

# High performer

Peter Zaccagnino ('92, DB) pushes the envelope to deliver new standards of flight safety

**P**eter Zaccagnino has turned “pushing the envelope” into a personal philosophy and a successful career. As the president and chief pilot of High Performance Aircraft Training/Testing Inc. (HPAT), a company that tests the limits of today’s sophisticated aircraft to help pilots fly smarter and more safely, Zaccagnino gets to apply his “see-what-we-can-do” attitude daily.

“Instead of looking at reasons why you can’t do something,” he explains, “we find out how you can make it happen.”

Zaccagnino “makes it happen” by pushing unique aircraft—such as MiG-21s, Lancairs and L-39s—to their limits and then providing that key information to civilian pilots during training. “We’re testing a plane’s entire envelope of operation—even beyond its envelope of operation—to determine what can and cannot be done when flying it,” says Zaccagnino, who is a Department of Defense-approved pilot. “For example, we find out if a plane can be flown into icing, or if a pilot can spin the plane and survive.”

All this systematic daredevilry serves a very serious purpose: to keep pilots safe and at the top of their game when flying high-performance aircraft. “Our tests are comprehensive so we can establish best practices for that specific plane,” Zaccagnino says. “We make sure the plane is safe to fly when a non-test pilot gets into it.”

## A SMALL COMPANY DOING BIG THINGS

Zaccagnino’s high-performance pursuit sends him all over the globe, something he thrives on. In one five-week period he covered most of Europe, northern Canada and even traveled to the Arctic Circle. “I’m always doing many things at once,” he says happily. Whether it’s flight testing, engineering a new design or modification, or developing new business, Zaccagnino is always ready for the next move. “I never want to wait for others to do something first, when I know I can do it.”

For example, Zaccagnino is leading the charge in supersonic flight testing for civilian airplanes. “It is the next step in civilian aviation and we intend to be the leader in spearheading this effort. People have asked

me why we want to do supersonic research and testing and my answer is, ‘Someone has got to do it. Why not me?’”

Today, with 35 employees and contractors working at any given time, HPAT may be considered a small company to take on such a challenge, but Zaccagnino is undaunted. “You don’t have to be a huge billion-dollar corporation to lead such a significant project,” he says. “I really think we will be the go-to company for how to facilitate supersonic flight—from the technology, to the research and development, to the regulations. We may be small, but we’re going to do big things.”

## GETTING BACK TO AIRPLANES

Zaccagnino has always felt he would end up doing big things. When he graduated from Embry-Riddle in 1992 with his degree in aeronautical engineering, the aviation industry was in a lull, but he



By Ashlee (Fiser) Ilg ('03, DB)

**Peter Zaccagnino ('92, DB)**

- Flown around the world several times
- More than 10,000 hours flying time, with 6,000 in turbine aircraft
- Owns several planes, including an Aeronca Champ and a MiG-21



pressed forward to find his niche. “I always knew I wanted to run my own company, so I pursued jobs that I knew would help the big picture I had for myself,” he explains.

Zaccagnino’s first job gave him an education in business, but kept him far from the cockpit. “It was a great learning experience, but I knew I had to get back to airplanes,” he says. “I began teaching aviation students at a local college and, at the same time, bought a Cessna to start training a handful of flight students. This first Cessna escalated into establishing a traditional flight school, and soon I was also testing race planes and flying internationally as a Gulfstream captain.”

During those 200-plus international flights, Zaccagnino saw his chance to do what he had been preparing for all along. “The need for high-performance training was apparent—especially internationally and in unique aircraft,” he says. “Since my days as a student at Embry-Riddle, I had been preparing to run my own company. By getting all the experience I did up to this point, I knew I could ‘walk the walk’ and had the background to know what I was doing in my company.”

Zaccagnino, who still uses his *Aerodynamics, Aircraft Design, and Stability and Control* textbooks, credits his

education at Embry-Riddle for making a “huge impact” on his career success. “When companies know they are talking to an aeronautical engineer from an established university, it means something. My education at Embry-Riddle has opened so many doors for me because I can speak the language of engineering.”

**LIVING IN THE FUTURE**

While Zaccagnino has opened a lot of doors using his Embry-Riddle education, he’s not one to look back for long. “I don’t revel in what I’ve already done. I am always looking forward to see what I will accomplish next,” he says. “To be successful, I believe you have to live in the future.”

For the near future, Zaccagnino will defend the gold-medal championship he won last year in the Reno Air Race. Beyond that, there are those plans to lead in the area of supersonic flight testing, as well as an aggressive global expansion program for HPAT. “We are already in the process of establishing a base of operations in both India and Europe and we are optimistic about expanding into Asia,” Zaccagnino says.

It may seem like a tall order, but Zaccagnino, not surprisingly, is used to living on the edge of what’s possible.