

The sky's the limit

By [Lucy Ibbotson](#) on Thu, 21 Feb 2013
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Wanaka pilot Simon Spencer-Bower takes to the skies yesterday after earlier in the week clocking up 20,000 flying hours. Photo by Lucy Ibbotson.

Wanaka Helicopters owner Simon Spencer-Bower is modest about his many aviation achievements, but even he could confess to being a little proud of his latest one - this week reaching 20,000 flying hours.

After returning from a routine helicopter flight on Tuesday, Mr Spencer-Bower (64) casually announced to his unsuspecting staff, including wife Carolyn and children Chris, Pete and Charlotte, who all work for the company, that he had just reached the massive milestone.

While his family had known he was approaching 20,000 hours in the air, he had kept the final countdown under wraps.

"He doesn't like a big fuss," Mrs Spencer-Bower said.

The flight on which the clock finally rolled over involved dropping off bikes and riders on the Pisa Range for a heli-biking outing. He had not told his passengers of the significance of the journey either, but did celebrate later with "a few beers" at the company's base at Wanaka Airport.

"The first 1000 hours is always a nice milestone ... then the second milestone would be 10,000, and I never thought I'd get to 20,000," he said.

There is a long list of accolades in Mr Spencer-Bower's equally lengthy flying career, which began when he was aged 19.

His safety culture and emphasis on maintaining high pilot standards have earned him much praise over the years. He initially flew aeroplanes, before developing an interest in helicopters in 1980, and has spent about 2000 hours flying fixed-wing aircraft and 18,000 hours in helicopters, including nearly 15,000 in Robinson R22 or R44 models. Several years ago, he was recognised by the Robinson Helicopter company as holding the world record for the most flying hours in Robinson R22 helicopters.

"And what is pretty amazing is that for all that time in the air they've [R22s] never let me down."

In fact, there has been just one minor accident in all Mr Spencer-Bower's aviation exploits, which was caused by a machine malfunction.

He has also logged about 12,000 hours flying in the instructor's seat while training 530 private and commercial pilots, a role he considers among the most rewarding aspects of his job.

"The hardest thing for a young pilot is to get that first magic 1000 hours, because then they're employable around the world. And here am I with all this excess of hours which I wish I could give to them."

His vintage aviation accomplishments include third place in the world in 1985 at the world Tiger Moth aerobatic championships and winning the New Zealand Tiger Moth title 15 times.

He received the individual award at the Director of Civil Aviation Awards in 2002, the New Zealand Airline Pilots' Association's Greg Vujcich Memorial Award in 2009 for his aviation record and outstanding contribution as a flight instructor, and the Queen's Service Medal for services to flight training in 2010.