

A Study in Safety

A whiteboard exercise in Miramar was a catalyst for a highly successful – and safe – event amid the peaks of the Crown Range and Southern Alps. Here, a case study in ensuring safety at an aviation rally.



The New Zealand Association of Women in Aviation (NZAWA) has held a three-day rally during each Queen's Birthday or Labour Day weekend since 1960.

With that longevity, the organisation decided that, prior to its 2017 event in Wanaka, it needed to take a fresh look at safety.

"We don't officially have to have a formal Safety Management System (SMS)," says Sue Telford, who organised this year's event.

"But with the focus these days on SMS, and the new health and safety laws, we felt we had to raise our game.

"We set out to communicate more widely and more effectively, to have a more streamlined competition structure, and to put in place enhanced airside safety."

Sue was reaching out to allies of the event a full year before it was to be held.

"Communication was key," she says. "Very early in the process I was talking with Wanaka Airport's manager, Queenstown Airport Corporation.

"They wanted a safety management plan for the event, including a hazard sheet and what systems we were putting in place to manage the risk presented by those hazards. That was a good exercise for me, to be thinking early about any hazards associated with the event."

Sue says the administrator of the airfield where such an event is to be held, needs to be brought on board early.

"Especially in terms of their SMS. It's good to work with them on that. And you don't take it all on yourself – it's really important to delegate."

She also met and briefed the Wanaka Airport management team, who in turn briefed the user group about what they could expect during the rally.



A smoothly running event is a safe event. A more organised and condensed grid competition reduced the risk of an incident.

"In response, I was contacted by the parachuting company, Wanaka Skydive, and between us, we worked out how we could both use the dual runways at Wanaka safely and efficiently. That demonstrated the success of an established user group within an airport community."

"Being careful to identify hazards, and mitigate their associated risks does not mean fun is sacrificed."

Elsewhere, a keen group from the NZAWA gathered in the Wellington suburb of Miramar in May 2017, to attend a CAA-sponsored seminar created specifically for them.

Included in the day was a whiteboard brainstorming session, led by CAA Aviation Safety Adviser, Carlton Campbell, on every threat to safety they could come up with, and its associated mitigation.

Some items were threats to the event no matter where it was held, and some were peculiar to Wanaka: for instance, the possible conflict with the parachuting operations there.

"What I found really pleasing," says Jeanette Lusty, CAA team leader of sport and recreational flying, and long-time member of the NZAWA, "is that the organisers were so open to different ways of approaching safety, even though the event had been going for so long without real incident.

"The particular issue the airwomen have is that each year, the site of the event changes. So every Queen's Birthday weekend brings new topography, new weather conditions, new aircraft, new people organising it. On top of that, the event is run by

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Photo courtesy Steve Worley / Wanaka Imaging Ltd

people who don't have a specific 'home'. They often don't see each other from one year's rally to the next.

"These are all special challenges that your average aero club doesn't have to worry about when they run competitions."

"As it turned out," says Julie Bubb, the NZAWA president, "some of the things we anticipated did not eventuate. For example, early morning ice on the wings. The frost hit the day after competitions finished, but mitigations were in place should ice have been a problem."

The most obvious of the new safety initiatives was the use of a handful of Air Training Corp (ATC) cadets.

"They marshalled people on to the apron, oversaw competitions, and acted as 'gophers'. They were just fantastic," says organiser Sue Telford.

The main job of the cadets was to escort all competitors and judges airside.

"One of the problems we've been increasingly aware of," says Julie Bubb, "is people wandering around airside. We knew it was a safety issue, and the use of the cadets minimised the risk."

"Your ATC or St John cadet is the perfect person to get involved in these sorts of events because they like the flying gigs," says Sue.

"Again, we had good early communication with the local ATC. They knew they were needed for this date, so their leader put in place a course of study on safety management. Then the cadets were able to practise that programme at the actual event. It was great foresight on the part of the ATC.

"Some of the cadets were only 13, but they were very mature, very capable. We told them, 'you have to wear your high visibility vest, you don't let *anyone* through the gate to go by themselves to the aircraft'.

"It all worked really well, and I think it was also good for the cadets to see how seriously we were taking safety. They will hopefully take that culture on for themselves."

Sue says everyone today is more aware of their personal responsibility for safety.

"We had a stack of high-vis vests from the airport manager to distribute. But, oh my goodness, it was astonishing how many people now have their own!"

A smoothly running event is a safe event. Carlton Campbell says a more organised and condensed grid competition also enhanced safety.

"When you've got aircraft trying to make a precision or forced landing, the pilot is focused on being very accurate. When you've got other traffic in the same area, it can distract the competition pilots, and that obviously heightens the risk of an incident, or worse.

"So making sure those competitions were out of the way in the morning lessened the chances of having aircraft competing for the same bit of runway."

Carlton says clear, methodical briefings for both judges and pilots are essential, particularly for those who are not local.

"A checklist of items should be gone through systematically and formally so that everyone taking part is quite clear about what will happen and what they are expected to do.

"The briefings also need to be free of time constraints. While it's important to event organisers to keep to schedule, that should not be at the expense of a thorough and coherent briefing."

Sue Telford said a 'run sheet' also helped to streamline the event and improve safety.

"It accounted for every hour's activity from Thursday to mid-Monday afternoon – what needs to be done now, what needs to be done next.

"When things are so well organised, safety can only be enhanced. For us that was particularly so on the Saturday, which is the important day of the rally. Everyone wants to compete, and you need to run the ship on that day fairly uninterrupted.

"So you have all your prior communications done months before, and you've got your marshals in place, your executive, management and organising committee fully informed. Then that run sheet gathers up what's been discussed, what's been put in place, and what needs to be chased after.

"It's definitely part of safety management. Because you're tired! And you can forget things, and if you don't have something to refer to, you run the risk of not having something essential in place."

A formal debrief about what worked, and what didn't, including safety measures, is following the 2017 event. It will be more analytical than in previous years.

"One of the things we can still improve on," says Julie Bubb, "is providing our competition organiser with a second-in-charge. The organiser this year was really pressured, and in future years, we'll remove some of that burden by having someone to help her. That will also enhance safety."

Sue Telford says everything new learned at Wanaka about safety is now officially templated so future event organisers can follow the routine. That 'kit' is online so it can be easily accessed.

"And we'll see how flexible it is. Next year the rally is at Whitianga, which is a totally different environment from Wanaka.

"So while some of those templates will be useful for Whitianga, we will need to go back to the whiteboard, and look at the special challenges staging the event there will bring."

Jeanette Lusty says the success of the rally showed that safety can be taken seriously without compromising fun.

"We don't want to get so nit-picky that it all becomes too difficult. People will just back off, saying 'it's too hard, I won't do it'. And of course that defeats the purpose.

"But they really raised their game this year, and it seems like everyone also had a great time. So being careful to identify hazards, and mitigate their associated risks does not mean fun is sacrificed." ■

