

Aero club gets two new bush pilot planes

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Ready to fly: Marlborough Aero Club chief flying instructor Travers Tennant gets ready to take budding aviator Nicholas Patchett, 8, out in one of two newly-assembled planes the club bought as part of its new training regime.

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After six months of waiting, pilots at the Marlborough Aero Club have finally been able to take to the skies in two new planes, the first steps in turning the club into one of New Zealand's few bush pilot training schools.

Club president Craig Anderson said it had been a long six months getting the two Cessna 172 planes from the United States to take off on their first flights here on Friday.

The planes, which cost \$140,000, had to be found using the internet, then inspected in California and Arizona, flown to San Francisco to be disassembled then shipped to New Zealand, to be reassembled and registered, he said.

"It's a lot of work. The paper work getting them on the Civil Aviation Register here is just a mess. Your shoulders start slumping."

However, Mr Anderson said the planes were crucial to the club's plan to transform itself, teaching prospective pilots to fly in back country, taking off and landing on grass strips and other less traditional runways.

Bush pilot training was something that was not offered by many clubs in New Zealand, but was more challenging and a lot more fun than traditional flying, teaching greater skills, he said, and the wait for the planes had been worth it.

"There's a lot of people walking out of those planes with big grins on their faces and everyone's been saying people are going to get a lot of enjoyment out of them."

The instructors had also been working with experienced Marlborough pilots learning and getting familiar with the about 10 landing strips, which the club will be training on.

"We're very lucky because on the field here [at Omaka] we have got people who have done a lifetime of bush flying and strip flying, people with in excess of 15,000 bush flying hours."

The strips offered different challenges, being curved or tricky to approach in different conditions. The club was preparing a list of each strip's features and trainee pilots would be trained specifically for each strip to make sure the training was safe, Mr Anderson said.

The planes will get their first serious outing at the club's inaugural Healthy Bastards Bush Pilot Champs on February 2.

The champs, which will attract at least 30 pilots, from around the country will involve two competitions, one will see pilots trying to take off and land in the shortest distance and the other will see them trying to land as close as possible to a line on the runway.