

SOUTH AUSTRALIAN AVIATION MUSEUM

SIGNIFICANT AVIATOR PROFILES

LEIGH THOMAS O'CONNOR¹



Leigh Thomas O'Connor 1998
Photo – O'Connor family collection

Leigh O'Connor spent his early life in Tantanoola, some 45k NW of Mount Gambier, where his parents Tom & Loyal O'Connor had a General Store business for forty years.

He left school in 1956 at age 15 to work in the hardware section of the family business. In the following years he developed a strong interest in flying, generated particularly by the operations of the Royal Victorian Aero Club (Tiger Moths) at the Millicent Airport. He was not in a financial position to undertake flying training so around 1958 considered the possibility of joining the RAAF. This was contrary

to the wishes of his father and he did not pursue it.

In 1967 he was runner-up in the flight test for a BP Flying Scholarship, which encouraged him to pursue a flying career in earnest. By then he was playing acoustic bass and clarinet with his father, who was a fine jazz pianist, and with other groups 2 or 3 nights a week. One night's music income went towards the achievement of a pilot's licence.

He was taught by Roger Pitt and Graham Wait in Mount Gambier, during which time Roger Pitt suggested he should work towards becoming a flight instructor and plan ultimately to work part time with him.

By then Leigh O'Connor was running the family hardware store, raising three children and studying commercial subjects by correspondence. He passed all subjects in 12 months, and had gained his Commercial Pilot's Licence and a Grade 3 instructor rating, which he immediately used as a flight instructor for Roger Pitt's company.

Roger Pitt was killed in a C150 on 26 June 1972 while searching for two lost fishermen. This resulted in closure of his company and Leigh O'Connor did not fly for about 8 months until he was approached to conduct some PPL theory classes in the Meningie area, followed by work with County Air Training (John Pope) at the Millicent Airport.

This led to the formation of his own flying school and charter business that he called O'Connor's Air Services (OCAS), which commenced operations on 11 February 1973. Over the next three years the

¹ Source: emailed correspondence between Leigh O'Connor and Mike Milln in 2012

business expanded to include ground courses in Millicent, Kingston, Kangaroo Inn School and Mount Gambier, and flying training at Millicent, Kingston, Mount Gambier, Naracoorte and Casterton.

OCAS, initially based in Millicent, safely and successfully conducted flying operations with the Millicent Gliding Club operating there also. Leigh O'Connor was President of the Millicent Gliding Club for two years, during which time the present excellent Club facilities were constructed. He also inaugurated the formation of the Mount Gambier Aero Club during this period.

In 1976 he was approached by the ANZ Bank to investigate the feasibility and viability of transporting bank documents to its Electronic Data Processing (EDP) Department by air. This required extensive investigation and consideration of all aspects of the routes, regulatory compliance, flight and duty times and operational management. The ANZ Bank accepted the findings and contracted OCAS in January 1977 to operate the first "bank run" route in South Australia on a route Mount Gambier – Millicent – Naracoorte – Kingston – Adelaide – overnight – then reverse return. To enable carriage of passengers over these sectors, very protracted regulatory negotiations were necessary to obtain an exemption under Air Navigation Regulation 203 to the requirement for an airline licence. This was a history making opportunity to provide air transport services to these otherwise unserved regional towns.



O'Connor Air Services Cessna C402C VH-A11, first of four
Photo – O'Connor family collection

In 1978 and 1979 three additional routes were established servicing Minlaton, Port Lincoln, Wudinna, Streaky Bay, Ceduna, Whyalla, Kimba, Cleve, Cowell, Port Pirie, Port Augusta and Hawker. This demonstrated OCAS's reliability and performance, and its ability to conduct the contract successfully.



O'Connor Air Services Cessna C402Cs landing Mt Gambier
Photo – O'Connor family collection

During this very busy period of growth, with seven pilots based in Adelaide, the flying school part of the business had continued to grow and develop too. The company had a policy to employ pilots with flight instructor qualifications so as to improve the utilisation of their time across the flying school and bank contract parts of the business. It was during this time that Leigh O'Connor met and was able to convince Sir Peter Abeles of the merits of OCAS operating the bank contract in partnership with TNT Couriers. (Sir

Peter was then managing director and deputy chairman of TNT and chairman of Ansett Transport Industries). TNT Couriers was to provide the ground content under the contract. OCAS undertook not to carry passengers out of Port Lincoln or Whyalla in competition to Ansett subsidiary Airlines of South Australia's scheduled F27 services, but would acquire three Cessna 402C aircraft to provide regular scheduled services under a Regulation 203 exemption to all other communities included in the contract. Those communities otherwise would not enjoy regular commuter airlines services.



O'Connor Air Services Partenavia on Koala Rescue
Photo – O'Connor family collection

Sir Peter agreed to the arrangement and OCAS immediately began procuring aircraft, initiating its own internal reservation system and appointing handling agents. OCAS flourished in the following years, with the flying school identifying prospective suitable pilot to progress to the bank runs, thus replacing the pilot departures to the major airlines that all smaller operators suffer.

When investigating the bank contract feasibility in 1976, Leigh O'Connor determined that a

major component of success would be dedicated engineering facilities at the Mount Gambier Airport. To that end, he approached John Davis and Gil Wood of Rossair and offered to build a large hangar and facilities on the Mount Gambier Airport to rent to them to operate their own engineering business. They agreed and moved to Mount Gambier and formed Lake City Aviation.

During the negotiations with the Commonwealth for lease of the hangar site, Leigh O'Connor contested the clause that required any buildings on the site to revert to the Commonwealth on expiry or determination of the lease. The then Minister of Transport (Hon Peter Nixon) intervened, which resulted in a general removal of the clause from site leases at all Commonwealth Airports and allowed construction to continue for completion of the hangar on time. This event evidently improved Leigh O'Connor's credibility and his recognition by the Regulator, which resulted in several capital works projects being undertaken to upgrade the airports he serviced.



O'Connor Air Services Partenavia on Koala Rescue
Photo – O'Connor family collection

The Bank Contract developed with passenger numbers increasing to satisfactory levels, and the ANZ Bank selling space on the aircraft to other banks. The passenger revenue was substantial and Leigh O'Connor had reason to believe the contract was secure. However, through the partnership of TNT

Couriers in the contract, Ansett Transport Industries caused the transfer of the contract at renewal to its ex-subsiary Wings Australia, which at the time was indebted to Ansett. OCAS's contract then ceased on 3 December 1983.



O'Connor Airlines Technical Library – Mt Gambier
Photo – O'Connor family collection

OCAS, having pioneered the very complex operations and introduction of Regulation 203 services to a large number of regional communities in SA, left a legacy of community benefit and airport improvements (including sealed runways, lighting etc), which it had directly and indirectly caused to be completed.

OCAS then had eleven surplus aircraft to sell and the company was reduced to two Cessna 402C aircraft operated each week day by Leigh O'Connor and one other pilot on two routes Mount

Gambier – Naracoorte – Adelaide return and Adelaide – Naracoorte – Mount Gambier return.

By January of 1984, OCAS was intermittently competing on the routes with a series of other small operators including Murray Valley Airlines, Rossair, Commodore Airlines, East West and Airlines of South Australia, but by October 1984 only OCAS and Airlines of SA remained.

OCAS had sold most of its fleet and its turnover had fallen from in excess of \$1 million to \$80,000 per year. Its Mount Gambier – Adelaide routes, flying school and charter business were viable, but clearly a new direction was necessary to survive. With that in mind, Leigh O'Connor hired a marketing consultant to assess the company's public credibility as airline service provider. The result was the reformation of O'Connor's Air Services Pty Ltd as a turbo-prop operator between Adelaide and Mount Gambier on 1 May 1985.



O'Connor Air Services Engineering Base – Mt Gambier
Photo – O'Connor family collection

During this period OCAS employed fourteen staff directly and employed agents under contract in various parts of the State. The engineering business, Lake City Aviation, the only engineering facility between Adelaide and Melbourne, by then had provided three apprenticeships and employed five staff at Mt Gambier Airport.

OCAS, being based in Mount Gambier, was asked by SA Police on several occasions to initiate searches off the south coast for seafarers in trouble. Because SAPOL did not have the immediate authority necessary to contract OCAS for the purpose, Leigh O'Connor initiated a process where his aircraft would commence the search immediately on request with the contract detail sorted out later. This worked very successfully and saved many lives. One particular search 35 nautical miles off Cape Jaffa resulted in two men whose boat had sunk being saved after Leigh



O'Connor Airlines C441 Conquest VH-0AA at Port Augusta 13 Feb 2006
Photo – Mike Milln

O'Connor located wreckage, stayed on station for over three and a half hours and was able to direct a ship to the site to effect the rescue. OCAS also provided valuable services in aerial surveying for siren wasps and during and after the 1983 Ash Wednesday fires in the South East of the State.

By 1985 OCAS was operating scheduled airline services with turbine powered, pressurised Cessna C441 Conquests on the Mount Gambier - Adelaide route in competition with Kendell Airlines Metros. This was an innovative move since no other company in the world had seen the commercial advantages in operating what was essentially a corporate aircraft on daily airline service, but public acceptance of the aircraft was promising. Its introduction, however, involved a steep learning curve for the company in all aspects of piloting, engineering and management.

In October 1988, after a period of consolidation and protracted negotiations to overturn a policy that



O'Connor Air Services Engineering Base – Mount Gambier
Photo – O'Connor family collection



Metalworker, O'Connor Air Services Engineering Base –
Mt Gambier
Photo – O'Connor family collection

allowed only turbine powered aircraft of more than ten seats to operate into Tullamarine, OCAS initiated return services between Mount Gambier and Melbourne.

Also in 1988, Leigh O'Connor introduced a flying scholarship open to the public to provide free instruction to Restricted Private Pilot Licence level at the OCAS flying school. There were 112 applicants, each of whom received a video briefing and 20 minute aptitude flight test. Leigh O'Connor conducted all the flights with an independent examiner selecting the scholarship winner. The winner of the 1993 scholarship rose to be a captain with Qantas.

On 12 December 1988 OCAS purchased the engineering business of Lake City Aviation to form O'Connor Aero-Maintenance Pty Ltd (OCAM), managed by Leigh O'Connor's wife Sally O'Connor. The company grew to employ eight engineers and two office staff, and became the only repair and overhaul facility for Conquest fuel control units in Australia.



O'Connor Air Services J32 implementation meeting- Mt Gambier 1997
Leigh O'Connor 2nd from left
Photo – O'Connor family collection

During the 1989 pilots' strike, OCAS contributed to community travel needs by operating a twice-daily revised schedule Mt Gambier – Melbourne – Adelaide - Mt Gambier and Mt Gambier –Adelaide – Melbourne - Mt Gambier.



O'Connor Airlines BAE Jetstream 3207
From publicity poster

By the early nineties there was a growing passenger expectation of larger aircraft on regional routes. OCAS's competitor had introduced larger Saab 340 aircraft and OCAS undertook a detailed feasibility study into the operation of multi-crew 19-seat turbo-prop aircraft. This led to the introduction of two BAE Jetstream 3207 aircraft into service during March/April 1997 to operate the Adelaide and Melbourne routes. Further, at the request of the Qantas subsidiary Eastern Airlines, OCAS took over the Adelaide - Mildura route in October 1998; then, following a request by Qantas, a third Jetstream was acquired to operate the Adelaide - Whyalla route in September 2001.



O'Connor Airlines BAe Jetstream 3207 VH-OAB
 over Blue Lake Mt Gambier
 Photo – O'Connor family collection

During 1995, OCAS, through Michael O'Connor, Leigh's younger son and a Conquest captain and Flying School/Airline coordinator, developed a business relationship with the Massey University in Palmerston North, New Zealand. This led to OCAS providing Regular Public Transport (RPT) exposure and experience in a multi-crew environment to several classes of the University's Chinese students. Several courses were conducted in 1995-96, with extensive professional and cultural content included in the experience, which is further evidence of the extraordinary vision and commitment to the

development of the aviation industry that Leigh O'Connor and his family contributed.

In late 1997 OCAS opened the O'Connor Travel Centre in Mount Gambier as a fully accredited travel agent. This required the employment of three travel consultants and the business developed into a successful and highly professional travel provider.

As another example of community service provided by OCAS, in 1998 Leigh O'Connor arranged to fly the entire staff and pupils of the primary school, of which his daughter was the principal, on flights over the city. The flights were provided as "an incentive to learning" at a difficult school and took six weeks to carry out.

Leigh O'Connor's elder son Andrew joined the company to assist with the J3207 aircraft introduction. The aircraft required a comprehensive approach to systemic safety management and OCAS, through Andrew O'Connor, brought ex-USAF safety expert, Lt Col Tony Kern, to Australia to conduct a



Leigh O'Connor at Port Augusta for service inauguration 13 Feb 2006
 Photo – Mike Milln

safety conference in Mount Gambier. OCAS offered the conference to industry at no cost and 75 attendees included representatives of Qantas, Ansett, National Jet, the ADF, the agricultural aviation sector and many others. Subsequently OCAS designed, constructed and wrote a highly detailed

safety management system called OASIS (O'Connor Airlines Safety Integration System). The system was provided to industry at no cost and has been taken up by Fijian Air Traffic Control, Alaskan Airlines, the Aerial Agricultural Association of Australia and many others. In 1998, OCAS won the inaugural Australian Safety Foundation Award presented by Lady Bird Walton.

In February 2006 OCAS introduced scheduled service on the Adelaide - Port Augusta route. This followed the closure of Airlines of South Australia in November 2005, and a competitive process undertaken by the South Australian Government to attract another operator this low-volume route. The South Australian Government had generally followed a policy of non-intervention in regional air services, but the importance of Port Augusta as a regional service centre led it to offer a route service licence to a single operator, which OCAS won.

At its 30-year celebration in November 2003, Leigh O'Connor was able to announce that over the period the company had donated more than \$1 million in retail value to the community. The company had also bestowed "The O'Connor Airlines Leadership Award" to a pupil at each school in the Mount Gambier area since 1997. At its height the company occupied a highly responsible corporate position in South Australia's largest regional community. It employed 51 people, flew 26 sectors a day and had trained more than 100 professional pilots who had gone on to fly with major airlines.

Sadly, the company ceased operating in December 2007. This was as a result of increasing difficulty in competing against larger aircraft with lower seat/kilometre costs and economies of scale, and the increased costs associated with various decisions of the regulator in relation to ongoing scheduled maintenance requirements of the Cessna Conquest and BAe Jetstream aircraft.

Mike Milln
South Australian Aviation Museum Inc
History Group
November 2012



Captain Leigh Thomas O'Connor
O'Connor Airlines
Photo – O'Connor family collection



O'Connor Airlines BAe Jetstream 3207 VH-OAB
 over Blue Lake Mt Gambier
 Photo – from publicity poster - O'Connor family collection

APPENDIX

Name: Leigh Thomas O'Connor
 Date of Birth: 30th August 1941
 Place of Birth: Mount Gambier South Australia
 Address: 9 Sunnyside Drive Mount Gambier, SA 5290
 Education: Tantanoola Primary School – Years 1-2-3-4-5
 Marist Brothers College (Boarder) – Mount Gambier Years 6-8
 Millicent High School – Years 9-10
 Education Level: Intermediate Certificate – Seven subjects (one credit)
 Further Education: Radio/Television Service Engineering Course – Correspondence
 (Australian Radio & Television College – Sydney)
 Aviation Qualifications: Student Pilot Licence – 03/12/1968
 (ARN 103732) Private Pilot Licence – 16/04/1969
 Commercial Pilot Licence – 15/10/1971
 Air Transport Pilot (USA) – 31/01/1997
 Air Transport Pilot Licence – 30/06/1997
 Certificates of Ratings Night VFR (A) – 16/02/1970
 Instructor Rating – Grade 3 – 14/12/1971
 Instructor Rating – Grade 2 – 19/03/1974
 Instructor Rating – Grade 1 – 25/03/1975
 Command Instrument Rating (A) ME – 31/07/1976
 Operational Approvals and Chief Pilot – O'Connor's Air Services Pty Ltd to 2007
 Appointments Chief Pilot – Tas-Air Pty Ltd – 2008 – 2012
 Held and/or Current Approved Testing Officer (ATO) for – NVFR (A) – GFPT (A) – PPL (A) CPL (A)
 – FI (A) Grade 1 Renewal only – Grades 2 & 3 Issue & Renewal - CIR (A) ME
 – SE, Co-Pilot IR (A) ME Issue & Renewal – CAR 217 for O'Connor's Air
 Services Pty Ltd - CAR 217 for Australian Jet Charter (ARN 224736)
 Conversion Training – ATPL & CPL pilots on BAe Jetstream 3200 / 3100 and
 Cessna Conquest C441 aircraft
 Glider Towing