



At a Glance

Aviation is a tightly regulated endeavor. How do air show organizers bring excitement, entertainment, and aerospace education to the public in such a regulatory environment? It takes organizers, performers, regulators...and lawyers.

AIR SHOWS! Bringing the Thunder to Michigan's Skies

By **Stephen L. Tupper and Kevin Walsh**

When you think of air shows, you think of intrepid aerobatic pilots flying upside down and jets whipping down the show line to delight crowds in places like Detroit, Willow Run, Traverse City, Battle Creek, Gaylord, and Selfridge Air National Guard Base. And you're right!

But aviation is a tightly regulated endeavor. How do air show organizers bring excitement, entertainment, and aerospace education to the public in such a regulatory environment? It takes organizers, performers, regulators...and lawyers.

The regulations and the waiver

Almost all aviation in the United States is governed by the Federal Aviation Regulations (FARs), particularly FAR Part 91.¹ The FARs regulate nearly every aspect of aviation, including who can do what, with what aircraft, where, and how.

It won't surprise anyone that much of the flying at air shows would ordinarily violate the FARs. After all, it's hard for a wing walker to perform while complying with the FAR regarding safety belts.² Or for an aerobatic performer to comply with the FAR requiring aerobatic flight to remain at least 1,500 feet above the ground.³ Or for a show over the Detroit River to comply with the FAR requiring everyone to be at least 1,000 feet above the tallest object within 2,000 feet laterally⁴ — the Renaissance Center is 750 feet tall and the U.S. side of the Detroit River is only 1,000 feet wide. And there are other, more esoteric considerations like the speed restriction to 200 knots in the lower parts of the area surrounding Detroit Metropolitan Wayne County Airport⁵ or prohibitions on certain activities near the center line of federal airways, which are invisible highways in the sky.⁶

Without some relief from these regulations, air shows would be too quiet, too high to be visible, and — let's face it — unexciting. Air show organizers apply to the FAA for waivers of

cooperating with the FAA. As a recent example, before the 2020 air show season, no specific credential was required in order to be an air boss — the person who directs operations during an air show. Within the last five years, ICAS has developed an air boss recommendation program that involves a knowledge test, recommendations, observations, and other processes.¹⁶ The FAA accepted the program in late 2019. ICAS recommends candidates who have completed the program requirements and the FAA issues letters of authorization to them. The FAA now accepts air show waiver applications only from persons holding the appropriate air boss letter of authorization.¹⁷

But, to some extent, same as the old boss

The FAA is a many-headed creature, and air show organizers deal with more than just the Flight Standards District Office. Organizers frequently must interact with the parts of the FAA that issue temporary flight restrictions (no-fly zones that keep other aircraft away from the air show), make radio spectrum assignments for control of ground and air operations, and air traffic control managers at the local airport and terminal and approach areas.

Beyond the FAA, organizers must interact with the Federal Communications Commission to obtain radio licenses to use assigned control frequencies; local governments (which might or might not be fans of the air show); law enforcement; fire personnel; ambulance providers (both those serving the show and air ambulance operators that operate within the airspace); and others.

The same deal-making and team-building skills that serve lawyers well in practice serve them well in the world of air shows. Even more than in law practice, the air show industry runs on reputation for skill and safety-mindedness and the ability to command the respect of a room of pilots, regulators, and first responders at a briefing.

Conclusion

The next time you attend an air show, have fun and be inspired, but also take a moment to think about the regulatory and operational work required to stage the event. The best aviation professionals are all about safety culture and making heavily regulated and complicated things look easy. Air shows are their love letter to those ideas and the public that comes out to watch.

We know. We organize and present air shows. And we do it because, first and foremost, we're fans just like you. ■



Stephen L. Tupper (pictured inverted in flight) is principal shareholder of Tupper Law Firm PC in Bloomfield Hills, practicing in the areas of information technology, commercial transactions, privacy, and aviation/aerospace. He is a commercial pilot and instructor in airplanes and gliders, a Formation and Safety Team formation lead pilot, a Civil Air Patrol (U.S. Air Force Auxiliary) lieutenant colonel and search-and-rescue pilot, and an air boss holding an FAA letter of authorization. Tupper is originator and air boss of the Tuskegee Airmen Detroit River Days Air Show each June.

Kevin Walsh is president and CEO of the Yankee Air Museum in Belleville, which stages the annual Thunder Over Michigan Air Show. From 2011–2019, he served as a director of the International Council of Air Shows, including a term as chairman.

ENDNOTES

- 14 CFR 91.1 *et seq.*
- 14 CFR 91.107.
- 14 CFR 91.303(e).
- 14 CFR 91.119.
- 14 CFR 91.117(c).
- 14 CFR 91.303(d).
- 14 CFR 91.905.
- FAA Order 8900.1, vol 3, ch 6, *Issue a Certificate of Waiver or Authorization for an Aviation Event* (May 15, 2015), available at <https://fsims.faa.gov/wdocs/8900.1/v03%20tech%20admin/chapter%2006/03_006_002.htm> [<https://perma.cc/YGV8-SQXG>] and updated by National Policy N 8900.1526 (October 10, 2019) [available at <https://www.faa.gov/documentLibrary/media/Notice/N_8900.526.pdf> [<https://perma.cc/U9UW-SLTA>]]. All websites in this article were accessed July 4, 2021.
- FAA Order 8900.1, vol 3, ch 6, § 3-155.
- FAA Order 8900.1, vol 3, ch 6, Table 3-1A.
- FAA Order 8900.1, vol 3, ch 6, § 3-148(l)(1).
- Colorado air show crash killed 20 in 1951*, Denver Post (September 16, 2011) <<https://www.denverpost.com/2011/09/16/colorado-air-show-crash-killed-20-in-1951/>> [<https://perma.cc/9SGP-VWNN>].
- Cudahy, *Remarks to the National Transportation Safety Board* (January 10, 2012) (available from the author). See also Negroni, *Air Shows Are Safe Enough*, Transport Safety Panel Is Told, The New York Times (January 10, 2011). <<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/11/us/air-shows-need-no-new-rules-transport-safety-board-is-told.html>>. Note that the September 16, 2011, fatal accident at the Reno Air Races was part of an air race, not an air show.
- The History of the International Council of Air Shows*, International Council of Air Shows <<https://airshows.aero/CMS/History>> [<https://perma.cc/C62S-WSSN>].
- Id.*
- Air Boss Recognition Program*, International Council of Air Shows (2018) (available from the author).
- FAA Order 8900.1, vol 5, ch 9, § 6, *Issue/Renew/Reevaluate/Rescind an Air Boss Letter of Authorization* (October 25, 2019), available at <<https://fsims.faa.gov/PICDetail.aspx?docId=8900.1.Vol.5.Ch9.Sec6>> [<https://perma.cc/STPG-UNSF>].