

contributed by Jill McCaw

An Interview with Michael Oakley

Balloon Pilot and Director of Ballooning Canterbury

MICHAEL and Kate Oakley of Canterbury are New Zealand's newest commercial balloon operators. It has taken them considerable time and effort to get Ballooning Canterbury off the ground. Operating out of Darfield, Ballooning Canterbury launched on 7th October 2012 with a large 16 place and smaller 4 place balloon. Jill McCaw asks Michael how it all came about.

What is your aviation background and what got you into ballooning?

I've been a glider pilot for a long time. I first started gliding in 1985 and ballooning in 1997. I find gliding a challenge between me and nature. Ballooning is similar but different in that it's in a microclimate. With gliding you are using a large part of the sky while in a balloon you explore the air currents in a local area.

You've flown at quite a few balloon meets and contests. How did you do?

I flew at the Christchurch fiesta 2001 and came 1st. I went to twelve Wairarapa fiestas and won five times and came second three. I've won both the Hamilton fiestas I went to. I also represented

New Zealand at the World Balloon Champs in Mildura, Australia in 2004. I'm currently president of the Canterbury balloon club.



Michael Oakley (centre) with a basket full of happy passengers.

Why did you decide to start a commercial operation?

It's something that's always been in the back of my mind. I'm a farmer and I was looking at something I could do as a job that would fit in with that. I grew seed potatoes with around 60% of my income based around potatoes. It would take a lot of investment to go forward with the potato business and I have no faith in the industry at the moment. Not to mention, since I lease land, I'm in direct competition with the dairy industry which is booming in Canterbury at the moment. I decided to invest in ballooning instead.

When did you seriously start pursuing the option?

In about June 2010 we decided we would go ahead with the idea and ordered the balloon in July from the Cameron Balloon Factory in Bristol, UK. It was made and on the water when we had the September earthquake which gave us a hiding. We had a lot of

damage to our Hororata farm and our equipment. We even got a photo op with the Prime Minister when he came to investigate the damage.

The balloon arrived in January 2011 and then in February the Christchurch earthquake killed tourism in Canterbury. We couldn't give up. We had too much invested. At the time we were sitting our driver's license endorsements so we could drive the bus we had already bought. Even the class 2, P, D licensing was expensive.

What other major investments did you have to make?

Being so far out of Christchurch we had issues with getting LPG for the balloons. We had to invest in a four tonne bulk LPG tank and filling station and with that came the licenses and qualifications for LPG handling and regulations surrounding the site. We also had to build a purpose built trailer to take the large balloon which weighs 900 kg empty.

Then CAA announced that anyone in adventure aviation needed a Part 115 certificate by 1 May 2012.

Yes. Part 115 caused several established balloon operators to close down and there are now only five in the country. Three are in the South Island, two here in Canterbury and one in Queenstown.

We were much helped by Aviation Safety Management Systems Ltd who we employed to write our Part 115 for the ballooning business. Andrew Shelley and Heather Andrews have been in the aviation industry for years. They approached us at Warbirds over Wanaka. They were already doing the Part 115 for the Strikemaster and were so knowledgeable about what we needed to do.

We did a couple of flights before 1 May 2012 but then had to sit and wait. It took CAA over 100 days to give us our accreditation which we finally got on 28th September. We flew our first passengers under Part 115 on the 7th October.

Did the wait cause any difficulties?

It could have done, but luckily tourist numbers were low over this time. When we did start the low numbers also meant we could ease into the operation and we've been slowly building since. Our passenger numbers have doubled every month since we've started.

We should mention you've got two balloons. Why? And what are they?

We operate all year round and having a large and a small balloon means that we have no minimum numbers required for a flight. A lot of our customers are tourists from Christchurch, and of course as tourist numbers grow we hope we'll be using the large balloon more often than not.

The smaller balloon is a Cameron V90, ZK-WRU. That's the smaller balloon and takes two to three people plus the pilot. The larger balloon which takes up to 16 people is a Cameron Z275, ZK-OAK. OAK is the largest commercial balloon currently flying in the country.

As part of up-skilling for the business I went to the Cameron factory, Bristol in November 2011 for a week long engineering course. I spent the following week gaining more skills working with the staff at the factory, mostly on the sewing machines which I really enjoyed.

Your business is very family orientated.

That's right. My wife Kate is a big part of this. She's helped with all stages of development and has her bus license too. She does everything except fly the balloons and she's much better at the bookwork side of it than I ever will be.

Our son Nicholas is a balloon pilot as well. Eventually it would be nice if he could get a commercial licence too, but at nineteen he's not really ready for that step yet. Our daughter Hannah is also very supportive of the business.

So the Oakley family is in the balloon business for the long term?

I would like to keep the balloon business personal and give customers a very special adventure. With my knowledge of farming and the Canterbury plains and drawing from my experience in gliding and weather they get the whole package. We want to grow but not get too big and lose that personal touch that our family business offers. As Christchurch grows and recovers, so will we.

People are paying me to do something I love to do. What could be better than that?

www.ballooningcanterbury.co.nz



John McCaw

Makes me want to try it. Phone Michael on 0508 422 556 or visit www.ballooningcanterbury.co.nz for more information.

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