

# IS CADET TRAINING A FLIGHT RISK?

Airline pilot cadet programs and the increasing number of inexperienced tech-crew on Australia's airlines has drawn scathing criticism from politicians and pilots alike. But the airlines themselves see the criticism as nothing more than pure folly. Derek Royal reports.

WORDS Derek Royal



GRADUATES FROM REX'S AUSTRALIAN AIRLINE PILOT ACADEMY (AAPA) OFTEN HANDLE STATE-OF-THE-ART SAAB 340BS EARLY IN THEIR CAREERS. (IMAGE: DAVID MORRELL)



**A**lyssa is a rookie regional airline pilot. Intelligent, ambitious and earning a crust in her dream career, the 21-year-old first officer paints the picture of a successful young professional.

For years, regional airlines have provided a stepping stone for pilots like Alyssa. Pilots with their hearts set on careers with major airlines both in Australia and overseas.

As a teenager, Alyssa dreamed of becoming an airline pilot. She studied

hard, worked part-time jobs to pay for flying lessons and by the time she was 16, she went solo. She then earned her private licence and aced HSC maths, english and physics and by the time she'd turned 19, had a CV impressive enough to gain entry into a cadet pilots' program. Competing against thousands of other applicants with similar ambitions to her own, Alyssa's credentials were simply too good to ignore.

With a little help from mum and dad, Alyssa paid close to \$100,000 for the privilege of being an airline

cadet. Given her voracious work ethic and ambition, her parents considered their outlay as an investment into their daughter's future.

The cadet program allowed Alyssa to pursue fulltime flight training and offered a guaranteed position as a line pilot on completion of the course. Within a year, Alyssa graduated to the right-hand seat of a state-of-the-art airliner, and armed with a few hundred hours under her belt, she's now well and truly on her way to the next level of her flying career.

But Alyssa's pathway into the airlines may be a thing of the past if the Senate Inquiry into Pilot Training succeeds with its recommendation for all airline pilots to have a minimum of 1500 hours flight experience. Most cadets graduate with around 200 hours, a figure some critics consider to be grossly inadequate. How, the critics ask, can cadets with just 200 hours in their logbooks safely transport passengers from A to B in aircraft worth millions of dollars? Following a series of incidents involving inexperienced Australian airline pilots,

Independent Senator Nick Xenophon and the Australian International Pilots Association (AIPA) have been the most vocal critics of the current system and through the Senate Inquiry have led the push for the federal government to introduce a mandatory experience and safety management plan. The move by the Senate Inquiry follows a similar proposal in the United States, which was implemented following a fatal Bombardier Q400 accident near Buffalo, New York that claimed the lives of 50 people.

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But the Inquiry has polarised the industry and obviously, not everyone agrees with the critics. Regional Express Airlines' (Rex) managing director Jim Davis slammed the proposal and said the severe cost required to train pilots to 1500 hours' experience could have a disastrous effect on smaller airlines, including the forced closure of Rex's Wagga Wagga-based Australian Airline Pilot Academy (AAPA).

"This would have a disastrous effect amongst small and regional operators as their pilot ranks would get plundered by the larger airlines," Davis said, a scenario that could see Rex face the same pilot shortages that almost bankrupted the company three years ago. To stay in operation, Davis adds, the smaller operators would have no choice but to accept pilots from General Aviation with sufficient minimum hours but who may not have the desired skill level to be airline pilots. "This would lead to the opposite effect intended by the proposal."

According to Rex, results from comprehensive simulator and aircraft proficiency tests have conclusively proven that cadets in their first year of flying demonstrate equal skills in all aspects tested, while in their second year of flying their performance surpasses the more experienced direct intake pilots with over 1500 hours.

"There is absolutely no scientific basis that a pilot with less than 1500

hours would be unsafe," Davis said. "If that were the case, the RAAF would not be entrusting our sophisticated fighter jets to pilots with less than 500 hours of flight experience. In fact European and Australian authorities have officially approved training programs that allow pilots to fly large jet aircraft with less than 100 hours of direct flight experience."

"A minimum requirement of 1500 hours for airline pilots would mean the end of all pilot cadet programs in Australia and make it impossible for airlines to source enough pilots to cope with planned future expansion."

"What the Senate Inquiry needs to focus on is the quality of training a pilot receives not the quantity of hours a pilot has flown."

#### SHARP AIRLINES

Sharp Airlines' CEO Malcolm Sharp agrees with Davis and is quick to defend airline cadet programs. In a column he wrote for the Regional Aviation Association of Australia's 'RAAA News', Sharp said it was frustrating to see pilot representatives and politicians questioning the calibre of airline cadet programs.

"Our company has been running a successful cadet program for 20 years now," Sharp said. "Our results have been outstanding with an external employment success rate of eighty-five per cent. Many of our cadets are now flying for major airlines in Australia and around the world."

According to Sharp, cadet programs deliver a higher standard of first officer and safety of flight when the training coincides with a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) with close links to an airline. "Cadet programs ensure a higher standard of working conditions and compliance and greatly assist in developing non-technical skills early in a pilot's career," he said.

"From a training point of view, the recent decision in the USA to only allow pilots with 1500 hours operate in Part 121 operations is ludicrous. The argument has to be based on competency and not hours," Sharp argues his case by saying that a pilot who completes 1500 single hour joy flights in VMC and qualifies for an instrument rating ticks all the Senate Inquiry's boxes. But he's adamant such a pilot is unsuitable to fly an airliner.

After a two-week induction, Sharp Airlines cadets are introduced to the airline environment as early as the third week of training, an introduction that includes everything from DAMP to SMS. "This occurs even before they have gone first solo," Sharp says. "The level of compliance and safety cannot even be compared to earning your 'wings' out in the sticks."

Despite making a statement that could be considered offensive towards his rural brethren, Sharp explains that he's simply speaking from experience. "Now before some of you start bashing me for giving



AMBITIOUS YOUNG PILOTS DREAM OF FLYING STATE-OF-THE-ART HARDWARE

Sharp Airlines

\$100,000 for the privilege of being an airline cadet



**DO CADET PROGRAMS ALIGNED WITH A REGISTERED TRAINING ORGANISATION (RTO) WITH CLOSE LINKS TO AN AIRLINE PRODUCE BETTER PILOTS?**

**If they are a flight risk then we don't take them**

the bush guys a hard time. I am speaking from experience. In fact it is the very way I started off and how my learning was achieved. All too

often I learnt by the true definition of learning: learning takes place when behaviour is modified by experience ... or simply, you learn from your mistakes.

"In a well disciplined, multi-crew environment the cadets are exposed to the day-to-day rigours of regional airlines and CAR 217 operations from the outset. They learn from an experienced captain and are intrinsically involved in the decision-making process. I am continually impressed by the calibre of our young cadets who demonstrate outstanding CRM and leadership in the normal and check and training environment."

Sharp believes that any attempt by the regulator to change this process would be extremely detrimental to the regional airline industry. "All too often our (regional) pilot ranks are plundered by the larger majors leaving us in a situation of high staff turnover which places pressure on all parts of the operation," he says. "It should be left to CASA in consultation with the aviation industry to deliver training standards in accordance with guidelines set down by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). A common set of aims and standards will ensure we continue to train high quality pilots into the future."

#### **SKYWEST AIRLINES**

Meanwhile, Western Australian regional Skywest Airlines last year announced the launch of a cadet

pilot training program to support its expanding operations. The CASA-accredited program was developed in partnership with Altara Training and Ansett Aviation Training and designed to allow students the opportunity to train on large commercial aircraft.

"Our aim is to promote careers in aviation and we're excited about providing Western Australians with the opportunity to become pilots for their local airline," executive chairman Jeff Chatfield said at the announcement.

The program offered a limited number of successful applicants a direct career path into the Perth-based carrier as Fokker 50 pilots, with the opportunity to progress within the company to other commercial aircraft types such as the Airbus A320. Unfortunately, the Senate Inquiry has forced Skywest to put the program on hold.

"We don't want to embark on this project and then have a ruling that would significantly effect the program," Skywest Head of Flight Operations Warren Wilkinson tells Aviator.

Skywest has a very low annual pilot turnover rate of around three or four per cent. Wilkinson says this statistic not only demonstrates that the majority of the airline's pilots are happy with their working conditions, but also reinforces the company's stringent recruitment policy.

"Not many pilots leave to fly for the majors - mainly due to our recruitment process," Wilkinson says. "For us it's very important that they want to stay in Perth and don't want to use us as a stepping stone. We spend a considerable amount of effort in determining this at the interview stage. If they are a flight risk then we don't take them, the reason for this is that we are one of the very last airlines where pilots don't have to

pay for an endorsement and if we had pilots abuse this by not giving a return of service then I'm sure we would go down the (same) path of the rest of the airlines."

The majority of Skywest's experienced pilots are recruited from other GA turbo prop operators, including Skippers Aviation and Network Aviation, but the availability of such skilled and experienced operators has changed in the past decade.

"Ten years ago we only had five F50 turboprops and a very static workforce," Wilkinson says. "There wasn't a whole lot of employment going on and when it did we could choose from very experienced pilots."

"Then came the start of the mining boom and the Fly in Fly out (FIFO) concept really started to take off - including major expansion into F100 jets. In the last five years we have gone from three F100s to nine and one Airbus 320 - all for mining commuters. There's still a static workforce but lots of employment for the expansion."

"Five years ago we still had no trouble getting experienced pilots, but two years ago we found it a little more tough to attract experience. Two thousand five hundred to three thousand hours is still the average entry pilot's experience we're looking for."

#### **QANTASLINK**

Demand for quality airline pilots in Australia remains high but more carriers are moving away from the traditional sources of pilot recruitment such as GA and the military in favour of in-house training.

Before the global financial crisis, the aviation industry in Australia and the broader Asia Pacific region was suffering from a chronic pilot shortage.



**SHARP AIRLINES' CEO MALCOLM SHARP SAYS "CADET PROGRAMS ENSURE A HIGHER STANDARD OF WORKING CONDITIONS AND COMPLIANCE".**

Indeed, Rex lost half its pilots in a massive shakeup that almost brought the airline to its knees. To address the situation Australian airlines needed to introduce a range of programs to train new pilots, including cadet programs.

In its submission to the Senate Inquiry, the Qantas Group (which includes regional subsidiary Qantaslink) suggested that training pilots through cadet schemes is increasingly becoming standard practice worldwide. "These programs offer tailored training and a consistent set of operational standards rather than a mix of flying experience in General Aviation."

"The cost of these programs is not uniform or standard. Some programs have an aspect of government and/or company-funded arrangements, while others have the option of either direct payment by the training pilot or via salary sacrifice arrangements. These different payment options create flexibility to ensure that appropriately skilled individuals have a range of options in attaining their CPL. The range of options for pilot training available currently assists in attracting the most suitable candidates, rather than merely relying on ex-service pilots and GA pilots (who historically paid for their training anyway)."

"There is no evidence of a connection between the manner in which a training program is funded and the skill level or safety of a pilot. It is common practice across a range of industries for the provision of training to have moved away from a more traditional apprenticeship model."

Qantas Pilot Recruitment late last year completed the final review of its cadet program requirements and decided to suspend all proposed cadet programs for 2011. "We acknowledge that this message will disappoint candidates interested in cadet opportunities for 2011; however the decision has been based on numerous internal and external factors which we believe warrants the suspension of all courses," a statement said.

So what does the future hold for local cadetship programs? Will the likes of Qantas again open their doors to ambitious youngsters seeking a direct path onto the flightline? And will Skywest eventually launch their own cadetship scheme to not only complement their current recruitment policy but to also cope with rapid expansion? No doubt the conclusion of the Senate Inquiry will go a long way towards answering these questions. ★