

Ag. Planes Past and Present

Part 4 - CAC CA28 Ceres and Yeoman YA-1 Cropmaster 250R

Readers following John Nicolson's series on Ag. Planes no doubt felt cheated in our last issue when that page had to be moved out to accommodate a last minute advertising request. We'll make up for it next issue with a double instalment but in the meantime John covers two more aircraft from NZ's rich topdressing history.

Commonwealth Aircraft Corp (CAC) CA28 Ceres

The 600hp CAC Ceres topdresser, with a maximum speed of 110mph, was said to be quite popular among its Kiwi and Aussie operators and six of them came to New Zealand from Australia between 1960/1961.

The Ceres was built to meet heavy-lift market needs and had its first flight in Australia in early 1958. It was produced from 1959 to 1963, during which time CAC had planned for 50 units. Only 21 units were ever built however, largely from cannibalised surplus (Harvard-like) Wirraway military trainers/light bombers - even the Ceres' cockpit layout was in a Warbirds style.

Following the build of Ceres number five, a rearward-facing buddy seat was installed thereafter behind the cockpit. Wirraway landing legs were used (although fixed), but the wheels were off ex-CAC P-51 Mustangs (I can see that in BPU). It was said that the more trendy, and available FU24 was the Ceres' nemesis. There are still two Ceres registered in Australia - VH-SSY being one of them which was flying out of Tyabb (Melbourne) in 2010. The Ceres, with its P&W nine-cylinder 600hp radial engine, had a payload of 2,200lb in its 41cu/ft hopper (and upwards of 2,400lb) and was quite active here for 12-odd years between 1960 and 1972, having been mostly operated by James Aviation and Aerial Farming. The Aussie-based laid-up Ceres has literally come the full circle nowadays in that its best parts are being hunted out and used to restore CAC Wirraways because of their popularity as Warbirds. I suppose this is the adage of going around, coming around.



ZK-BPU was originally CAC's primary demonstrator as VH-CED - and was the first to sport the ZK marks. Our six Ceres inclusive were ZK-BPU, BVS, BXW, BXY, BZO and BSQ. The history was: December 1959 - VH registration cancelled, and reregistered ZK-BPU at the same time. December 1959 - went to Aerial Farming of NZ Ltd at Palmerston North (with BVS/BXW/BXY). January 1960 - went to Aerial Farming (Holdings) Ltd. February 1961 - damaged in an accident. December 1968 - James Aviation Ltd. of Hamilton acquired BPU (with BVS/BXW) and underwent a JAL rebuild in early 1970. BPU suffered a couple of accidents in the field (forced landing/loss of power) in the months following the rebuild. In May 1970 BPU was withdrawn from service and its rego cancelled. Evidently the best parts of BPU, in James Aviation colours, went to MoTaT. Cookson Airspread and Manawatu Aerial Topdressing also operated the Ceres BZO, latterly, and BSQ was flown by Wanganui Aero Work in the mid-to-late 1960s. (John Nicolson Collection)



ZK-CLW, ex-VH-TPH, is one of six Croppies to come here, in 1965 (21 were built). All six were first registered in Southland, with CLW first going to Southern Aviation of Gore. In mid-1973, after having been repaired following a crash on the job, CLW went to Western Airspray, a subsidiary of Wanganui Aero Work, as a cropsprayer with a 650ltr tank. The aircraft was soon after deemed surplus to needs by WAW in mid-1974, which saw an end to its aerial agricultural job. It was placed in storage and thereafter moved around a bit between different private owners in the North Island. There is also a hint that CLW was operated by the Barr Brothers - but I can't confirm that. ZK-CLW was deregistered in December 1990. CLW was then acquired by Lindsay McNicol and moved to Oamaru where it was again placed in storage as spares for Lindsay's airworthy all-yellow Cropmaster CPW - the only Cropmaster flying in the world, and still configured as a (display) topdresser complete with all-yellow loader truck. Is CLW a delightfully boring-looking plane, or is it just me? (John Nicolson Collection)

Yeoman YA-1 Cropmaster 250R

In essence, the Cropmaster is another of those numerous well-intentioned, low budget purpose-built topdressers, capable as they might have been, that arrived on the topdressing scene without much fanfare. They just sort of turned up on the day and got on with the job!

The Australian-built Yeoman Cropmaster 250 is something of a head-scratcher in that the type ultimately slipped quietly into the dark depths into anonymity - having been more recently revived in NZ by one of the last-built Croppies in Lindsay McNicol's ZK-CPW.

The Yeoman Cropmasters flew for 12 years here, mostly as topdressers and were said to be good at what they did - Lindsay told me that his Croppy is the best plane he's ever flown (his former mount was a Cessna A185F). The Kiwi Croppies (all but CTX were ex Australia) were ZK-CCP, CDI, CLW, COE, CPW and CTX, the latter of which arrived in Gore in 1967 and was deregistered in 1973. The former CTX is today owned by Craig Dowden of Gore and is currently under a rebuild programme as a two-seater. Craig's father Bill has notched up 4,000 flying hours on the type in Southland during the 1960s and 1970s.

The Yeoman Cropmaster had a payload of 1,740lb and in 250R configuration was powered by a 250hp Continental engine as opposed to the original 250hp Lycoming engine (which was a vast improvement on the prototype's oily old radial engine).

A 'Series II' suffix signalled a modification involving shifting the mains forward because of the aircraft's propensity to tip over on its nose during ground handling.



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