

50 amazing years

Flying around the world with Jack Snow

Story by Clive Wilkinson

Photographs Jack Snow collection

On 11 July 2008 I saw something remarkable at Hood aerodrome, Masterton. Kerry Connor, CFI and owner of Ace Aviation wanted me to witness a circuit flight by Jack Snow, in Ace Aviation's Piper PA 18 Super Cub. The reason was that Jack Snow was reliving, 50 years later to the day, his first solo flight, undertaken at Rotorua in PA 18 Cub ZK-BTQ. This event in itself maybe does not warrant an article, but the more I talked afterward to Jack, the more I became intrigued, not just by the flight, but by the amazing things he had done and contributed to aviation in those 50 years.

As a student at Rotorua High School (now Rotorua Boys High School), Jack already had a passion for flying and the aviation industry. For four years after leaving school he worked for the Ministry of Works, but spent most of his spare time around planes at Rotorua airfield. It was there that he first learnt to fly. Jack's instructor at Rotorua was Ian Palmer, an Air Force-trained pilot who worked as an agricultural pilot during the week and an instructor for the local aero club at weekends. Jack was the first student Ian trained to achieve his Commercial Pilot's Licence, and in 1961 at the age of 21, Jack joined Ian on the aero club instructing staff.

But soon Jack, never one to let grass grow under his feet, decided a change in direction was on the cards and moved into the agricultural aviation industry. This was an area that had long held a fascination for him. As a schoolboy he had watched Beaver ag-aircraft flying from Rotorua airfield, and had even experienced an exciting flight one afternoon with local ag-pilot Bill Pentecost as he spread fertiliser over local fields.

By the time he had completed training with James Aviation's 225 hp Fletchers Jack was hooked. He flew with James Aviation for the next three years, but again, this time as a result of a letter from another ag-pilot, Evan Grey, his career took a new turn.



Fifty years to the day separate these pictures: Jack just before his first solo, and just after his anniversary flight.



Clive Wilkinson



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Mongolia, 1996: Jack Snow turns his back on a Mil 8 for the horsepower of AD 996 — but does keep a firm grip on one piece of post-medieval technology.

Evan had been spraying potatoes in the UK, and the company he worked for had offered him extra work spraying cotton in the Sudan. They needed another pilot. With the approaching winter threatening the usual seasonal downturn in topdressing, Jack asked James Aviation for six months' leave.

The next three years were busy. Once he'd obtained his UK Commercial Pilot's Licence (which covered the Sudan when flying UK registered aircraft) Jack began an annual routine of five months spraying potatoes in the UK and cotton in the Sudan, alternated with five months topdressing in New Zealand. At home Jack remained employed by James Aviation, while abroad he flew with Aerial Dusting and Spraying Limited, more commonly referred to by its Czech owner's name, Ladi Marmol. The company was based at Stapleford Tawney, an airfield northeast of London, which during World War II had operated Spitfires and Hurricanes, before in the 1950s being used by Edgar Percival for the manufacture of the Edgar Percival Aircraft Limited EP 9, used primarily for crop spraying.

Ladi Marmol had obtained a large cotton-spraying contract, so Jack's first job with them was to ferry one of four brand-new Piper Pawnees from the Piper agents in Geneva out to Wadel-Mansi airstrip in the Sudan. These aircraft joined four other Pawnees already owned by the company that were ferried out from the UK.

Spraying cotton was a new experience. Flying under telephone and power wires while dodging storks, cranes and vultures big, low and numerous enough for a collision to be fatal was all part of the annual three months' fun. After this he would return to New Zealand for the topdressing season, before heading back to the UK in their spring to spray potatoes against blight. Jack did two seasons of potato spraying and three of cotton spraying before returning to New Zealand full time and permanently. Or so he thought.

After three years of living out of a suitcase, it was nice to get back to a steady routine. But then work started to drop off with a downturn in the topdressing industry. James Aviation offered Jack a contract spraying rice in the Solomon Islands using a Pawnee. With his previous spraying and Pawnee experience he was the perfect man for the job and, after obtaining a Fiji licence (the aircraft he was to fly was registered there) he was off to Guadalcanal. He spent two years spraying rice, eventually obtaining a Solomons pilot's licence and diverging into teaching locals how to fly at a newly formed aero club. But the greatest indicator of where his career would take him came when he helped the local Director of Civil Aviation rewrite some of the aviation rules.

Jack returned to New Zealand, but that grass still had no chance to flourish under his feet. The New Zealand Government, under the Colombo Plan aid scheme, decided to give Thailand two Fletcher aircraft and an instructor. James Aviation was asked to supply the instructor and recommended Jack for the job. He duly arrived in Thailand and proceeded to introduce local pilots to the merits of the Fletcher. All had previous spraying experience with Cessnas so it was a relatively easy task. Crop spraying in Thailand was limited to corn during a short season in the Lopburi area 100 miles north of Bangkok. But a sideline developed in rainmaking, with the pilots in the late mornings dropping warm salty water from 7,000ft over an arid area, causing cloud to form and generate rain. Interesting work but not very time consuming, so Jack had plenty of time to study the culture and people.

Back in New Zealand again, work for a topdressing pilot was limited. James Aviation offered Jack the job of manager

at Taupo with one pilot and one aircraft under his control. This kept him occupied for another three years until an advertisement caught his eye. The Ministry of Transport required a General Aviation Inspector. Jack applied and was successful.

To quote Jack, there had always been a rift between the aerial topdressing industry and the Civil Aviation Department. He believed his agricultural flying experience would help him bridge this gap. Posted to the Auckland regional office, from 1975 to 1982 Jack worked at carrying out the administrative requirements of the department. His industry experience frequently helped in solving some of the less straightforward problems, and he felt he was putting something back into aviation after all it had given him.

As with most things Jack became involved in, another avenue opened, in this case a most enjoyable one: ferrying aircraft. He was usually entrusted with three or four planes a year of various types, and they took him to some exotic destinations. Apart from the thrill of the experience, it gave him opportunities to observe how other Civil Aviation administrations ran their systems. An Air Trainer to Bangladesh, Fletchers to Iraq and Pakistan, a Cresco to Khartoum and a Cessna from San Francisco to Auckland were just some of his deliveries.

After a restructuring of the department Jack was promoted to Superintendent Flight Operations in Auckland, a position he held for his usual three years. He was in charge of three General Aviation Inspectors and two Flight Testing Officers. The latter he held in great awe for their skill at discerning what made a good or bad pilot. It was at this time that hang gliders started to make an appearance. No regulations existed then covering hang gliders, and Jack had many discussions with head office in Wellington over this. Eventually rules were put in place, much to his satisfaction. Meanwhile the occasional ferry flight enabled him to get out of the office and enjoy his first love, flying.

Jack's next move was to head office, Wellington, and the position of Controller General Aviation Standards. He had the responsibility of ensuring that everyone in New Zealand aviation outside the major airlines had a good set of rules to work to, and that all Civil Aviation Inspectors were properly trained and supported by the government as they did their job. In his new position he wrote general approvals for publishing in Civil Aviation Safety Orders (CASO). The first he revised was CASO 7 covering ferry flying, followed by CASO 20 covering helicopters. Next came Safety Orders for microlights. Jack was the most senior person in the division who held a pilot's licence, and he still managed the odd ferry flight, generally at this stage just across the Tasman and mostly on weekends. In 1988 he ferried eight Fletchers across to Australia. Then in 1989 several major changes in the structure of the Department, plus the appointment of a new Secretary for Transport, decided him it was time for another change. This time it was to Fiji.

The Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji was looking for somebody to start a flight standards branch due to the high accident

H4-AAW, a Fletcher Jack was ferrying from Hamilton to Honiara, having some work on the mag. at Norfolk Island, circa 1981.

