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## **THOSE MAGNIFICENT MASTERTON MEN ....**

Old machines stir the hearts of men and flying into the past makes the hearts of some take wing. HOWARD SMITH visits a home for vintage planes.

Masterton-based Sport and Vintage Aviation Society – a registered museum – boasts New Zealand's third most impressive vintage fleet. It permits flying of enviable variety and offers more user-friendly advantages than either of two high-powered rival groups.

Auckland's exclusive Warbirds, as their name suggests, are all machines once used in aerial combat. Sir Tim Wallace's Wanaka-based Alpine Collection is privately owned and operated. "By contrast we're the real McCoy", SVAS president, industrialist Bill Iazard declares.

Wairarapa's well-established organization beats the lot for its accessibility to those with appropriate pilot's accreditation and ratings. "Members own and run the society and fly our planes," he says.

Twirling handle moustaches, fuselage scoreboards, wildly trailing fliers scarves, wickedly leering combatants and boastful tales of 'deering do' – all are consigned to wartime mythology. Yet here's a chance to turn back the clock; to evoke the spirit of early aviators.

This was once the world of Lindbergh, Charles Kingsford Smith, the Red Baron and Antoine de Saint-Exupery. Equally names like those of Jean Batten, Amy Johnson and Amelia Earhart, spring to mind.

Where else other than at Hood Airfield can rank-and-file members of any regional society spend an hour at a Harvard's controls .... for only \$300 ?

What other organization lets its pilots enjoy a \$150, 60 minute spin in a De Havilland Tiger Moth .... or opt to drone contentedly in the J3 Piper Cub (a snip at \$70); high above Wairarapa homes and farms.

With an old-style joystick there's a rare, reassuring sense of control. Solitary antique cockpits are a haven apart. Here these fliers enjoy true elation as the dogged vintage aircraft nose upward, then bank and turn, urged on by heady thermals. As planes encounter downward, clear-air eddies, our veterans compensate with gentle skilled adjustments.

High on the agenda is a major rebuilding programme on two more vintage aircraft: an English Christlea Ace with its high mono-wing and Gypsy Major engine ..... plus a 2-seater American Rearwind, powered by a French La Ronde engine.

“We’re looked upon as a safe haven and regularly receive gifted aircraft, bits and pieces, or flying memorabilia,” says Izard. Among them are Kittyhawk, Bristol Freighter, and Lodestar engines, radio and navigational equipment, propellers, Second World War instruments, a turret, bomb and gun sights, flying jackets and a fully operational Link Trainer – forerunner of today’s flight simulators.

The society’s nerve centre comprises a Spartan lounge, coffee and ops room partitioned off within the main hangar. Outside these quarters the SVAS fleet is crammed .... nose-to-tail. Inside, its visitors’ book reveals names from around the world.

Fading wartime pictures show ex-RNZAF members ‘on active service’ beside their sturdy aircraft. Immobile scale models hang from the ceiling. Flat surfaces are strewn with back copies of Flight, Wings and Fly Past magazines. The society ‘mascot’, a cuddly bear, sits atop a tall metal locker, peering through dark flying goggles.

These rooms are a library for logs, flight schedules and maintenance records. Around the low tables anecdotes are shared; tales of legendary aerobatics, of demanding topdressing; or of Spitfire, Hudsons, DC3s ...

The 16-year-old Masterton society has around 100 members. Most are from the Wairarapa-Wellington districts.

Chief pilot is John Lanham, manager of Wellington operator, Rex Aviation. A few others hail from as far afield as Auckland and Christchurch. Some 10 percent currently fly the aircraft.

Founder member Tom Williams asked the infant society to rebuild his twin-engined Dominie biplane. Proceeds from that job enabled the members to pay for a hangar and begin an aircraft collection.

Masterton’s Harvard, with its 550 horsepower Pratt and Whitney radial engine was a gift from former Air Commodore, the late Stan Quill. It was formerly in use at Ohakea where the RNZAF Red Checkers flew these US-built aircraft. They were phased out in 1977; though one was retained for the Force’s Historic Flight.

During the war years De Havilland’s Tiger Moths were produced at Rongotai. They were later widely used by aero clubs and private owners. Before the advent of purpose-built top-dressing aircraft. Tiger Moths frequently dispersed fertilizer over remote hill farms. Now it’s a privilege to fly in one; either as pilot or passenger.

As a powerful slipstream wails in their quivering struts, terra firma quickly recedes. At first towns and country resemble toyland; from higher still, humanity’s mark on the land is reduced to the microscopic; then the earth becomes a province best known by map-makers and jet-setters.

The four-seater Percival Proctor V (designated ZK-AQZ) is one of just six registered in New Zealand. Original red leather seats remain in place and its six-cylinder Gypsy Queen engine runs like clockwork. Some claim it's the only airworthy one in the Southern Hemisphere. It closely resembles a Percival Gull, flown by Jean Batten.

All society aircraft are operated according to Visual Flight Rules. Though the unpredictable fantasy of clouds never loses its allure, where there's cloud ahead you manoeuvre around it.

When low or excessive cloud fills the sky, just one edict applies .... return to base ! No one takes chances.

Members include privately taught pilots, former commercial crew, one-time fighter pilots, wartime ground crew, early topdressers, some retired personnel from the Department of Civil Aviation, enthusiastic amateurs and dedicated non-flying members.

On site at Hood Aerodrome's hangar 'wood-and-rag' expert, Ted Ashwell, maintains and services the fleet. He's rated tops among experienced aviation engineers.

SVAS has some \$600,000 worth of assets; all assiduously looked after. Most notable among these, the flying museum. In addition SVAS provides pilots for flying displays, for adventure flying or for invaluable pilot training in any of the historic aircraft.

Modern aircraft have a tricycle undercarriage – “kid's stuff,” jokes Izard. “Real pilots fly ‘tail draggers’, aircraft that rest on a back wheel. They're more fun, but a greater challenge to land. You need to be far more conscious of rudder control.”

Wairarapa's magnificent men have applied for Lotteries Commission funding. Their plans are to build a third hangar, to enhance the museum and provide more attractive visitor facilities; a lounge, new toilets and the like. Bill Izard looks to the day when membership reaches 500.

Says former topdressing and delivery pilot, Doug Donaldson, “A new generation of fliers are club trained on ‘trikes’. We can instruct them in ‘tail draggers’. But we definitely do need more men, or women, to pilot these aircraft ... and backup mechanics to help with our technical groundwork.”

The romance of flight and practicalities of modern leisure are both expressed when piloting or caring for vintage aeroplanes. Both receive top billing with the SVAS at Hood.

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