



AMERICA'S FREEDOM FEST

A GREAT SMALL AIRSHOW RETURNS TO GOSHEN

In 2007, I covered 17 different airshows and air races for *World Airshow News*. But by 2009, that number was down to three. When the economy tanked in 2008, in the heart of the Midwest, airshows began dropping like raindrops, until the only remaining shows were either very fortunate with their finances or were massive municipally-sponsored events.

One of the airshows that suffered greatly during the recession was in Goshen, Indiana. Located in North Central Indiana, not far from Interstate 80, Goshen is a small town with a massive recreational vehicle manufacturing base nearby, and a large rural area surrounding the town.

The Goshen show traced its roots back to 1994, when a simple fly-in took place at the local airport with about 100 participants. A C-130 from "Feed the Hungry," was flown over from its base at South Bend, Indiana. This simple fly-in grew into a full-fledged airshow titled "Skyfest Michiana," which ran until 1999.

In 2000, the airshow director moved from the area and a new organization called "Freedomfest Goshen" was created, and it ran until 2008. Freedomfest Goshen became one of the finest small airshows in the country.

But once the 2008 airshow was completed, and planning for the 2009 airshow began, it became clear that there was almost no money available for sponsorship of the event. The local unemployment rate exceeded 20%, and President Obama even visited Elkhart County three times due to the severity of the recession there. Airshow Director Randy Sharkey tried soliciting local businesses for sponsorships, but found it hard to compete with other, more pressing community priorities.

"Our business owners told me they were giving money to the food pantry, to the homeless shelter, and to the Boys and Girls Club, and didn't have anything left to give," admits Sharkey. "How could I compete with that as an airshow producer?"

The 2009 show was canceled, and its longer-term future was as uncertain as the economy.

RISING FROM THE ASHES

In 2011, Sharkey began another aviation event at Goshen, titled "Rotors and Ribs." It was a helicopter fly-in and had 16 helicopters attend. The event grew and continued until 2016 when it became the largest helicopter airshow in the U.S., with 60 helicopters participating.

Opposite Page: The F-100 Super Sabre flown by Dean Cutshall (photo by Alan Barbor).

Below: The MiG Alley Airshows F-86 flown by Paul Keppeler (photo by Michael J. Gallagher) taxis in after a sunset dogfight with the MiG-17 flown by Jeff Kaney (bottom, photo by Alan Barbor).

When Sharkey began planning for the 2017 Rotors and Ribs, he found out the rib supplier was selling his business and wasn't able to support the event. "I've lost half of Rotors and Ribs!" Sharkey exclaimed. He tried to book some helicopter airshow acts, but found that there is a dearth of such acts. So, the event was put on hold for 2017.

Around the same time, the organizers of the Goshen July 4th fireworks show, called Celebrate America, contacted Sharkey because sponsorship was lagging along with enthusiasm. Urban sprawl had also encroached upon the country club where the event was held. They agreed to move the event to the Goshen airport as a fireworks show.

Slowly, a small airshow was added to the mix, working with Julia Dacy of Dacy Airshows. But for Sharkey, small is never enough. He returned to solicit sponsors and found that there was enthusiasm and support for a return of Freedom Fest. "People were hungry for an airshow," says Sharkey.

A new organization was formed from the key members of the fireworks and airshow groups and "America's Freedom Fest" was born. Three weeks before America's Freedom Fest, the event was almost fully funded with sponsorship and donations. Compare that to another Indiana airshow in Gary, Indiana that had to cancel due to a lack of sponsorship, and the Rockford, Illinois airshow had cancelled due to other factors. "But this little town in Indiana with a population of 30,000, a Mennonite and Amish community, is able to put on an airshow with a budget of around \$200,000 and have it paid for before the gates opened," explained Sharkey.

The Goshen airshow had historically formed a relationship with the Battle Creek, Michigan airshow, held the same holiday weekend, sharing acts between the shows. Beginning in 2000, some of the biggest airshow acts were seen in Goshen, thanks to the relationship with Battle Creek. Sharkey contacted Barb Haluszka, the Battle Creek airshow producer, and asked if they could share acts since Battle Creek was a day show and Goshen was an evening show.

This year, tiny Goshen, Indiana had the mighty F-22 Raptor ripping through the skies overhead. In stark contrast, in the parking lot, were over 100 horse drawn buggies and 400 bicycles from the local Amish community.

A REMARKABLE SUCCESS

Not one penny was spent on advertising for the 2017 airshow, so its producers had expected only about 0,000 attendees for the show's return to Goshen. They were shocked when they parked over 7,000 vehicles and attracted an on-site attendance of 30,000. Off the airport grounds, there were countless more stuck in traffic

trying to attend, those that just pulled off to the side of the road and watched, or those who lived near the airport and watched from home. They estimate those people accounted for an additional 15,000 spectators.

While the attendance and popularity of the airshow was beyond expectations, it created problems that will have to be remedied for next year. Sharkey explained that first thing Monday morning after the event, they had to run some damage control, first because of the parking problems. As in previous years, a dedicated parking director and staff will now manage parking. A new lot will be created on the east end of the field in addition to the



...AIRSHOW REPORT: Americas Freedom Fest

west lot that currently exists. This will simplify traffic movement as well. If a car comes from the east, then it parks in the east lot and the same for the west. Tickets will be collected or sold after parking, not as a vehicle enters.

The director in charge of the food vendors was also told to expect 8,000 to 10,000 spectators and arranged an appropriate number of vendors. While the lines were long for food, the vendors were raving about how much money they made. Sharkey said that the kettle corn vendor emailed him after the event and said he had never at any previous venue popped over 400 pounds of popcorn. Learning from this year, next year there will be double the amount of food vendors, and they will be spread out across the grounds as well.


Looking forward to 2018 with massive changes to parking, food vendors, and opening the gates much earlier in the morning, something will need to be done to keep the spectators entertained throughout the day. One event that just moved to Goshen is "Air Supremacy Over Goshen," a radio-controlled model airshow that was scheduled just one week after America's Freedom Fest. Sharkey hopes they can provide teaser acts next year promoting the RC event.

A NEW FULL-TIME DIRECTOR

Randy Sharkey was born and raised in the Goshen area, and got his start in a corporate flight department. He and a partner then started the Goshen Air Center FBO in 1992. In 2013, another friend purchased a helicopter and wanted his help to form a charter operation. That business has since grown into Indiana Helicopters, with six helicopters and a very busy charter operation

ranging from Indianapolis to the Chicago area.

As a result of his new responsibilities, there simply isn't enough time in a week for Randy to devote to producing an airshow. So, he has hired Erin Shuttleworth to serve as the full-time Executive Director of the show.

Growing from three warbirds to about 20, along with skydivers, civilian acts, jets, and jet cars, the 2017 airshow grew from an hour to over three. Drawing on a long line of successful aviation events in Goshen, 2018 will undoubtedly be even bigger, better, and more successful than the 2017 America's Freedom Fest. If you're in the Goshen area, check it out next summer. 



Above: The F-22 Raptor piloted by Maj. Dan "Rock" Dickinson (photo by Alan Barbor).

Below: The Team Steam Jet Cars, Chattanooga Choo Choo & Cannonball Express, presented by Darnell Racing, Shockwave and Flash Fire Jet Trucks (photo by Michael J. Gallagher).



