

NELSON & MARLBOROUGH'S MAGAZINE

Tomato



FLY WITH THE
**BUSH
PILOTS**

from Marlborough
Aerodrome

Meet Nelsonians
**BRAVING
POVERTY TO
VOLUNTEER
ABROAD**

After a gruelling
pre-season

**THE MAKOS
ARE HUNGRY**

PILOTS GO BUSH

– AND LOVE IT

The Marlborough Aero Club is making a name for rugged landings in remote destinations. Sophie Preece finds out how a flight less ordinary is attracting new pilots

Craig Anderson finds flying dull and airports boring – which is a little unsettling because he is president of the Marlborough Aero Club. The truth is, he would far rather land on a river bed than a runway, and flying is about the destination, rather than the journey.

It's not just about being in the air, he says, "it's about where it gets you". The big, fat bush-wheels on his plane mean the destination can be a paddock, the side of a hill, or Fa beach, just as long as he has 60 metres to land and take off.

"We love the outdoors and I can use that plane to go wherever I want, without driving." Craig even packs his fishing rod for some aero-angling. "You can spot the nice deep holes in the river and land right beside them."

It's an ethos shared by many in the local flying fraternity and sets the Marlborough Aero Club apart as the only one in New Zealand specialising in tail-wheel and strip flying. Instead of run-of-the-mill, runway-to-runway operation, the club teaches pilots the skills for flying and landing in rugged and remote terrain, says Craig.

"They can go out to a farmer's airstrip, take a Thermos and a couple of sandwiches and have lunch as part of their training. Or even land on a beach at D'Urville Island. It's a whole niche market that no-one else is doing."

The club has bought two Cessna 172s – perfect for short landings and takeoffs – and developed a flying syllabus to match, focused on hands-on flying, improved stick and

rudder skills and "eyes outside". That means considering what's going on below and around the plane, rather than just the control panel. "It's flying by the seat of your pants," says Craig.

He has been flying since he was 18, and says a whole lot of experience, trial and error goes into landing on river beds, with few planes designed to do it. But aero club

"We're not saying there is zero risk, because there always is, but the challenge is to go and enjoy it."

*– Craig Anderson,
club president.*

pilots and planes can still land at places most people wouldn't feel comfortable with.

Aviation, along with the rest of society, is risk-averse these days, he says. "It's become very safe – and part of that is that it can become very boring." People often gain their Private Pilot Licence (PPL), happy to achieve the goal, then tire of the standard flights to Nelson or Kaikoura.

"I think we have something really special here. We are going to encourage you to go to

these challenging places, and we train you to do it properly. We're not saying there is zero risk, because there always is, but the challenge is to go and enjoy it."

Most flight training in New Zealand is geared towards airlines, and pilots who visit from Auckland and other major airports have often never landed on a grass strip, so even the easiest ones are an exciting change. The club has a dozen strips available around the province, from paddocks in the Awatere and Wairau Valleys, to the Moawhitu strip on D'Urville, offering access to corners of Marlborough that many people never see. Most are owned by farmers who learned to fly at the club, and they often own aircraft.

The push to give the club a name for a flight less ordinary is yielding returns, with a new level of interest in recent months. That's vital for its survival because, like elsewhere in the country, business has been decreasing.

"You have to have a certain amount of flying hours to pay the wages," says Craig. "The planes don't make money just sitting in the hangar."

The ultimate goal is to entice people to Marlborough to do their PPL because they want the kind of back-country flying that isn't available anywhere else. Steve Stretch is a perfect example. The 38-year-old returned to New Zealand recently after a few years working in Australia's mines, and decided to learn to fly. He eyed Nelson and Tauranga, but chose Marlborough because of the excitement of strip-flying, backed up by stunning scenery and good weather.



Steve was the first of the club's students to learn in one of the "tail-dragger" bush planes. Landing on strips in remote corners of Marlborough has been the highlight of his training, with a recent trip taking him to the back of the Awatere Valley for a barbecue, for example. He has clocked up 30 of his required 50 flying hours, and expects to gain his PPL in the next few months. After that he can take family and friends away in an aero club plane, paying only for the time the engine is running, and he has plans for snowboarding down south and diving and hunting trips to D'Urville Island and beyond.

is making judgement calls." And the biggest satisfaction is sending someone to fly solo for the first time, which takes just 10 hours on average.

“School ended at 3.30 and I turned up here at 4 o'clock for my trial flight.”
– Young Travers Tenant knew where his future lay.

Club Chief Flying Instructor Travers Tenant says Marlborough is the perfect pilot playground, with mountains to explore, farmers happy to share their strips and an aero club dedicated to training for the rough.

Travers learned to fly the day he left Queen Charlotte College in Picton, always intending to make it his career. "School ended at 3.30 and I turned up here at 4 o'clock for my trial flight." Previous flying instructor Kevin Wilkey took him aloft that day, "and six years later here I am in his job".

The air time Travers gained as an instructor helped him meet his aspiration of flying commercially, and he is now a pilot for Sounds Air, while also working three to four days a week as instructor.

"I didn't want to be any instructor - I wanted to be a good instructor," he says.

The difference comes in caring for students: "Going over and above - turning up on days off, or staying on an extra hour because a student has a flight test tomorrow."

Being in a small club makes the training personal. "You get to know people very well. You get to read people. The biggest part of it

Aviation engineer Jay McIntyre, whose JEM Aviation hangar sits at the edge of the field, has been club captain, vice-president, president and "general dogs-body". His hangar is full of classic old planes, and when he sets off down the runway, he's likely to be in a Nanchang or Tiger Moth he owns with a syndicate of pilots.

Camaraderie is one of the highlights of the club for him. "The flying is cool, but the bar is often the best bit because there are so many different people with so much to talk about."

A PASSION FOR ALL AGES

Frank Prouting remembers looking up at a plane when he was a schoolboy at Peel Forest in South Canterbury and dreaming of being able to fly. He had just turned 22 when he gained his licence in 1964 - numbers he

recalls easily: "You always remember the highlights of your lifetime."

The strip on Frank's Awatere Valley farm is now a popular place for the aero club to take students to practise landing in a paddock. "It's good to see the aero club out and I feel young people need to get experience on paddocks and so forth, in case they ever have a forced landing."

His own flying combines business with pleasure, using planes to get farmhands, dogs and supplies to the six outback camps on the family farm. "Also aircraft were handy for spotting and keeping stock out of high basins in winter."

Frank still takes his own plane around Marlborough's mountains whenever he can, landing in the Clarence Reserve, before circling back around Mt Tapuae-o-uenuku, or heading to the Leatham Valley, where he used to take his children when they were younger. "That one is down in a valley around a steep gorge and you can't see it until you're right there, so you have to be the right height and ready to land before you can see it."

He loves flying as much as ever, saying he would be a "dismal critter" without air-time to keep him happy. Flying around the mountains he also loves to walk in makes it even better.

"Just flying from A to B, from airport to airport, is like being in a car, whereas you get out into the mountains and it's mighty interesting." It's also more technical and you have to "fly by feel," he says. "Once you learn all the ins and outs around the mountains it's a real challenge."

Frank already has close to 4000 flying hours in his log book, which is "not bad



1 The Marlborough Aero Club has recently bought two new Cessna, perfect for strip landings 2 The Healthy Bastards competition in February was perfect promotion for the Marlborough Aero Club. Photo by Rob Duff 3 Travers Tenant says one of the biggest parts of flying is looking outside 4 Craig Anderson lands on riverbeds, paddocks and hillsides, thanks to the fat tyres of his plane 5 A highlight of Steve Stretch's pilot training has been landing on strips in remote corners of Marlborough 6 Aviation engineer Jay McIntyre 7 A new Marlborough Aero Club Cessna

for young fella like me". At 71 he should have plenty of gas left in the tank, if John (Sandy) Sandilands is anything to go by. The 87-year-old was a technician with the RAF during World War Two, doing "air adjustments", fixing planes en route.

The chronology doesn't quite add up - until Sandy explains how he forged his birth certificate to get into the air force. He would have liked to fly then, but didn't have the necessary academic qualifications, which he says were stringent.

"Since I have been flying I've wondered what all the fuss was about," he says. On his 80th birthday his family gave him two flights through the aero club, and he's been flying ever since, living life with the philosophy that you're only as old as you feel.

At the other end of the age spectrum is the club's youngest trainee pilot, 12-year-old Alex Dawson, who tracks his desire to fly back to a plane trip from Russia when he was aged 1. He flies every second Sunday, and has taken friends up to check out the view as well.

Alex joined the aero club through the Young Eagle programme, which has a membership of 30 to 40 teenagers, all of whom are interested in aviation. They get to visit all aspects of the operation, from Marlborough Helicopters to the control tower at Woodbourne, and have two flying days a year, all for free.

Marketing and Administration Manager Zoe Gray says club member donations help to pay for the programme. "They know how passionate they were at a young age and they think it's nice to be able to help young people with that passion to have a go."

Zoe delights in talking to aspiring pilots, whether they are 12 or 87. "It's amazing with the people who come through the door. They are all really interesting and they all have a story behind what motivated them to fly."

BUSH-PILOTS TEST SKILLS

The inaugural Healthy Bastards Bush Pilot Champs at Omaka in February were perfect promotion for the aero club's bush-pilot training course. About half the 55 pilots competing for best short landing and take-off, as well as the most accurate precision landing, were from outside Marlborough - and entries are expected to double next year.

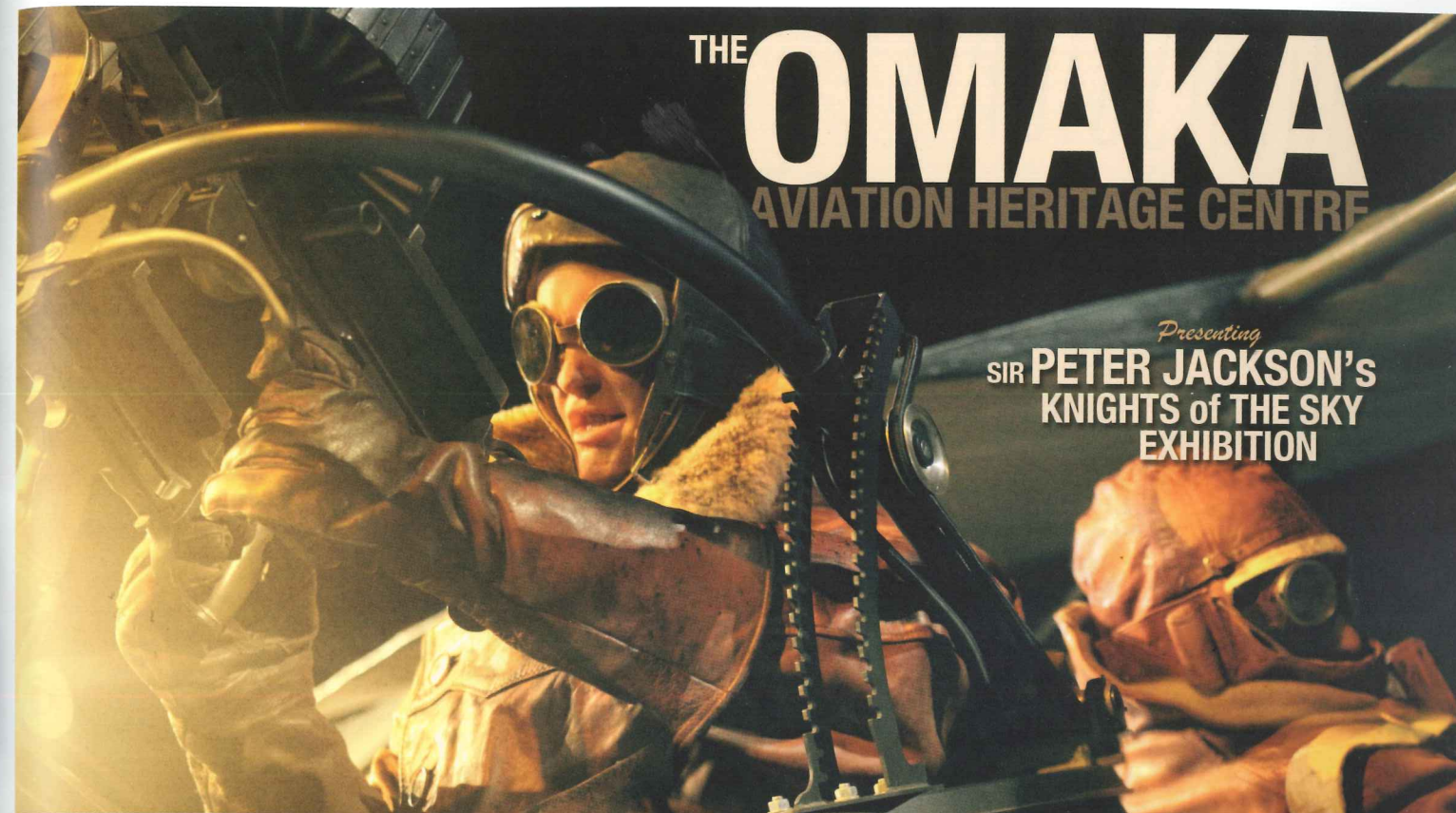
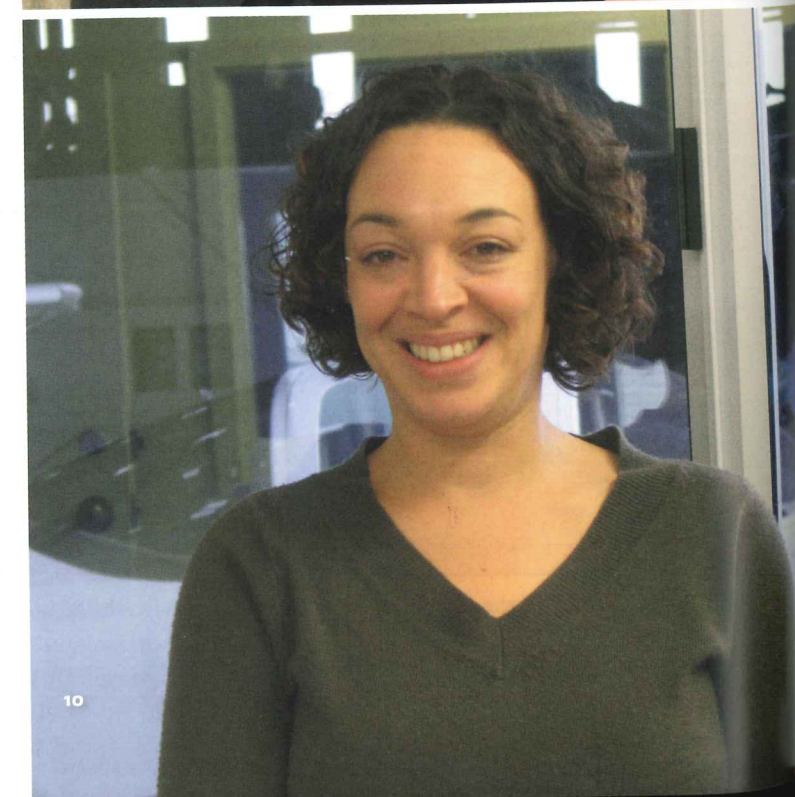
A PROUD HISTORY

Omaka Aerodrome took flight in 1920, just after the first flight across the Cook Strait by Euan Dickinson.

The first hangar was completed in August 1921 and the aerodrome became a regular stopping point for military aircraft, according to a 2003 web entry of the club's history.

It states that the Marlborough Aero Club was formally constituted in 1928 and in February 1929 became the first in New Zealand to commence flying operations using its own aircraft, a Government Gipsy Moth on loan. On March 9, the club got its own Gipsy Moth featuring the famous registration ZK-AAA.

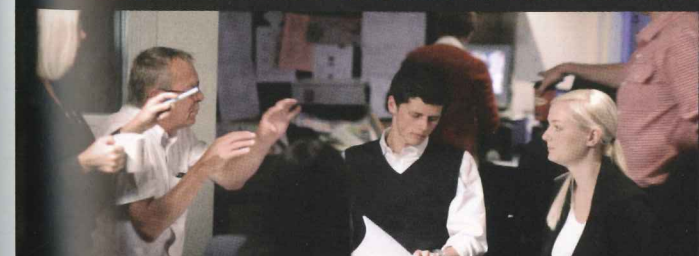
8 John (Sandy) Sandilands spent a lot of time fixing planes in WWII but only learned to fly one when he turned 80 9 Alex Dawson, 12, flies above Marlborough 10 Marlborough Aero Club marketing and administration manager Zoe Gray



THE OMAKA AVIATION HERITAGE CENTRE

Presenting
SIR PETER JACKSON'S
KNIGHTS OF THE SKY
EXHIBITION

Open 7 days, 10am-5pm 79 Aerodrome Rd, Omaka, Blenheim, Marlborough, New Zealand
Ph: (03) 579 1305 Email: info@omaka.org.nz Visit: www.omaka.org.nz



Be Better Informed.

NEWS, SPORT & INFORMATION WITH MARCUS LUSH, HILARY BARRY & MARTIN DEVLIN. 6-9AM WEEKDAYS.

BLENHIM 95.3FM PICTON 92.3FM KAIKOURA 89.1FM WWW.RADIOLIVE.CO.NZ

RADIOLIVE
NELSON 96FM