

FIFTY YEARS OF FLYING

Pioneering Days in New Zealand Aviation

WINGSPREAD, the pioneering of aviation in New Zealand, by Leo White. Published by the Unity Press, Auckland.

CONSIDERING the leap forward it has taken in the last decade, the history of aviation in New Zealand goes back a surprisingly long way—to the year 1890 in fact, when a certain "Professor" Jackson made the first balloon ascent in New Zealand at Lancaster Park, Christchurch.

It is a far cry from daring balloonists and parachutists with aneroids fastened to their pink tights, risking their necks to provide sensations for gawking crowds, to these days of highly efficient commercial airlines; a far cry, too, from the Bleriot monoplane which in 1913 was presented to the Government by the Imperial Air Fleet Committee to the present training scheme of the Royal New Zealand Air Force. Much history has been made in the years between; many setbacks and obstacles have been overcome; many gallant figures have come and gone. For the first time the history of New Zealand aviation has been set down in permanent book form in *Wingspread*, written by Leo White, a well known Auckland news-photographer and a flyer himself. A well illustrated book, it makes no pretensions to careful literary style, being more concerned with a straightforward setting down of historical facts. As such, it represents a good deal of work and research, and is a valuable document.

The Real Pioneers

The balloonists and parachutists who provided so much excitement and Jules Verne-ish speculation in the years

between 1890 and 1910, were hardly a serious contribution to aviation. The real pioneers are such men as Bertram Ogilvie of Hawke's Bay, who in 1907 began experimenting with heavier-than-air machines and was apparently one of the first aeronautical engineers in the world to hit on the idea of aileron control; Arthur Schaefer, a Wellington photographer, who in 1909 built himself a

strange, hybrid aeroplane which he christened "Schaefer's New Zealand Vogel"; Leo and Vivian Walsh, of Auckland, who imported an unassembled Howard Wright Farman biplane from England in 1910, made successful controlled flights and a few years later formed a training school at Mission Bay; "Wizard" Stone, an American flyer, who gave demonstrations throughout New Zealand in 1913; young Seaforth McKenzie, of Marton, and his brother Hector, who flew an American-made biplane around the Manawatu in 1913; big, bluff, Joe Hammond, who in 1914 was the first pilot ever officially appointed by the Government to fly an aeroplane (he lost his job when he gave a free joyride to a young woman from a visiting theatrical company); J. W. H. Scotland, who in 1914 flew 98 miles from Timaru to Christchurch in two hours and five minutes.

is now with the R.N.Z.A.F.; Keith Caldwell, New Zealand's greatest "ace," is also with the R.N.Z.A.F. now; J. C. Mercer, who was an instructor for the Canterbury Aviation Company is now operating an air service which penetrates into the most isolated districts of South Westland, and the other day reached his 10,000 hours of flying time; and, of course, the late Squadron Leader "Mac" McGregor, most famous barnstorming pilot of them all.

Training With the Walshes

They were rich exciting days. Landing fields were few and far between, and engines being what they were, a pilot who wished to reach a healthy old age always had an eye cocked ahead for the nearest flat paddock. Leo White's description of training at the Walshes school gives some idea of the handicaps overcome.

"Flying tests were simple. All a pilot had to do on completion of dual instruc-



LEO WHITE

gaged in flying them. Survey flights were made all over the country. George Bolt carried the first official air mail from Auckland to Dargaville in a Boeing float-plane and was the first to fly from Auckland to Wellington. Captain Euan Dickson, chief pilot of the Canterbury Aviation Company, which had turned to commercial flying, made the first flights over Cook Strait and Mount Cook. Carefree pilots used to fly out over the Hauraki Gulf and bombard returning troopships with messages and bags of sweets—until a ship's captain received a direct hit from a too-well aimed parcel. Barnstormers reaped a fantastic reward. In Timaru in two days, 280 passengers were carried at £2/2/- a time; in Oamaru, 260 flights were made in two days; in Dunedin, 365 people went up in four days.

It was a false start, however, and aviation languished between 1924 and 1928, which marks the beginning of the aero club era, and of real air mindedness. The clubs received their impetus originally from the trans-Tasman flights of Kingsford-Smith and Ulm, and from the fact that serviceable light 'planes such as the De Havilland Moth became available. From 1928 on, Leo White's record is one of continual progress, with club flying becoming more and more popular and airlines branching out on longer and longer routes. The pioneering days were over; flying was a solid, commercial, established fact.

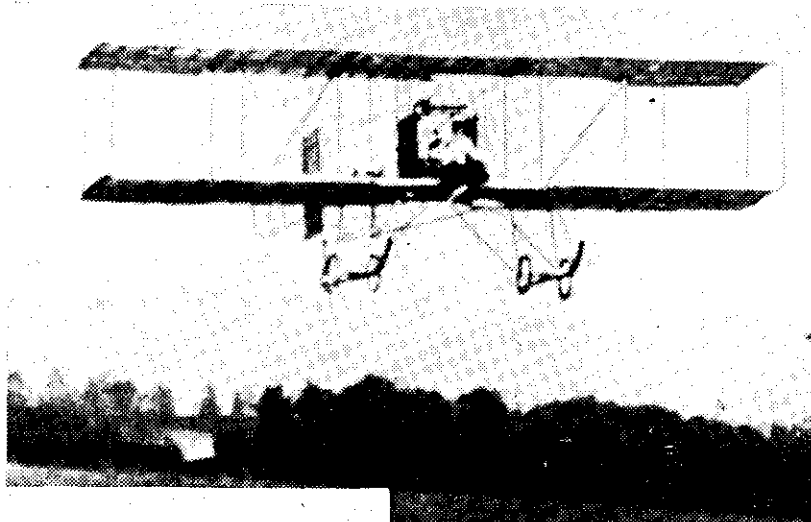
Light-hearted "Mac"

Mr. White has many typical stories to tell of about famous flyers. One which concerns "Mac" McGregor is typical of the light-heartedness which endeared that flyer to aero pageant spectators up and down the Dominion. "Mac" had made an air mail flight from Invercargill to Auckland in one day, and next morning, while his Spartan was being warmed up, Dave Allan, the Auckland Aero Club instructor, walked over to the machine and noticed a crack in the fuselage, just behind the rear cockpit.

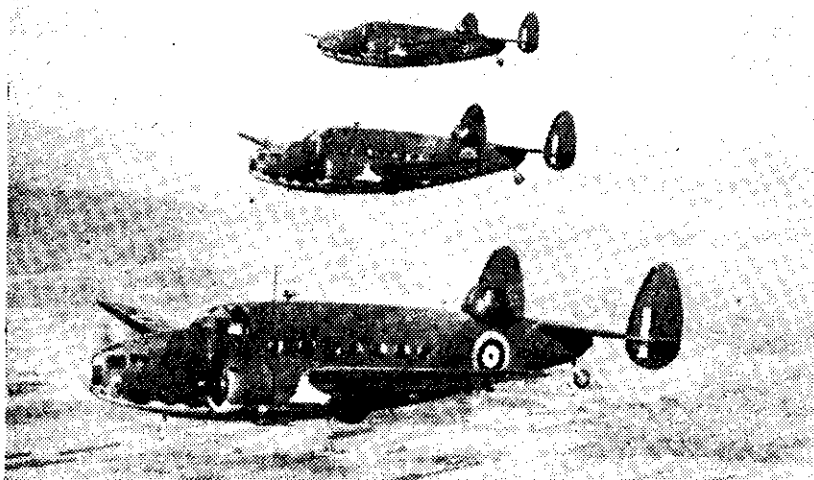
"Look, 'Mac,' she's splitting open," he said, pulling hard.

"Hell," said "Mac," in his quiet way, "don't do that or you'll pull the damned machine in half."

And he slid into the cockpit and flew off with a cheerful wave, his unfastened safety straps dangling in the slipstream.



Above: The earliest successful flight made in New Zealand. Vivian Walsh at Papakura, Auckland, in 1911. At left: Lockheed Hudson bombers of the Royal New Zealand Air Force on reconnaissance. Both these illustrations are from "Wingspread"



tion was to make turns over marks on the harbour and then volplane to a good landing. Completion of this test enabled the pilot to carry a passenger right away. The old pusher engines, mostly 8-cylinder, V-type, water-cooled, were situated behind and above the pupil and instructor, who sat side by side in the nose. Their only communication was by signs and a good deal of yelling. The cockpit was bare of all those instruments which aid flying to-day. The panel had only a couple of indicators. The weight-on-the-seat-of-the-pants indicated a good or bad turn. Air speed indicators were non-existent. An artificial horizon for straight and level flying was provided by a taut piece of string from which a fluttering piece of tape indicated drift."

The years following the Great War saw over 40 aircraft of various types in New Zealand, with 15 pilots continuously en-

And then the brave band of war-time flyers, some of whom, trained in New Zealand by the Walshes and by the Canterbury Aviation Company (sponsored by Sir Henry Wigram) for the Royal Flying Corps, lost their lives in France. There are familiar names here. George Bolt, one of the Walsh brothers' first instructors, later became chief pilot and technical adviser to Cook Strait Airways, and

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