

“Hey, Majd! Nice work at the airshow down at Langley! Would you mind covering our airshow?” the airport manager asked, while I was getting my rented plane ready for a flight.

“Anything for you, sir!” I replied.

A formal photography assignment that I didn't have to either freelance or bug anyone for! All of my work has put on the map! I was so excited!. I also had absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into at the time. If I would have discussed everything a bit further, and if I didn't have my mind focused on the upcoming flight, I would have asked him a couple of questions, regarding what I had to do in order to be able to get behind-the-scenes photojournalistic access to the airshow. Everything that's accomplished in aviation has to first cut through an entire roll of red tape. The Federal Aviation Administration has to roll out a procedure for every last thing that you want to do. The purpose behind that is to keep you, the other pilots in your airspace, and the actual airspace itself, safe.

An example of the red tape is when a pilot is going for a flight that is further than 25 miles. You have to plot all of your waypoints on an aeronautical chart and calculate the distance from point-to-point. You then have to measure the exact magnetic heading that you are going to fly. You also have to estimate the exact time you will be flying over that waypoint. Once you are done that, you file it all to the Flight Standards office so that they will be able to perform a search-and-rescue if you crash.

Think that's a lot of work? Well, let's fast forward a couple of months to the day before the air show. Traditionally, the day before the air show is supposed to be a laid-back day of rehearsals, hanging out, talking about airplanes, and best of all, no crowds! I finally arrived at the airport at about 10 AM, and met the airport manager, who was sweating bullets in the hot August sun.

We sat down for about 20 minutes, while he was explaining the paperwork that I had to fill out so I could photograph the air show from an unusual angle: An application to be covered on the air show's insurance policy. A volunteer form that I didn't fill out originally, because I didn't want to be assigned to parking cars and not have a big part in the air show. A detailed explanation of the type of work I will be trying to perform. A form saying that I acknowledge that I won't have an opportunity to walk back and forth during the actual itself. A form saying that I must have my camera with me at all times. You name it! After filling out all of the forms, the airport manager warned me that new regulations pop up like the zits on my face.

I wasn't expecting much else to do in the morning before the air show. The airport manager told me to stand back for the practice day and just shoot from where the general public stands, and write a preview article for the air show. Seemed simple enough for me. I had a great day with some of my best friends just enjoying what I love to do. Being around planes and taking photos.

When I got home, I went to the computer to edit some pictures that I took at the air show, and did a brief write-up for the airport's website, and some aviation event websites. I went to bed expecting a nice, stress-free Saturday of covering an airshow from the best seat on the airport.

My hope was shattered when I woke up in the morning. The camera wouldn't turn on. The flash would pop up, but the screen and shutter were frozen. I felt like I was going to make an amateur out of myself at my most prestigious photo shoot yet.

So broken camera and all, I made the trek back up and was one of the first cars on the airport. The extra time was useful for trying to pick out the root of the issue, and attack it from that root. My battery contact was misaligned. No big deal! Once I was able to fix my problem, the other performers, media, and airport staff came marching in like a disorganized army. My green mediavest served its purpose.

"Majd, it's nice to see you out here! Gonna take some cool pictures?" the airboss asked me smiling.

"Of course, I'm one of the airport photographers today," I said in an excited tone.

"Oh, you're one of them guys that are going to sit right under the flight path. Glad we talked early. You have to sit in on the performer's briefing, fill out this form, and present it to the FAA official on the field," he informed. I had my work cut out for me. I filled out the form, as it was a piece of cake.

The scariest part was when I had to sit in on the performers briefing. I was going to lead the group of photographers I was with. My head was a pressure relief valve, trying to push away the heat of thought out of my head in the form of sweat. The performers were talking about safety, the box, and the photographers. The subject of photographers in the box kept everyone on their toes. I mean, it's hard to fly at tree top level when you are concerned for the safety of others.

One of the guys said "It makes me uncomfortable having more than three people out on the box."

That alone made me feel nervous about the situation. It gave me the message that there might be too many people, and made me feel like I wanted to opt out of my contract. I never want to feel like one who compromises safety. It is against a fellow pilot's will to not give another pilot his wish.

Walking out with my head down, my flight instructor and fellow photographer saw me.

"Majd, be happy. It's air show day!" he laughed.

"I'm thinking of relinquishing my vest - There are too many of us for the comfort of the pilots," I said.

"It's just me, you, and whoever Air Museum Network is sending out. Three people," he said in a cheerful manner.

"Okay, I'll go," I said.

We made our rounds with the ground displays, before heading out to photograph the airshow from under the flight path of the planes. It was a fantastic experience! The headlining plane was the Grumman FM-2 Wildcat. In case you don't know, the Wildcat was America's response to the Pearl Harbor Attacks. It was the hired gun of the Navy in the Pacific Theater of World War II. The Wildcat was buzzing above us at breakneck speeds. It's diving made me feel like I was on a Japanese warship that was in the process of getting attacked. That experience made me freeze. It's hard to take pictures for me when something astonishing happens. I was surprised I still had hair at the end of the day.

That experience was worth all of the hard work and dedication I put into obtaining flight path access. It made me feel like viewing an air show from everyone's perspective didn't do justice in experiencing an airplane. Being right under the airplane makes you feel its power, its purpose, and its elegance. It also taught me that the best things in life don't come without hard work and dedication.