



Book Review: Bill Black's story

Bill Black learned to fly helicopters when most of one's pilot training came from figuring things out for oneself and surviving any bad experiences that happened along the way. It was also a 'golden' time when regulations weren't especially keeping up with the industry's development. He was a natural pilot who transitioned from schoolboy models to Tiger Moths as fast as he could earn the money for lessons. Before long he had bought his own, but after being given a ride in the first helicopter to visit South Otago where he lived, he realised that was what he wanted to do. Now retired, Bill is one of the living legends of our aviation heritage and was awarded an MBE (way back in 1977) for his tremendous contributions to mountain rescue and outstanding service to the industry and community.

Compiled and edited by Merv Halliday, a good half of the text in this book has been written 'as narrated' by Bill – personally telling you the stories, largely unedited and as though you were sitting there with him, sharing a drink probably. Thus the language is conversational, and sometimes colourful, and sometimes not to the point, but this narrative style does offer an excellent insight into Bill Black - the man and the personality. Much of the rest of the text is commentary from a wide variety of others involved in Bill's life of flying – and many tales are told from their points of view also. There are some poignant moments too, that may well bring a tear to the eye.

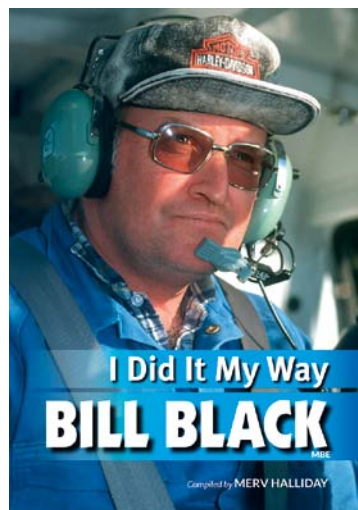
Especially in the deer recovery days, it was a hard working life. Shooter Errol Brown says that "In one year during the late '60s, we (he, Bill and the Gutter) recovered 8,501 deer. Our biggest day was 195 deer, that's found, shot, gutted, picked up and ferried down to the boat. I think Bill flew 14 hours that day." And from Bill, "I was doing between 100-120 hours a month. I sometimes wondered why I put the machine away at night because I could be away again about three hours later next morning and the machine was bloody well still warm."

There's significant detail in some of the recollections and they are always very honest, and in a good few cases probably incriminating too. There are many tales involving calculated risk taking and several near misses. That said, with almost 29,000 hours of helicopter time logged, Bill only ever had one accident which was actually the fault of his passenger (who bumped off the mags while moving in the cockpit).

Given the locations and type of flying Bill did, that is an outstanding record. And without some of Bill's calculated risk taking over the years, many rescue missions would not have been conducted and many lives would have been lost.

For some reason I imagined there would have been a greater sharing of Bill's 'theory of safe flying', and it is included, but only indirectly. No doubt a fair degree of modesty means that he's always telling the story, rather than telling anyone how to fly. All those years of aviation wisdom are there though – you just have to read between the lines to see them.

I Did It My Way doesn't particularly need to be followed sequentially and can quite easily be opened at random pages for short and interesting reads of whatever



tale you've happened across. In fact that's not a bad way to start this book, especially if you've a pre-conceived expectation of getting straight into the thick of exciting helicopter adventures.

As with most self-published books, there are more words and content than would have got past a commercial editing process, but that is easily forgiven once you've adjusted to the style and got into some of the tales held within. *I Did It My Way* will be a fascinating read for flyers and enthusiasts alike. It's great that a book has been written on a life such as Bill's and capturing this story makes an important contribution to the documentation of aviation history in New Zealand. So thanks and well done to Merv Halliday for that. Add it to your collection for \$40 plus \$6.50 P&P from www.billblack.co.nz

Huge turnout for book launch and reunion

A LARGE crowd gathered at the Te Anau Club on Saturday 24th August to celebrate the achievements of local helicopter pilot Bill Black with the launch of his biography *I Did It My Way*. (See review this page.) Several hundred people attended the function and over 200 copies were sold.

Bill became one of the pioneers of deer recovery in Fiordland when he signed up with Tim Wallis (now Sir Tim) as a pilot for Luggate Game Packers in 1967. Bill recovered thousands of feral deer from the bush and later as the owner of his own helicopter business, also serviced the fishing industry, worked with muttonbirders, fought fires, salvaged other aircraft and was involved in over 500 search and rescue missions.

Merv Halliday, who compiled the book and organised the launch, said he was overwhelmed with the turnout and support of the function which provided for a rare reunion of former Fiordland pilots and

those associated with the deer recovery industry - during a period of aviation which we will never see the likes of again.

A minute of silence was observed in

honour of absent friends – a poignant time to remember Bill's many colleagues who have died in aircraft accidents. Bill says he "was lucky because he just kept coming home". "During the deer recovery era the attrition rate was very, very high," said Merv.

The gathering then took on a festive atmosphere, with speakers sharing their memories and tall tales much to the delight of the audience. These included Sir Tim

Wallis, Xerox Challenge and Coast to Coast founder Robin Judkins, and others.

After the speeches there was plenty of time for informal catch-ups with old friends and many people enjoyed the camaraderie well into the night. Sir Tim summed the day up well, saying, "That was the best reunion I have ever been to".



Bill and Shirley Black arrive at the reunion.