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The Curtiss P-40E and P-40N Kittyhawks, one with the mandatory shark's teeth nose art.

Classic Fighters 2005

A Touch of France

Easter 2005 once again saw historic Omaka aerodrome transformed into a small part of Europe to host the third biennial Classic Fighters airshow.

Located at Blenheim in the picturesque Marlborough region of New Zealand, Omaka has quickly established a name for itself as the home of WWI aircraft within the southern hemisphere. With aircraft such as the Fokker DR.1 Triplane, Halberstadt D.IV, Pfalz D.III and the fabulous Sopwith Camel powered by an original 160 hp Gnome rotary engine, no one would argue that Omaka's reputation as the 'Old Rhinebeck Collection' of down-under is well deserved.

The philosophy behind Classic Fighters is for visitors to experience a weekend of entertainment, not just see aircraft flying. To help achieve this, organisers put a lot of effort into the shows re-enactment sequences. These include ground theatre in the form of military and historic re-enactments complete with costumes, sets and props, while at the same time, co-ordinated pyrotechnic and flying displays are presented. This year's main

re-enactments took on a more historical nature with one based around WWI and another around WWII.

Sitting near the fence line during the re-enactments you were close to the action, real close. There were more than fifty troops on the ground, all dressed in period uniform firing a range of weapons. Armoured vehicles were moving around the battle field including a full size WWI British Mark IV replica tank. Artillery emplacements were firing a barrage toward the enemy positions, and a number of aircraft appropriate to each battle were flying overhead.

For WWI we saw the Airco DH-2 and DH-5 patrolling the skies, the Bristol F2B fighter, the Pfalz D.III, Halberstadt D.IV and five Fokker DR.1 Triplanes battling it out. During WWII the Douglas Dakota C-47 dropped paratroops into the battle, and the FG-1D Corsair, P-51D Mustang and the P-40E and P-40N Kittyhawks flew ground attack runs, complete with synchronised pyrotechnic explosions on the ground.

Sitting at what felt like shouting distance from the troops, with all that action, the smoke, the noise, and the aircraft flying overhead, you felt like you were part of it. This certainly allowed you to experience the battle sequences and was not only exciting, but very entertaining as well.

The theme for this year's show was simply 'France'. Omaka was transformed, complete with replicas of the Eiffel Tower, Arc de Triomphe and the red windmill of the Moulin Rouge. And for that touch of realism, organisers asked trade stall holders and staff to dress in period costume or uniform. This year also saw an invitation extended for visitors to get into the spirit of things and dress up. Prizes were awarded for best costume and a number of people took up the challenge. Striped shirts and berets were a popular choice, although my personal favourite were the three guys dressed as 'A Few Good Men' in their US Navy dress whites, very stylish. A nice touch from the organisers were the armed guards on century duty at the entrance to the WWI aircraft park. I'm sure this made anyone think twice about sneaking in for a quick look!

For the official show opening organisers planned a bit of a surprise. Three Yak 52s positioned themselves a few miles out, flying straight in toward the crowd at low level. The Yaks pulled up into a gentle climb however this was somewhat of a diversion. With all eyes turned skyward, a WWII FG-1D Corsair piloted by Keith Skilling snuck in from the right of field, making a very low curved pass in front of the crowd, with pyrotechnics firing as he passed. Everyone was so busy watching the Yaks that the Corsair took them by complete surprise. It worked well and everyone was duly impressed.

Although the re-enactments were a major part of the show, there was also a wide range of interesting aircraft to see, including a number of large formations. We were treated to the sound of no less than eight Gipsy Major engines when the Chipmunks took off and formed up for their fly-by. Not to be out done, six Yak 52's together with three Nanchang CJ-6As took off and formed up for a fly past before the Yaks broke off for their own display. This included some very close formation flying that would have given the military teams a run for their money.

As a Winjeel pilot I was pretty keen to see the British equivalent, the Percival Piston Provost fly its handling display. However, what really got the heart stirring was the solo display of the Goodyear built FG-1D Corsair again piloted by Keith Skilling, followed by the close formation display from the Curtiss P-40E and P-40N Kittyhawks piloted by John Lamont and Ray Hannah.

The layout of the public area really did allow pilots to show off these aircraft to great effect too. Cleared areas to the left and right of the public area allowed pilots to approach from slightly behind the crowd line, bank to make a curved pass with the top of the aircraft visible, then depart again behind the crowd line while still banked. Standing at the corner of the public area, watching two WWII fighters fly past in close formation and at low level was simply mind blowing; you felt like you could reach out and touch them. Oh, and the sound of the two Allison V-1710s flying past at close range wasn't too bad either!

The sight and sound of twin engine classics were also out in force with displays from the Consolidated PBY-5a Catalina of the New Zealand Catalina Club, the Lockheed 12a Electra Junior of Pat Donovan, the Douglas Dakota C-47 (DC-3) of the New Zealand Warbirds Association, and the world's smallest twin engine aircraft, the French-designed Cri Cri. Powered by two nine horse power Rowena engines, this little aircraft was surprisingly agile, and fast.

Another rare sight was the formation of the de Havilland DH-89 Dominic and the DH-90 Dragonfly which teamed up with the single engine DH-83 Fox Moth. It was lovely to have

the chance to see and hear these graceful old aeroplanes take to the skies together.

Pilot John Bargh decided to show us just how low you can fly an Ag Tractor on his first pass, having a number of people holding their breath while contemplating John's wing tip clearance from the ground! The four ship Harvard aerobatic team provided us with that unmistakable sound that only four Pratt and Whitney R-1340 radials can provide, and for aerobatics we saw the Pitts S1-S flown by Richard Hood, the Giles G202 flown by Doug Booker and the amazing Edge 540 being flown by Steve Taylor. While each one of these aircraft is great to watch, the Edge is a purpose-built unlimited class aerobatic aircraft and can do just about anything you could imagine, or would be game to try.

Several smaller re-enactments were also played out during the show including the arrival at Omaka of famous New Zealand aviatrix, Jean Batten in her Percival Gull, represented by a Percival Proctor. Jean arrived at the field complete with period flying suit, leather helmet and goggles. She then taxied up to the crowd line and climbed out onto the wing to wave hello.

We also saw the downing of the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen in his Fokker DR.1 Triplane by Australian ground troops. This re-enactment saw the Baron involved in a fight with a Sopwith Camel. Eventually the two aircraft strayed into the range of the Australians troops who opened fire, bringing down the Baron who landed near by. The Australians rushed to the aircraft, removing von Richthofen who was taken away by field ambulance. The Red Baron, played by pilot John Lanham had an interesting historical artefact with him. The scarf adorned by John was the actual scarf worn by von Richthofen when he was shot down in 1918.

The RNZAF put their support behind the show with a number of displays. The 'Kiwi Blue' parachute team showed us a demonstration of precision parachuting, and then participated in the WWII re-enactment sequence, jumping from a C-47 into the battle. The German re-enactment troops decided this was too good an opportunity, jumping one of the parachutists and wrestling him to the ground. He was a good sport too and wrestled back, something which impressed the crowd drawing plenty of laughs and cheers.

The RNZAF also demonstrated their P-3K Orion along with the Bell UH-1H 'Huey', including a demonstration of lowering a crew member into a moving vehicle. The Red Checkers display team gave a demonstration of precision formation aerobatics and the new VIP transport aircraft, the Boeing 757 was put through its paces. The 757 only recently replaced the 727 in this role and although the 727 is a beautiful old aeroplane with 'real jet engine sounds', one could not help but be impressed by the 757. It was a pity the low cloud base prevented the 757 from finishing its display with its usual high speed climb and ninety degree angle of bank wing over. It's very impressive to see!

This was a fabulous show and even though we had cloudy skies and the threat of rain, organisers estimate some 20,000 people braved the elements to attend. Visitors came from all over the globe too, including England, Germany, Holland, France, Australia, and of course New Zealand, and they all had high praise for the show.

Classic Fighters is a great weekend's entertainment for the whole family, and given the success of the first three shows, I would say it's here to stay. Best to pencil in Easter 2007 because the next show is sure to be bigger and better again. 