

Launceston pilot Kevin Swiggs has some stories to tell

After clocking up 47 years and 31,700 hours in the cockpit, Launceston pilot Kevin Swiggs has some stories to tell, as CARLY DOLAN discovers

Kevin Swiggs remembers well the fierce thunderstorms one Christmas Eve about 40 years ago.

The weather that evening is etched in his memory, not because of any holiday-related celebrations, but because it was the night he navigated his way through the storm to take a four-year-old boy to hospital in Melbourne.

“We used to do charters for Burnie ambulance - take patients up to Melbourne for the RFDS operation,” Mr Swiggs said, as he recalled his 47 years of flying. I remember Christmas Eve, a little boy got hit by a bus in Burnie and he wasn’t in the best of conditions. They rang me at 8.30pm to take him across to Melbourne. When we departed Wynyard, we were advised Melbourne was closed due to thunderstorms. There were some big thunderstorms around. However, his probability was going to decrease very quickly so we got in, a bit of native cunning and a lot of help from air traffic control, and we landed in and got him there.”

“Eight weeks later, we brought him home.”

That was about 1977, when Mr Swiggs was based in Devonport.

“We had an ambulance officer, a nurse and a doctor on board, plus the patient. We didn’t have radar in that aircraft. I had to rely on air traffic control telling me where the storm swells were and I was able to descend down to minimum altitude, which kept me clear of the cloud, and I flew around the showers.”

Originally from Victoria, the now 75-year-old moved to Tasmania in 1961. The intent was to spend about six months in Hobart, exploring the place while working at the drive in.

“But I found I enjoyed the place and learning to fly,” he said.

And he’s been based in Tasmania ever since.

While based in Hobart, Mr Swiggs saw an advert for flying scholarships in the local newspaper and applied.

He wasn’t successful in that round of scholarships but found the “aviation bug” had bitten him and began learning to fly with the Hobart Aero Club at Cambridge Airport.

His first job as a pilot involved flying DH82 Tiger Moths for £4 an hour.

In 1965, he achieved his commercial pilot licence and took a job in Devonport as a charter pilot for Dick Foster’s company Air Charter Services.

A decade or so later, Mr Swiggs began working at Executive Airlines in Launceston and in 1987, he and his wife bought a house and moved there.

“Executive won a contract flying Launceston to Flinders Island and Launceston to King Island,” he said.

“Executive Airlines became Airlines of Tasmania and operated in Launceston.

“They needed a bigger aircraft at one stage, particularly on the Flinders Island route, because in those days, Flinders Island had a lot of school children coming to school here and there was a lot of traffic backwards and forwards.”

After the airline went into liquidation, Mr Swiggs worked for a few years in Darwin, while still based in Launceston.

“I flew full-time out of there and I used to come back and forth. The years I worked up in Darwin, I had great job satisfaction.

“The weather was nice, except for the wet season. My wife didn’t like the wet season - she didn’t like the humidity. So, she used to have two summers. She’d have summer down here and then she’d come up and have summer up there.”

Mr Swiggs recalls a few cyclones coming through during his time flying in the top end.

” Sometimes when the weather goes bad, the first thing you do is look at the fuel gauge and see how much fuel you’ve got and what you can do.

“In the flight planning, you always allow for fuel to go to another aerodrome.

“Where possible, you go that bit of extra fuel.”

But Mr Swiggs didn’t just fly domestically. He flew to most of the Indonesian ports and around East Timor.

“It’s a bit different - a bit more challenging for a small airline, whereas a larger airline has more staff to handle it.

“We used to run to Bali and Kupang on a regular basis as an airline, and we did a lot of charter work for the government the ADF when they went into East Timor.”

Two days after Australian troops landed in East Timor to begin their occupation, Mr Swiggs operated the first civil flight into Dili with the UN secretary general.

“I took in the secretary general of World Food because they were starving up there and they needed that.

“We had a contract with the UN to fly people in and out between Darwin and East Timor.

“It was a big world. You certainly realised that.”

Mr Swiggs said he didn’t have any close calls as a pilot during his 47 years of flying.

“There was nothing really scary - just sometimes things that would make you sit on the edge of your seat for a while until you resolve it, knowing that you’d planned it right.

“And they had holding fuel on the different aerodromes.”

Mr Swiggs’ children David and Jan have followed in their father’s footsteps, both working in aviation.