

# AN INVESTMENT in the future of our industry

ADAM SUTTON, MEMBERSHIP CO-ORDINATOR

In early April I visited the Australian Airline Pilot Academy (AAPA) facilities in Wagga Wagga to learn about the Regional Express (Rex) Pilot Cadet Programme and AAPA's vision for the future of pilot training.

I arrived in Wagga with an image in my head of what to expect - I think it is an understatement to say I was amazed at what I saw on arrival. I spent the day with Geoff Cook, the General Manager and CFI of AAPA, a man who needs to think as both a flying instructor and a businessman - not an easy task by any means. Rex and AAPA management has managed to construct a \$20 million training facility while continuing normal day to day operations without a dedicated project team. This is clearly a huge investment for a small regional airline, however to do it in the middle of a financial crisis, with profit down just 5.8% in the GFC is simply outstanding.

AAPA was set up as part of the Rex Group back in 2007, to ensure a continual supply of high quality pilots that will remain with the airline for many years to come. As well as the provider of the Rex Pilot Cadet Programme, AAPA is an accredited RTO and has CRICOS approval (accreditation to train overseas pilots) and also runs the normal CASA approved PPL, CPL and IFR courses for aviation students.

The first sod of soil was turned in Wagga on 13 July 2009, when AAPA construction began. I toured the site and was blown away by the facilities and the ideas they have come up with.

AAPA initially chose Wagga because of Rex's heavy maintenance facilities, which allow AAPA to utilise Rex Engineers for day to day maintenance of its training fleet. The location also receives good weather all year, and the council has provided great support to the Academy in its setup as well as agreeing to construct another sealed runway at Wagga airport.

AAPA's new buildings cost \$12 million, and can accommodate up to 200 cadets/students per year. The facility includes office space throughout for Rex and AAPA's staff, a gym, pool, secure car park, kitchen and dining facilities, training rooms, brand new

synthetic training facilities, and soon a Rex Saab 340 in the middle of the courtyard!

AAPA has plans to expand in the near future, with enough land purchased to accommodate more students. This will allow Rex to expand their cadet programme, if required, but will also allow AAPA to take on international students. AAPA is going to be the biggest and most modern pilot training academy in Australia when it opens next month - so why wouldn't other overseas airlines want to utilise this amazing setup?

Rex has spent another \$600,000 on synthetic trainers, and \$7 million on brand new glass cockpit aircraft. The current AAPA fleet consists of 8 Piper Warriors and 2 Piper Seminole. AAPA will double its fleet by June.

I was amazed at the new glass cockpit setup in these aircraft - it simply consists of your usual backup instruments, throttle, mixture etc, 2 GPS units and 2 huge screens which look like something out of the future. These training aircraft are more advanced than a Saab, which is expected as the cadets are being trained for airline operations. Another surprising, yet clever point is that the cockpit setup of the Warrior is exactly the same as the Seminole, apart from the obvious pitch, mixture and throttle differences in the twin engine version - this will make the transition from single engine to multi engine that little bit easier. Each aircraft is equipped with all required IFR equipment. The 3 synthetic trainers can represent a Warrior, a Seneca or a King Air with the obvious capabilities to conduct everything IFR, as well as 180 degree views.

The program Geoff is most proud of is the Rex Pilot Cadet Programme. When AAPA was setup in 2007 this was the first program they created. Cadet pilots are put through a thorough interview process, which includes panel interviews and a one on one interview with the Chairman of the Rex Group Lim Kim Hai, who travels from Singapore to individually meet each applicant. Those who are successful are granted a job with Rex for as long as they

wish, but set to a minimum of 6 years returned service after training. Geoff Cook says each interview is not a training course interview; it is a job interview for the role of Regional Express First Officer, and those who pass are granted this position.

AAPA has written its own syllabus, which aims to train pilots in an 8 month window, from zero hour pilots to approximately 150 hour CPL students, who are MECIR rated and ready for the right hand seat. So far AAPA has trained 85 cadets, with 45 checked to line as F/Os within the Rex Group, 6 shortly to join ground school, 20 in the academy at present, and another 20 to start in April. Rex plans to recruit 20 cadets each year.

Interestingly, Rex prefers to take applicants who have very little experience. They look for a passion of flying and a proven ability to study. They prefer to "mould" these students into Rex pilots, rather than try to iron out individual habits which experienced pilots hold.

Rex assists cadets with funding of this \$88,000 course, through loans which are paid back via salary and scholarships which are forgiven after an amount of returned service.

Rex has definitely learnt from the past, and realised how important it is to produce well-trained pilots and ensure it does not suffer such an immense setback next time the big airlines recruit. Rex and AAPA have produced a training facility second to none in Australia. As a CPL student, I see the benefit of such a comprehensive and well run program. It is reassuring to know that the future of my training is seen as a priority by airlines like Rex. It is also reassuring to pilots like you who will one day fly with these Rex cadets, to know that they are well trained and have had money invested in them to ensure they are the best of the best.

It is clear that Rex, through AAPA is not letting the dollars blur their vision of pilot training in Australia. I believe that all pilots should be proud of this and congratulate Rex on a job well done.

