

HALF CENTURY FOR LETABA FLYING CLUB

Tzaneen celebrated an historic anniversary on April 14

ANYONE WHO HAS VISITED the Letaba Flying Club or who has attended any of the Bush Pilot Airshows at Tzaneen will be familiar with the wonderful spirit of camaraderie always present. It is this spirit that has prevailed over the years and has enabled this progressive flying club to survive and grow for the last fifty years.

Way back in 1948, the idea of creating an airfield for Tzaneen was first mooted, but the geography of the area ruled out every proposed site as being too close to the nearby hills to enable training to be carried out.

One of the driving forces behind obtaining an airfield was one Albert Keller, owner of Troye's Garage, Tzaneen. He proposed a site in what was then termed a 'Native Area'. The site was well situated and the department of Native Affairs was notified. However, they would not grant the ground for use as an airfield until the approval of the local Chiefs was obtained.

Unsurprisingly, this was not forthcoming. Tzaneen remained without a viable airfield (though a few airstrips apparently existed) until 1956 when negotiations with the Hans Merensky Trust and Westfalia Estates led to the granting of 30 morgen of part of the farm *Rietbokspruit*, 10 miles East of Tzaneen at a

nominal rental of 10/- per annum.

The ground however was virgin bush and had to be cleared before an airfield could be constructed. An appeal was made to local farmers and businessmen to assist and a meeting was held on 30 November 1956 with the operation being directed by ex RAF Wing Commander LE 'Cookie' Leon DSO, DFC, a potential club member. 30 farmers with 20 tractors, bulldozers and tractor-trailers started an operation that ran for two days and two nights. 400 labourers were obtained and they toiled until the task was finished and only some grading and tidying up was carried out over the next two months.

The airfield was approved by the DCA and the first meeting of the Letaba Flying Club was held on 23 April 1957. JP 'Lambi' Lambinon was appointed as Commercial Pilot, Instructor and secretary of the club at a salary of £125 per month.

The first Annual General Meeting was held 12 May 1957 and Albert Keller was appointed chairman, AH Hoole Treasurer, N-C 'Nic' Maritz a local lawyer, Theo de Marillac, (later co-owner



Tzaneen-Letaba airfield, fifty years on, still the home of the Letaba Flying Club

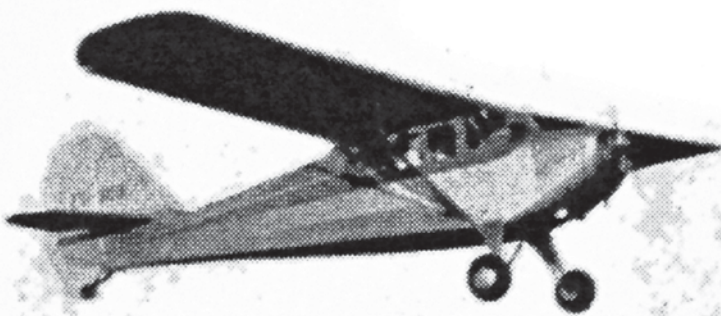
of the first Tiger Moth in Tzaneen), 'Cookie' Leon, CJC Kosie Pienaar and Harry Taylor.

On 13 May 1957 several members managed to purchase an Aeronca 11AC Chief, ZS-BON, for the club for £600 from the Moriah Flying Club and members would hire this at £3.10 per hour with booking facilities made available by Albert Keller at Troyes garage. In addition to the committee members, additional members that commenced training or renewals were SC Schoeman, Mrs H Laws, Mrs Jane Maritz, Fred Drake and O. Mare. One of the most renowned members was Bob Coppen, ex 21 Sqn SAAF.

Jane Maritz was the first woman pilot in Tzaneen to receive instruction and the first to solo. She was the wife of Nic Maritz. A hangar was put up by Theo de Marillac, Manie Schoeman and Kosie Pienaar had the area cleaned further for parking and a proposed club house.

A brand new 1957 model Piper PA-22-150 Tri Pacer 150, ZS-CGO, in the colours rose and white was purchased from PLACO for £3,356 on 14 August 1957. The name *Letaba* was painted on the cowling and on 7 September 1957, the club's first honorary member, Dr J.C. Fick opened the airfield and his wife officially christened the new Tri Pacer by pouring Letaba River water over its name. Dr Fick, who had facilitated the ground for the airfield was made

This poor quality photo shows how the Tzaneen-Letaba airfield looked in 1957. The club's first aeroplane, Aeronca I1AC, ZS-BON, is seen flying past.





Left: Finished in Rose and White, this brand new 1957 Piper Tri-Pacer 150, ZS-CGO, bears the name Letaba on its nose.



Lower left: Taylorcraft BC-12D, ZS-BLH, replaced the ill-fated Aeronca IAC after its tragic crash.

an honorary member of the club, as was the Mayor of Tzaneen.

By this stage Mr Lambinon had moved on to be replaced by WG Boonzaier as instructor and a satellite aerodrome was opened at Boyne early in November. In that month tragedy struck the club when the Aeronca Chief ZS-BON crashed while carrying out an intentional spin, killing the pilot, Mr OJ Mare and his passenger Mr Swart on 17 November 1957. ZS-BON, which had flown 469 hours with the club was totally destroyed. Intentional spins were thus prohibited with a passenger in future and also without the instructor's authority.

On 3 December 1957, a Taylorcraft BC-12D, ZS-BLH, was purchased from Mr du Plessis of Sunnyside Motors, Pretoria.

It was decided to clear the bush to open a second runway. By the end of the year the Tri Pacer had flown 266 hours and the Taylorcraft 43.

There was a gradual fall off in flying in 1958 and Mr Boonzaier was replaced by Fred van Zyl. A club day was held on 23 May 1959. In June Albert Keller had to resign as Chairman due to health and work related problems – his contributions were greatly appreciated.

On 29 August 1959 Taylorcraft ZS-BLH was damaged in an accident at Phalaborwa and was to be out of action for some time. A Piper J3C-65 Cub, ZS-AUP, was thus purchased for £600.

At this time club members got to work to design a badge for the club, which was finalised in the latter part of 1960. By the end of 1960, Albert Keller decided to purchase a

Piper PA24-250 Comanche ZS-CRC and this arrived in December. This was made available to club members at £8-10 ph solo and £9.10 dual.

At the AGM in March 1961 Cookie Leon was elected President with Bob Coppen as VP. The Cub suffered a crankshaft failure and was sold and not long after ZS-BLH was returned to service. In January 1962 Albert Keller traded in Comanche ZS-CRC on a 1962 model, ZS-CUM. Interestingly CRC was soon resold to the Katanga Air Force as KA-III. The Tri Pacer had by this stage flown a good number of hours and as some expensive maintenance was due it was decided to sell it. It realised £3,000 for the club. In 1962 the Hans Merensky Trust agreed to sell the airfield land to the club for a book figure of just R200.

Fred van Zyl decided to leave as instructor, purchase his own aircraft and offer this facility to the members. During the early 60s drought in the area caused many businesses to suffer losses and flying hours declined. ZS-BLH only flew 263 hours in 1962 and 120 hours in 1963.

On 8 June 1964, ZS-BLH was destroyed beyond repair in an accident at Letaba while being flown by DW Frylinck. There was some debate at this stage regarding ownership as the decision had been taken to sell the aircraft to a member in April for R 600. The club was without an aircraft for some time and aircraft had to be hired from individuals on the airfield (two Cessna 172s).

By the early seventies it was found that visiting aircraft were using the airfield more than the club and airfield maintenance was becoming expensive. Accordingly the airfield was sold to the Tzaneen Municipality in 1974 with the club retaining all their previous rights to the field and not paying landing fees.

Upper right: Letaba Flying Club stalwarts, Eddie and Miemie Vorster, at the 50th anniversary celebration.

Right: Two of the serving inaugural members of the LFC are Nic and Jane Maritz. Jane was the first woman club member to solo. They were guests of honour at the recent function.

A Cessna 150, ZS-EDE, was purchased from Johan Schoeman in February 1975 but after three months was traded in on a Cessna 150 Aerobat, ZS-IDV. The seventies saw the club's situation improve and regular flying days were held.

In 1979 ZS-IDV was replaced by a Grumman AA-1, ZS-IXI owned by a Mr Viljoen and there was an ongoing battle with the municipality over the imposition of landing fees. By this stage another strip had been opened at Oceana, which was considered as a possibility for a move. By the end of the year some sort of deal had been worked out, which involved the tarring of the main runway. At this stage there were quite a few other operators and private owners based at Letaba.

During the 1980s and 1990s regular airshows became a feature. Today, although not the oldest club by a long margin, the Letaba Flying Club is one of the best run in the country.

The function on April 14 was well attended with guests of honour including Nic and Jane Maritz and Mrs Keller, Albert's widow, receiving commemorative plaques. LFC of course plan to host the Bush Pilot airshow on June 30 as well as the new air race later in the year.

With the large dose of enthusiasm and goodwill that is part of the LFC's tradition, these events are set to be a roaring success.

