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Learning
to

FLY

Australian Airline Pilot Academy

About Rex

- Rex is Australia's largest independent regional airline.
- The airline has more than 40 Saab 340 passenger aircraft.
- Rex operates about 1300 weekly flights to 35 destinations throughout NSW, Victoria, Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland.
- As well as owning the Australian Airline Pilot Academy, Rex owns and operates charter operation Pel-Air Aviation and Dubbo-based airline Air Link.



Learning to FLY

Cadet pilots Kareem Kantar and Kristen Bennett in one of the Australian Airline Pilot Academy's flight simulators. Picture: Les Smith

Training facility really taking off

cover story

Ken Grimson



don Kendell was a Riverina aviation pioneer and visionary who turned a small Lockhart flying business into a regional passenger airline rated the best in the world by an influential industry magazine.

The main road at the Wagga airport, named in Mr Kendell's honour after his death 10 years ago, fittingly goes past the Australian Airline Pilot Academy (AAPA).

It is fitting because Mr Kendell founded Kendell Airlines, one of the two roots along with Hazelton Airlines, from which passenger airline Regional Express (Rex) grew after the collapse of Ansett, which had bought out both Kendell and Hazelton.

It is also fitting because the vision Rex had in establishing the academy is exactly the foresight Mr Kendell had that resulted in the success of his airline.

It may be going a bit far in saying AAPA has been Rex's saviour, but it has certainly seen off one of the most serious threats to the company's future.

Almost exactly four years ago, Rex was being ravaged by new discount airlines that were plundering its stock of pilots.

At the time, Rex was vulnerable, still trying to establish itself fully in the cut-throat passenger airline industry.

Rex flights were cancelled and passenger numbers fell off as cut-price airlines Virgin Blue and Jetstar took the easy recruitment option and swooped on Rex pilots to help staff their growing operations.

At the same time, QantasLink was strengthening in Wagga, a market some said could sustain only one airline.

In July, 2007, 21 Rex pilots resigned. The attrition rate passed an unsustainable 50 per cent in the 2007-2008 financial year.

"They are raiding regional airline operations, they are taking the easy way out," said Rex deputy chairman John Sharp during a November 2007 press conference called to assure investors and passengers that his airline had a future.

"They (the discount airlines) knew their services would be expanding and they did nothing about it except bludge off Rex."

To cope with the pilot shortage crisis in the short term, Rex reduced flights across its network.

It cut four daily flights between Sydney and Wagga and suspended whole services, including Cooma and West Wyalong.

There were cuts to services at Mount Gambier, Mildura, Albury and Griffith.

The sudden cancellation of flights - blamed on crew sickness that could not be covered because of the pilot shortage - also affected passenger goodwill in places such as Griffith.

Journalists called to Rex's headquarters in Sydney to hear Mr Sharp were told the airline would not fold, and the reason for that was

customer loyalty and a new cadet pilot training scheme.

Originally, Rex was a partner in a small pilot training academy at Mangalore, a regional airport about two hours north of Melbourne.

But as the pilot crisis deepened, Rex took full control of the facility in April 2008 and renamed it the Australian Airline Pilot Academy and started to make plans for the future.

While at first hinting AAPA would be staying at Mangalore, Rex announced the following February that it would move the academy to Wagga having bought a hangar at the Forest Hill airport as well as 2.4 hectares of land off Don Kendell Drive for \$1.55 million.

The investment boosted Rex's commitment to Wagga, which already was the airline's engineering base for its fleet of more than 40 Saab aircraft and the home of more than 100 staff.

The significant existing Rex infrastructure and resources in Wagga made the city a logical location to establish AAPA for the longer term.

By then, AAPA was already doing its job for Rex, having trained 45 cadet pilots.

Since announcing AAPA's move to Wagga, Rex has pumped more than \$25 million into the facility.

The main complex, which contains accommodation, training and recreation facilities (including a swimming pool, gymnasium, soccer field and multi-purpose hard court) was built by Albury building

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on the cover



Australian Airline Pilot Academy deputy chief flying instructor Jeremy Ponsonby with a decommissioned Saab 340 passenger aircraft used at Wagga to train pilots and cabin crew.

Picture: Les Smith

is a Rex-ceptional coup for city

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company Zauner and was named best commercial project in the over \$10 million category at the Master Builders Association's regional NSW 2011 awards.

It was officially opened on May 27 last year; the celebration made greater by news the federal government would contribute \$1.05 million towards a \$1.63 million instrument landing system (ILS) at the airport that would be a major boost for pilot training at Wagga.

AAPA was never designed to be a facility to train pilots for Rex only, and quite a number of its graduates have been trained for Alpha Aviation, which provides pilots for Air Arabia in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Earlier this month, the first batch of five Alpha Aviation cadet pilots graduated from AAPA.

It is expected up to 60 cadets from the UAE will graduate every year in Wagga.

Among the current crop of six Alpha Aviation cadets is 18-year-old Kareem Kantar.

He is on an eight-week course that will include 70 hours of flying, of which 18 will be command (solo) hours.

Kareem's first solo flight was around the perimeter of the Wagga airport and lasted just six minutes.

"It was a pretty special six minutes," he said.

Males dominate the number of cadet pilots, but 20-year-old Kristen Bennett is determined to forge a long career in aviation.

The daughter of the chief helicopter pilot at Seaworld, Kristen described her first solo flight as amazing.

"They always say you will always remember your first solo flight," she said.

After completing eight weeks at AAPA, Kareem will head back to the UAE to continue his training with Alpha Aviation, starting with 240 hours in a flight simulator before even more extensive training with Air Arabia.

His long-term goal is to earn a command with Air Arabia and fly the massive Boeing 777s and Airbus A340s.

Kristen is part of a Rex scheme in which she paid a \$20,000 deposit for her training and then obtained a loan from the airline which she will pay back over six years while working for Rex.

The total cost to Kristen of her pilot training will be about \$88,000 and she can expect to earn up to \$50,000 in her initial year as a first officer.

Rex cadet pilots come to Wagga from all around Australia, according to AAPA deputy chief flying instructor Jeremy Ponsonby, himself just 23 years old and with the academy now for more than three years.

"We have had a lot of 18- to 20-year-olds coming through, but also people in the 35 to 36 age bracket," Mr Ponsonby said.

Currently, there are 19 Rex and six Alpha cadets in training at Forest Hill.

More Alpha cadets are expected at AAPA next month, and another intake of 10 Rex cadets is expected to start on October 31.

Rex cadets are at Wagga for about eight months, but the exact length of their stay depends on their individual experience and weather conditions, which determine when flying can take place.

Training then continues with another five-week ground school concentrating on Saab aircraft, three months on a simulator and then "line" training during which the cadets work in aircraft in the air with experienced command pilots on the passenger routes.

Rex graduates receive a Certificate IV in Aviation Operations, which is an advanced diploma that qualifies them as commercial pilots.

The AAPA cadets fly in single-engine Piper Warriors and twin-engine Piper Seminoles at Forest Hill.

Incredibly, AAPA has 16 Warriors and four Seminoles at Forest Hill, some of which were assembled in Wagga by the academy's engineers.

AAPA employs more than 20 people at Wagga, including eight instructors and four engineers.

The academy has its own catering unit that provides three meals a day for the cadets.

Kristen, a member of the Rex 008 course, was undertaking a Bachelor of Aviation at Griffith University in Queensland when she decided to switch to Rex.

"A few people from Griffith (university) had been here before; I researched it and it seemed



AAPA cadet pilots Kristen Bennett and Kareem Kantar with academy deputy chief flying instructor Jeremy Ponsonby and one of the academy's Piper Warriors.

like one of the better courses in Australia, so I applied," Kristen said.

She admits that Wagga is a lot different to the Gold Coast, but has settled in and has enjoyed going out with other cadets when they have free time.

For Kareem, the change is much greater, but he is already a seasoned traveller and has appreciated the differences between Australia and the UAE.

"It's beautiful scenery when I am flying, I really enjoy it," he said.

Mr Ponsonby said the academy was putting Wagga on the map as far as the aviation industry is concerned.

"For a company that was struggling with a pilot shortage in 2007 and just four years later to being talked about overseas for its training is amazing," Mr Ponsonby said.

"To achieve that progress in such a short amount of time has been phenomenal."

As well as the international connection with Alpha Aviation, the academy in July signed an agreement to provide pilot training services for a company called Jeppesen.

Under the agreement, AAPA will train future airline pilots for Jeppesen's client companies around the world to the standard required for Australian and international commercial pilot licences.

Jeppesen, which is an international provider of aviation training services, envisages more than 80 students a year coming to Wagga to learn to fly.

The pilots will be trained for airlines in China, India and the Middle East.

Kareem said he saw Wagga becoming a major centre for training of pilots for Middle East airlines.

"In the Middle East, every country has a minimum of 50 airlines and they want to find as many pilots as they can; they all have cadet programs," Kareem said.

He said he would be taking back to the Middle East positive messages about AAPA.

Mr Ponsonby said the new instrument landing system was very important in not only allowing more flying in foggy conditions but also removing the previous need to send cadets to Canberra for ILS training.

Mr Ponsonby said Rex was still targeted by other Australian airlines for pilots, but thanks to AAPA was now in a much better position to deal with the problem.

He said Rex employed between 250 and 260 pilots.

Success of the academy has resulted in Rex having long-term plans to expand the facility to cope with a throughput of 200 cadet pilots a year.



City ideal for centre

ONE of the primary reasons Regional Express (Rex) chose Wagga as the place to develop the Australian Airline Pilot Academy (AAPA) was that the city has ideal training conditions not found elsewhere in Australia.

According to AAPA, Wagga's weather is particularly conducive to flying because its prevailing winds are generally light and in line with the main runway. It says that on average, fewer than 10 days a year are lost to poor weather, and that is mainly due to fog on winter mornings.

AAPA says the Wagga flying training area is one of the largest in Australia, covering about 540 square nautical miles and an aerobatic area of about 90 square miles.

And in the event something goes wrong for a cadet pilot in the air and they need to make an emergency landing, the land in the training area is mostly flat farming ground that contains several landing strips used by rural producers for their own planes.

Wagga, says AAPA, is free from air traffic, weather and airspace restrictions that exist at capital city airports.

Other advantages of Wagga's Forest Hill airport include the runway being long enough to handle high-performance aircraft and the new instrument landing system (ILS) that has been operational since last November. An ILS is a precision approach guidance system normally found only at capital city airports and is an essential part of the instrument rating syllabus at the academy.

The addition of an ILS at Forest Hill has meant AAPA cadet pilots no longer have to travel to Canberra for that part of their training.

Males dominate the number of AAPA cadet pilots, but Emma Chadwick was still named best cadet in the Rex 005 class which graduated on the day AAPA was officially opened last year.