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Volume 44 #7 | July 2022  
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# Spotlight on Sun 'n Fun's Drone Light Show: Insider's (female) perspective.

By Emily Hines



It is 4pm and a relaxed crew gathers for a briefing by a trailer packed with drones. The team spreads out and jumps on golf carts and inside an RV, and the caravan begins to roll towards gate 74. We are about to set up for a drone light show. No big deal, we are only a performance at the world's second-largest airshow, attended by over 100,000 people. The largest gathering for a drone light show in the United States.

Starlight Aerial Productions, a division of Great Lakes Drone Company, is responsible for the performance. The company is owned by Matt Quinn, yet I look around at the rest of the crew who will carry out this monumental task and notice that I am surrounded by mostly women. Chief pilot Haley Carpenter, Operations Manager Ashley Munson and Assistant Stacey Kunkle are carrying out this mission, with a few other notable male crew members such as Zach Scholz.

In an industry with circa 7% female pilots (and 30% non-pilots overall), I am fully cognizant that I am

surrounded by a statistic-crushing team. Surprised, albeit pleasantly, by this higher-than-average ratio of women in this small group, I nonchalantly stride up to the owner and ask how this came to be for the Drone Light Show pioneers of America. Coincidence or conscious decision? In this industry, he tells me, attention to detail is critical and the necessity to ask questions rather than guess the answer makes the difference between a show being successful, or having drones fall out of the sky - quite literally - in front of thousands of people. During the hiring process, all three of these ladies stood out versus their counterparts in those particular areas. "Women are not afraid to ask questions when they don't understand something, and they work hard to learn every aspect of this drone application meticulously" I am told.

By 6:15pm, 75 drones have been laid out on a grass field each in order and by number. 300 propellers have been screwed on, batteries connected, bulbous undercarriages armed and ready to shine bright. The back-up

drones are standing guard. RTK and GPS connectivity is established and being monitored. Visual inspections are underway and weather is checked every few minutes. Everyone knows what they need to do, and their roles are each executed with precision and accuracy, akin to the maneuvers undertaken by the Thunderbirds a few hours beforehand. There is no distracting this team of committed hard workers despite Sun 'n Fun's best efforts to throw random novelty aircraft in the skies directly above their work area which is only 500 feet from





the nearest active taxiway. No. With several hundreds of thousands of dollars at stake, the team at Starlight Aerial is focused on the task at hand and if the sound that high performance aircraft make when flying directly overhead can't distract them, then nothing will.

When the drones have been queued up, pre-flighted and checked, I overhear all 3 ladies on the phones with their kids checking in before bedtime back home. They are done 90 minutes early and able to turn their attention back to the first love of their life, their families back home. Each of them wants their children to know that aviation can also offer a home.

"Look honey! Check out that plane going by." "I miss you too, sweetie. Give Daddy hugs from me. I love you guys so much." "I can't wait to tell you all about it." Ah, the sweet familiar draw of home as a full-time working mother, I feel that conflict intensely. I love aviation but I miss my girls and my husband too and wish they could be a part of this.

The sun begins to set. The 3 ladies are standing side by side, aligned with

their backs to the sun. Their silhouettes appear, ponytails peeking out from their aviation-themed caps. They meticulously spread out and visually inspect their army of drones while simultaneously air-kissing their kids over Facetime goodnight. The conversations were brief but important. They were interrupted just once by the thunderous roar of the P51 coming in to land, making way for the T33 which was cleared for the air boss to takeoff next. That's how it's done here. This is the norm when you are behind the

scenes at an airshow, with things to do and continually multi-tasking. These women were inspiring to watch. Each of them had their own story. This article is not the place to disclose those, but they each shared with me their life and I am happy that they trusted me to do so. We all talked about what we each go through, the delicate juggling act of managing careers with home life. The desire to raise children while simultaneously fulfilling a meaningful career. A brain being constantly occupied by two conflicting needs with little mutual



overlap between them both.

A female welder is the RPIC for tonight's performance. The Chief of Operations doubles up her workload doing drone maintenance/repair in between shows. It may be that the lawn chairs lined up outside the Starlight trailers are predominantly pink, but let it be clear that the women who are running this show are resilient, driven, multi-disciplined and crushing the gender stereotypes. They also have full male support in learning this elite drone light show trade.

Babies tucked in, phones put away, it's back to business and the stakes are high. There's just over 1 hour to go before our slot and the amount of work which goes into prepping this is unfathomable. There is no end to a checklist before launch, and when it is finished, the drones are checked again. Matt is now pacing anxiously in complete silence while observing every meticulous move his team makes. They exude calm and focus and his trust in their ability is palpable to the extent that he has encouraged them to train several additional people right here, right now, in preparation to perform the largest live crowd in his company's history. He is present but not intrusive. His team has got this and he knows it.

By 8pm, I am looking at well over

\$100k of drone equipment sprawled out on the grass. RPIC Haley is only 5 months into working with Aerial but already she sits in the driving seat inside the trailer. Zach too is a RPIC for Starlight. He sits beside Haley, patiently, quietly, and watches her as she monitors the performance of each drone and runs through the software like she has been doing it for years. Her focus commands the respect of both her boss, her instructor, and her team members alike.

In 2021, Starlight Aerial performed 96 shows. In 2022 that number can be crushed with a larger team. This business is a high-risk model. Mother nature determines the final go- or no-go decision, regardless that pyrotechnics have been ordered, waivers filed, permissions sought, operational limits established, travel accommodations and drones ready on site, and contractual limits are met. Here we are, over 4 hours of preparation and ready, watching the winds to make sure the drone swarm can fly safely and legally.

As our slot nears, I am treated to a few quiet minutes on top of the 11-ft RV which hauls the gear trailer behind it. I observe the calm before the storm and acknowledge the gratitude I feel to be in the privileged position of experiencing first-hand what it's like to watch this from the front lines. But that gratitude is

fast interrupted by the "Go" decision being made and now it's time to shine.

The countdown begins. The show starts. The first bars of Sia's "Unstoppable" play. Over the headsets I can hear commands to launch, and now it sounds like angry hornets are about to invade our planet, starting with my head. Drones are rising to the skies. In small groups, and after a tense bit of flickering, they slowly take off and

the first form of two intertwined blue and yellow hearts take shape and off we go. We sequence through a multicolored DJ spinning his decks, a "75" to commemorate USAF history and a number of other dynamic and sometimes 3D shapes to include an American flag waving in the wind, the lift off of Space X's Falcon Heavy and a nod to John "Lites" Leenouts, the CEO and President of Sun 'n Fun who recently retired. I am acutely aware at this point, that there is not much the team can do if things don't go to plan. Watching the show is the recompense for all but the PIC who has her back turned and is working too hard to reap the rewards of watching her own display. The others in the crew are supervising the drones. Like the mothers they are, they observe which drones are behaving best and which might need to go on time out. The consequence for bad behavior is immediately being grounded but not replaced by another. It's too late for that and the show must go on.

It isn't until well past 11pm that the equipment is finally taken down, put away and loaded onto the trailers again. A resounding round of high fives for the success of this event, and we each retreat to our various accommodations to reflect on the evening's performance and plan the next show. So many drones crewed by so many women! But first, another text home to the husband to check that child #1's cough isn't keeping her up, and a reminder that child #2 needs to remember her saxophone for band practice tomorrow. For mothering continues to be a full-time job with many benefits but little downtime nor vacation. Such is the way of the working women these days. And that's fine by us, because despite our work commitments, that show too, must go on.

