

DANNY CLISHAM TALKS ABOUT HIS FORTY YEARS AS AN AIR SHOW ANNOUNCER

The decision to become an air show announcer came very easily. I knew when I was growing up that there were some terrific performers and pilots, and that there always would be. I was always interested in Hollywood and as I went to air shows as a spectator I realized there was a way to take what announcers of the day were doing and make it more entertaining. I liked to talk and I wasn't shy about talking, and I just thought I could get the job done.



I never had any professional training. In those days, a lot of pilots just announced for each other. One would land and pick up the microphone for the next guy. Bill Barber was probably one of the most articulate pilot/announcers in that regard, and I learned a lot from him. I was given a big time break by my uncle, Jim Mynning. If he hadn't been a flyer and a pilot, my folks might have been reluctant to let me try it. But we always had planes parked in the yard so it was kind of natural for me. As an announcer in the entertainment business, I took a lot of cues from Ed McMahon and Dick Clark. I used to watch their presentation style as announcers and try to emulate them.



My very first air show was in Elkins, West Virginia in the fall of 1965, and it happened entirely by chance. I was there as a ferry pilot for Bill Barber. The show was produced by Johnny "Skyrocket" Morgan, and they had hired the local TV color man as the announcer. He got up on the hay wagon, which was how a lot shows back then were announced. The first act took off, and the color guy said, "OK, here he comes... here he comes." The pilot flew past the crowd and the color guy said, "OK, there he goes!" When the next act came on, he said basically the same thing... "Here he comes...now he's turning... there he goes!" I could see that was all he had to say, so I got up on the hay wagon behind him and told him that I could whisper the maneuvers in his ear and then he could repeat what I said to the crowd over the microphone. He turned to me with a real deer-in-the-headlights look about him; he was terrified, he was clueless, and he knew it! He just stuck

the microphone in my hand and turned tail and ran. The last I saw of that guy was the bottoms of his shoes as he raced away. So the show was mine. I wasn't even dressed for it...

That first air show was done on the fly, so to speak, and I was dressed in casual clothes. But I was already thinking about the Hollywood thing. We needed to elevate the industry and get the respect we were due. After all, we're entertainers first and pilots second. I thought that dressing like a celebrity would if they were the master of ceremonies just made the whole thing more Hollywood. And so, the Danny Clisham signature suit was born. The first suit, at my second air show, was grey. Then came a dark blazer. The white suit was much later.



People ask me about the boutonniere. That's easy. The boutonniere came from Jackie Gleason. He would come out to host his show with a pocket hanky and a boutonniere. He looked like he cared about his audience. It was just a class act. I thought, if it works for him, maybe it could work for me.

In forty years of air show announcing, I've certainly seen a lot. I'm often asked if there is one person or one event that stands out in my mind, and I have to say, "No." There are so many dynamic performers that have been able to accomplish things even my wild mind couldn't conceive. They certainly bumped up

the industry in terms of entertainment value, skill and professionalism. If I had to pick one, I know when I read this article I'd say to myself, "What were you thinking? You forgot so-and-so." All I can say is there have been people in every calling – producers, skywriters, wingwalkers, pilots, designers and builders – who have left something lasting behind for our business.

But the biggest change I've seen in the past forty years is in the crowd. The crowds are bigger and more diversified every year. That came from quantum thinking by people like Rick Grissom and others who brought in the corporate aspect with chalets, corporate sponsorships and company events. That really helped to bring out people who would have never thought to come to an air show by themselves. And that has helped shows to build up loyalty and develop a tradition that keeps people coming back to a show year after year.



There have been a lot of changes in technology since the 60's. But the one thing that has had the most impact for me is the professional outdoor sound systems we have now, with professionals at the helm. My personal air show world is better if the crowd can get a clear picture of the pilot. If I can't get the message out about all the great and talented people I work with, it's all lost... Waldo Pepper had to do it with a bullhorn. I get to do it with state-of-the-art communication equipment.



And, being recognized by the people I admire most is probably the most gratifying. Collectively, I'd say the Sword of Excellence and the Art Scholl Showmanship Award are my proudest accomplishments – just to know that some people thought I was worthy. I wasn't ready for either and I was surprised by both. But those awards led me to believe that for all these years... at least I was on the right track. That was ten years ago, and I had been announcing for 30 years. I said then that I wanted to be doing this for another 30 years. I just have the most fun, and get such a kick out of it; I hope I'm announcing air shows way into my 80s.

All of my professions have been extensions of my hobbies. I still have a lot of fun with general aviation airplanes. I have three of them and they're all a little different. And I'm very intense about live performances – they just recharge me. I would encourage everyone in our business to go out and see as many live performances as they can – concerts, opera, theatre, the orchestra. Even if you think it will be boring, you'll always see something you can learn from about showmanship, practice, and sacrifice. The more you can incorporate from what you see, the more you'll enhance your own performance.

I do have some advice for up-and-comers. If you want to be an airline pilot or an air show performer or a competition pilot or anything, here is my blanket statement. It works for everything, it's simple, it will never change and your success is guaranteed: *Choose something you have a passion for, and work to get just a little bit better at it every day.*

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