

INTRODUCTION

I have been overawed by the imagery associated with flight for as long as I can remember. Basically anything that had wings, including birds and even things from my own imagination. As a child I would see shapes of birds, dragons, aircraft and aerial creatures in the clouds, the landscape, almost everywhere. It was unnerving as a child when someone was talking to me, I would see an image of a Spitfire in a building behind them. I was listening to them but my mind was on something else. I had my head in the clouds a lot of the time, pardon the pun, and I thought it was normal at the time.

The touch of blended metal, the sheer grace of an aircraft in the air was mesmerizing. It has always been that way and still is. I never had the chance to become a pilot, and in reflection I am glad of this. The joy of sitting half way out of a helicopter with a classic aircraft alongside is simply gobsmacking. So if I had to pilot an aircraft and keep my passengers safe, I would never have stumbled upon this unique perspective.

I don't know what the catalyst for this obsession was, apart from nightly dreams of flying that lasted for years and years. Neither of my parents or any past relative had any connection with aviation. All I can assume is that it was from the New Zealand landscape that I grew up in. Around us were aircraft that to my mind at least, were in

places they were not meant to be, in the fields of my childhood. Let me elaborate.

During the Second World War, New Zealand took part in the reciprocal 'lend lease' program, where



the United States supplied military hardware to its allies to help fight and defeat the axis powers.

Part of this agreement was that the lend-lease countries had to either purchase or destroy the equipment that remained at the end of hostilities. But because the equipment was 'war weary' and of little monetary value, the New

Zealand government offered the equipment to the scrap-yards and to the public, calling the aircraft 'aircraft remnants'. The scrapping and subsequent melting of all this equipment took time, so it was a common sight right up to the 1970s, to see abandoned WWII aircraft and military vehicles in the New Zealand country-side. In one field alone at Rukuhia near Hamilton in the early 1960s, I saw and wandered amongst hundreds of abandoned combat aircraft. There were gull-winged F4U Corsairs, P40 Kittyhawks, and Hudson bombers all awaiting their inevitable fate with the smelting furnaces, so their precious aluminium could be turned into household products.

In other parts of the NZ landscape were TBM Avenger torpedo bombers, Harvard trainers and others. So as a kid, I grew up playing on these Second World War combat aircraft, amid pristine green fields and rolling hills, bathed in a crisp Pacific light, unique to New Zealand. Yet my heroes in the comics and books I was avidly reading then as a ten year old, had been flying in these very same aerial chariots in the skies over the Pacific only ten years earlier.

These aircraft were sitting outside my back door, so to speak. I clearly did not understand the bigger picture at that tender age.

Hundreds of Vought F4U Corsairs at Rukuhia near Hamilton, awaiting the smelters furnaces.



My point of view from the rear of the R44 helicopter cameraship to the Beech 18 subject ship. I wanted an image that paid homage to Amelia Earhart, leaving the safety of land, flying into the sunset and into the history books. Therefore the Beech had to be this close so I could show the complete aircraft and the earth / ocean background in one frame. After this test for proximity and scale, we repositioned for the great rear end view with just the sunset and the ocean, which appears on page 33.



It seemed all so familiar, I knew the names and shapes of the aircraft I climbed over, as I had built them as Airfix models and they were still hanging from the ceiling at home. I got to know their scents. Military aircraft in particular have a very distinct aroma, one that is a heady combination of sweat, hydraulic fluids, oil, leather and aviation fuel. Just about every military aircraft I have ever been in, whether operational or not, has this scent. You never forget it.

I don't think I had the 'right stuff' to actually be a pilot and I didn't want to have to accumulate thousands of hours, in order to qualify for a job. I simply loved the look of them and how they seemed to fit so well the medium they flew in. But more, I needed somehow to be there with them, in the air! how was this to be? I had no idea. So I dabbled with skydiving to see if this was the answer. I learned about the relativity of things, the illusion of height and depth perception, but skydiving was not the answer.

Years later as a commercial photographer in the UK, I had the chance to do a photo shoot for a flying school near Oxford. Had I any experience with air-to-air photography? well no, but I sure had a passion! ... and somehow I got the job. The assignment was to photograph their Piper Senecas and Navajos from the open door of a Bell Jet Ranger, and so a love affair began. When I first sat in that open doorway with the aircraft alongside me, I knew this was it! I knew that I could bond with my subject. I know, sounds

odd but I can explain. When you are in a studio or on location, you create a bond with your subject in order to capture their personality, or your interpretation of them. You know when this happens, or if it is not going to work, and you know the progress and outcome of the session is governed by this insight. The same goes for a subject in the air. As well as the aircraft I am photographing, I have anticipated the lighting and the effects of the location I am flying in.



I know the moment that I have the shot, so I only need to take a half dozen shots at the most.

This point seems to coincide with when I feel that I am alone in the air with the aircraft. Meaning, I am often in the slipstream on the helicopter skids or in the open cargo doorway of an aircraft most of the time, therefore the camera aircraft is behind me, it doesn't exist and I am not aware of it at all for those precious moments. It is just the subject aircraft and me. It is an uncanny feeling. I don't fly them but here I am alongside these

amazing machines in the air, far above the world below. How did I get to do this I wonder?

Aviation photography is a specialised occupation, there are not too many of us out there in the field doing it professionally. Aircraft, like any other human commodity, needs to be promoted to civilian users and defence customers alike. The manufacture of an aircraft is an amalgam of a number of suppliers who have products or components that are essential to its construction.

The larger the aircraft, the more suppliers there are, anything from the electronics, the paint, the seats, the metal itself, tyres, upholstery, cabin cuisine and more. And why wouldn't you be proud of the part that you played in the involvement of an aircraft. If you supplied the electronics, then a shot of in its environment is the best end result of your work.

'Plane Crazy' is a portrayal of some of the many photographic assignments and commissions I have worked on as an aviation photographer, shooting aircraft in the air and on the ground for many different clients and reasons. A wonderful client over the last ten years has been Pilatus Aircraft of Switzerland, and I include some of the photoshoots around the world of their superb

OPPOSITE: *Two Pilatus PC12's from Australia's Northern Territory Police Air Wing over Darwin Harbour at sunrise. Cameraship is a Robinson R44, with Crocodile paniers, flown by David Adamson from Specialist Helicopters.*

ABOVE: *My first A2A photoshoot involved a Piper Seneca and Piper Warrior over Oxfordshire, UK.*

PC6, PC9, PC12, PC21 and PC24 aircraft. The imagery covers a wide time frame and incorporates both analogue and digital image capture. I started shooting with colour slide or transparency film (E6) in the late 1960s and in 1997 crossed over to digital capture and have never looked back.

Along with some of my favourite shots in each chapter, I have tried to include some behind-the-scenes frames and my thoughts relating to the shoot where possible. Some photoshoots were published as illustrated stories, so I have included some of these verbatim, as well as an example of the client's use of the images where possible.

Unfortunately over the book's time frame, some of the aircraft depicted here have been retired from service. In time, restored examples are seen on the airshow circuit, whilst others, due to their complexity, may only be seen in museums. So its a bit of a time capsule for me to include aircraft like the Victor, Vulcan, VC10 or F-111 and others.

In naming them, I have tried to keep to the original manufacturers designations as much as possible, even though the original company may well have been absorbed by a larger group. For instance Blackburn, who made the Buccaneer, is now part of the much larger BAE Systems, the same goes for the McDonnell Douglas F/A-18 which is now known as the Boeing F/A18.

I really hope that you enjoy my photographic encounters with these aircraft as much as I have.

Jon Davison 2020.



