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End of an era



With Andrew Thompson beside him, Derek Williams makes his last landing in his trusty Fletcher, ZK-JAA, prior to retirement after 59 years and over 32,000hrs' topdressing.

As January drew to a close, so did the amazing career of one of New Zealand's longest serving topdressing pilots. The sun was shining brightly and the winds were light for Derek Williams's last flight in his trusted Fletcher ZK-JAA.

Accompanied by his loader driver and good mate of 19 years, Andrew Thompson, the pair touched down at Hamilton Airport in front of many colleagues and friends.

As I looked around the Super Air hangar I saw many faces of experience belonging to people who were clearly enjoying catching up with old friends. Bright smiles and happy handshakes as each guest arrived. Each of the retired pilots was happy for Derek, but they also would have felt his sadness to be ending a career spanning 59 years and more than 32,000hr.

When Derek left Tauranga for his final flight in JAA, Rescue Fire bid him farewell with a good hose down, and as he taxied in at Hamilton he received his second soaking of the day. The propeller stopped turning and the canopy slid back, releasing Derek to the sound of applause. He had saved his last pair of white overalls for the occasion.

Quietly he greeted everyone and then sat down at a table to fill out the paperwork for the day's flight. The job is never over until the paperwork is done.

As with all such occasions there were stories to be told. I could see that some of his friends, who have known Derek for a very long time, were keen to share their thoughts and to wish him well. A few amusing stories were shared by Mike Feeney, Dave Starr, Les Marshall and Mike Keen. Looking around the listeners I could imagine that there were many yarns to be told as the evening wore on.

Neil Miller, Super Air manager, presented Derek and Andrew with gifts and invited Derek to say a few words. We were all keen to hear his rundown of his life as a pilot but also appreciated that the end of a wonderful era is an emotional time for him.

Quietly spoken, Derek speaks only when he has something to say. He is like most of his old mates, understated and modest. They just get the job done without the need for song and dance.

A couple of years ago I asked Derek if he would let me tell his story. He smiled at me and nodded his head. I am happy to be writing this now to help Derek celebrate a great career.

The following week I flew the Cub over to Tauranga and sat down with Derek and his partner Edith Robinson for a few very enjoyable hours, listening to Derek recall his life as a pilot.

Derek was born in 1937 and he grew up in the Piako district. In 1953 he saved up 10 shillings for his first ride in an aeroplane, at a local air pageant. The pilot that day was June Howden, flying Percival Proctor Spirit of Waikato. It was uncommon in those days to be flying with a woman pilot, but June was well known for her WWII ferry flying with the Air Transport Auxiliary in Great Britain and continued commercial flying back in New Zealand.

That flight obviously left an impression on Derek. He worked at the Waharoa Dairy Factory to earn some money and he began learning to fly in 1954 at Waharoa (Matamata airfield) with the Piako Aero Club, along with his friend Jimmy Woodhams. Their instructor was Alex Blechynden, ex RAAF, and to this day Derek believes that the discipline taught to him by his early instructors was a vital influence throughout his career.

Alex was unable to supervise Derek's solo flying, so he would ride his motorbike over to Ken Fenwick at Hamilton. There Ken sent Derek solo in Tiger Moth ZK-ALU on 8 January 1955. He gained his PPL later that year at Waharoa in Miles Magister ZK-AWX.

Alex was a part-time pilot for Adastra Aviation in Tauranga and asked Derek if he would like a job as a loader driver. In 1956 the company was operating Tiger Moths and there was a lot of work about, which meant working long hours and time off only when the weather was unsuitable for topdressing. At the time Derek was trying to build up his flying hours, so progress was a little slow.

His boss at Adastra was Garry Toulson, who took the young Derek under his wing. Derek speaks fondly of Garry and with great respect. He recalls that he had a motorbike in those early days, and "Garry called me aside one day and said that I would kill myself on that bloody bike and that I should get a car. Of course I couldn't afford a car and Garry's solution was that I would have his nice three-year-old Vauxhall, paying him back when I could.

"Not many young fellas had a car like that. It would have been pretty good for picking up sheilas, but I was too busy working for that and I needed all my money for flying."

Garry gave Derek a rating in Fletcher ZK-BIZ at the end of 1957 which was handy for the company as then Derek could ferry aircraft when needed — and it was the start of his topdressing career.

In those days the driving between farms was long and slow and so the loader drivers spent a lot of time staying with the farming families. Derek enjoyed this side of the job and loved getting to know the clients well. It was a time of hard work, great hospitality and good friendships.

“Now all these years later, I could be working for sons and grandsons on some of the farms.”

The Tauranga Aero Club became a familiar place to Derek after he joined in 1956, and it was there that he passed his CPL flight test on 22 November 1960, in Tiger Moth ZK-BFG. There were no vacancies at Adastra for a new pilot, but a little over six months later Derek was spreading his first load of fertiliser for James Aviation, flying 225hp Fletcher ZK-BWC, on a farm at Reporoa.

Ian Palmer was supervising from the ground for Derek's first 50hr, following which he was mentored by Bill Pentecost for a further 150hr and says that “I learned a hell of a lot from Bill ... he had a way about him, without telling you off, but you really knew what he expected.”

Derek recalls that there were plenty of pilots after the war and many were looking for flying jobs. Unlike today, airline work was not a common career path. He felt lucky to have a job topdressing and, although they worked long hours, the pay was “pretty good”.

This was an era when the pilots were learning from their own experience for much of the time. The Fletchers were not dual control and the young pilots had to rely on advice from others and learn as they went along.

Today's industry standards have come a long way from those early times in which Derek was working. Health and Safety was not a priority or well understood. The standard of the airstrips themselves has improved and pilots are aware of issues such as fatigue.

Besides spreading fertiliser, Derek has handled some pretty heavy-duty chemicals over the years, including 2,4,5-T, 1080 and 2,4-D. He once found himself with a case of Dipterex poisoning and was very ill for a week. Thankfully the agricultural industry has moved forward and there is much better protection for everyone today.

Apart from a period 1962–63 when he moved to Hawke's Bay to work and three seasons spent spraying in Malaysia, Derek has been based at Tauranga.

He says he really enjoyed working at Adastra, flying four different Fletchers, and then in 1969 he found himself flying ZK-CPK, a brand new 600hp Aero Commander Snow S2D. Adastra had the New Zealand agency for the type and Derek found his new machine was a delight to fly. It was much lighter on the controls than a Fletcher and the big radial engine meant he could carry bigger loads and there was plenty of power when he needed it. The only downside was that the Snow had no flaps, which made some of the strips a bit marginal.

Derek logged 5000hr in the Snow, spraying forests, topdressing and at one stage spending three days dropping water on a fire at Bay Park. A more unusual task for the Snow was carting barley in the hopper from Matakana Island to Tauranga, from where it was trucked to the mill.

In September 1971 Adastra Aviation was sold and once again Derek was working for James Aviation. The Snow fleet was not retained by James Aviation and the aircraft were put into storage before being sold overseas. Derek returned to flying 400hp Fletcher ZK-BII, which he flew for many years. When James Aviation closed down, Derek began Williams Aerial Work and continued flying the bright yellow BII.

Eventually Mike Keen organised for a fertiliser company to buy out Derek, five other sole operators and Robertson Air Service, forming Super Air which continues to operate today, now owned by the large fertiliser company Ballance.

An opportunity to have a change of scenery came Derek's way in 1998 when the company needed pilots to fly in Malaysia, spraying fertiliser on palm oil forests and tea plantations with turboprop Crescos.

Derek was in his 60s and thought he would like to have a go. John Ponds and he earned their basic gas turbine ratings and then drove down to Feilding to get their type ratings in Hallett Griffin's Cresco. Derek spent some of his time at 5000ft in the Cameron Highlands and he didn't really enjoy the flying in this region. The altitude made it a little cooler than near the coast, but the weather was very changeable and unpredictable. Jungle was not the most desirable terrain for flying over, he considered.

In 2000 Derek was posted to Mersing, a fishing town on Malaysia's east coast near Johor and Singapore. He enjoyed his time topdressing in a Cresco there.

Derek has also made a few interesting ferry flights throughout his career after earning his single engine, single pilot instrument rating. He has delivered Fletchers to Scone, NSW, and to the Solomon Islands, as well as spending time delivering a Cresco in Borneo. Later he got the call to train a pilot in Sabah, Malaysia, so he took two Crescos across the South China Sea to begin work.

Derek's 40 years of accident-free flying lasted until the new millennium, when he suddenly had two in a row. His first, in 2000, saw him lucky to escape injury but Fletcher ZK-LAY was written off. On takeoff near Te Miro, Cambridge, the engine suddenly lost power and Derek was forced to jettison the load. The Fletcher ran off the end of the strip, hit a water trough and was arrested in a fence.

"When the aircraft hit the trough everything went black," says Derek. "I thought I must have been dead. Then the plane came to rest and I realised I was still alive. I pulled back the canopy and found the engine was missing and the canopy was covered with black muck from the bottom of the trough.

"I walked back up to the strip and found the engine halfway up. I met up with my loader driver and the farmer who were both thinking the worst. We headed to the farmhouse for a cup of tea and when we got back to the strip all the emergency services were there. A pretty young ambulance officer offered to check me out but I said I was fine.

"I went and got a replacement aircraft from Hamilton and continued working. Maybe I should have let that ambulance lady check me because that afternoon I developed the biggest headache and I had in fact suffered whiplash."

The following year Derek had his second accident. He was up in Sabah, Malaysia, on a strip which was cambered to allow for water runoff in heavy downpours. The Malaysian CAA had requested that Derek take one of their pilots for a flight and he put him in the pilot's seat. Maintenance standards had been a problem over there and Derek was unaware that the brakes were not working on his side.

He explains how events unfolded. "We took off and spread the load and on landing the aircraft started to run down one side of the camber. I found there were no brakes, so I tried to spool it up but it was too late. The aircraft ran nose down into a drain. The fuel tanks had split open and I noticed a little fire down by the prop, which was being fed by the dripping fuel.

"Luckily the canopy opened and I told the Malaysian to get out fast. I grabbed my flight bag with my passport and camera from the back locker, and then took pictures as the aircraft burnt. The whole thing burnt in 20 minutes and the next day I was on a plane home to New Zealand."

Derek considers that he has been very lucky in his career, having lost many good pilot mates over the years.

Besides topdressing all these years, Derek has enjoyed recreational flying and is well known in his Harvard NZ1091. In 1978 Derek and a group of colleagues tendered for 14 Harvards from the RNZAF for \$6700.

To their surprise they won seven aircraft for this price, so they called a meeting at the Tauranga Aero Club and offered the aircraft for sale. The plan was that they would sell six machines which would give them one for free. There were no takers, so Derek and three friends took one each and the remaining three were handed back to the air force, to be re-tendered and sold to Australia.

Derek found the Harvard easy to fly, as it has the same engine as the Snow. The running expenses mean that he doesn't fly it a great deal, but he has enjoyed demonstrating it at airshows such as Wanaka and every year he flies it over the cenotaph at the Mount for the Anzac Day dawn parade. He hopes to fly it at a few more dawn parades yet.

With a career spanning nearly 60 years, Derek has lots of great memories, has made some great mates and will continue to enjoy flying for fun. We wish him well and look forward to meeting up around the traps.

Enjoy your retirement, Derek!

- *Report and photography by Neroli Henwood*

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