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# In full flight

Joining the Air Training Corps at school set Steve Padgett on course to becoming one of the Australian aviation industry's most significant figures. Here he explains to **Nigel Bowen** how he rose from being a flight instructor to creating the Aeromil Group of Companies and launching several airlines.

**Text** Nigel Bowen

Steve Padgett isn't quite as well known as one of his fellow Canterbury Boys' High alumni, but he's had an equally profound impact on the field he chose to go into.

"John Howard was a few years ahead of me," Padgett notes, "but we were both at the same school. I grew up in the Canterbury-Bankstown area, near Canterbury Race Course (which put me off gambling for life) and also not far from Bankstown Airport, though it was at school I developed my love of aviation."

Padgett was a standout member of Canterbury Boys' High Air Training Corp unit, as a cadet under officer (CUO) delighting in spending his school holidays at air force bases at Wagga, Williamtown and Richmond. At 14 he was selected to visit Butterworth RAAF base in Malaysia flying by C-130 Hercules, where he "spent three weeks in the jungle with Gurkhas operating out of helicopters" before winning an RAAF scholarship a year later. This covered the cost of attending flight school and building up his flight hours to achieve his private pilot licence at the Royal Aero Club at Bankstown Airport.

After completing high school, Padgett became an officer in the RAAF reserve and simultaneously worked as an airfreight clerk at the airport to finance the flight hours he needed to get the commercial pilot's licence that would allow him to work as a charter pilot and go on to gain qualifications as a flight instructor.

At the tender age of 19, Padgett spent the then princely sum of \$20,000 buying three new Cessnas and launched his own flight school. The school was a success, but after five years he decided there was more potential in selling planes than teaching people to fly them. "Instructing was enjoyable but with an entrepreneurial spirit I wanted to create something rather than just continue as a pilot," Padgett explains. "I worked for an aviation company selling aircraft, then launched my own sales organisation in 1978 from a one-room office at Bankstown airport. I started brokering airplanes and progressively built up what is now the Aeromil Group of Companies."

Over the last four and a half decades, Padgett has grown a large and multi-faceted aviation business that now defies simple categorisation. "It was pretty much a case of one thing leading to another," Padgett says. "Aeromil went from selling aircraft to supplying customers with spare parts, to maintaining them. Operating from Sydney Airport grew difficult so we decided to relocate our operations to Sunshine Coast Airport in 1995 and to what was then a 'greenfield' site. We ultimately built business infrastructure and five hangars and started up an airline to support Ansett and then Qantas."



Padgett is chairman Alliance Airlines, which now has over 30 jet and turboprop airline aircraft in Australia.

"A significant achievement for me was the creation of Alliance Airlines, which I launched 15 years ago in response to the mining boom and a need to transport fly-in-fly-out workers. Through the efforts of a great team over the last decade, Alliance has become a very successful public company, which is now also expanding into tourism and other markets in Australia and New Zealand. I'm still the chairman and a major shareholder and still very much enjoying the challenge.

"For the first half of the nineties I co-owned Austin Aero, an aircraft and airline support business at a time when Austin, Texas was growing quickly and was the second-biggest movie-making location in the US.

"As a new decade commenced in 2000, Aeromil began a 15-year association with Singapore International Airlines, assisting with the set-up and operation of an airline pilot training college on the Sunshine Coast. In 2005, we acquired the Cessna Aircraft distributorship for Australia and New Zealand."

And if all that wasn't enough to keep Padgett busy, he's also chairman of the Australian Aviation Hall of Fame and a board member/life member of the Regional Aviation Association of Australia. Oh yes, and he recently negotiated the Moto Art Aircraft Furniture representation in the region and the Cutwater Boat distributorship for this corner of the world, having been impressed by "the lovely displacement cruisers made in Seattle" he saw while travelling in the US. "I fell in love with their lines, practicality and simplicity and thought they'd be the perfect boat for a couple to handle easily in our waters. I have a Cutwater 28 and enjoy taking it out on Sydney Harbour showing it to prospective customers."



Padgett owns a Cutwater 28 and says for him, boating is more for leisure than racing.

That's right, Padgett has somehow found time to be an enthusiastic boatie while playing a pivotal role in the creation of a modern Australian aviation industry. "I love being on the water, even if I'm just catching a ferry. I've done some racing in the past but boating for me is a leisure activity. It is a great release from the pressures of business and a good way to spend time with the family. My wife Lorraine and I have two children, one of whom is a Qantas captain, and five grandchildren, they love spending time on the harbour with us."

Padgett is an accomplished pilot of business jet aircraft who now owns several Cessna Citation jets.

With business the priority he no longer pilots them himself but still makes sure that he is personally involved in demonstrating the benefits of aircraft ownership to business associates and those new to aviation. "This is a part of the business I have always enjoyed – showing how our aeroplanes are so efficient and can get you practically anywhere, anytime. Some of our customers use their aircraft solely for business purposes and others privately with family and friends."

Six decades on, Steve Padgett is still as entranced by the magic of flying as he was when he joined the Air Training Corps, and is excited about what the future holds.

"The big change with planes over time is that while the technology has got a lot more sophisticated, the systems have got much simpler and more user-friendly. A Cessna Citation Mustang, which is a single-pilot jet, seats six, flies at 41,000-feet and has incredibly advanced avionics, and is as easy to fly as one of the single-engine Cessnas produced over half a century ago."

Padgett doesn't have any desire to vacate the Aeromil cockpit, so there are no plans for a long cruise, though he does plan to spend more time boating. "I suppose I may have to bow out at some point but why would I retire? This industry is up and down depending on the state of the economy but it's the most satisfying business of all time and it allows me to meet and work alongside so many wonderful people."



Steve Padgett with close friend Sir Jack Brabham with the BT23 race car.

**STEVE'S TOP TEN BUYS**

**1. My first planes**

I purchased three brand new Cessna training aircraft for my flying school at a total cost of \$20,000. That was my first big purchase!

**2. The first business jet**

Funnily enough, I bought my first business jet aircraft, a Learjet, just before the 1987 stock market crash – it was delivered the day before Black Monday. Fortunately, I sold it to an American banker for a profit within days of taking ownership.

**3. My American business**

I bought Austin Aero, an aviation business in Austin, Texas, in the early nineties in partnership with my American best mate. It comprised five large hangars, a business aircraft terminal, fuel farm and fuelling service to many major US airlines. I met two ex-US presidents and a host of well-known actors, such as Clint Eastwood, through that business. We eventually sold it, but it was a heap of fun when Austin was a growing city (and he is still my best mate!).

**4. My cars**

I get a lot of satisfaction from my small but cherished collection of classic and modern cars, which has included Corvettes, Mustangs, Ferraris, a Maserati and my favourites, an original and rare Honda NSX and a classic MGB in original condition.

**5. My Cessnas**

My love for aviation was the inspiration behind acquiring the rights to represent the Cessna Aircraft Company in the region and the purchase of several Cessna Citation jets for business and related uses. These include a Citation Mustang and, my favourite, a historic 'rag and wood' 1936 Cessna C34 Airmaster, which was the first ever Cessna to arrive in Australia in 1937.

**6. Alliance Airlines**

Fifteen years ago, together with several business associates, I acquired the assets of Queensland airline Flight West, then in administration. Out of that, Alliance Airlines was created. It's now ASX-listed and the predominant FIFO airline in Australia, with more than 500 employees and over 30 jet and turboprop airline aircraft. As its chairman, I am proud of the hard work of staff and management, the support of customers and the continued growth of the company.

**7. A flight training and simulator centre**

In 2000 I worked with Singapore Airlines to establish, in association with Aeromil, an airline pilot training facility at Sunshine Coast Airport. In 2014 Aeromil acquired the facility in order to create a Centre of Excellence for Advanced Jet Pilot Training. It's a great asset with exciting potential for the training of pilots from Australia and beyond.

**8. The Cutwater dealership**

Being tasked with selling these US-manufactured boats in Australia has enabled me to pursue my love of being on the water and bringing a new range of cruising boats to the region. Planes, cars and boats – I love them all!

**9. My Breitling**

I am not into expensive watches but I treasure my classic 1967 Breitling watch, which was admired by pilots and racing car drivers of the time. It's a beautiful timepiece with history to match.

**10. A BT23 Brabham Formula 2 Race Car**

My greatest purchase of all. The BT23 was designed, built, owned and driven by my friend Sir Jack Brabham throughout the 1967 European season. Sir Jack and I were with the car the day before he passed away last year. That's a memory that will stay with me always.

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