

## **NOT UP AND AWAY, BUT UP AND DOWN!**

By Sue Edmonds  
*For Waikato Farmer*

Around the beginning of the 1950's New Zealand had its own 'magnificent men in their flying machines' only we called them topdressing pilots.

Many were ex-WW2 pilots and a number had been instructors at some point during the War. Their flying days had been both exciting and terrifying, and had left them with a longing to continue flying. Some had transferred to flying for the fledgling domestic airline, National Airways Corporation (NAC). For others the lure of going back to flying Tiger Moths, which were fun to fly and great for aerobatics, proved irresistible.

My first memory of the lure of topdressing was soon after we arrived in NZ in 1952, and my father (an ex RAF pilot) discovered a topdressing Tiger Moth and its pilot at what was probably an A&P show in Auckland. If my mother hadn't put her foot down about him staying grounded, life might have been very different!

So when I discovered that at least one topdressing pilot from those days was living in Hamilton, I couldn't wait to hear what it was really like. Doug McElwain is now living in the northern suburbs of Hamilton, and we spent a hilarious afternoon while he plied me with anecdotes and information.

Until the advent of aerial topdressing, adding fertiliser in steep country was either out of the question, or had to be done by hand. Thus much of this land remained fawn coloured, with little grass growth all year. But prices for wool were skyrocketing, and the benefits of superphosphate were being appreciated on lower country where it could be applied from trucks.

But there weren't any Civil Aviation rules which would allow the sort of flying which would inevitably be involved, and Doug gave huge credit to E A (Gibby) Gibson, then Director of Civil Aviation who, he believed, aided and abetted those pioneers in bending the rules. With so much wartime flying experience, he reasoned that they knew what they were doing, and allowed them to get on with it.

After the War Doug had become a travelling salesman for Berlei, with a 6 week run in ladies' underwear stretching from the middle of the North Island down as far as Motueka in Nelson. When in 1952 he heard that a topdressing firm in Wanganui was looking for more pilots he eagerly turned up at the local airstrip.

His instruction in the new job consisted of "You take off and fly to the corner of the paddock we're spreading. Then you pull this lever and fly straight up the paddock, put the lever back, turn, and then pull the lever when you come back the other way." Nothing about height, airspeed, windspeed, how to ensure the strips were straight and close, or anything else. In fact it was 20 years before real training for topdressing pilots came into effect. His graphic description of his first takeoff with the contents of two 70kg bags of 'super' in the hopper was of feeling as if he was driving a model T with four flat tyres, and when he finally got into the air when the ground dropped away he was amazed and much relieved.

The 'super' was carried in the space where the front seat of the plane had been. Initially they lined it with a tarpaulin with a hole cut in it, then progressed to plywood and finally to a lightweight duralium liner made to the shape of the space. It was loaded by a tractor fitted with a long arm and a hopper which held around 200kg which dumped its load into

the space on the plane. In the early days it took two men to lift and empty the huge sacks into the hopper for each load.

As a pilot Doug wore gumboots, while others favoured leather boots or sandshoes. Over these went two pairs of trousers, three jerseys, a scarf, an oilskin, gloves, goggles and a leather helmet.

One of his first jobs was hilly country at the back of Taihape. The method in those days was to spread paddock by paddock, rather than broad sweeps across country. They flew at about 100feet, turning back and forth, using the airflow to spread and bed in the 'super'. Two planes were used for each job, with the one in the air making a slipping turn at almost stalling speed, while the second took off.

But Tiger Moths didn't have flaps or brakes, and stopping on those tiny airstrips was an art form. A metal skid which stuck out the back had a piece of metal (referred to as a knife) slotted through it at right angles, and when landing the pilot thrust the tail down and the knife dug into the soil and slowed the plane. On one record breaking day Doug remembered starting at 5.30am and dumping a record tonnage of 250 tons by 8pm, which involved 140 landings.

Doug moved to Hamilton and became the first pilot for Robertson Air Service which, for many years was the foremost topdressing business servicing the Waikato. Initially using Tiger Moths and later the wonderful and reliable Fletchers, he spent 5 years dumping 'super' on every hill in the region. Describing the job as 95% boredom and 5% sheer terror, he coped with the hazards of animals wandering onto the airstrips, and of mending punctured tyres by stuffing them with grass and wool until the job was finished. He credited Robertsons' excellent safety record with having 6 pilots of whom 5 had been wartime flying instructors, so they all 'knew their stuff'.

They all had breathtaking moments, such as flying through low cloud and suddenly coming upon power lines right in front of them, or not being able to stop before the top of the hill on landing, and careering down the other side till they ended up in the bush. But despite the crashes, the survival rate with just a bumped leg or a gashed lip was amazingly high.

Later he became Sales Manager for Robertsons, not only selling the benefits of aerial topdressing to farmers, but also designing and overseeing the building of over 500 airstrips on farms, sowing them with Cape barley and fine grasses to ensure a quickly established firm sward, which wouldn't wash away in the first winter rains. He credits his most effective promotions through the regular Federated Farmers newsletters, and in the early days they didn't just fly the stuff on, they also offered plans, specifications and advice on such matters as building the bulk bins to store the fertiliser beside the airstrip.

So when you hear a topdressing plane swooping back and forth in the hills, spare a thought for the pioneer pilots who worked out how to do it, and turned so much of our hilly country into profitable farms.