

# JOHN Tilley

For a bloke who is not a pilot, John Tilley, has owned more aeroplanes than just about anyone in this country. John fell into commercial aviation almost by accident. Over the years he has built and sold his own airline, and now owns a large aircraft leasing and spare parts business.

He puts a lot of his success in the business of aviation down to the fact that he doesn't think of aeroplanes with the same passion (and often shortsightedness) as do the rest of us.

It's a business not a love affair (although like most pilots he does love his personal aircraft and like most pilots, he fills the panel with all the avionics you can get).

John is 71 but looks and acts 15 years younger than he is and he shows no signs of slowing down any time soon.

40 years ago, John was a beef cattle grower at Katherine in the Northern Territory.

Never had an interest in anything aeronautical. Never imagined he would.

His only experience was as a passenger/co-pilot with a good friend who went round Australia in a Cessna 172 in 1964.

Then he made friends with the bloke who owned the local abattoir.

And one day, his friend told him he had a problem. He needed to get his meat out to his customers more quickly and efficiently. Many of them were aboriginal missions far from the beaten track. Could John help?

The vast distances of the Northern Territory and the primitive state of the roads in those days pointed to aviation being the answer.

"I bought my first aeroplane, a Cessna 206 for \$16,000," John recalls.

"I employed a local young pilot and he started delivering meat and then fresh bread around the region."

John's reputation for on-time delivery at a reasonable price started to spread. A lot

of the company's fortunes coincided with explosive growth in the Northern Territory at the time. John was in the right place with the right product at the right time.

Business poured in through the door.

To keep up, he bought more and more aeroplanes - all of them Cessna's - and employed more young pilots to crew them.

Tillair, as the business was then called, eventually grew to be an airline with an astonishing fleet of 45 aeroplanes. Everything from 182s to Citations. In the air on any given day, you could speak with the pilots of five Conquests and 16 Cessna 210s.

Guess who must've got Christmas cards from the Cessna Corporation every year?

"We delivered mail to every cattle station in the Northern Territory," says John.

"It was said by others in those days that Tillair aircraft landed in more ports in a week (108 of them) than Ansett or TAA.

John's policy was always to give young and ambitious pilots a start on the first rung of the commercial aviation ladder. He says he only employed the ones who told him they had dreams of flying the heaviest metal.

More than a hundred young pilots got their start at Tillair over the years and went on to make John proud at the controls of Qantas and other airlines.

Most of them look back on their days at Tillair with fondness. They even get together for reunions from time to time so it must have been a warm and friendly place to work.

After 12 solid years, John began to feel the business was becoming too big for him to manage. So he sold the airline to Air North in 1988 and took himself off to retirement in Burra, South Australia where he purchased another farm.

But being the sort of man he is, John wasn't the sort to do nothing. And his sharp business brain was quick to spot another opportunity.

"In 1992, when interest rates dropped, I bought another aeroplane and leased it out" says John.

"It turned out to be a good time to start up a leasing business."

As before, John had picked the right moment. The mining boom accelerated the demand for aeroplanes and John was there with the supply.

He now has 13 aircraft on his roster, all of them leased to companies operating above the Tropic of Capricorn. The boom continues to be good for him.

John's new defacto airline fleet is not just Cessna's either, although seven of them are Caravans (two of the seven are in Papua New Guinea, the remainder in the Kimberly region of West Australia).

He also has three Brasilia EMB120s at work in Western Australia and his personal favourite his pressurised R model 210.

He keeps track of his fleet via a satellite feed to his mobile phone. He can show you where any of his aircraft are at any time, their flight plans and even if the aeroplanes are being handled correctly.

John says his new business might still grow further, because the short-term picture looks good, but he takes each opportunity only as it presents itself.

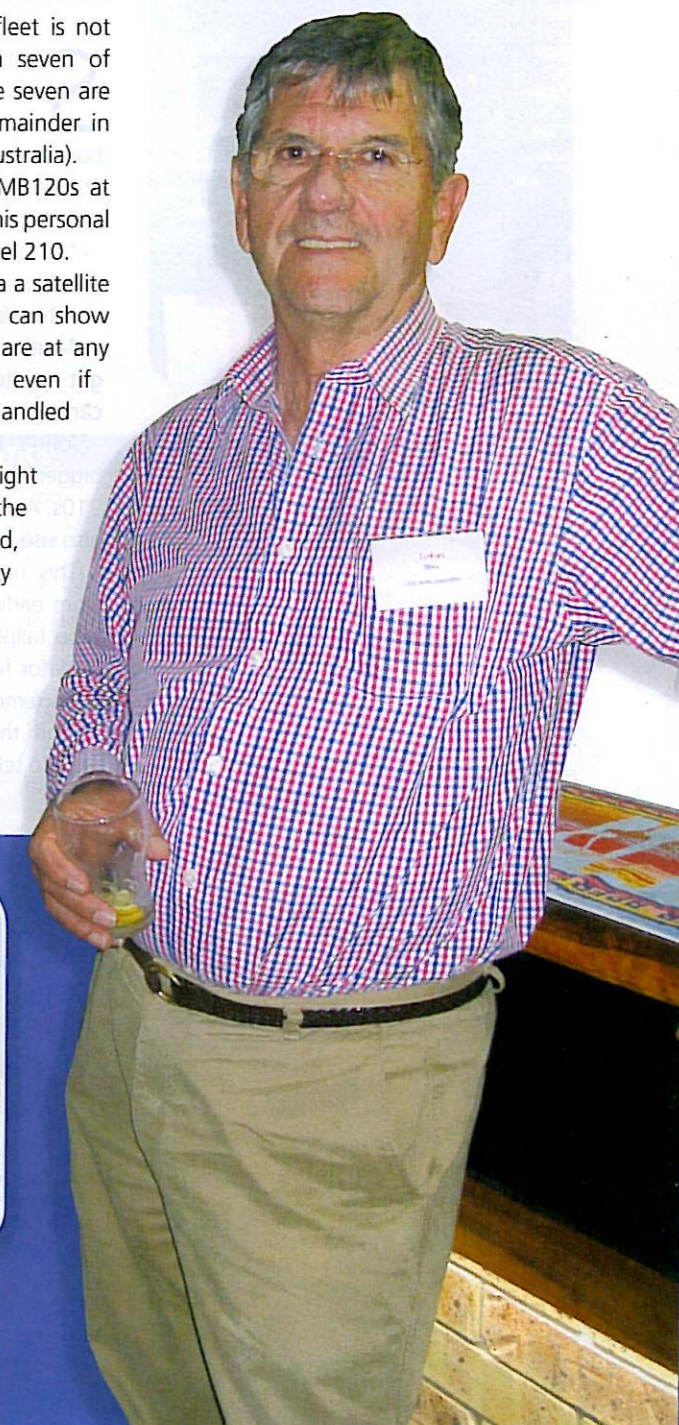
He and his wife fly all over the country whenever they feel like it, for holidays and for business.

He may not share a pilot's

passion for flying, and he is modest about his sharp business acumen, but John understands and appreciates that aviation has given him more than he ever expected out of life.

And you'd have to admit, John Tilley has proven to be a person who knows how to land in the right place at exactly the right time.

**So what aircraft does a person who has owned 63 aeroplanes choose to fly in?**



"He puts a lot of his success in the business of aviation down to the fact that he doesn't think of aeroplanes with the same passion (and often shortsightedness) as do the rest of us"