

CHAPTER 6.

THE NEW ZEALAND FLYING SCHOOL

In 1915, Mission Bay, or Kohimarama as it was still called, came into the limelight as the site of the newly established New Zealand Flying School, and for many years was called "Flying School Bay". The promoters of the school were Leo and Vivian Walsh, who had for some years been interested in aeronautics. (For details see Section 2, "Orakei", p.42).

In about 1913 the elder brother, Leo, had designed a flying boat, the original rough plan of which was sketched on a six inch scrap of paper. The machine was built and assembled at the Walsh home in Orakei Road, Remuera, where the brother made the cedar hull and their sisters, Veronica and Doreen, stitched at the canvas. With the exception of the engine, the plane was constructed of raw material bought in New Zealand. When completed, it was dismantled and taken to the little bay to the west of Bastion Point; the hull was towed around and the rest of the structure was taken by night along the sewer, which crosses Hobson Bay, and then over the Orakei hills to the beach. There in a makeshift hangar of motorcar cases, the flying boat was re-assembled, and on June 1st 1915 Vivian Walsh who had taught himself to fly without an instructor and without printed instructions, made a trial flight. Two months later, after several adjustments had been made, another trial flight was made with a passenger.

The Great War, the first conflict in which air warfare was to play a part, had broken out seven months previously; so the Walsh brothers now decided to do their "bit" for their country by training pilots for overseas. Having been assured of financial assistance from their backers, Frederick Earl K.C., A.B. Williams and R.A. Dexter, they took a lease of the old Mission site and began the construction of their school buildings. The large old Mission kitchen behind the refectory was converted into dining room and new buildings were erected near it: a stone kitchen; a recreation room near the sea, to the north west of the refectory; a cottage for themselves to the northern end of the refectory; and hangars and pupils' quarters in the vicinity of the present N.Z. Dry Cleaners. Leo, the elder, was to be the organiser Vivian the instructor pilot.

Thus was established the first, and for considerable time, the only flying school operated by private enterprise in the British Empire which trained pilots for military service.

Now Vivian Walsh who had taught himself to fly began to instruct others to help in the work - George Bolt of Christchurch, later Chief Engineer to Tasman Empire Airways Ltd.; M. Matthews of Taranaki; and Bob Going of Whangarei. Pupils, who were trained in successive groups of from 12 to 25, paid £100 each to learn to fly and for an engineering course, and, when they

graduated Sub-Lieutenants, were refunded £75 by the British Government who were willing to take all the available men trained at the school. Ultimately 110 trained personnel left New Zealand for active service.

As the school increased in numbers, more flying boats were required: a Caudron bi-plane which had crashed at Harewood was reconstructed by the Walsh brothers and given floats; a Curtiss flying boat with 90 h.p. OX5 engine was financed by R.A. Dexter as a patriotic act; and the construction of more aircraft was begun on the premises with the help of Bob Johnson, who had joined the school as Deputy Manager, and two Engineers "Mac" and Wally Ross.

Leo White in "Wingspread", a history of aviation in New Zealand, gives an account of the school as follows:

"Routine was based on military lines... but for all that the days were full of excitement for these young adventure seekers. Flying tests were simple. All a pilot had to do on completion of dual instruction 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 very bare of all those instruments which aid flying today. 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 not a part of the equipment. An artificial horizon for straight and level flying was provided by taut piece of string from which a fluttering tape indicated drift! To a pilot in a modern cock pit, aided by its complicated array of dials, such an idea has the ring of Mr. Ripley's 'Believe It Or Not.'

"The maximum flying range was two and a half hours. The life of a motor was from 20 to 50 hours at a maximum, before a complete overhaul became necessary. With today's engines it is 1,000 hours. It was no uncommon sight to see a flying boat alight in the middle of the harbour and the pilot start waving frantically to the shore for a tow launch. At a pinch he might even endeavour to keep a balance on the floating plane and attempt to re-start the engine with a very large and cumbersome crankhandle. In flight 3,000 feet was considered a fair altitude.

"Keith Caldwell (Auckland), G. Callendar (Wellington), and B. Dawson (Auckland) were among the first pupils at the school, and the two former were first away for active service. Dawson was over age for the Royal Plying Corps.

"Malcolm McGregor also underwent his training at the school.

"Aerial reconnaissance was undertaken by the school when Count Von Luckner escaped from Motuihi Island.

"With such a crowd of daring young fellows it is obvious that pranks of all descriptions could not be completely suppressed for long. One day when the whole school turned out for a motor cycle race from St. Helier's Bay to Kohimarama" (Mission Bay) "it is no wonder that the local constable was forced to take action and prosecute the lot. Among the culprits was Tom Lowry, later to become famous in New Zealand cricket. Malcolm Mc Gregor was a motor cycle fiend like the rest, but he met his Waterloo when he dashed along the beach and did not see a gaping hole left by a scow which had unloaded cattle there on the previous tide. 'Mac' promptly ceased to take any interest in his surroundings for some time, but he was soon about again.

"One day a practical joker stretched a rope between two nearby trees through which the track to the school ran. The first luckless rider, Billy Warner, of Christchurch later an Imperial Airways pilot - was catapulted in great style. But it was all taken in good part."

After World War I the Flying School carried on to establish commercial aviation.

"Vivian Walsh, owing to ill health, left actual flying and joined Leo, supervising administration matters. Chief of ground staff was Bob Johnson, while George Bolt did much of the flying. Also piloting were Captain R. (Dick) Russell, D.F.C., Croix de Guerre, who returned to the school where he had been taught to fly. Another war bird was Captain A.C. (Arthur) Upham, D.F.C.

"Flying equipment was greatly increased and besides the three original flying boats, two Boeing float planes with 125 h.p. Hall Scott engines, were purchased. together with a D.H.6. The former were originally built for the Russian Government. A Vickers Supermarine Channel type of airplane, capable of carrying four passengers was added to the fleet.... After the Armistice the Government gave the school six Avro 504 K's (Gnome engines), together with three sets of sea plane floats, and two D.H.9's. which were used as land machines. The happy-go-lucky pilots flew the land machines from a small section and the beach at Mission Bay. It would give a modern pilot the jitters even to force land there. Plenty of petrol was available from the Government, at £1 per case, a large shipment arriving with the gift aircraft.

"Dropping messages and bags of sweets on returning troopships was a favourite pastime until a peppery ship's captain suffered a direct hit on the head with a well-laden bag of sweetmeats.... The ship on which the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. W.F. Massey, was returning from Great Britain was met in the Hauraki Gulf by airmen who dropped two waterproof mail bags painted with the Union Jack. They missed the ship, but were retrieved by launch and the letters they contained were duly delivered to Mr. Massey with his breakfast.

"The Fiji Government sponsored the visit of the Supermarine for a two weeks' survey of the Fiji Group. Captain Upham was the pilot, and Leo Walsh accompanied him....

"Pigeons were vital equipment, and the fine birds at the school loft often brought back news of material assistance to stranded aviators....

"Air mails were one of the first commercial ventures, the Air Board deciding it was the best means of paving the way to passenger and freight air services.... On December 16th 1919 the first official air mail in New Zealand was transported to Dargaville in a Boeing float-plane, with George Bolt pilot and Leo Walsh as passenger... registered articles were not included, the words 'too risky' being written on the waybill. The words 'Royal Mail' were boldly painted on the fuselage.... The next trips were down the Firth of Thames, up to Onerahi and as far north as Awanui. Almost wherever there was an expanse of water with a small settlement, the Flying School aircraft alighted sooner or later. Bishop Cleary,....soon became one of the most frequent passengers on charter and mail flights....

"A highlight in the School's history was the first flight from Auckland to Wellington in the Supermarine,.... Flying time was 5 hours 6 minutes. Attempts on records awoke intense public interest in the early 1920s, and Aucklanders suffered many a crick in the neck watching the 'Kohi' fliers. When George Bolt reached 3,400 feet they thought it marvellous, but George later reached 6500 feet.... Racing contests between seaplanes and power boats were highlights on regatta days on the Waitemata Harbour."

In 1924 the N.Z. Flying School was taken over by the Government and transferred to Hobsonville. The Walsh brothers then returned to private life; they re-organised their engineering business in the city and rejoined their family who were now residents of Mission Bay. When the Flying School was first established, the family had taken a lease of the "Captain's House", but later bought a home near the bottom of Selwyn Avenue, on the old Atkin estate. From its front verandah which

commanded magnificent view of the bay and the Waitemata, the aviators could then look down on the scene of their trials and triumphs and, as the years passed, could watch with interest the modern successors of their own crude craft soaring over the harbour. Both Vivian and Leo became life members of the Auckland Aero Club, but took no active part in aviation after 1924. The former died in 1950 and his brother in 1951.

After their deaths, it was felt by many that something should be done to perpetuate the name of these pioneer aviators whom one writer has described as ranking "with the Wright brothers of early American aviation, with Bleriot and his Channel crossing and the host of British pioneer airmen." So in 1953 group of interested people, mostly former pupils of the School, formed themselves into an association to raise funds towards suitable memorial. Towards the end of that year, with the co-operation of the Auckland Aero Club and the New Zealand Air Force, the association organised an air pageant at the Hobsonville Air Base. The proceeds formed nucleus of fund which, it was decided, should be used in various ways to keep the name of Walsh before the notice of the public. Ultimately the organisation, which in 1954 registered as the "Walsh Brothers Memorial Organisation Incorporated", hopes to augment its present funds so that in the near future it will be able to award scholarships to promising young aviators who are anxious to study aeronautics overseas.

The only memorial to these brothers which has as yet been erected on or close to the site of the former Flying School, is a sundial which was presented by Tasman Empire Air ways Ltd. in 1961. This memorial consists of a large block of stone which stands about 4 feet high and whose other dimensions are approximately 4 feet by 2 feet 6 inches. On the flat upper surface there used to be circular bronze dial 2 feet in diameter which has been removed, probably by a collector of bronze*. (The imprint of the dial on the cement and the holes into which the screws fitted, are easily discernible.) So the sundial no longer functions as such. Set into the southern face of the stone there is bronze plaque inscribed thus:

New Zealand's Air Pioneers

Presented by

Tasman Empire Airways Ltd.
on the 21st anniversary
of its first service
30th April 1940.

To mark the founding of the
New Zealand Flying School
Here at Mission Bay in 1915.
By the Walsh Brothers.

*Other sundials in the district have also suffered this fate.

