

Young Eagles Flying High

Last Sunday was a big day for Warbird Aviation, not only was it the recognised 80th anniversary of the Battle of Britain, but for the Tauranga Aero Club Young Eagles it was their first foray into historic aircraft. It was probably also the first time a Young Eagles event has flown such a collection of rare aircraft!



Olivia Pratt gets a nice perspective of Marty's Stearman in formation

The day dawned with what aviators call “Wing Commander weather”, in laymen’s terms it’s means a sky devoid of cloud, and only light breezes, the kind of weather that the senior boss can take an aircraft up and not embarrass themselves. Just perfect for an introduction to warbirds and formation flying for budding aviators too young to hold a licence, but possess a passion for slipping the surly bonds of earth and turning the planet into a stunning panorama. The Young Eagles program is run under the Royal NZ Aero Club for 13-17 year old youth and once a month they meet for a flying experience, or ground based aviation activity.

Sunday’s flight to Matamata was not only a highlight for the young folk, but also the program helpers as some were treated to a rare opportunity of flight in a 1940’s vintage aircraft. It was a collaboration between the club, and Classic Flyers, the well-known local aviation museum and cafe. Mums and Dads of the region will know it for its kids ‘Torpedo Park’ playground adjacent to the cafe, a safe weekend activity for everyone.



Willie Kay and Olivia Pratt exit Stearman 03

First call of the day was a briefing - if you’re going to fly your wingtip within two meters of another wingtip, you want to make sure everyone is on the same song sheet! The briefing ensures everyone is proficient at hand signals, flying procedures, timing, and how to navigate multitude aircraft to the same place without swapping paint.



Co-Ordinator and club instructor Sky Davies got to fly home in the Harvard front gate to inspect the grass.

The most rewarding part for me is hearing the excited chatter on the intercom from the lucky young aviator behind me, from seeing the exuberant look on their counterparts face staring back at us from the Perspex of another plane just a few meters away.

The warbirds arrival into Matamata airfield was via a ‘Buzz n Break’ procedure, in our case with the smoke turned on. Not only were the sixteen Young Eagles impressed, but plenty of vehicles on state highway 27 and a few locals swung into the proceedings and observe a flying museum sunbathing on the

During afternoon tea at Matamata they also got an introduction to aerobatics, two lucky recipients more so, as they had won a simple competition which treated them to ten minutes of aerobatics in a Yak 52 Russian warbird trainer, or yellow CT4 Airtrainer which you might recognise as being ex RNZAF. While nine young folk had sausage rolls, Olivia and Flynn got barrel rolls! Both landed with their lunch still contained internally, in fact upon disembarkation heading straight back to the snack table like all good teenagers.



The epic collection in Matamata

Adjoining the Yak on the flight line was another of its ilk, two North American Harvard's (yep the noisy ones that leave smoke on airshow day), three Boeing Stearman biplanes, and the Airtrainers little sister, the Airtourer. Rounding out the gaggle was some Aero Club members private aircraft, which are kindly donated for each event complete with competent owner pilots. Young Eagle's pilots are vetted before they start flying budding aviators to ensure only safe outcomes and happy landings. This week completing the airlift we had a Cessna 180, which is sometimes referred to a bush plane, and three owner built aircraft, two RV's which are sleek and fast, and a Murphy Super Rebel which is a short take off and landing minivan.



Derek Williams boards his Harvard after strapping Kalarn Mark in the back.

Before long it was time to tuck the wheels up and shred air back to Tauranga, this time deviating north and scaling the Kaimais at Katikati before turning down the scenic Matakana coastline for The Mount. With a new voice on the intercom, and a new young face staring back at me it was renewed excitement all round, again cumulating in a smoke on 'Buzz n Break' recovery to the home runway.



The Tauranga Young Eagles

The day was not over yet though. Local aerobatic pilots Murray Rogers and Steve Geard put on spirited aerobatic displays, Murray in the club's Cessna, and Steve in his Yak 55, a single seat overpowered competition projectile! The aero club deck was crowded with faces drawn to the smokey trails and aeroplanes defying normal flight characteristics, thank the stars there's only one seat in that tin sled!

Too soon though the sun hit the horizon, the warbirds returned to Classic Flyers hangers, and sixteen teenagers enthused by the scent of old leather, engine oil, and some unnamed vintage aroma, got stuck into the provided BBQ dinner....as you'd expect!

Article written by Nick Rowe