

contributed by Jill McCaw

An Interview with John Oakes

Helicopter Pilot and Director of Central South Island Helicopters

THIS issue's person of interest is helicopter pilot John Oakes, a man using his unique blend of skills to help eradicate introduced pests on some of the world's most remote and inhospitable islands. Jill McCaw talks to him about how this came about, why he does it, and what it's like flying in the Sub Antarctic.

Tell us about your day job John.

I'm part of the family business, Central South Island Helicopters Limited. We operate out of Herbert near Oamaru in North Otago. We've been operating since 1988 in the South Island and offer services such as agricultural work, heavy lift up to 1800 kg, surveying, pest control, fire fighting, tourism sightseeing, fishing and hunting, and search and rescue. We've got 6 helicopters and 2 planes and these days my job is in co-ordinating it all. We've got 3 people working in the office and another 13 or 14 staff, loaders and support crew. It's my job to plan each day for each aircraft and crew.

How long have you been flying helicopters?

Well I've been involved with them for longer than I've been a pilot. I started in live capture (deer recovery) in 1975 as a netter. I did my flight training in '82 and got my commercial, which I paid for as I went, in '88. I've flown full time ever since.

It was your pest control skills that got you involved with Macquarie Island. Is that right?

That's right, that and a bit of knowing the right people at the right time. Macquarie Island is one of the sub Antarctic islands and it is Australian territory. The Australia Antarctic Division has maintained a base there since 1948. In 1997 it became a World Heritage site and planning began for eradicating the pest from the island. It was a really bold plan. They were hoping to make a triple eradication of rabbits, rats and mice, something that's not been achieved before.

New Zealand's Department of Conservation (DoC) are world leaders in this sort of thing so they were approached. All credit to DoC here for letting their experts get involved. Queenstown DoC officer Keith Springer became part of it. Keith ended up working for Tasmania's Parks and Wildlife Service. He spent five years pre-planning for the operation. Keith knew of me from work we'd done on pest control in the South Island.

I'd also done some wild deer recovery in Queensland. I was involved in the live capture programme in South East Queensland and the Torres Strait in the early '80s. In fact that's where I met my wife Bruna.

Helicopter Resources from Hobart won the tender Keith put out for the Macquarie pest control contract, and they knew me from the time in Queensland. They had no agriculture or baiting experience and knew I did. It all fell into place.

When did you first get to Macquarie Island?

We were only supposed to go for the one time. All the planning was completed in 2009 and we were to have three months there in 2010. In the end the weather was so bad we only managed to get 10% of the operation done so we came home and reprogrammed it for the next year.

And what do you actually do on the island?

Well we did three complete go rounds of the island with baiting. We had approximately 300 tonnes of bait dropped at 20kgs per hectare but with different rates for different hot spots. Before baiting could start, we first had to unload it all off the ship.

I was the lead pilot and I was subcontracted to Helicopter Resources. I supply the aircrew, ground crew, support gear, eg the buckets and GPS units and other gear. Putting the equipment together was a big job. Helicopter Resources supplied the four squirrel helicopters and a complete set of spares and then more spares.



The team involved in the Macquarie Island Pest Eradication Project. Most of them are Kiwis.



John Oakes and Denis Browne on Macquarie Island in 2011.



So obviously you have to bring everything with you.

We have to be completely self-sustainable.

The first year we had to carry in the whole set up. The huts were carried off the ship on long lines. And we had to bring in all the supplies for the huts. Once the ship goes away, you're on your own for three months so you have to have everything you are going to need. The ship stays a week to unload. All unused stuff from the previous season and all waste from the island gets loaded back on the ship and then the ship goes away. Last season in February I was one of three pilots doing the re-supplying. We long lined 350 tonnes of freight on and off the ship.

Normally there are only 10 to 12 people there, but with the eradication people and the builders and plumbers who were working on the new power house we had up to 30 to 35 people so that is why we flew in extra huts.

Our operation, as well as pilots, has three ground crew, two engineers and ten hunters who were a separate component to our crew.

Macquarie Island is at 54°S in an area of extreme weather conditions. How does that affect working there?

All of us working for Helicopter Resources had to go through the Australia Antarctic training and health and safety things. We had to have really good job safety planning in place to prove we could do everything we said we could. And then you have to be prepared to look after yourself for months.

Last year when I was there one of the workers, a girl, broke her back in one of the research sites. She was a long way from base and the weather was clagging in but I managed to fly out and get her back to base where there is a doctor on site. It was six weeks before the boat came back and she spent that time on a bed in a cast. She has since healed up completely. If I couldn't have gotten to her when I did, the way the weather was, it could have been weeks until we could have gotten her back to base.

So the weather can be pretty extreme?

The biggest thing, as pilots, that we had to deal with was windy, turbulent, rough conditions. We were pleased we were flying Squirrels which deal with that sort of thing pretty well. We had to fly to make the operation succeed. We were sowing in 30 knots sometimes. It could be real hard on the lee side of the island.



Long-lining freight off the ship. Last season 350 tonnes were moved to and from the island by helicopter.

It was usually visibility that stopped us flying, not the wind.

You did the big pesticide drop in 2011. Did you go back last year (2012)?

I did. The place had got to me and I really wanted to see the results of our work so last year I went down just to do the resupply trip.

The results were amazing. When we left at the end of July last year the hunters had found 13 rabbits, no rats and no mice. Since then, there have been no rabbits, rats or mice found. No mice is amazing.

Mice are so hard to get rid of and we are coming up to two years pest free. The island is bouncing back with flora and fauna thriving. The regrowth is dramatic. It is very satisfying.

The whole thing is pretty awesome, one of the good things you do in your life.

You've done a few similar jobs as well in fairly exotic places.

I guess you can call the Galapagos exotic. Yes, we baited ten small islands in the Galapagos. My wife Bruna ground crewed. That was absolutely awesome. The place is mind blowing with the turtles and lizards and things, plus the volcanic stuff. There are thousands of acres of solid lava so that was a real eye opener for me. When we sowed Bartholomew Island we were operating out of a volcano crater on the next island.

I've also done some pesticide sowing on some islands in Fiji.

Working out of a volcano crater in the Galapagos sounds like we need to come back to you for a sequel to this interview. Thanks for talking to us John. We'll have to catch up again in the future.

Photos by John Oakes and Rob Rogel.