



photo - Owen Zupp

In house

Rex responds to pilot shortage by growing its own

by Owen Zupp

Regional airlines have always been a prime hunting ground for the major airlines when the need for pilots arises – so much so that at one stage in 2007, Regional Express lost 50 per cent of its pilots to the majors.

The revolving door of qualifying crew on its Saab 340 aircraft was leaving the cupboard vary bare and a solution had to be found. And so was born the Australian Airline Pilot Academy.

A NEW APPROACH

Don Kendell was a pioneer of Australian aviation who grew a small flying school and charter business into one of the nation's premier regional airlines, operating a fleet

of Saab 340 turboprops and Bombardier CRJ jets across an expansive interstate network. In the wake of the Ansett collapse in 2001, Kendell Airlines and fellow regional Hazelton Airlines were sold to a consortium which merged the two to create a new entity in the form of Regional Express Airlines, or more simply, Rex.

Rex has retained Don Kendell's home base of Wagga Wagga as its operational HQ, but today the airport is a far cry from the airfield where his airline had its humble beginnings with a lone Piper Navajo. It is a thriving regional airport with a modern terminal, substantial maintenance facilities, a newly commissioned ILS approach and a main promenade that bears Don Kendell's name. Most significantly, that promenade hosts a series of modern accommodation blocks, offices and classrooms that are home to the Australian Airline Pilot Academy.

For a pilot who came through the training system when a flying school was little

more than a demountable building with a couple of Cessnas parked out the front, the academy is a whole new ball game. Your author met the general manager and chief flying instructor, Geoff Cook, in a modern foyer with walls adorned by the framed photographs of graduating classes and various dignitaries. Subsequently sitting in the conference room, the large glass window frames a modern gym across a courtyard centred upon a large in-ground swimming pool. This is definitely flight training as they do it in the 21st century.

Geoff begins by describing the origins of the academy in 2007 as a direct response to the mass exodus of pilots to the major airlines at that time. There was a shortage of pilots, and no sooner was a vacancy filled than another was created by yet another departing pilot. The demand could not be met and the training system was working at its limit just to keep the aircraft crewed. It was unclear where the next group of pilots would

come from, so Rex took the initiative and started the Australian Airline Pilot Academy, which it wholly owns and operates.

Staffed by 10 flying instructors and supporting staff, AAPA currently has over 100 cadets and an impressive fleet of 20 new aircraft. The full time Rex cadet pilot program takes place over 32 weeks and sees the graduates not only gain a commercial pilot's licence, but a Diploma in Aviation. Additionally, the academy is training its first courses of students from the United Arab Emirates under a separate syllabus to meet the requirements of CASA, the UAE General Civil Aviation Authority and ICAO's new Multi-Crew Pilot Licence (MPL).

Before we tour the facility, Geoff and I discuss the overall training philosophy at AAPA. Simply put, the academy applies one overriding question to all of its operations: "How would an airline do it?" This is immediately evident from the rows of manuals adjacent to me in the conference room. There is a suite of manuals for the Saab 340 sitting right beside similar sets for the Piper Warrior and Seminole training aircraft. The format is duplicated to encourage familiarity with the layout for students, thus facilitating their transition into the airline on graduation. Geoff explains that the concept is not only sound in a training sense, but incredibly efficient. As they are owned by Rex, the software and systems are already in place, and all that is needed is to tailor them to the academy's requirements. I am soon to learn that this is a common theme throughout all aspects of the operation.

The syllabus for the Rex cadets also has a bias towards the needs of future airline pilots. There is an emphasis on multi-engine and IFR training, and students receive 65 hours of instruction in this form as well as numerous hours in ground based synthetic trainers. In fact, the cadets complete their multi-engine command instrument rating before they undertake their commercial pilot's licence.

A great deal of attention is also applied to standards and compliance issues, just as they are in an airline. To facilitate this, Geoff's operational role primarily involves ensuring that the instructors are compliant across the syllabus, while a dedicated training standards manager continually looks at how the training is implemented. It is an ongoing process designed to not just set, but maintain a consistent standard of training.

BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Walking through the halls of the multi-storey complex, I envy the student pilots training at AAPA. They have modern accommodation, recreational and dining facilities, but more to the point, they have a



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wealth of resources at their fingertips.

There is a fully stocked library with books, DVDs and computers where all manner of aviation information is available. The computers also access an internal AAPA intranet site that has a substantial operational menu and access to approved company forms. There are also prompts for rostering, operational notices and safety management, and each student is required to check and sign off on these administrative requirements on a daily basis as this is where the academy promulgates any new operational information. Not surprisingly, the format and process is the same as that utilised by the airline.

The computers also offer access to the entire syllabus. Any lesson can be selected

and the content, execution and required standard are there to download and study. There are no surprises, but similarly, there are no excuses for not being prepared. The assessment form also tells a tale as categories such as punctuality, grooming and teamwork feature right alongside the assessments for manipulative skills.

The campus also has a dedicated facility for Assessment Services Ltd which provides the CyberExams on behalf of CASA, so students can sit all exams at the academy as required.

The facilities are very modern, with secure accommodation facilities and shared common areas. The dining room is serviced by its own onsite kitchen, while nearby the fitness centre offers all manner of means to burn off any excess calories. The classrooms are well lit and spacious, with desks designed to cope with charts and an array of textbooks and manuals. Every class is faced towards a whiteboard on the hallway side of the room, with windows at the back. While this assists with lighting the room, the arrangement also prevents students from being distracted by the sight of everyday operations at the airport and technical and cabin crew undertaking 'wet drills' in the swimming pool.

As Geoff points out, the accommodation and facilities are also used by current Rex crews for training purposes as well. This is reinforced by the presence of a fully restored but decommissioned Saab 340 that sits near the academy's entrance. While a fantastic visual signpost, the Saab is enjoying a second life as a full scale emergency trainer for crews both in initial training and ongoing renewals.

There are three sophisticated synthetic trainers to provide ground based training. These modern five screen devices are





HIGH TECH TRAINING Three synthetic trainers are used to provide ground based training. (Owen Zupp)

configured to represent the academy's Warriors and Seminole, as well as more sophisticated types. They are valuable aids, not only for instrument training, but in preparing for visual exercises such as cross-country navigation and multi-engine training. In the latter case, all students receive at least four hours multi-engine training in the synthetic trainer before they ever fly the aeroplane.

In the air, the students also maximise their exposure by back-seating a large number of their fellow pilots' flights, although in the interests of safety, this doesn't occur when emergency and non-normal training is to take place.

Across the tarmac from the classrooms and accommodation a number of hangars provide the base for maintenance of the

Rex Saab fleet, and among their number is a hangar for the academy's single and twin engine Pipers. Incorporated in this new facility are a number of briefing rooms, a flight instructors' office and a preflight planning area. Once again everything is modern, and both maintenance releases and manuals conform to the format and system employed by the parent airline.

Interestingly, the students are required to brief the instructors prior to flying, thus making it impossible for a scantily prepared student to fudge his way through the lesson. Furthermore, each cadet is required to spend time in the hangar and assist with at least one 100 hourly and two 50 hourly inspections. Undoubtedly, this will provide not only an insight into their aircraft's systems, but a genuine introduction to the

STEPPING STONES AAPA's fleet comprises modern Warriors (pictured) and Seminole, providing a stepping stone into the right hand seat of Rex Saabs. (AAPA)



important role played by engineering in making safe flight possible.

The fleet itself consists of 16 Piper Warriors and four Piper Seminole for multi-engine and IFR training. All are immaculately presented and kept looking that way by cadets wiping down their aircraft post-flight and participating in weekly washing sessions. Inside, the aeroplanes are all standardised in their layout and boast impressive glass cockpits to introduce the new aviators to the ways of their future flightdecks.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

From top to bottom, the academy is characterised by well maintained, modern equipment, but there's something more. There is a real attention to detail. Everything from the procedures to the manuals is focused on the sole purpose of providing the cadet with not just training, but genuine insight into the real world operations at Rex. This thorough approach must not simply pay dividends in the quality of the finished product, but provides a smooth transition for the fledgling pilot and airline alike when the time comes to step into the right hand seat of a Saab 340.

The academy is looking further afield too, as evidenced by the presence of the UAE cadet pilots. Currently, Geoff is spending significant time 'spreading the word' at symposiums around the world at venues including Bangkok, Hong Kong and the US.

While students from abroad are a welcome expansion of the business, the origins of the academy have never been lost, and the issue of pilot retention is directly addressed through the course's payment schedule. The course costs around \$93,000 through a series of loans, repayable on a sliding scale over time from commencement as a pilot with Rex. However, should the cadet stay with Rex for six years, there is a substantial discount offered in the form of reduced interest, and should they complete seven years, the final 25 per cent of the fees is a "scholarship loan" and will be waived altogether. It is a fair system that offers a tangible incentive for the cadet to provide a return of service to the company.

The fee schedule, like the facilities and training philosophy, is extremely practical. The goal is to provide a high level of graduate who can transition into the Rex airline operation with a minimum of difficulty, and this is achieved by adopting the Rex systems and culture from day one. The Australian Airline Pilot Academy was born in the days of a pilot exodus from the regional airlines, but on the evidence of the Wagga facility there are now many reasons to stay. ■