to the region and an event that relies on the support from sponsors, spectators and the city government that controls the airport. We will need to work harder to showcase the importance of aviation, the benefits of a strong and vital airport, and that air shows are one of the only venues left to highlight aviation — give that aviation spark to the next generation. And, finally, we will need to prove to the community that air shows are a true family event and one that all walks of life will enjoy.”

— Ken Hopper, Quad City Air Show

“ICAS surveys have consistently shown that the Blue Angels, Thunderbirds and military jet demos are the top air show draws. Without them, we would have to make some changes in our revenue plans to remain successful; probably pursue more sponsor dollars and corporate chalet sales, and rely less on gate sales. Also, add new events; perhaps a vintage car display, etc.”

— Dick Walstad, Fargo AirSho

“We believe that air shows need to return to their roots by providing family entertainment. No one can expect people to come out just to see airplanes. At our event in New Smyrna Beach, we created a three-day festival of family activities. In addition to world-class air show performers, we display hot air balloons, a carnival, three-acre 4-H animal encounter, entertainment stage and an education area called 'Inspiration Village.' Our 2013 event experienced record crowds with no military participation.”

— Steve Clegg, New Smyrna Beach Balloon and Skyfest

“These are challenging days for the industry, as we face the very real threat that military participation will never be as strong as in the past. However, this becomes an ideal time for the industry as a whole to be creative, roll up its sleeves and re-invent itself. This has to occur in two primary areas: Create an irresistible experience by producing the best civilian-based show possible, and strengthen marketing capabilities to promote and sell the family-friendly experience.”

— Darcy Brewer, California Capital Airshow

“Without the DoD jets, the mega shows are going to have a difficult time, even in major markets, attracting mega spectators. We as an industry have followed the easy path and developed our repertoire as only handmaidens to the DoD teams, and never allowed breakout stars to emerge from the fine lineup of professional performers. The reasons for this lack of foresight are many, but the reality has come to roost, and we have no one ready to bill as an alternative star outside of our very limited air show fan base. Losing the DoD jets will not destroy the air show industry, but will put us in a very difficult period of contraction and restructuring.”

— Hugh Oldham, ProAirshow

“There are some who believe we are in the business of flight demonstration and adjutant military recruiting arm, but – in reality – we are in the entertainment business. We have to look at how families like to be entertained and what they are willing to spend money on today. After determining those key points, we then need to build our events around those elements of the air show that the families have indicated interest in. When I took my crew to a Brewers’ game at Miller Stadium recently, it was an event! There were games, interviews, great food, cold beer, kids’ games, and – yes, eventually – they played baseball. The baseball audience isn’t very different from the air show audience if you consider the breakdown in percentages of athletes/pilots, spouses/spouses, kids/kids, and folks who got free tickets or just wanted to do something different that day. The key difference is that the ballpark provides fun for all ages as its primary role.”

— Bill Bordeleau, Continental Air Show Productions

“Our industry has a good number of outstanding non-military aviators who provide the kind of entertainment that’ll pull audiences in…with the right marketing. Couple that with great interactive ground entertainment — think kid-friendly “extreme” adventure opportunities and live music — and we have an event that people will look forward to year after year.”

— Angie Faulise, Great Georgia Air Show

“The primary focus has to be on quality entertainment. Amigo Airsho has always hired world-class professional performers. And we mix up the kinds of acts. In trying times, you have to stay vigilant and don’t settle for poor performances to fill your schedule. And keep your eye on the ball; the primary attraction of your event is an air show which differentiates it from other community festivals. But that doesn’t mean you couldn’t or shouldn’t include some of the attractions and activities that you typically see at festivals. Add the diversity that will expand the interest of those attendees wanting to see an air show and will attract and entertain those who enjoy festivals and a family outing in general. Take some time to explore what activities attract crowds in your community and add them to your event. See if there are opportunities to team up with other existing activities.”

— Rhonda Butler, Amigo Airsho

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