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Officials highlight air show safety record despite recent fatal incidents

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By DENNIS MAGEE, dennis.magee@wfcourier.com | Posted: Thursday, August 25, 2011 9:00 am | (0) Comments

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Rusty Zey, a firefighter at the Waterloo Regional Airport, said emergency personnel and a variety of agencies are prepared for the Thunder in the Valley Air Show. (DENNIS MAGEE / Courier)



WATERLOO, Iowa --- Two pilots and a wing walker died over the weekend, throwing a shadow over such stunts as local organizers close in on final preparations for the Thunder in the Valley Air Show.

One of those killed, Bryan Jensen, a native of Atlantic, was scheduled to appear Saturday and Sunday at the Waterloo Regional Airport.

Event coordinator Chris Harshbarger opened Tuesday's planning committee meeting with a prayer.

"Incidents in recent days make us very mindful of our temporary existence," Harshbarger told the assembled group.

The show will go on as scheduled, and in fact three acts were added to replace Jensen's performance. Harshbarger, though, acknowledged a heightened sense of awareness.

"Our attention to detail has been stiffened by this," he said.

Rusty Zey, a firefighter at the airport, said personnel are trained to handle emergencies, and events over the weekend won't alter their efforts.

"Nothing's going to change. The plan stays the same," he said.

The International Council of Air Shows in a message to its members emphasized the personal nature of the incidents.

"Industry considerations are secondary to the heartbreak being experienced by those most deeply and personally impacted by the deaths of these air show performers," the statement reads.

On Saturday, Lt. Jon Egging, a member of the Royal Air Force Red Arrows, crashed his jet at the

Air Show Info

- Time: Gates open Saturday, Aug. 27 and Sunday, Aug. 28 at 8 a.m. Show starts at 11 a.m. and ends before 5 p.m.

- Location: Waterloo Regional Airport
2790 Livingston Lane, Waterloo, IA 50703

- Tickets: \$10 for adults in advance and \$15 at the gate. Tickets are available online or at local HyVee stores. Children 12 and younger get in for free.

- Parking: No parking will be allowed on Dunkerton Road, Wagner Road or Leverage Road.

- More information: [Air show website](#)

Air Displays

- The Beast Air Shows (Pitts model 12 biplane)
- Erik Edgren Air Shows
- The Indy Boys (A 350 mph jet powered bus)
- Larry Schlasinger (Yak 52)
- U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds
- U.S. Army Black Daggers parachute team
- Younkin Air Acts
- Hawkeye L-29 Flight Team
- Super Club "Franklinstein"
- AeroShell Aerobatic Team
- Chuck Coleman (Extra 300L)
- Darrel Massman (Panzel 330 N422DM)
- Tim Newton (Grumman TigerCat)
- B-2 Flyover

Ground Displays

- E2-Hawkeye
- CH-Supper Stallion
- FA-18 Hornet
- T-6 Texan II
- C-130 Hercules
- P-3 Orion

Airport Photos

Bournemouth Air Festival in Dorset, England.

That same day, Jensen went down with his Pitts Model 12 in Kansas City. He called his biplane The Beast because of its powerful thrust-to-weight ratio. A video of the crash shows the aircraft spiraling nose first into the ground and bursting into flames.

Then on Sunday, wing walker Todd Green was on an open cockpit plane. As he attempted to grab a helicopter's landing skid in midair, something apparently went wrong. Green seemed to miss a handhold and fell 200 feet.

Air shows in 2011 in the United States have produced four fatalities, according to the association. Despite appearances, the group said the industry has a proven safety record, describing the weekend crashes and deaths as "very likely an anomaly."

"... In both 2009 and 2010, there were no fatal accidents at any North American air shows. And, in 2008, there was just a single fatal accident," the message reads.

The association also reminded its members there have been no spectator fatalities at an air show in the United States since 1952.

"Accidents on the air show circuit are very rare," Harshbarger said. "All of the pilots and performers take precautions that they are safe."

At the same time, the International Council of Air Shows acknowledged what stunt pilots and aerialists do is dangerous.

"Low-level aerobatic flying has inherent risk associated with it," the message reads.

Waterloo Fire Chief Pat Treloar will serve as incident commander should an emergency develop during Thunder in the Valley. The fatalities over the weekend, though, changed little in the way of planning for Waterloo's event.

"Safety is the No. 1 concern of any air show, and this is no different," Treloar said.

He noted the viewing area will be separated from the aerial arena by more than 1,000 feet, and pilots are well-trained.

"They know what to do when they get in trouble," Treloar said.

"They know exactly where the spectators area is and will stay away from that," he added.

Capt. Joe Leibold with the Waterloo Police Department is more concerned about traffic flow than an incident with an aircraft. Organizers anticipate thousands of spectators each day, meaning a lot of vehicles will be working their way toward the airport.

Gates open at 8 a.m. Aerial displays will start about 11 a.m.

"If 50,000 people show up at 11, there's no way our highways can handle that," Leibold said.

He hopes guests take advantage of the wide window available to arrive.

"If they trickle in at 3,000 or 4,000 an hour, that would be good," Leibold said.

The International Council of Air Shows described efforts pilots pursue to lower their risk factors, including "meticulous maintenance of their aircraft, frequent practice and careful design of performance sequences." Each is designed to enhance safety.

According to the association, as many as 12 million people attend air shows in the United States and Canada annually. On average, 350 events are scheduled each year in North America, generating about \$110 million annually.

There are only 320 air show pilots in the U.S. and Canada, according to the association.

Treloar said visitors should feel comfortable attending Thunder in the Valley.

"I'd bring my family and sit in the spectators area. No doubt about it," he said.

Leibold echoed the sentiment.

"It's very safe. My family is coming out to it," he said. "In fact, my son would live here for three days if he could."

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Photos: Thunder in the Valley 2011



Waterloo Regional Airport prepares for air show



A look at the Waterloo Regional Airport throughout the years

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