

BEHIND THE SCENES

REDLANDS AEROBATIC CUP

STORY BY SUSAN BELL, IAC 438132

In Hollywood, a behind-the-scenes look at your favorite movie or television series reveals how movie crews seemingly shoot the impossible: that crazy car stunt performed with precision drivers and pyrotechnics, how that alien creature was computer animated over an actor's performance, and how entire worlds are shot on green-screen backgrounds. While perhaps not on the level of a feature film (and as a member of the Producers Guild of America, I should know), starting a new regional contest has some near-impossible feats as well. Let's take a look behind the scenes of the inaugural Redlands Aerobatic Cup, which took place September 3-5, 2021, in California.

THE SCRIPT

Like any good movie, a contest must have a solid foundation. Chapter 26 held the Delano Labor Day contest for over four decades before issues with the flight standards district office (FSDO) made it impossible to continue. It was a major blow, and the chapter searched for a new contest home. After an aborted try at Santa Maria, the chapter held three contests near Lancaster, California, at Fox Airfield. But the extreme desert weather proved too challenging, so the search — or as Joseph Campbell, an American author and professor, would call it, “the hero's journey” — for a new home began.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BOB DRIVER

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PREPRODUCTION

A contest location needs three things: manageable airspace, accessible and unpopulated land under the box and waiver area, and a cooperative airport. Finding all three of these items in California has become increasingly difficult. In March of this year, I contacted the former contest director from Chapter 49, which held a contest in Redlands a decade ago, and I received an overview of the local issues and history. First plot point of our story is to find out who is in charge.

Redlands Municipal Airport is managed by the city and has an appointed Airport Advisory Board that advises the city council on airport matters. It was to this group that I made an initial presentation via Zoom during COVID-19 pandemic restrictions that was attended by relevant parties, such as the local pilots association, the current aerobatic practice area (APA) holder, city management of the airport, and the mayor of Redlands. I introduced our chapter, explained why we were interested in Redlands, mocked up a draft box over the river bed, explained the airport could remain open, and answered questions. The board unanimously approved the concept of a contest, and I was given the okay to move forward with the FSDO and city management.

At this time, I listed the contest on the IAC contest calendar and alerted our chapter membership to mark their calendars. Member Zinnia Kilkenny offered to help set up a hotel discount and look into local food and banquet options. I started designing the contest poster as it always gets people excited about attending and gives us something to use for promotion.

The second plot point in our preproduction script is to identify who owns the land where the box markers must be placed. It ended up being extremely complicated at Redlands as there are five federally protected endangered species in the river bed north of the field: the San Bernardino kangaroo rat, the beautiful Santa Ana River woolly star flower, the tiny San Bernardino spineflower, and two nesting birds.

Redlands Airport Supervisor Carl Bruce Shaffer facilitated this discussion by contacting the relevant parties: a conservation district, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the county flood control district. The conservation district happened to be on the phone with the Fish and Wildlife Service immediately before our Zoom meeting and suggested the box markers be elevated to protect the species. They also wanted the chapter to hire a biologist to survey each marker site — an expense we could not afford. The BLM responded to the initial inquiry with a time frame of over two years before it would be able to review our request!

Following some careful repositioning with the help of a geographic information system map expert, the box was moved entirely onto airport and county property, with the exception of a corner we would not mark. After speaking with a county representative, I applied for the ingress permit in April, which included an environmental review. I detailed a new “floating” box marker made of Tyvek bungeed to stakes that would not trap the kangaroo rats or thermally damage plants that I had tested in my windy, desert backyard.

After all these environmental concerns, dealing with the actual contest box waiver and traffic pattern change — plot point three — was a piece of cake. These should be applied for with the local FSDO a minimum of three months out in my experience to allow for any issues to be addressed. The contest box waiver submission included diagrams of a requested 1-mile radius of the box center, with part of the waiver to the surface north of the runway, and then increasing to 1,500 feet AGL south of the runway to allow the airport to remain open. The holding area was placed in the existing APA with the permission of its owner, local Redlands IAC member Tom Jones. Both the waiver contest box and the traffic pattern move were readily approved by the FSDO later in the summer.

In June, I attended a meeting of the local pilots group, the Redlands Airport Association (RAA), to present the contest plan, reassure everyone we will strive to keep the airport open, and answer questions. The RAA was supportive of the event, and several of its officers and members volunteered to work the contest. This month I also developed the on-site ground plan with the airport supervisor and made arrangements with the FBO to ensure adequate aircraft tiedowns and vehicle parking in their leased space.

And then the unexpected happened — plot twist! I tore my ACL and meniscus in my right knee and must have surgery in July. That same month, the city department over the airport decided — 10 days before the event was to be approved by the Redlands City Council — that we must pay a \$3,500 event fee for use of the airport. This development was an unacceptable, arbitrary, and capricious fee compared to the no-fee usage the local EAA chapter and pilots association have. IAC’s government liaison Bruce Ballew and I strategized, and I prepared a slide deck rebuttal to send around and called the mayor, who had offered his help should we need it. At one point in these stressful 10 days, it seemed I needed to appear at the city council meeting the same day as my knee surgery, which would have meant someone driving me there and wheeling me in seated in a wheelchair. Redlands Mayor Paul Barich rectified the situation, the event contract was redrafted with the city attorney, and it was signed and returned the day before the vote.

The major dramatic conflict of this contest script was overcome, and now it was time to play catch-up on all the usual contest directing tasks. The T-shirts must be designed and ordered, sponsorships secured as our regular fundraising volunteer was not available this year, trophies and special awards selected and ordered, hotel and food finalized, and program book laid out and updated. Finish the incident response plan. Order a port-a-potty for the judging line. Meet with the county to add a lock on the river bed gate for box access. Figure out the near box makers on the airport as the brush is 3-4 feet high. And encourage pilots and volunteers to preregister.

That last item is what we in film script writing call the “dark night of the soul.” When pilots do not preregister, it feels like all is lost to the contest director (CD). The budget was ballooning with fixed expenses, and I was worried my guestimates on attendance were way off base. I did not know which judges I could count on yet. I worried my lunch plans were too expensive and that we wouldn’t have enough volunteers to run the lines. I wondered if I should eliminate niceties such as the posters or the programs to reduce the outlay so the chapter would not be too far in the red. The goal was to break even when we set the contest registration fee, which covered the majority of the contest expenses, as well as the \$55-per-pilot IAC sanctioning fee and a \$5 California point series fee. If there is one thing you take away from this article, it is please preregister!



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PRODUCTION

In moviemaking, production is when the cast and crew come together to start filming. In my analogy, production begins with moving materials to the contest site and setting up the box.

During the weekend before all the pilots flew in, a small core group of chapter members gathered to load three vehicles with ice chests, tents, chairs, boundary devices, and markers that were spread out between Fox Field and Apple Valley Airport. This year, as I was on crutches, I could do little but point and make sure we collected everything we needed. The convoy drove past an active wildfire in the Cajon Pass, helicopters and tankers flying overhead, and delivered the bulk of materials to IAC member Tom Jones' hangar in Redlands; he volunteered space.

For the week of the contest, more registrations and volunteer signups were coming in, and I sent out emails reminding everyone of dates and times. I also had several preregistered pilots pull out of flying, which made the film producer side of my brain nervous.

As the contest was Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, with a holiday on Monday, the box setup was Thursday. This box wasn't flat. It wasn't an easy-to-transverse cornfield. There were boulders

everywhere. In fact, it might be the most challenging box the chapter had ever set up. The front three markers were on airport property — a rise above the dry Santa Ana river bed. This area is covered in brush with embedded cacti, and we had to use pop-up tents as markers. We were blessed to have two young, eager student pilot volunteers helping the box team navigate the terrain. It took several hours to get the front of the box done, and I could sense we were getting hangry. "To lunch in an air-conditioned restaurant," I ordered.

Next up was placing the new floating Tyvek markers in the environmentally sensitive river bed. I had pre-identified the closest dirt road parking spots and loaded a hiking GPS unit with coordinates. Off the team went, with me hanging out by the cars and unable to follow on foot. Slow but steady progress was made until, while driving to the next marker, I smacked into a large rock, backed up, then got stuck between a slope and another rock in my "city" 4x4 Jeep. Tom Jones and Lloyd Massey dug out the offending 400-pound monstrosity as the rest of the team set off to mark top center. Forty-five minutes later, the Jeep was freed, and we managed two more markers before sunset and the numerous coyotes made marking impossible. We were disappointed not to see any kangaroo rats.

Friday dawned too early. More Redlands volunteers appeared, registration was set up, and the box monitor was educated on announcements to incoming traffic but didn't bother to read NOTAMs of the pattern change. The box team went back out to finish the missing markers. I began to breathe a sigh of relief that six months of work was about to commence.

If you've never volunteered behind the scenes in a key role at a contest, you likely do not know the massive amount of work and time spent once the flying is done. At the end of practice and registration day, most people head off to dinner. The core contest team is just getting started as the volunteer positions for the next day must be assigned and the judging clipboards for the Known and Free flights must be assembled in flight order. Both of these jobs can take hours upon hours.

Volunteer coordinating is the HR of the contest. The volunteer coordinator must balance the requests of pilots flying with those of full-time volunteers here to learn. In the case of Redlands, many local pilots volunteered who would be able to return year after year, and making certain they were exposed to different positions was paramount to me as the CD. I also made sure we balanced the pilots volunteering so no one is put on a boundary more than once, and Primary and Sportsman pilots got a chance to record and learn. So, the next day when beginner pilots complained about their assignments, my three hours of sleep made me a grumpy CD.

Flight order is first picked by random, then adjusted to take in account shared aircraft and safety pilots. There is no perfect way to do it when categories are not large, but we try very hard to make sure no one gets stuck flying first or last every flight. Once the order is determined, the clipboards are built by stacking sequences and judging forms in the correct order. Because everyone is so tired at this point, we take

the time to go back through every board (and there are 14 per flightline when you have five judges) and double-check.

On Saturday, the contest began with the mandatory 7 a.m. briefing. I started with roll call of the pilots in order of flight, and not uncommon, one of them was not present and wasn't rushing in the door. Per the rules, that is a \$50 fine or failure-to-prepare point penalty. He won't ever be late again! Next, we went over the volunteer assignments, and because our flightlines were so complicated, I reviewed the names for the entire day. Chief Judge Michael Church took over to discuss how he wanted the flying to take place. The order of flight and volunteer assignments were posted and the day began ... I wished.

I had many issues with no-show volunteers and pilots not wanting to do specific jobs, so I had to revise the volunteer positions four times. I started using colored paper to make certain the correct version was distributed. I borrowed a golf cart to zoom about with my injured knee and now started picking up slow movers and depositing them at the judging line so we could get going.

Behind the scenes, ice was being purchased and poured into chests we had filled with water and Gatorade the night before. Radio batteries were switched out, and clipboards were given to the chief judge, the starter, and the boundaries, who drove out to their positions. Our north-east boundary was at least a 20-minute drive due to having to cross a bridge and approach the rugged river bed from the north, unlock and relock an access gate, and then hike to a lonely spot in the midst of the elusive kangaroo rats. This boundary was almost always the slow point in getting the flying started. But my chapter is so adamant on good box placement, we give a "No Outs, No Zeros" award to the rare pilot who achieves it. We would have boundaries.

The first day of flights went well. Starter Ronald Hansen kept things moving, and we finished before 5 p.m. I distributed the Unknown sequences to Intermediate and above. As usual, scoring took some time, and many people headed off without knowing the results from the Frees.

Sunday was a repeat of the above — same efficiencies and same volunteer issues — and we got done just after noon. We had a break for tasty sandwiches, which a volunteer had picked up. People fed, and with many pitching in, the on-airport tents, chairs, and ice chests were swept into a hangar in record time and the airport set back to normal. Pool and nap time happened for many as the scoring continued for several hours.

As Hangar 24 Brewery is located across the street from KREI, I wanted to develop a relationship with them. We asked to hold a casual "happy hour" awards banquet there, and at 5 p.m. arrived to set up. Many of the pilots already had gathered on their patio, so the awards were started promptly at 6 p.m. with the silent auction that had been open all weekend closed. Awards presented, we broke down the awards setup, collected the money for silent auction winners, and made sure we had a plan to move everything the next day from Redlands to Apple Valley. And we drove home. As CD, I got 12.5 hours of sleep over three nights.



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POSTPRODUCTION

I wish the contest ended after the awards show ended and the contest materials were moved into storage. But another week or so of work remained for the CD and others. I wrote handwritten thank-you notes to all nonflying volunteers and sponsors, an old-fashioned touch. Contest paperwork had to be scanned and sent to IAC for record-keeping. Outstanding sponsorship invoices were made, and silent auction winners were invoiced. The accounting was caught up and the reimbursement check was sent by the treasurer. And work was done with the contest photographer to post awards photos on social media.

In the case of Redlands, I was also asked to attend the city's Airport Advisory Board meeting for a debrief later in September. I want to build this contest into a public-facing event for the local community, so outreach there and cooperation with city officials are key. We had a few tiffs with locals on the field, but involving the RAA helped counter this tension as their volunteers now understood the realities of contest flying and judging. I'm crossing my fingers and toes all is well for next year.

And once all these things are done, it is rest for a few months, and then start the process all over again. At least next year we will have the first contest under our belts and understand where the pressure points will be. Contest directing is often a thankless job herding cats and playing politics. But a well-run contest that everyone enjoys is the reward the hero, or heroine, of the story seeks, and it leaves the audience with warm fuzzies and a desire to come back next year. **IAC+**

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