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Happy faces at Matamata



The joys of going solo! Tyler Bond receives his reward.

Neroli Henwood reports and photographs activities at the 47th Walsh Memorial Scout Flying School

Every January a piece of New Zealand aviation history is recreated and celebrated at Matamata aerodrome, in the heart of the Piako District. Many young Kiwis have followed aviation dreams which began at the Walsh Memorial Scout Flying School, and many come back to roost, year after year. It has been a part of hundreds of lives and for some families the connection is generational.

It seems that one Walsh camp is often not enough. A good number of the students return each year, often taking up where they left off the previous year — and after the age of 20 they still keep coming back in other roles.

Some are in the fledgling stage of their aviation careers. Others have gone in a different direction, but the love of flying and the Walsh are still strong. These young people volunteer to help with day-to-day tasks and take valuable leadership roles.

It all began in 1967 when George Arkley, a senior Scout Commissioner and a member of the Royal Aeronautical Society, ran the first Walsh Memorial Scout Flying School. The first school was a success and the NZ Division of the RAeS offered to provide a financial subsidy, through New Zealand Aeronautical Trusts Ltd, and offered the help of its members to run a school to a high professional standard. The requirements of the trust are that the school furthers aviation in New Zealand and is a lasting commemoration of the early aviation efforts of Leo and Vivian Walsh.

It has proved to be a very successful partnership that reaches many areas of society. While it is fundamentally an aviation event, the various groups involved today are by no means all aviation orientated.

A most important part is the involvement of the Scout Association of New Zealand, and leading that side of the organisation is David Jupp, a Walsh veteran of 43 years. Scouts NZ has assisted hundreds of Venturer Scouts and Ranger Guides to experience the thrill of flying, and many attain their Flying School Certificate and the Scout Wings.

Much of the culture at the camp is from the Scout/Guide movement and the original Walsh brothers' WWI New Zealand Flying School. It is quickly apparent that the camp runs like a well-oiled machine.

Of course an event of this size cannot function without the help of many adults. Some of the adult helpers, who arrive from all over the country, have been to most of the 47 camps held so far. They have made such a difference to so many young lives and have made lifelong friends, many of whom they only see at the camp each year. It doesn't take an outsider long to see what a close "family" they have formed.

The Walsh also draws the aviation community together, and the support it receives from all sectors of the industry is testament to the high regard in which the school has been held since it began. Employers regard Walsh graduates highly as an indication of the calibre of the person they are looking for.

Gordon Ragg, director of the school, shared some astonishing statistics. The school has seen many important milestones and has seen around 500 young people follow their career aspirations into all areas of the aviation industry. In the past 47 years there have been more than 1500 students and 25,000 hours of flying, and the school looks forward to its biggest milestone to date when it turns 50 years old. That will be an impressive celebration!

This is probably the only place in aviation that sees support on this scale, given freely and in such a coordinated fashion, from many different Trusts, RNZAF, Rotary, Airways, CAA, Air NZ, ASL, Air BP, MetService, regional flying schools — a most diverse range of businesses and individuals.

The school relies on flight training organisations from all over New Zealand to lend aeroplanes for the duration of the camp. This year the 17 aircraft in the fleet were predominantly Cessna 152s and Piper Tomahawks.

Each of the students has earned a place at the camp, chosen because they are motivated and set themselves high standards. These are attributes which are necessary at the Walsh, and the students I saw didn't seem to have a problem meeting these requirements. Some students are Scouts/Guides, some have received scholarships from organisations such as Rotary, and others have funded themselves.

The generous support from individuals and companies, both by financial contribution and the donation of experience and time, allows the students to fly at very favourable rates. The need for continued corporate sponsorship is vital, and the benefits are shared equally between the

graduating students and the companies supporting the school. After all, this is where the aviation industry will get many of its quality future employees from.

The huge depth of experience within the instructing staff is enviable, and the Walsh students receive the very best instruction and mentoring available. This team is led by CFI Mark 'Woody' Woodhouse and he is clearly very proud of everyone involved.

Mark originally trained as teacher before embarking on a career as a pilot with the RNZAF, flying helicopters for about six years and serving as an instructor for a year. Upon entering Civvy Street he took up the role as CFI at Massey University School of Aviation, followed by a training captain position with Air Nelson. He presently enjoys long-haul flying with Air New Zealand on the B777. Throughout his career Mark has held instructional roles and clearly has a passion for teaching and is very good at it.

As CFI of the Walsh Memorial Scout Flying School, Mark works with people from all walks of life and leads a team of equally enthusiastic staff. He is an excellent role model to his young students and their respect for him and the rest of the staff is plain to see.

Like Mark, many of these instructors have been volunteering at Walsh for years and some began their flying there. The fair scattering of A category instructors and high-hour airline pilots among the 25 instructors gives plenty of people available to answer questions and talk flying with the students.

On arrival at Walsh Camp the students are divided into four flights under the direction of the CFI. Each flight has a flight commander (an instructor), a flight leader (a returned senior student), a group of instructors and the students themselves, each student assigned an instructor for the duration of the camp. The flights are all assigned a roster of duties including cooking, cleaning and working on the flight line.

This year the school had 41 ab initio students, 24 returned students and one student staff.

I first visited the camp on day 3, when it was clear that the groups had already settled into a routine. This was the first flying day for many of the ab initio students.

The flight briefings are given as mass briefings in the Matamata Soaring Centre using PowerPoint displays, an efficient way to cover this large number of students. If any are unclear on any points their instructor can explain during the pre-flight briefing.

By mid-morning the Effects of Controls briefing had been given and the flight line was buzzing with activity. You would think that chaos could quickly prevail, but what I saw was anything but. The students knew what time they were flying and each shift took off as planned.

As this was the first flight for many of them, I could see a mixture of excitement and a little apprehension on their faces as they made their way out to get to know both their instructors and their aircraft. While I was talking to Steve Scott, deputy CFI, his student arrived beside him — Jacinda Coupland, about to fly an aeroplane for the first time. She had a lovely smile, but I could see she was a little nervous too.

Jacinda was one of a number of young women attending the Walsh this year. As a generality, the balance of males to females each year is approximately four to one. Jacinda had some excellent women role models throughout this year's camp, with women represented in all areas, encompassing six instructors (including A cat Penny Mackay), two meteorologists, three air traffic controllers and many other female Scout leaders and staff.

With such a large number of aircraft movements in the short duration of the camp, ATC is considered to be vital for safe and smooth running. The mobile Airways Corp control tower occupies centre stage on the flight line and the controllers take an active role in runway preparation, lighting placement for night flying sessions and directing the airborne proceedings.

To accommodate such a busy circuit, Matamata's runway 28/10 is divided into three (left, centre and right), with parallel operations permitted on the left and right runways. It makes for a busy workload for controllers, instructors and students, but the experience gained is invaluable and essential for the heavy traffic volumes.

On a hot day the control tower was well worth a visit with the occupants having the best view on the airfield, air conditioning, chocolate cake and lollies. Luxuries aside, they had plenty to keep them on their toes. Phil Craig, in charge of the tower when I visited, had been coming to the Walsh for 15 years. He explained that over the duration of the camp they would deal with 700-plus hours of flying from around 1700 flights, all adding up to more than 8000 movements.

As New Zealand's air traffic control has been centralised to the larger airports, exposure to this type of control work is not common. The controllers who work at the Walsh readily confess how much they enjoy their experience and how valuable it is to be exposed to this type of event.

Kate Lindsey was at the helm, clearly enjoying her first taste of what would be a busy two weeks in the tower. From Dunedin, Kate has been rated for two years. She has two young children and saw a newspaper advertisement to recruit air traffic controllers, so she decided to apply and see what happened. She was accepted to train and enjoys her job enormously.

To gain an appreciation of how the students were feeling after their first time at the controls, I tracked down Jacinda and her fellow Flight 1 member Enya McPherson for a debrief.

The first thing that struck me was the brilliant, beaming smiles on both their faces. Jacinda had gone from apprehensive to absolutely buzzing. She confessed that she had not been sure if she wanted to come to the Walsh, as she was worried about coping with the flying and getting to know everyone. However, all worry had been in vain and she couldn't wait to go up again for her second flight that afternoon and already felt part of the family.

Enya was able to attend Walsh with the help of a Rotary scholarship and had already done some gliding at Omarama. She sparked her interest in aviation as a cadet with the Air Training Corps and knows how much she loves to fly. She had been for her first powered flight that morning and was looking forward to many more in the following days.

On day 10 we arrived just as Tyler Bond taxied in from his first solo. A long-held camp tradition has all first solos drenched with buckets of chilly water by their peers. This young man strolled out bravely to take his dues and came back looking happily soggy.

I was delighted to hear that Enya had become the first student of the camp to solo, early that morning, so I was keen to find the girls again for an update on their progress.

Enya was understandably elated with her achievement, and anybody would have suspected she had been solo purely from the delight on her face. I felt quite emotional as she told me about her flight. You have to have been lucky enough to have walked in Enya's shoes to really appreciate how she was feeling.

Jacinda was thrilled with her flying and proud of what she had achieved so far. She was looking forward to her chance to solo, along with the rest of her classmates, in the following few days and was clearly loving the experience at the camp.

The weather was less than ideal this year with consistent days of swirling crosswinds and three mornings with fog. Those who were not out of bed bright and early missed the best conditions of the day. Cancelled flights due to bad weather create some anxiety for the ab initio students as they near the end of the camp and strive to reach their goal of going solo.

This year all the students went solo except one, who just needed a little more time, a huge achievement by the students and their instructors under difficult circumstances.

Along with all the friendships formed over the years, I also found that romance had blossomed at the Walsh in recent times. Mel Voorend attended the camp from 2006–2010 where she met Aaron Silcock, an instructor. Aaron is an Eagle Air pilot based in Hamilton and the couple still enjoy returning to Matamata each year for their summer break.

The strong personal bonds among the staff and the students are obvious. The Walsh seems to be the kind of place where friendships are made and memories will stay for a lifetime.

With the camp drawing to a close and the excitement among the students high, the 47th Wings Presentation Parade and Awards Dinner was a highlight of the camp. My husband Bill and I felt honoured to share this evening with all the people who had worked so hard at this year's school and, most importantly, with the very proud students.

The biggest treat for many was the guest appearance of the Mosquito, with Keith Skilling in command, on its return journey to Ardmore from Wings Over Wairarapa. The aeroplane was parked as a backdrop for the Wings Parade and everybody marvelled at the sight. I hope the presence of the Mosquito was truly appreciated by the younger generation as they posed for their photos in front of it. Where else in the world has this happened since air force squadrons were photographed with this amazing aeroplane?

Keith Skilling presented the students' Wings and certificates on parade before climbing back into the Mosquito to bid us an exhilarating farewell. As the Mosquito was taxiing for takeoff we had a surprise attack out of the blue by the Strikemaster which then joined the Mosquito for its homeward flight.

The Awards Dinner was a lovely occasion, once again reinforcing the high regard in which the Walsh Memorial Scout Flying School is held throughout New Zealand aviation. When I looked around the marquee and listened to all the esteemed guests speak, including the keynote address by AVM Peter Stockwell, Chief of Air Force, I felt humbled to be a very small part of it all.

A delicious four-course dinner was prepared and served to the large group of diners by the Matamata and Morrinsville Scout Packs under the supervision of Gwyn Fraser, Ann Hammond and their hardworking team of chefs. Throughout the serving of courses, the recipients of the large list of awards were announced, many accompanied by very generous prizes and all to huge applause.

The ultimate award each year is the Walsh Trophy, a lovely trophy depicting the faces of Leo and Vivian Walsh with some very well regarded names already engraved upon it, presented to the best all-round ab initio student. This year the honour went to Joseph Turner-Steele and was accompanied by a huge round of applause from his fellow Walshies.

Three cheers to all the staff, sponsors and students for another happy and successful year at the Walsh Memorial Scout Flying School!

- *Report and photographs by Neroli Henwood*

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