



# A SOLO AT WALSH

Twenty-two of the country's best instructors, 70 teenagers, huge spirit, two weeks to a solo at Matamata. Why the annual Walsh Memorial Scout Flying School is “addictive” and the huge emphasis on safety contributing to that.

**F**or two weeks every January, Matamata is the busiest aerodrome in the Southern Hemisphere.

With an average of 800 movements a day – sometimes a thousand – off five runways, the air traffic controllers in their mobile tower are constantly on their toes as they shepherd as many as 12 novice aviators at any one time around the circuit.

The seven air traffic controllers are volunteers, as are the school's instructors, as is everyone else associated with the 55-year old event. Many of them leave family behind and take annual leave to work up to 15-hour days to – as one instructor put it – “give their all for the kids”. They come back year after year.

“Many of us feel we got a lot out of GA, and we want to give something back,” says A-cat and flight examiner Penny Mackay. “We love encouraging the kids into an industry we've spent our lives in.”

Newly minted Tauranga C-cat, Tom Shaw, was an ab initio student at Walsh. He came back the following year as a ‘returned student’, to learn more flying and with more responsibilities in helping run the camp. Then the following year he returned as a student flight leader, helping to run the camp.

“The place is addictive. You talk to anyone here and they'll tell you it's the best two weeks of the year. It's the people who make the place. Everyone is so positive, so helpful. I've learned so much as a new instructor. I'm sort of filling in for when other instructors are away for some reason, so I'm teaching lots of different students who are in different parts of their flight training, and I'm learning lots of different teaching techniques.

“If I have any questions, I have the best instructors in New Zealand right here. I'm so lucky.”

The school's CFI, Steve Scott – an Air New Zealand Q300 captain – relishes the personal growth he sees



✓ A delighted Anna Haine and her Walsh instructor, Simon Davies after Anna's solo.

Photo CAA/Pen Mackay

in the 16–19 year olds over the two weeks of flying instruction. “They arrive and they don't know anybody. They're shy and they shuffle around staring at their feet. Then they're here for two weeks, learning to fly and learning some good life skills. They go solo and when they step out of the plane, it seems to me they're about a foot taller, they look you in the eye, the new confidence is obvious.

“We have a saying at Walsh, ‘A parent drops off a child, and two weeks later, we give them back a young adult’.”

### Safety – teaching and learning

Safety at the school is paramount. “We've assembled the best experience in instructing that we can,” says school director John Hamilton. “We have about five A-cats and about 17 really experienced B-cats. Where else in New Zealand are you going to find that depth of expertise all in the one place at the one time?”

The CFI also brings in four to five C-cats each year. “It's developing talent for the future,” says John. “It gives them the opportunity to instruct in a very busy, compressed setting. They benefit hugely by being exposed to that.”

Penny Mackay says the instructors learn from each other. “The instructors here come from every field of aviation – airlines, 135 ops, training institutions – such a mixed group. It's nice to talk aviation with people who have a passion for it. It's really a unique opportunity.”

The instructors are not the only ones to learn: the air traffic controllers learn how to deal with a massive amount of traffic in a short period of time.

Wellington-based air traffic controller Phil Craig (“I'm a relative newbie really. I've been controlling at the Walsh for only 23 years”) says there's a real mix of aviation expertise in the circuit at any one time. »

» “We appreciate that the ab initio students don’t know anything when they first get here. The returned students do know the lie of the land, and some of them have trained in between Walsh schools, but some haven’t. We have C-cats who’re brand new, instructing in this environment for the first time and we have B-cats and A-cats with a wealth of expertise. So we’re dealing with a whole range of experience here.”

Phil says what the students can achieve and what the air traffic controllers can teach them is what brings him back each year. “Also,” he says smiling, “we try to poach as many as we can off the pilot fraternity. We get about one student a year who decides on an ATC career”.

The school has had almost six decades to bed down procedures and it runs like a well-oiled machine. The event’s organisers believe they have the most robust safety processes in place that they can, although they regularly review and improve them. After a collapsed nosewheel on a hard landing a few years ago the instructors gathered to sort out how to avoid a recurrence.

“The result of that discussion,” says Steve Scott, “is that when the students start their circuit training, I occasionally stand beside the touchdown point with a green flag and a red flag. A nice two-wheel landing with the nose high gets the green; a red flag means ‘raise that nose more next time’.”

“The kids get totally into it,” says Tom Shaw. “It’s a good challenge – ‘Impress Steve Scott and we’ll be good’. It’s a brilliant idea because it’s turned this issue into a really positive learning experience for them.”

“You learn about safety from, like, day one,” says 16-year old Tom Catto, from Te Puna, near Tauranga. “The first thing I remember my instructor saying about safety was, ‘Don’t stick your head in the propeller,’” he laughs. “We were being taught how to tie up the plane and people were going underneath and then sticking their heads where the propeller would be circling and, yeah, we kind of got told why that was a really bad idea.

“Then I forgot about always wearing shoes and got told off for going for a run in bare feet.

“Definitely a lot of health and safety goes into this. They mean what they say.”

Tracey Gore, a B-cat from Waikato Aviation, is at her fourth Walsh as an instructor, but was an ab initio student then a returned student. “I can relate to the students because I was once in their shoes and flew my first solo at Walsh.

“I’m always aware of the formidable responsibility I have as an instructor when I walk out to the plane with the student. It always runs through my head that a parent has left their young adult in my care, to operate an aircraft.



Walsh CFI Steve Scott with ZK-FML, a Piper PA-38 Tomahawk, the first of what’s hoped to be a fleet of dedicated Walsh aircraft with the highest possible specs. The Hawaiian-style shirt is intentional. Many of the returning students, camp leaders and instructors were wearing them the day Vector visited. “The ab initios are stressed enough with everything they have to learn in such a short time, and then the prospect of a solo at the end of it all,” says Steve. “So the Hawaiian shirt thing just kind of relaxes the vibe a bit. If I had my way, we’d wear them every day”.



// The temporary 'tower' at Walsh.



// Janet Taylor (foreground) and Kate Lindsey on duty at Walsh. A team of seven volunteer air traffic controllers manage up to 1000 movements a day.

## // We have a saying at Walsh, 'A parent drops off a child, and two weeks later, we give them back a young adult'. //

"That extends to their welfare on the ground. Are they getting enough sleep? Are they fitting in with the other students okay? Are they enjoying themselves? I often check in and work with them to make sure they're getting any support they might need."

### WASSI

The immense responsibility of introducing 44 ab initio students (the remaining 26 this year were returnees) to flying an aircraft motivated former Walsh CFI, Mark 'Woody' Woodhouse, to form the Walsh Aviation Support Society Inc - 'WASSI'.

The society is responsible for raising funds to create a fleet of dedicated Walsh aircraft with the highest possible specs, even including a special paint pattern and colour that air traffic controllers find the easiest to identify.

"I feel deeply that we have the care of people's loved ones," says Woody, "and we have the responsibility to put them in the safest possible machines."

Generous contributions to WASSI mean the first dedicated Walsh aircraft, ZK-FML - a Piper PA-38 Tomahawk - took its place on the flight line this year. The second - a Cessna

152 Aerobat - is being rebuilt by JEM Aviation in Blenheim and will fly at Walsh in 2022. WASSI has identified a third possibility - another Tomahawk, in the United States.

"We're aiming for a fleet of 14 two-seaters and one four-seater," says Woody. "They'll be leased out around the country but they'll always be available for Walsh each January.

"Every year of the 27 I've been involved with Walsh, I've felt that our aircraft could be even better than they were. I want to put my hand on my heart and say that our instructors, our procedures *and* our aircraft are the best they can possibly be.

"I can't stop everything happening, but I can do everything I can to prevent it."

### Discipline. Leadership. Addiction.

While 'going solo' is important, it's not all there is to Walsh.

"I feel much more disciplined in myself," says 17-year old Hugh Lee, from Auckland. "You learn a lot about punctuality and attention to detail. They say all the time here, 'early is on time, on time is too late'. I've been waking up at 5.30 and I'm going to keep doing that when I get home.

"You learn that you have to do exactly as the procedures and your instructor says. It's the first time in my life I've accepted that close enough is probably not good enough."

Hugh says he has a "new dream", possibly an air force career. "It's really opened my mind. I'm going to have something to look forward to each morning at 5.30. Yeah, that's what's going to get me up in the morning I think."

All the students are expected to do their fair share of duties - helping in the kitchen, cleaning ablutions, support work on the flight line, among them. Those returning for a third consecutive year - the student leaders - virtually run the camp. »

» “We guide them and mentor them if they need it,” says John Hamilton, “but we pretty much stay out of their way. It’s a successful formula.”

## The addiction

Tracey Gore agrees with Tom Shaw that the school “is addictive”.

“To watch the students build in confidence as they train, and then their quiet pride when they’ve gone solo, you realise what you’ve been a part of is life-changing for them. There aren’t too many opportunities to change someone’s life in such a positive way.”

Tracey says the teamwork that has Walsh running smoothly is the most marked impression she has of the school. “I take that sense of teamwork and its value, not just back to my job, but everywhere in my life. It’s not just the instructors and the controllers. Everyone pitches in, and all together we make this a successful, fun, and safe two weeks. It shows me that a team put together successfully can do wonders.”

## The solo

“About 90 percent go solo,” says John Hamilton. “They have to have completed three consecutive, absolutely top-notch approach and landings with their instructor first.

“If they have hiccups, particularly on takeoff and landing, they keep going until they run out of flying time. The instructors are very conscious that the student only gets the opportunity to go solo when they meet the standard required, and not just because they’re trying to meet a target of two weeks.”

Motueka Aero Club CFI and Air New Zealand 787 first officer, Jonathan Westenra says, “You don’t know if a student will go solo. But if there’s improvement, and when they’ve done three safe circuits in succession, you say, ‘I’m going to hop out now and you can go and do a circuit by yourself’.

“You tell the tower the student is on their first solo and you know the air traffic controllers will usher them safely round the circuit. So you hop out of the plane to turn them loose and you watch them climb away and you think, ‘well, it’s all up to you now’.

“You’ve taught them engine failure after takeoff, how to go round, what do about radio or electrical failures. But I’m still ‘with’ them as I watch them fly, ‘keep straight on downwind, watch your airspeed on base leg, hold it off on landing’.”

After they land, Jonathan says, the instructor hops back in and taxis the aircraft to the flight line. “They’re so excited, we don’t want a bad ending to a momentous occasion.”

The instructor accompanies their student into the flight ops office to complete post-flight paperwork. “Then they leave their watch and cellphone in the office,” says Jonathan, “and head outside to be hit by 14 buckets of water.”



While most of the students say they're concentrating too much to be either frightened or aware of the significance of what they're doing, they're also told to relax. Tom Catto says he took that to heart and sang *Hakuna Matata* all the way round, "You know, just to keep up a cheerful mood.

"But there's a lot of talking to yourself as well, running through all the checks. When you say it out loud, it makes it a lot more obvious to you."

Sixteen-year old Anna Haine from Auckland says when people started going solo, she began to stress. "I'm a bit competitive so just the fact that people had already done theirs made me worried."

But Anna's time did come – on family day so her parents were watching as well.

"Simon (Davies, Anna's instructor) did a really good job of making sure I knew all the emergency procedures, just in case. So when I went up I was confident I could fix any mistakes that I'd make and also if something went wrong with the aircraft.

"It was kind of surreal. I got the clearance to take off and I knew what I wanted to do but I turned around to double check with Simon and he wasn't there.

"It was a bit busy and I was really concentrating, but once I had the aeroplane trimmed out, I was sitting there like, 'Oh my goodness this is so cool!'"

John Hamilton says the care for the students doesn't stop when everyone strikes camp at the end of the two weeks.

## // GOING SOLO

The night before, with the opportunity to go solo not at all guaranteed, Tom and his instructor Grant Reidy, had 'walked the circuit' – a hose on the ground – Tom yet again going through checks, flying technique and correcting errors. It was virtually dark and everyone else had drifted away for Saturday night's activities.

"I think Tom kept going even after I left," says Grant. "He then obviously thought about it overnight, and his flying the next morning was awesome."

"I didn't think I'd solo," says Tom. "I was coming in a bit low on my first circuit, perfect on my second, and too high on my third."

Grant says although Tom was a bit low, then a bit high, "he corrected perfectly. I knew he was ready."

"I will have sat down with every student and asked them what their hopes and plans and ambitions are, and then we'll give them support as they move through their careers. We give them mentors and contacts of people who can help.

"They have the phone number of at least one person they can ring during the year and ask questions. That applies to whatever career they choose. Only about 30-40 percent go into an aviation career. So they get life mentors as well as aviation mentors.

"Whatever career you choose, once you've been to Walsh, you're a Walshie for life." 🍷

// A-cat Penny Mackay and ab initio Hugh Lee head out in the calm of early morning for what could have been just another three circuits of Matamata aerodrome. About 20 minutes later "something clicked" and Hugh was flying on his own.

// Penny: "Hugh had been very unsure of his own decisions and I wasn't convinced he'd take control enough to go solo. Then about ten days into training, he'd been mucking about with the trim during the preflight to the point where I became impatient and said, 'Hugh just leave it. It'll be fine, we can sort it out during the flight if we have to.' He carried on with the other checks, then suddenly he stopped and said, 'No Penny, I'm not happy with the trim, I'm going back to it.' Inside I did a fist-pump. I knew he was ready to be a pilot-in-command."

// Hugh: "Penny had said to me, 'Don't be disappointed if you don't solo'. So I really didn't expect to. When my friend Chris soloed earlier in the morning I was pleased for him but pretty despondent for myself. But Penny and I headed out as usual, and something just clicked in those circuits and she said, 'I think you're ready'. It was sheer concentration the whole way round. When I landed, it felt like victory."