

# Phill Hooker (Hookz)

*While at Tauranga for the Classics of the Sky Airshow, regular KiwiFlyer Contributor Chris Gee took the opportunity to meet up with local identity and pilot of most things that fly, Phill Hooker. Phill's aviation history is diverse to say the least, and he flew displays of no less than nine different aircraft at the show. Chris asked Phill about this feat, as well as his background, motivation, and favourite aircraft types.*

Tauranga Airport hosts an energetic, tight-knit and eclectic community of aviators, with around 50 people living at the airport. Perhaps the most experienced and charismatic among these is Phill Hooker (Hookz), who has lived at the airport for over 12 years. He has an intimidating array of accomplishments and qualifications to his name, including A-Category Fixed Wing instructor, B-Category Gliding instructor, Flight Examiner, Authorised Testing Officer for Microlight and Gyros, an airline pilot, commercial helicopter pilot and is the go-to test pilot for many of the other aviators at the airport. With over 100 types in his logbook (and rated on most), Phill is one of the most versatile flight instructors in the country, and can teach you to fly almost anything apart from hot air balloons. Phil has over 15,000 hours of airtime under his belt, but as he explains, "when you are an airline pilot you build those hours up really fast".



Phill Hooker in the Titan T-51 at Tauranga, and below with the Rubber Ducky.

## From Hang Gliding to 737s

His career in aviation was jump-started, quite literally, with his first flight in a hang-glider. "I started off hang gliding back in 1976, then I got into gliding at the Taranaki Gliding Club. I saw these tow planes and I thought 'that's a bit of me', so I started my Private Pilot Licence in order to tow the gliders." Things progressed from there. Soon Phill had enough hours for a PPL and later a CPL, and then went on to get his instructor rating at the New Plymouth Aero Club. At that point Phill's sights became set on helicopters. "I was lucky enough to work with Keith McKenzie in Taumarunui for a year where I learnt valuable lessons about low flying around wires and hills from one of the top helicopter guys in the country. My ambition was always to fly helicopters, and go chase deer, but my girlfriend didn't want to be the wife of a helicopter pilot stuck in Timbuktu for ten years, when all our friends were heading to Eagle Air and getting into the airlines. So I went the airline way, and I have no regrets. I got so much value from that kind of flying that I could pass on in flight training."

Phill's career took a new tangent in 1983 when he took a job flying floatplanes out of Rotorua for a season. "This turned out to be very handy years later when I became a Flight Examiner; very

few people had experience with float planes and I still go down there and do the annual checks for them." After moving up to Hamilton in 1986 to instruct for Falcon Flying Academy he then moved in as the Chief Flight Instructor (CFI) at Waikato Aero Club. He joined Eagle Air in 1988 and flew their Embraer EMB 110 Bandeirantes for seven years. This was followed by a move to Air Nelson for five years where he flew the Saab 340, after which he went on to fly the Boeing 737 for Freedom Air. Phill explains: "You become a pilot because you love to fly. During my time as an airline pilot I never let my instructor rating lapse and in 1996 I started up my own flying school 'Bay Flight' in Tauranga." In 2001 he left the

airlines to devote all his time to that enterprise which became very popular and drew students from all over the world to Tauranga. Phill sold Bay Flight 18 months ago, and very recently HeliPro purchased Bay Flight and has brought Phill back as CFI.

## A Gyro Enthusiast

Gyrocopter flying formed part of Bay Flight's operation in the early years utilising RAF2000 Gyros. They were also used for joyrides, search and rescue, shark patrols for the surf clubs and at airshow displays. "We have dropped skydivers from them, soared the Mount engine off and flown the Tauranga Wave. Gyros are still the safest type of aircraft if operated correctly." As Bay Flight got busier Tony Unwin arrived in Tauranga and took over gyro training renaming it 'Gyrate', which has grown into one of

the larger gyro training operations in the southern hemisphere, and Phill is still involved in the operation. Phill is also involved in Flying for the Disabled, and he has a 'hand kit' for a Cessna, allowing people who would normally be ground-bound to make it into the air on their own.

## The Tauranga AirShow

With the Classics of the Sky Airshow being such a big day on the Tauranga aviation community's calendar, Phill was certain to play a big part in it. He flew nine different displays in six different aircraft over the two days. He flew T-51 Mustang, Motor glider, Furio, Tecnam Twin and Cessna 152 at the airshow, as well as being the part of the 5-ship gyro team. So how does one deal with the mechanics and rules of so many very different aircraft in such a short time? Phill says the fact that they are all so different with such different controls actually makes it easier. "If you were flying many similar aircraft with similar controls you are more likely to make a mistake. Jumping from one type into another is something I have always done so it's not a problem for me." Phill does ask the Airshow Directors to give him at least half an hour between each of his displays - enough time to have rest, get a coffee, and clear his head before prepping for his next display. At the biennial Matamata



Airshow however, Phill is the Airshow Director, a role he fits in between piloting several of the displays himself.

## Display routine planning

Phill's approach to display planning depends on the aircraft he is flying. For example when conducting low level aerobatics in the underpowered Cessna 152: "I scared myself years ago trying to follow a planned sequence. I now make it up as I go, using the height and energy I have after each move and decide which manoeuvre I can safely perform next. So in the 152 I usually don't perform them in an exact order. The Mustang and Furio displays however are pretty much worked out in advance because I have the certainty of power available to get where I know I need to be at the end of each manoeuvre. To be asked to display for a crowd is exciting and an honour and you should always set out to thrill the layman, impress the knowledgeable and scare no one, especially yourself!"

## Test Flying

Having such an experienced pilot on hand is invaluable to the aviation community at Tauranga, and test-flying most of the aircraft that reside at the airport can place particular demands on Phill as a pilot. "You have to test fly with the right attitude. When you get up there, you have to expect the unexpected, and consider that a 'worse case scenario' could happen to you at every phase of the flight, and you have to be ready for it. You can't rush." Phill carefully flies each mission one step at a time, always planning ahead for his next move. "I have a game plan ready and know what I am going to do if something goes wrong. I do all my test flying directly overhead the airfield, it's got a nice big runway to land on if I need it in a hurry, and they have rescue people down there if it all goes wrong!"

## Diversity at Tauranga

So what's the attraction of Tauranga? "Tauranga Airport is the only airport where you have everything: helicopters, gliders, microlights, gyros, model aircraft, airlines, warbirds, flying schools, aero clubs, sport aircraft, and experimental aircraft. I am heavily involved in the community here and the airport is excellent to operate out of." Tauranga is lucky to have a council that is right behind the airport, and the airport's management are very proactive. "The Airport Manager is a pilot himself: in fact he used to be my co-pilot on the Bandits." Tauranga airport also boasts a very capable air traffic control team. "It must be one of the hardest airports for new air traffic controllers because you have so much going on. You have aircraft coming over at 200 knots, then you have gyros buzzing about at 40 knots, and skydivers dropping in, as well as the usual commercial airline traffic."

## A passion for sport aviation

Despite the airline flying, the aerobatics and the test flying, Phill's passion has always been with sport aviation. "Back in the day in New Plymouth the microlight scene grew out of the hang-gliding movement. We were putting all sorts of crazy contraptions together and flying them... but they sure have evolved since then." There is, of course, a massive juxtaposition between the automation and routine of airline flying and the 'seat of your pants' hang gliding

and sport aviation that Phill enjoys so much. "My hang gliding experience has given me a competitive advantage over a lot of other pilots since it is the purest of flying, and really teaches you things you won't learn any other way. On the beaches of New Plymouth if you didn't get the landing right you would go over the cliff and wreck your glider. So when I started flying Cessnas at the aero club, where you had flaps and throttles and control surfaces etc. I thought 'this is easy!'"

Not everything is easy to fly however. Phill tells of an aircraft nicknamed the 'Rubber Ducky', which was basically a trike microlight with a rubber dingy in place of the trike. Given his combination of microlight, hang-gliding and water experience he was the natural choice to test the aircraft, and teach others to fly it. "Once I ended upside down in the harbour with a pilot I was training, which was hilarious. With a trike you steer with opposite feet. If you want to go left you push forward with your right foot, which is natural for a trike pilot, but this guy was a glider pilot, where you push with the same foot as your intended direction. Well, when we put this machine onto the beach, people came out to take photos and there was a bit of a to-do around us. We taxied out onto the harbour and set off. This guy guns it, and it started to yaw, well in the heat of the moment he compensates with the wrong foot... Nek minnit, flip, we are upside down in the water. We both emerge to find the whole beach was laughing at us. What can you do but laugh as well?"

## Choosing a favourite

Given Phill's vast and varied experience, what is the favourite aircraft he has ever flown? "A hang-glider and the Hughes 500! They are my favourite, but it's a tough question because every aircraft has its purpose. If I want to have fun and flap around the sky a gyrocopter is the way to go, but if I need to go long distance, I want to get there in something fast like an aeroplane. If I need to drop onto a client's farm, a helicopter would do the trick. Each type has its role in aviation and you shouldn't make an aircraft do something it's not designed for. It's horses for courses."

*KiwiFlyer thanks Phill for his time with this interview and wishes him well for all future aviation endeavours, the next of which is likely to be demonstrating the Falcomposite Furio at AirVenture Oshkosh in July.*



"If I want to have fun and flap around the sky a gyrocopter is the way to go." Phill pictured with a Gyrate Eagle gyro.

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