

NEW ZEALAND

High flying Northland rescue helicopter pilot Peter Turnbull ONZM

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Chief Pilot Pete Turnbull has been recognised for his contribution to the aviation industry. PHOTO/ File

Northern Advocate

Some quick maths establish that the kilometres flown by pilot Peter Turnbull over his career to date

equates to at least 110 times around Earth.

There have been an estimated 55,000 successful take-offs with 49,999 successful landings over nearly 50 years and 21,000 flying hours for emergency missions makes him one of New Zealand's most experienced helicopter pilot in the country.

Now as chief pilot for the Northland Rescue Helicopter service, he has been recognised for his services to aviation and made an Officer of the New Zealand Order of Merit (ONZM).



Peter Turnbull with his trusty sidekick - Sammy
PICTURE/Michael Cunningham

The 66-year-old is humble about the honour which was totally unexpected. In fact when the official-looking government letter arrived in the mail he thought it was a speeding ticket.

"There was quite a bit of mail that day. It was official-looking and I was trying to think where I may have been pinged."

But on discovering the real contents he said he was overwhelmed.

"It's a real team approach at work and no one is really singled out."

But looking back over his years in the sky it's hard not to be impressed.

After becoming a qualified pilot at 20, he took up a job flying skiers and tourists to Mt Cook. The same company was a top-dressing contractors which satisfied the excitement young people of that age craved, he recalls.

"In top dressing you do everything you're trained not to do — flying low, slow and with heavy loads."



His work has included agricultural crop spraying over most parts of New Zealand and many hours flying to oil rigs off the New Plymouth coast.

During four years in the UK he also did crop spraying and lived in Aberdeen, Scotland where he flew to offshore oil rigs in the North Sea.

In 1995 he joined the Northland Rescue Helicopter team where he became the chief pilot.

He was instrumental in the upgrade to the three Sikorsky helicopters the trust operates.

He implemented the personalised GPS route structure in Northland for Instrument Flight Rules, which has been emulated by other services around the country, meaning pilots can navigate in poor weather.



But it's not only his work in the air that is impressive, it's Mr Turnbull's involvement in the industry on the ground that has been acknowledged.

In 2008 Mr Turnbull became CEO of NEST and has remained in this role to the present, and is also the chairman of the New Zealand Helicopter Association.

He said wife of 35 years Nicky and his four children had supported his flying career and now it was time to give back to them. But it will be business as usual as he is rostered on to fly over the New Year period.

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