

Balloons Over Waikato

BALLOONS Over Waikato is the second and most northern of a series of three New Zealand balloon fiestas held during the autumn months. This was the 10th year of the event under the Balloons Over Waikato banner with 27 balloons participating. 18 of these were from New Zealand, 6 were Australian and there were 3 shapes.

The five day fiesta started late on the afternoon of Tuesday 23rd March with registration of pilots and crew, followed by an Event Briefing which included the Hamilton Tower Manager, the Power Network Manager and the Flight Director. With Balloons Over Waikato being rescheduled forward a week or two ahead of the ideal weather (due to the car race), there are only five flying slots now instead of nine. This is due to the afternoons not being flyable at this time of the year and unfortunately restricted the normal plans to give rides to sponsors throughout the event.

Wednesday morning

At 6am we woke to mist and fog that grew deeper by 7am, as it came and went and came again, and was then followed by a low cloud ceiling of 1200 ft which closed the field for the morning. Balloons are VFR only unless a transponder is on board.

Thursday morning

The task for Thursday morning was Hare & Hound. The Hare balloon takes off 5 to 10 minutes before the Hounds which follow by mimicking the flight pattern or devising their own in order to ultimately drop their marker on the large cross laid out by the Hare balloon's crew.

It was an unusual morning weather-wise with some very strong gusts. Most of us had windy landings. Never the less several balloons scored on the target and as many more landed on the same farm making the landowner very happy with seven landing gift packs (a tradition in ballooning).



A total of 27 balloons participated in this years fiesta, with the mass ascension from Innes Common creating the usual superb photo opportunities. Hamilton's Lake Rotoroia is in the foreground.

Thursday afternoon

In the afternoon Balloonists visited various primary schools around Hamilton. My team went to Te Rapa Primary in the north of the city. The purpose of these visits is educational. We talk with the children about our sport, how a hot air balloon works/flys, and we explain about the equipment we carry on board – air com radio, retrieve radio, altimeter/variometer, the fan and of course the burner/s. I took up this part of the talk which was in the

Contributed by Pauline Hickey

school hall and explained what the crew were doing as they assembled the burner frame, I turned on the air com radio so they could hear the Tower talking with airport traffic and let them talk to each other on the retrieve radios. We then held a question & answer session with the children. If we had been outside, we would also have turned on the fan for them to feel the pressure as well as lighting up a burner.

Mathijs (the other pilot with me) showed the children his flight maps from around the world and explained about the PZ (prohibited zones) maps – height restriction and no landing areas, which usually comprise horse training, specialist farms, zoological parks and quarantine areas, before testing their balloon knowledge by asking them questions.

Friday morning

On Friday, we all make "out and about towns visits". We went to Morrinsville (30 minutes east of Hamilton) where we had a very nice light breeze launch from the local domain

with about ten other balloons (including the Jack 'n the Box balloon). After 45 minutes the wind came up. Cambridge and Ngaruawahia were too windy for flying so Balloonists there spent the time talking with locals at the launching sites.

Friday evening

Friday evening's event is the Burner Parade down the main street of Hamilton. This is where Balloonists decorate their baskets, burners and trailers like a float.

Local retailers participate by dressing up their shop windows and getting into the theme of the fiesta. Balloonists light up the streets at dusk with the very bright flame of the whisper burners. Flame rolling skills are demonstrated to send small balls of fire into the air. The local radio station acts as compare for the evening introducing each balloon team and congratulating the float winners on their achievement. This year, the Mushroom shape team won first prize, the Foxtale Fairies second prize and the MizFits were third.

Saturday morning

A fly-in task is held on Saturday morning, with Balloonists competing to grab cash from the top of a 20 foot high pole. The balloons were to launch from a location where the winds would take them close enough to the pole to be able to reach out from the basket and lift the bag from the top of the pole whilst observing the launch distance and location restrictions. Although many balloons boxed around the area close to the pole, no one was close enough on the day to take the money.

Saturday evening

The highlight of the week for many locals is the Night Glow held at Waikato University. Turnout for the event numbers in the tens of thousands.

The Night Glow Briefing is at 3pm and is run by the Night Glow Director (UK) and the Flight Director (NZ). We are told the order of the giant U shape that we will each be positioned in. And so that we know who is on either side of our balloon we are put into the U shape in the hotel lounge to meet our neighbouring pilots.

The Glow Director gives us the run

down on the music he has chosen and the burn patterns he is expecting from us – the plan being that the balloons glow in time to the music. We are also given a burn sheet (with the burn pattern information for our balloon) and a radio for receiving instructions from the Glow Director.

The plan is for all the balloons to cold inflate and stand up in unison and then

The Glow usually lasts 20 minutes and the theme of the tunes is often determined by the theme of the shapes. The whisper burner is used to make the envelope 'glow'. These use raw propane which creates a little less heat and a magnificent glow – pilots wear sun glasses to help prevent night blindness during the glow.

Once the glow is over, teams quickly drop/deflate their envelopes and pack up so that they might see some of the next part of the show – the fireworks display.

Then when all balloons are packed away into their trailers and tanks are on the truck for refueling, the teams go to a evening meal onsite while crowds disperse and the roads become active again.

Sunday morning

The last day included another fly-in task – the 'shortest distance double drop'.

Two V shapes on the ground with the narrow ends closest. ie: > < The pilot must drop a marker in each V shape. Unfortunately the fog arrived and came through in waves, some of them quite thick. Only a few pilots participated in this task as most balloons don't carry a transponder. Also, breakfast was waiting, followed by prize giving and pilot photos.

This final part of the five day event arrives all too soon as we say goodbye to some old and dear friends that we see just once a year, plus the new ones made this year.

BOW 2011

Thoughts are already turning towards Balloons Over Waikato 2011. You can follow progress on www.balloonsoverwaikato.com



Top: The Night Glow attracted tens of thousands of spectators. Lower left: Inflation by twilight. Lower right: Pilots operated their burners to make envelopes glow in time to music. Inset: The burner parade in Hamilton's main street. Local resident Anne Kalnins compared the fire in the evening sky to having mythical dragons on parade. Later, hundreds of ordinary balloons were released into the night sky, disappearing smartly in a strong breeze.

start to glow in unison. This can be rather difficult and requires each pilot to be really onto their timing due to differences in the size of envelopes (the fabric part). To accommodate this the Glow Director gives us a time to be cold inflated by and a time to stand up at, making it the pilots responsibility to be ready at the right time by knowing your own rig and crew capabilities.