



From AOPA desk to airline cockpit

It's all uphill, but if you and your bank manager are made of the Right Stuff, you too can be an airline pilot. Ellen Putt explains

‘I learned to land.’ I disconnected the autopilot and guided my 20 tonne EFIS equipped aircraft onto final approach. Six years of memories came flooding back as I remembered flying this very same approach in a C152 on my first solo navigation exercise, and later, an AA-5 for my IMC rating. As we taxied onto stand I couldn’t stop smiling for I had truly come full circle and achieved my dream of becoming an airline pilot. Today, I am employed as a First Officer for a small British regional airline, flying a Dash 8 into a variety of interesting airports including London City.

Some readers may remember various book reviews and articles I wrote for this magazine while working at AOPA as the Information Officer. At the time I was deeply embroiled in a study marathon for the ATPL ground exams, a seemingly endless task without which I could not continue my training. The light at the end of the tunnel was a commercial flying job, but it did seem to be slightly fantastical especially when I saw how many of my friends were finding it almost impossible to gain employment. For anyone who knows me, this just hardened my resolve to persevere and achieve my dream. There was a huge sense of relief when I successfully passed all 14 exams. I already had the number of hours required to embark on commercial training but I had another hurdle to surmount before I could even sign up for a course – the bank manager. It is a sad reality that aspiring airline pilots receive no financial assistance for their professional training and it really is down to exceedingly generous parents, personal savings or a loan. My only option was to obtain an unsecured professional studies loan and with that in mind I prepared a detailed financial summary of the projected cost of training, employment situation, potential earning capacity etc. Sitting in the bank while the manager deliberated over the loan was possibly the most agonising time

in my training. Along with the Class One medical, this was an all or nothing situation. Without it, commercial flying was an impossibility.

Luckily I received the loan with very little hassle, but I was told that such a large sum was only granted because of the financial review I had prepared and the fact that I had another career I could fall back on. If there is any advice I can give to aspiring commercial pilots, get your Class One medical as soon as possible to avoid any disappointment, and really think carefully about the financial aspect of training. It is not just the cost of the multi CPL/IR, MCC, ground exams, and hour building but the additional hidden costs. Consider CAA fees, daily living costs, petrol, buying a suit for interviews, being unemployed, membership of BALPA or the IPA, keeping your flying skills fresh, further training costs like IR renewal, FI course, type rating, travel to interviews, books, telephone and internet costs whilst job hunting. This may sound obvious to some, and even silly, but believe me it is the hidden costs that can spiral out of control. Even when you have got the treasured job, initial wages are not that good and that sizeable loan you took out a year ago needs to be paid back. Membership fees will go up in line with your salary and you should consider life insurance, cost of medicals etc. Many individuals that I have met did not make allowance for hidden costs and are now in a very sticky financial situation. Put simply, can you really afford to chase after your dream? More importantly, are you prepared to live in debt after you are qualified?

The actual multi CPL/IR was completed relatively quickly over a period of three months. I flew six days a week, weather permitting, and worked hard to keep the costs down. The training organisation that I was with was fantastic and everything was run very

smoothly and professionally. I really enjoyed it, despite everyone creating a terrible mystique about the Instrument Rating. It is hard, especially when you are getting to grips with flying a multi-engine aircraft at the same time, but highly rewarding. To navigate yourself around the skies with sole reference to needles is a great accomplishment, and even more so when you pop out of cloud (or your screens!) at your decision height and see that you are perfectly lined up with the runway. Naturally there are days when it all goes terribly wrong; everyone has a bad landing, unstable approach, poor tracking etc, but the trick is not to dwell on the bad times and to move on. This was reiterated by a wonderful simulator instructor when I was doing my DHC-8 type rating, and it is true.

When I had finished my training my first port of call was Gatwick to get my licence issued. All those years of cramming for exams, shaking with nerves throughout my whole IR test, friends not believing I would or could do it, and my battles with the bank were obliterated in the form of a little blue book – my Commercial Pilots Licence. Unfortunately such excitement was quickly dissipated as I realised that getting my first commercial job was not going to be easy. Last year the hiring climate for low-houred, ‘straight out of training’ pilots was poor. Airlines seemed to be more interested in direct entry Captains and First Officers with type ratings and experience on type. Despite this negative atmosphere, I dedicated my daily life to getting a job. Several trees were destroyed as I sent CVs to every aviation employer known to man at the beginning. Then I realised that everyone else had the same approach, so I became selective working on a handful of companies I knew would consider an inexperienced pilot. My strategy was not to become a pest, but to ensure that my name was remembered when



they found they needed a First Officer. After six months it really did work. One company who had sent me a 'You must be joking' email three months previously phoned me up out of the blue and invited me for interview. Following a successful interview, psychometric and aptitude testing, and a simulator assessment, I was offered a job. Within a day of that I was asked if I would come for interview with another company that I had been persisting with. I do admit that there was an element of luck in my job offers and I know several who have not enjoyed such good fortune.

In March last year I started my type rating on the DHC-8 300. I remember clearly meeting up with my colleagues, each of whom had the same thoughts. It was all terribly exciting but scary at the same time. The timetable was intense and allowed no slack from the very beginning. The computer based training was formidable and for the first two days depression set in among all of us, wondering how on earth we were going to assimilate all the information and successfully pass each section of the exam in ten days time. This was clearly no PA28, but a highly complex aircraft. As a break in our ground studies, we were introduced to the 'stimulator' for a familiarisation session, primarily to work out where all the buttons and switches were. It amuses me now as I reach for any required switch automatically, but at the time I sat in the right hand seat wondering how I would ever cope with the plethora of switches and instrumentation laid before me. Having passed the ground exams with a massive sigh of relief we were sent into the simulator to start our flying training. If there is one piece of advice I can pass on, keep your instrument flying skills current! While I was unemployed I did some flying but didn't concentrate too much on instrument flying because of the cost. Apart from a refresher when I did my MCC course I

Top left: view from the office window – Ellen's Dash 8 on final approach to London City
Above: Ellen Putt, former AOPA Information Officer, now an airline First Officer
Right: the Q300, the latest incarnation of the Dash 8 flown by Ellen

had not really flown on instruments for a good six months – and it showed! I was the most inexperienced pilot on the course, with two others having thousands of hours in commercial IFR operations, one other straight out of flying training, and the other an instructor. I had a steep learning curve to get myself up to speed with the others as well as learning how to fly the Dash. Fortunately my instrument skills came back rapidly and I was soon back on track, but it made life harder than it could have been. Once the instructors felt we could handle the aircraft well on both engines, they started to fail one engine with regular glee. And with a turboprop, you don't just have engine failures to contend with, you get all sorts of other problems such as propeller overspeeds, situations where the propeller will not feather etc. As we became more confident with each emergency situation, the instructors added more problems. There is nothing like flying an aircraft with an engine failure you have just contained to be faced with a hydraulic failure requiring manual lowering of the undercarriage, and a partial failure of your EFIS screens so that you are flying in a composite mode. Naturally, all flying training ends in an exam, and our check flight was rigorous and demanding. Perhaps the most galling part of it was that we were training in Oslo and half a pint of beer costs around £6. So, we couldn't really celebrate until we got back into the UK!

I then embarked on my base training to

complete the required number of circuits. It was both thrilling and terrifying flying the aircraft for real but the simulator is so realistic that after the initial panic you settle into the flying very easily. Having successfully been signed off I went back to CAA House again, literally a year after I had been issued with my CPL, and I was immensely satisfied to have DHC-8 300 stamped onto my licence. Then I went to get my uniform fitted. Oh dear! For any woman reading this article, most clothing suppliers to the industry have very little in the way of female-only uniforms. Because we represent such a small percentage of the piloting community it is not financially advantageous for them to design a specific uniform. I can guarantee you will come out frustrated and looking 100% man.

I spent a week doing the required CRM, fire awareness and smoke hood, wet drills, security, dangerous goods, and first aid training, followed by line training. Locked in the cockpit simulator you forget about what is behind you, but it hit home when I saw 50 people embarking on my flight! The short flight went smoothly considering the high workload, and the feeling when we shut the engines down on stand at our destination was incredible. I had done it – I was an airline pilot!

So, what is the moral of this tale? Dreams do come true, with a large dose of determination, hard work, a friendly bank manager, and an overwhelming desire and enthusiasm to fly for a career that superseded anything else. All those years ago, it seemed a wild pipedream – never-ending goals to



achieve, exams to pass, a limitless flow of money.

Secondly with the current percentage of commercial female pilots lying at a paltry 5%, did you need to be some sort of superwoman to earn a CPL? The simple answer to that is 'no'. It is a myth that you require superhuman strength, degree level abilities in maths and physics or any other such nonsense. There is no doubt that you will be in a minority (I am the only female pilot in the company at the moment, and throughout my training was often the only woman on the course) and you will have to put up with a fair amount of banter but I have never felt singled out and have been treated in the same way as the men.

You also need to want to fly for a living more than anything else in the world. It is not glamorous, salaries are not the six-figure sums the general public think they are, the hours are long, the paperwork endless, and you have a permanent Damocles' sword hanging over you in respect of medicals, proficiency checks etc. Despite all that, I can say unequivocally that I would not do anything else. My office is at 20,000ft, the sun shines every day and I get paid to fly a beautiful aircraft. It really can't get much better than that. ■