



**Steve Padgett, executive chairman of Aeromil Pacific, is a great example of someone who has turned a lifelong passion into a very successful enterprise. Through a career spanning 45 years to date, Steve still gets a lump in his throat when he sees a plane in the sky. He tells Angela Bueti of the many colourful stories throughout his illustrious career in the aviation industry.**

It's a niggling fear that even the most seasoned flyers experience – what if the big bird inexplicably falls out of the sky, hits bad weather, or blows a tyre on landing? The majority of us will thankfully never have to face that situation, but for Steve Padgett, executive chairman of Aeromil Pacific, surviving a plane crash when he was a young man didn't deter him from flying for a second.

"It actually taught me some good lessons," he explains. "Darkness, low fuel and bad weather can be your worst enemies." It was the latter issue which forced Steve and his two mates to make an emergency landing in a paddock, leaving them lucky to walk away. But today, after 45 years in the aviation industry, Steve points out that modern day flying is very safe. And it's still as exhilarating to him today as it was when he started flying as a 16-year-old cadet pilot.

"I still get a thrill flying in a 747. I look at a plane that big in the sky and I am still amazed at how it can fly and transport people to other side of the world. I know how it works – lift and thrust and so on – but it still leaves me in awe." It's also one of the reasons Steve built the local Aeromil Pacific head office in the style of an old Queenslander, perched on the edge of the Sunshine Coast Airport tarmac to take advantage of the daily flying spectacle with Mt Coolool as a backdrop.

Aviation history runs deep through Steve's veins and so do many fascinating stories. He recounts being Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen's pilot for a couple of years, but is tight-lipped about any insider secrets. "He really treated me well. If we had to fly on a weekend, he'd suggest I bring my wife," says Steve.

He recalls in the 1960's organising a last minute cocktail party for dignitaries in a tin shed on the railway tracks of the Nullarbor, and the driver of the Indian Pacific being so shocked at the sight of men in suits and bow ties in the middle of nowhere, that he backed up the train to show the passengers. Steve's guests in the tin shed were none other than the very famous World War II fighter pilot Sir Douglas – Tin Legs-Bader, known for his depiction in the book and movie *Reach For The Sky*, and Frank Talman, the star US pilot out of the movie *Those Magnificent Men In Their Flying Machines*.

And then Steve tells me one of his most interesting stories about a cherished Cessna C34 Airmaster and how he came to acquire the first ever Cessna in Australia.

"I have owned and flown many aircraft, but I am particularly proud to be the owner of this one, to protect and preserve Australia's flying history. This beautiful Airmaster was built in 1936 and known as the aircraft that brought Cessna back from brink at the end of the great depression. It first flew in Australia in early 1937 and the rich flying history includes service with the RAAF during World War II and later with the Royal Flying Doctor Service. This Airmaster is now one of only two of its type left in the world."

He whips out a myriad of photos showing a young woman in flying goggles with a parachute strapped to her back. She was the first woman to parachute in Australia and she jumped over Sydney in the very same Cessna Steve has today. Later I get to see that Cessna sitting in the pristine hangar and marvel at the history it holds – and at how small it is. Steve's relaxed and down-to-earth style belies the focus and dedication he has poured into building one of Australia's largest and most successful privately owned and operated aviation companies. Established in 1980 and now with major operational bases in Sydney and on the Sunshine Coast, the company employs more than 64 staff across their operations in aircraft sales, flight operations, maintenance, flight training services and aircraft parts and support.

As chairman of Alliance Airlines, Steve heads a company which employs more than 300 people across Australia. Alliance Airlines operates 11 Fokker F100 - 100 seat jets and 6 Fokker F50-50 seat turbo prop aircraft, servicing the mining and resources sector.

Aeromil has long sold planes of all shapes and sizes and now boasts being the exclusive Cessna distributor for Australia. As we admire a little four-seater sitting on the tarmac, I enquire how much these little babies cost and who buys them?

"The Cessna 172 costs about \$300,000 and there is the new entry level Cessna, called a Skycatcher, for about \$100,000. And in stock at the moment I am happy to say we have the world's newest and most advanced small jet, the Cessna Citation Mustang, for about \$3 million – ideal for flights to and from the Sunshine Coast."

Steve says all sorts of people buy planes and "they are not the Packers of this world."

"We sell to architects, professional people, farmers, enthusiasts ... a retired doctor on the Coast uses his plane to visit friends and play in bridge tournaments all over Australia. It's much quicker than driving," says Steve with a wide smile. And more thrilling, I expect!

In 2001, Steve achieved a major coup to attract the Singapore Flying College, a division of Singapore Airlines, to the Sunshine Coast. Specially designed facilities and infrastructure were purpose-built next to the Aeromil head office to train Singapore Airline's airline pilots.

"The airline was looking to relocate their school from Singapore to Perth or the US. I phoned them to say our location was green and had plenty of space and they should consider us. They had never heard of Maroochydore. They said they would give me 30 minutes to talk to them if I flew to Perth. After a three hour meeting they started to change their mind." It's this ability to see an opportunity and act upon it which has been the catalyst of Steve's long career in the aviation industry. And this hunger started early.

While at Canterbury Boys High School, he joined the Air Training Corps which was run by the Air Force. "Maths and chem [chemistry] didn't do it for me," he recalls, glad to be doing something he loved. At 16 years of age he was a cadet under officer – a notable position for someone so young – and at 17, through a RAAF flying scholarship, he attained his private pilot's licence.

Soon after, Steve worked diligently to achieve his commercial pilot's licence. "I worked in an air freight company to pay for my flying lessons. I earned seven pound a week and would then hand it over to pay for one flying lesson a week which, coincidentally, cost seven pounds." At 19 Steve was running his own flying school at Bankstown in Sydney and at 21 he was selling private and business aircraft as sales manager at Hawker De Havilland.

Where did this entrepreneurial flair come from, I asked? "I'm not sure," says Steve, genuinely baffled. "My father was a factory worker and died young and my mother never worked. I didn't apply myself particularly well at school. I was too busy with my passion for all things aviation." Whatever the reason for Steve's business success, two things remain dear – his family and flying. His wife of 41 years, Lorraine, has supported Steve every step of the way, and they adore their children and five grandchildren who all live in Sydney. Steve and Lorraine's son is now a Qantas captain and one of their young grandsons is showing a keen interest in all things flying.

Next Steve shows me his most precious photos of all – his grandchildren. "We are a very close family," Steve says proudly as he launches into more colourful stories.