

from

THE SOMETIMES DIFFICULT ROAD TO IMPROVED SAFETY

the home office



More than 20 years ago, the North American air show community suffered through a three-year period with an average of more than 13 fatal accidents per year. Frustrated by their inability to reduce the accident rate, the FAA approached ICAS for help. Together, the two organizations developed a partnership that focused on using experienced air show pilots as evaluators of all current and prospective air show performers.

The result? Initially, a barrage of protest. The ICAS leaders who led the effort to implement this program were widely criticized and complaints continued for many months after the program had been implemented.

But, almost immediately, the accident rate dropped from about a dozen fatalities each year to 4.6 per year during the five years immediately after ICAS assumed responsibilities for the Aerobatic Competency Evaluation (ACE) program. In the 20+ years since, the government/industry partnership has become a model for similar safety initiatives elsewhere in aviation.

More recently, following a rash of accidents in 2007, ICAS launched an initiative to change the culture of air show safety, including the adoption of Safety Management System (SMS)

principles, hiring a full-time safety director, and an industry awareness program.

The result? Another round of criticism followed by a significant drop in the industry's accident rate. After experiencing an average of 4.25 fatal accidents per year from 2004 through 2007, the number of fatalities was reduced to 1.5 per year since 2008.

While not always popular, concerted and focused effort can reduce the number of accidents in our business.

In 2010 and 2011, the ACE Committee proposed changes to the rules used to administer the ACE program. These changes were recommended by the committee as part of a larger effort to find additional ways to improve safety. In accordance with procedures, the changes were vetted among the membership and discussed on two different occasions during the ICAS Convention. They were then reviewed and approved by the ICAS Board, and then accepted and recognized by the FAA and Transport Canada.

In 2012, a different ACE Committee suggested additional changes. They were also proposed to improve safety and decrease accidents in our business, but – due entirely to a series of errors by the ICAS staff and me personally – the changes were not properly vetted with the

ICAS membership, members did not have a chance to discuss the changes, and the Board did not vote on them as required. This failure to adhere to procedures kept the committee from getting feedback from members before changes were submitted to and approved by the FAA and Transport Canada.

Following a three-month controversy during the spring of this year and a 60-day comment period that provided members with the opportunity to express their opinions on the changes, the ACE Committee has modified their recommendations and made a new proposal to the ICAS Board.

As unfortunate and unnecessary as this controversy has been, it has been useful in a number of different ways. It has reaffirmed our industry's commitment to identifying and implementing every tactic possible to improve safety and reduce accidents. It has also helped to encourage a dialogue about different methods and tools for improving safety. And it has demonstrated that, in accordance with SMS and risk mitigation principles, ICAS will continue to identify potential hazards before they result in loss of life.

Very soon, ICAS will once again step into the breach. Together with ICAS staff, an ad hoc committee of air bosses has been

working on a new accreditation program that will set minimum experience and training requirements for air bosses working in the air show environment. Like the ACE program, it will be built around a peer review and step-down process that allows air bosses to work shows that are appropriate for their level of competence. Members will be invited to comment on the proposal and, as they have in the past, those comments will help to improve the program and, ultimately, improve safety in our industry. Although we will work hard to apply the sometimes painful lessons that the organization has learned on similar initiatives in the past, we expect that this program will also generate its share of controversy.

Improving safety in our business is no easy task, particularly when the process begins with the kind of self-inflicted wound that I inadvertently caused earlier this year. But experience has demonstrated that improvements are possible and that there are steps we can take that make a difference and save lives. Respectfully, I ask that you join us in this effort and support the hard work being done by many ICAS members on our collective behalf.

John Cudahy
President