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Tony Burson
HAI Chairman 2013-14

**Mentors: Promoting the Future,
Providing a Legacy**

American Heroes Air Show Celebrates 20th Year

Twenty years ago, in the summer of 1993, the first American Heroes Air Show (AHAS) was launched in Los Angeles, California, by Jim Paules. His vision was an admission-free, grass-roots event for the general public that celebrated the helicopters used in public service by southern California-based law enforcement, fire services, search and rescue, and national defense agencies. This unique, all-helicopter event was designed to showcase the versatility of rotorcraft, as well as the dedication and courage of the men and women who fly and maintain them.

Today, American Heroes events are held in five to seven U.S. cities each year, enabling spectators from coast to coast to get an up-close introduction to the military, public service, and civil helicopters that serve their communities and to meet and mingle with the pilots and crew. There are regular shows in Los Angeles; Seattle; Canton, Georgia; Fort Myers, Florida; and Austin, Texas.

HAI offers affiliate memberships to organizations that share our goals to promote the helicopter and its safety, advocate the principles of "Flying Neighborly," and improve the public image of rotorcraft. The American Heroes Aviation Network, Inc., the umbrella nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization developed to coordinate the national network of AHAS events, definitely fills the bill on all counts and has partnered with HAI as an affiliate member organization since 2008.

As HAI President Matt Zuccaro puts it, "Every year, AHAS provides thousands of people across the U.S. an opportunity to learn firsthand about the value and benefits of helicopters in their daily lives. The positive public image of helicopters projected by these AHAS events benefits everyone in the helicopter community.

We definitely support AHAS and encourage others in the industry to do so as well."

Different Cities, Different Shows, Same Rules

My first personal experience with a Heroes Air Show came in September 2011 at Pioneers Park just a few blocks from downtown Canton, Georgia, a city of some 23,000 people. Nearly 3,000 of them — mostly families with strollers, toddlers, and teens — turned out to view their city's annual influx of helicopters.

The helicopter family was well represented too. There were Black Hawks from the Georgia Army National Guard, a UH-1H Huey from the U.S. Air Force, helicopters from the U.S. Border Patrol and state and local law enforcement agencies, and a variety of privately owned and operated helicopters. There were also two Robinson R44s giving people a

chance (for many their first) to fly in a helicopter.

Another HAI Affiliate Member, the Atlanta Helicopter Pilots Association, was there too. President John Woodruff holds an informal meeting of his group at the air show every year, in part to support the Canton Heroes show. The Atlanta pilots' organization provides financial support to help defray the costs of the show, and its members display their personal aircraft on the flight line.

Woodruff says there are two reasons his group supports the Canton show: "Because it focuses on the general public, and because it provides everyday people a chance to learn firsthand about these unique flying machines and to actually meet the heroes who fly them."

Even though helicopters were the main attraction, this show was about more than the aircraft on display. It was also about patriotism



The Atlanta Helicopter Pilots Association, seen here displaying aircraft at the American Heroes Canton, Georgia, show, also provides much-needed financial support to AHAS to defray the show's costs.

and citizenship: there was a special swearing-in ceremony, organized in partnership with the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services. With a National Guard Black Hawk as a backdrop, 50 serving members of the U.S. military and others from all around the world raised their hands to take the oath of allegiance and become U.S. citizens. In addition, there were booths, displays, food vendors, even funnel cakes. It was a perfect September day.

My second AHAS event came in April this year when I attended a two-day extravaganza hosted jointly by AHAS and the Texas Military Forces, headquartered at historic Camp Mabry in downtown Austin, Texas. The AHAS volunteer event director, Wut "Tank" Tantaksinanukij, from the Austin Police Department's aviation unit, organized the helicopter and aviation-related portions of the program, including parachute teams, flight demonstrations, and helicopter troop insertions and extractions, along with static helicopter displays. Tank and his volunteers had the process down to a science, and everything ran as smooth as clockwork.

On their part, the Texas Military Forces were fantastic hosts for the event. Enthusiastic local reenactors staged maneuvers from well-known historic military campaigns, complete with era-accurate uniforms, vehicles, and weapons. Attendees were treated to a view of what actual American heroes looked like 60 years ago. In addition, there were weapon demonstrations and a fascinating military museum.

These two events illustrate the diversity that characterizes the air shows arranged by AHAS. Each show has its own volunteer event director and army of volunteers and sponsors. The host cities range in size from Canton, with a population of 23,000, to Austin, which, with a population of about 840,000, is the 11th largest city in the United States. As a result, each Heroes show has its own personality.

Despite this diversity, however, there are some steadfast rules that Paules insists all the shows follow: No paid organizers or employees are allowed; the shows are all volunteer.

They are also all-helicopters and only helicopters. Safety must be the top priority from beginning to end. And finally, no admission fees or parking fees can be charged at any AHAS event.

Admittance-Free Air Shows Still Have To Pay the Bills

Paules's rules, and particularly the free admission mandate, are commendable and probably have contributed

considerably to the success of AHAS events over the past two decades. However, there is a corresponding rule of economics — one of the sad realities of life — that states: even if you don't charge people to attend your air show, at the end of the day, the Porta-Potty guy still wants to be paid.

Free air show or not, you have to pay the bills. This means that AHAS's commendable commitment to admission-free air shows creates



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a self-imposed but constant pressure on Paules and his local volunteer coordinators around the country to identify and attract financial sponsors and supporters.

Admittedly, because AHAS relies exclusively on volunteers and there are no salaries to pay, production costs aren't tremendous. But just as each of the shows is different, their costs are different as well.

For example, at the Austin air show, the costs are comparatively modest, even though it is one of the biggest AHAS events. Because the show is located on Camp Mabry, a military installation, AHAS doesn't incur permitting fees, insurance requirements, or major infrastructure costs — like Porta-Potty rentals. At other sites, AHAS must absorb all these assorted costs, in addition to other infrastructure needs like parking, signage, garbage cans, and dumpsters.

To offset these expenses, there are a variety of limited sources of income available to AHAS organizers. In some locations, like L.A., Seattle, and Canton, helicopter rides are popular and successful fund-raisers with a valuable side benefit of providing many attendees their first helicopter flight. Concession sales and booth or space rentals can provide

Learn More About American Heroes

Attend an Air Show

You can find the latest on AHAS events at www.facebook.com/AmericanHeroesAirShows.

Display at an Air Show

To display your aircraft at an AHAS event, contact your local event coordinator, who will be listed on www.heroes-airshow.com.

Get Involved

Interested in being a volunteer event coordinator or AHAS sponsor? Contact Jim Paules at 818-61-8132 or jim@heroes-airshow.com.

additional income.

Still, these sources of income fall short of meeting the funding needs of the AHAS each year. Paules and his team of volunteer event directors must constantly seek financial and in-kind contributions to cover costs.

Local Events and Local Support but National Dreams

As one might expect, because the Heroes shows are, at heart, local community events, the lion's share of financial support does come from local community sources — local businesses, auto dealers, banks, insurance companies, and from friends and supporters of the public safety aviation units and operators who participate in the air shows.

However, during the past 20 years,

AHAS has become truly national, and organizers keep hoping that they can develop a national network of support to complement local contributions. AHAS does have a start in this direction.

For the past couple years, American Eurocopter has provided substantial financial support for three of the AHAS events: the Austin, Los Angeles, and Fort Meyers shows. Ed Van Winkle, American Eurocopter's sales manager for airborne law enforcement, explains his company's participation by saying, "The basic reason we support AHAS is because they are so effective at highlighting the public benefits generated by helicopters in this sector, a sector that Eurocopter is actively involved in as well."

Several years ago, when AHAS lost some longtime sponsors to the economic downturn, HAI stepped in to pick up the costs of lunches for all the volunteer pilots who participated in the air shows. And, as mentioned earlier, John Woodruff and the Atlanta Helicopter Pilot Association have been long-term financial supporters of the AHAS.

Paules hopes this kind of industry support will take root among other OEMs and helicopter-related businesses and organizations, providing a reliable source of funds.

Aside from financial support, there are plenty of other ways for people in the helicopter industry to support the AHAS in its role as a proven helicopter good-will ambassador. For example, more helicopter participation in existing AHAS events is always welcome. Bringing your aircraft to a show is a great way for operators and



The AHAS all-volunteer shows charge no admission and introduce the general public to the public service missions flown by helicopters and the heroes who fly and maintain them.

owners to broaden current friendships and build new ones in their home communities.

Paules and AHAS are also always on the lookout for new event coordinators to line up additional locations for the air shows. One of his top priorities is the reestablishment of an east coast venue, and discussions are under way about a possible show in Virginia. Paules is also involved in efforts to bring AHAS to Las Vegas.

According to Paules, the only thing needed to get an AHAS show started is one volunteer with an obsession for helicopters and public safety, who is willing to take the lead as a local volunteer event director. Paules has a three-ring binder that leads new event organizers through the process, and he stands ready to provide hands-on assistance and guidance.

Sequestration Hits AHAS

AHAS started celebrating its 20th anniversary year on several powerful notes. It began with a strong show at JetBlue Park (the spring training home

to the Boston Red Sox) in Fort Myers in January 2013, and followed up with the successful Austin event in April. The two-day crowd at the Austin event might well have been a record breaker with more than 17,000 people in attendance at Camp Mabry.

Unfortunately, several weeks ago, this year took a decidedly sour turn. In late May, two of the perennial AHAS events, the Seattle show in August and the Canton meeting in September, had to be taken off the calendar and deferred until 2014.

Both shows fell victim to the U.S. government's self-imposed sequestration budget cuts. Because of the forced spending cuts under the sequestration plan, many of the expected federal agency or military helicopters were not going to be able to participate in the AHAS shows.

Paules does plan to go ahead with the Los Angeles event in June. That show will definitely be affected by cutbacks in government aircraft participants, but this event is typically not as reliant on military

and government helicopters as other shows. It enjoys broader participation by commercial operators, air medical, and electronic news gathering helicopters, which are not as significantly affected by sequestration.

Paules is confident that these sequestration setbacks can be overcome and that their impact will be temporary. Nonetheless, they certainly highlight just how fragile the future can be for any all-volunteer, nonprofit organization like AHAS. And they provide another good reason to support AHAS with your helicopters, your time, and your contributions. AHAS is a valuable education and public relations outreach program for public safety helicopters and the helicopter community in general. It deserves the support of the entire helicopter industry. **R**

David York is HAI vice president of regulations and international affairs.



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