

Personal Insights from the Old Pueblo Group

Sharing our world with you.

The Big 'Sho'

Air Ops – James Lemaster

One of the key tenets of the Old Pueblo Group that I find particularly important is the ongoing sharing of personal stories with our clients. Although I am relatively new to the Old Pueblo Group, I have spent my entire career at Morgan Stanley. I began as an intern for Dean Witter in 1986 and officially joined the firm after graduate school in 1991, and here I am still today. But much older and wiser, which leads to my story.

I am proud to be a parent to two wonderful children, Elisa (27) and David Luke (23), and I feel incredibly blessed to have my longtime partner, Dawn, and her daughter, Haley, in my life. Family is very important to me, and I cherish the time I can spend with them, be it in the mountains and outdoors or at home on weekends. I particularly enjoy winter outdoor sports but will save sharing those adventures for a later time.

Growing up in a military family, I was profoundly influenced by my father and both of my grandfathers, who were Veterans. I was born in Vicenza, Italy, while my father served in the U.S. Army during the late '60s. During his deployment in Vietnam, my mother and I lived with my grandparents in Rapid City, South Dakota, where my grandfather served as the Deputy Adjutant General for the South Dakota National Guard. I have fond memories of that time around the Guard post and am truly grateful for our Veterans.

From an early age, I developed a passion for aviation. As a son of a pilot, it was something I was continually exposed and fancied myself flying in the rarified air amongst the clouds. And like all pilots, I cannot hear an aircraft overhead without instinctively looking up to identify it and determine if its 'super cool' or just 'kinda cool,' but still cool, nonetheless. It was such a passion that I earned my wings in 1997 and have been flying ever since.



Air Ops overseeing placement of an F/A-18 Hornet

I ultimately became the owner of a 1979 Cessna Turbo 210 Centurion, colloquially known as the *SUV of the Sky*. This trusty and capable aircraft has taken me and my family to all corners of the continent and back, and never fails to feed my aviation enthusiasm and passion. I fly it regularly and it always puts a smile on my face. Well, except when its time to fix it, then it puts a smile on my mechanics face.

After college and graduate school, I aspired to pursue a career in Army aviation. However, after discussions with both my grandfather and father, I was dissuaded from that path and chose to follow my father's footsteps into the financial services industry. As I began my career with Dean Witter/Morgan Stanley, I sought ways to remain connected to aviation in other capacities besides flying, which opened me up to the airshow business and the crux of this Personal Insights. It all led me to the Big 'Sho.'

The Amigo Airsho (and yes, that is how it is spelled) was founded in 1981 as a unique partnership between the U.S. Army and The Amigo Airsho, a civilian-run 501(c)(3) organization. Its mission is simple: To promote aviation and honor the sacrifices of service members and their families. It highlights aviation for our El Paso community and has become a source of pride for our city. Normally the show has been held at Biggs Army Airfield which resides on the Fort Bliss US Army Post complex. This military location, originally known as *The Post Opposite El Paso Del Norte*, was founded in 1846 and has had numerous mission changes over the years. It is one of the largest military training installations in our country.

The airfield itself has an equally interesting history. Prior to becoming an Army Airfield, Biggs Air Force base was home to various bombing squadrons in the 50's and 60's and was a key part of our Strategic Air Command. It has had stationed upon its tarmac historically significant aircraft from the B-29 Superfortress, B-36 Peacemaker and B-52 Stratofortress. The Air Force base served in that capacity until it was realigned in the mid 1970's to become Biggs Army Airfield at Fort Bliss. Throughout its life, Fort Bliss has always been an integral part of El Paso's history. As we like to say, "Fort Bliss is El Paso and El Paso is Fort Bliss."

What started out as a simple event, showcasing a mix of civilian and military aircraft, had grown into a thriving annual event attended by hundreds of thousands of spectators. I started volunteering in 1990 within the Airfields Operations Group. My official title was Airsho Ops Staff, which sounded fancy while my REAL work was that of manual laborer - moving fences, setting up booths, carrying bottles, and directing airplanes. It was hard work but fulfilling beyond all expectations! I worked my way up through various positions and currently sit as the Senior Vice President of Airfield Operations. Annually I would volunteer my service for this mainstay events and consider myself a part of its history.

Unfortunately, that all stopped in 2012. The Army was going through a major reorganization of priorities when it became evident that the growth and mission of Fort Bliss would complicate holding the event at Biggs Army Airfield. As a result of this, the event was put on hold and remained so for the next 12 years. The loss of the show was felt by aviation enthusiast throughout the valley, and even though smaller local events were attempted, they never had the impact of the Big 'Sho.' During this hiatus, the Amigo Airsho volunteers kept together, working on possible solutions and we did our best to keep the mission alive and the community interested. Imagine my excitement when in early 2023 we were asked to discuss with the US Army the interest in re-establishing the show at the base. They essentially tasked us to start creating a framework and operational plan for a show to go down in October of 2024. The Big 'Sho' was back!

My job this time around was unlike anything I ever experienced as this renewed mission felt like I had bit off more than I could chew. I immediately began working on pulling together my team and resources. To better help you understand, the Airfield Operations group is responsible for the aviation components of the event and ensuring the safety of the airshow performers and guests. We collaborate closely with Biggs Army Airfield management, the FAA, El Paso International Airport, and various Fort Bliss departments to ensure a safe and seamless collaboration occurs between all the entities involved. It is regulatory intensive and logistically challenging with an incredibly tight timeline of events that took all my free time to develop and deliver. To give some perspective, we typically start planning years in advance. Not this time - we had to accomplish it in just nine months! Thankfully, I have great partners within the Old Pueblo Group, a supportive family and a dedicated volunteer corps that allowed me to dive fully into this challenge.

The show itself is a massive undertaking, involving logistics for parking, security, feeding and transporting tens of thousands of guests each day, ramp movement coordination, equipment and services organization, timeline management and above all Safety. Once the patrons are on the airfield it is my team's responsibility to safely entertain and inspire them with performances alongside interesting exhibits and displays. This year we featured the Royal Canadian Airforce flight demonstration team the Snowbirds, the US Army Golden Knights parachute team, hosted Red Bull Aerobatic champion Kirby Chambliss and many others. Static displays included Army SH-60 Blackhawks, and AH-64 Apache attack helicopters along with numerous General Aviation aircraft. We also had the Commemorative Air Force support by providing a nice mix of WWII Aircraft which included the famous C-47 "That's All Brother," B-25 Mitchell "Yellow Rose," and the ever-popular P-51 Mustang "Gunfighter."

Getting ready for an event like this takes a tremendous amount of pre-planning and coordination. In fact 90% of the work is done way before the Aircraft even arrive. We have an extensive process with the FAA which ensures the site and performers are properly qualified. Additionally, all the Airspace around the venue needs to be coordinated and closed for safety. Although most of show coordination and administrative tasks fall on me, we hire a Professional "AIRBOSS" to coordinate the daily flying and manage the airspace during the show. Mr. George Cline has handled these duties for us for the last 6 events. We also have a dedicated team from the FAA that liaisons with us through the whole process up until the final flight. They are fantastic to work with and share our common goal of creating a safe operational space in a fast-paced environment.

I am truly proud of my time with the Amigo Airsho and the working relationship that our organization and I have developed with Army and installation management through the years. It is very rare for a Civilian organization to hold a major festival on a military installation, in fact we believe we are the largest with this structure in the world. It is a great source of pride, and I am personally honored to be able to give back to my great community.

But as much as I love the aircraft (which I really do) and the challenge of the task, the amount of meaningful relationship I have made along the way is what I truly cherish most. The next Amigo Airsho will be in October of 2025. I'll be there!



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