



The Kiwi Anson

The only Avro Anson Mk.I flying anywhere in the world is based at Omaka on New Zealand's South Island. **Dr Andreas Zeitler** talked to the owner about the history of the aircraft and its immaculate restoration.

Bill Reid's Anson is one of only two flying examples today and the only original wartime variant. The restoration effort on the aircraft is a piece of engineering art. Sitting down in the aircraft with the good-humoured owner and pilot is a revealing experience. Plenty of details in the cramped cabin draw the passenger's eyes. One starts to wonder if this Avro Anson is a flying museum and what parts of the equipment are actually

working. "Pretty much everything!" is Bill's short and simple answer. Even the lamp on the navigator's table lights up, even though a not very bright bulb is installed. From under the seat he then gets out some replica life jackets, there are replica bombs in the bomb bays and, during flight, his hands are on original control handles. Admittedly, one panel containing the modern radio and transponder in the cockpit is not original, but Bill has

constructed a cover with the fuel and oil system placard that was in this position – this is always at hand and put on when the aeroplane is on static display. Even the radios could be made to work, he adds, but there is no one today who listens to Morse code on those frequencies.

"I was fortunate to find most of the discarded military equipment before internet trading kicked off," says Bill. "Internet trading is great because you

Flying over Marlborough wine country, near the Anson's home base of Omaka, Bill Reid's aircraft is a tribute to Coastal Command and all who trained and fought in the 'Annie'. All photos Dr Andreas Zeitler



can find stuff, but prices have gone sky-high! If I wanted all that radio gear today I would need to pay more for that than I have paid for the whole aeroplane, because collectors pay silly prices for the equipment." So he was very fortunate having started this restoration in 2002, and he is convinced it will be difficult doing another Anson like this.

"This Anson was totally stripped when I bought it," Bill recalls. "There was plywood installed from floor to ceiling because it was used as a freighter carrying crayfish from Tasmania to Melbourne. All the military equipment was gone and I had to go and find it. But I was lucky to be able to buy another ex-Royal Australian Air Force Anson [N1334] which had all the radios and a lot of British Air Ministry material still in it. Not all, but most of it."

AUSTRALIAN AVRO

Rebuilding this aircraft to its original Mk.I configuration was a major effort, taking ten years. The airframe was originally built in 1943 as an Avro 652A Anson Mk.I, by A V Roe and Co at Yeoman, near Leeds. It was powered by Armstrong Siddeley Cheetah IX engines and taken on strength by the RAF as MH120. On March 20, 1944



Bill Reid acquired the Anson from Australia in 2002. His next restoration project is an ex-RNZAF Lockheed Hudson bomber.

it became one of more than 1,000 Ansons to be delivered to the Royal Australian Air Force during the war.

Its civilian career started in February 1953 when Greenfield's Air Taxis purchased the aircraft and stationed it in Albury, New South Wales, using the civil registration VH-BLP. However, the aircraft was quickly sold on to Brian and Brown Airfreighters of Melbourne and re-registered VH-BAF. After a forced landing in 1960, it was rebuilt with an Avro XIX metal wing and more powerful Cheetah XV engines were installed. As

a civil variant, the aircraft also lost its 'glasshouse' appearance and had airliner-like windows installed for the cabin.

This became the basis for Bill's restoration. When he sold his helicopter business in 2002, Bill purchased the Anson. He had many years' experience flying helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft commercially, and had owned a Tiger Moth for fun. "If I had had enough money, I would have bought a single-seat fighter. You know, I love Kittyhawks, especially with the New Zealand connection, but I thought I couldn't afford it," he remembers of the time the decision was taken to buy the Anson, and adds with a big laugh: "As it turned out, this thing cost me twice as much as a Kittyhawk would have cost!"

One of Bill's influences for buying the Anson was that his father, who was still alive at this time, had flown the type while serving as a flying instructor with the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan in Canada. Furthermore, as Bill explains: "Everybody that I have talked to who flew Ansons had fun with them. They had a nickname 'Gentle Annie' – it is just lovely to fly, very forgiving and lots of character and ever since I was a kid building model aeroplanes I had a soft spot for the Anson with its funny little ▶

Impact is added to the Anson's display routine by a smoke system. The Armstrong Whitworth turret with its single gun can be clearly seen.



Armstrong Whitworth gun turret perched amidships." When it came up for sale, Bill was surprised that no one else had restored one of these yet, even though it is such an important aircraft in the history of the Royal Air Force, being the first monoplane in squadron service and the first RAF aircraft with a retractable undercarriage. Also, more than 11,000 were built and they remained in service until 1968. Bill therefore acted quickly to purchase this aircraft.

During the rebuild to its original appearance, he received huge support from BAE Systems (formerly British Aerospace) in the UK. They provided lots of photographs and drawings of original Ansons and especially factory photos taken during the war, which were more than helpful in recreating everything correctly. After buying the aircraft, Bill also visited the Shuttleworth Collection a couple of times; BAE Systems has based its Mk.XIX Anson at the Old Warden aerodrome and her maintenance crews and pilots have been very helpful to him.

Six months ago, he could return the favour: "They were due to go to an airshow in Scotland and they blew a pneumatic brake bag. They contacted me to see if I had a spare one to help them out. I did and gave it to them." With a big laugh he says he is quite proud: "Now I can say I supply British Aerospace [who absorbed Avro post-war] with parts!"

KIWI CONNECTION

Bill was always determined that the aeroplane should have a Kiwi connection, and this was the reason for choosing the colours of K6183, 'VX-B' of 206 Sqn, RAF Coastal Command, as flown by Pilot Officer Laurie Edwards of Patea, New Zealand. It helps to highlight the important role that Ansons played in the early days of World War Two. "A lot of people think of the Anson just as a trainer," Bill finds out regularly when talking to visitors at airshows. "But, in the first years of the war, they were a frontline operational type with Coastal Command and they were actually sent out to bomb the Channel ports where Hitler was preparing for the invasion of England.

Below: A close-up shows the extensive cockpit and cabin glazing of the Anson. One non-original feature is the metal wing from a Mk.XIX. The Mk.I's wing was a fabric-covered wooden structure.



They were doing daylight raids from 3,000ft, when places like Brest harbour were amongst the most heavily defended targets in Europe, and they made the first attack on a U-Boat during the war, so they do have an operational history."

Laurie Edwards had the dubious distinction of becoming New Zealand's first PoW of the war and the first RAF officer to be captured when his Anson was shot down into the sea by a Heinkel He 115 floatplane during a reconnaissance mission off the Frisian Islands. All the crew except Laurie were killed during the fight, after which the German seaplane landed and rescued him. Edwards had been burned in the crash and was pretty badly wounded, and therefore chosen for a prisoner exchange in 1944. "Usually, they only exchanged prisoners who they thought would not fight again and they did it through Spain, but Laurie got repatriated [directly] to England and he went straight back to the air force, where he stayed until the 1960s."

Taking his Anson out of the hangar at Omaka and for a flight is always an enjoyable experience, and Bill flies it around 25 hours a year. It is not a lot, but as Bill says, it's a typical amount for a warbird. Most of the flying time is clocked up when travelling to and flying at the major airshows in New



Above: Cockpit restoration is down to the last detail in the Anson and includes recognition flares stored behind the pilot's seat.

Below: The Anson lifts off from Omaka's grass runway. Registered ZK-RRA, it is marked as K6183, an aircraft flown by 206 Sqn and shot down on September 5, 1939.

Zealand, namely Omaka, Wanaka and Masterton. The flying display is basically steep wingovers and high speed runs, but Bill adds: "Until recently, we also did the bombing displays with replica sand bombs, but we don't do it anymore. We carried out a risk assessment after the Shoreham accident [which killed 11 people in 2015 and that has influenced display flying across the world] and conceded that it may be a bit wild."

"they made the first attack on a U-Boat during the war."

A royal tour by Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge in 2014 provides another memorable anecdote about Bill's prized aircraft. Bill recalls: "During their visit to New Zealand, they

also visited Omaka and I did a display for them. They came on board the plane for ten minutes and we chatted about the aircraft, but we did not fly. William might have wanted to, but there were all these security guys on the roof of the adjacent building with machine guns. If I had tried starting up with His Royal Highness on board, they would have taken me out..." He finishes this last story about his Anson with a big laugh. **AN**

