

Wide-open skies



RICHARD GARDNER reports from Western Canada on a new initiative that revives a great tradition of pilot training.

During WW2 over 130,000 RAF, Commonwealth and Allied military aircrew learned their flying and navigation skills in the wide open skies right across Canada. The British Commonwealth Air Training Programme operated from 1940 until 1944 and even today there are many visual reminders of these hectic flying days when more than 10,000 of trainers, including hundreds of Tiger Moths and Ansons, filled the skies over sprawling air bases, six of which were located in Alberta. Now, though most of the largest bases are overgrown sites gently returning to nature, numerous gate guardian Harvard trainers remind passers-by of what were once part of the most extensive air training scheme in history. Their student pilots went on to fly everything from Lancasters over Germany and Liberators over Burma to Hurricanes

over North Africa and India. Many of these old airfields have survived and continue in use for regional transportation or as recreational flying and training airports. The reason why they were built in the first place has not changed — Canada remains an excellent location for all aspects of flying training — and this has led to a new collective marketing initiative by a group of companies in Alberta, designed to offer a highly competitive training product for commercial would-be pilots, including training on fixed-wing and rotary aircraft, on single or multi-engine types.

Known as the Alberta Professional Pilot Trainers (APPT), this is a group of Alberta flight schools focused on commercial pilot training with operations based in Edmonton, Cooking Lake, Red Deer, and Wetaskiwin. The participating companies include E-Z Air Helicopter Services at Edmonton, the Cooking Lake Air Academy, Sky Wings Aviation Academy at Red Deer and Wetaskiwin Air Services. Offering quality training and a structured process to best exploit the groups many aircraft types and ground training facilities, including simulators, perhaps the biggest benefits to customers are

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Left: General view of the general aviation area at Edmonton.

uncongested airspace with (mostly) clear skies and relatively low fuel and insurance costs. The APPT calls this ‘The Alberta Advantage.’

An ability to meet pilot licence standards within minimal training times is due largely to the locations where the training is based, cutting out wasted time travelling to and from the airfields and waiting for the weather to improve. Many students can live right on the doorstep while on their courses and then make full use of the time available to get up into the air, carry out their tasks, and get down again. Extensive ground training aids are available to them, to help familiarisation with the cockpit layout and controls, and radio and airport procedures as well as handling emergencies. The simulators can replicate 19 different types. The training schools linked in the scheme are licenced by Transport Canada and are all members of the Air Transport Association of Canada and the Helicopter Association of Canada (HAC)

At Cooking Lake Air Academy, Cessna 172s are available with glass cockpit technology and all aircraft are fitted with GPS navigation systems, which have brought much extra confidence operating over relatively remote areas and featureless prairie grasslands and forests. The transition from private pilot to a commercial pilot can be achieved quickly and compared to most other parts of the Western world, at considerably less cost. For example, C\$67,000 will buy a package of air and ground training for a heli-



Representatives of the Alberta Professional Pilot Trainers group in the E-Z Air Helicopter Services hangar.

copter licence, including 100 hours of flying. Helicopter training can be achieved in just six months on a full-time course, or one year for fixed wing. One of the APPT founders, and president of E-Z Air Helicopter Services, Ezra Bavly, told *Aerospace International*: “The Canadian licencing standards are very high and are known for this worldwide. We know what is being offered in the training market and we use best practice procedures all the time. We have a unique video recording record of a student’s progress so we can play-back for de-briefing after

every session.” He added: “We have identified new niche training markets, such as medivac flying. Helicopter growth is big business, with more helipads on high-rise buildings and a consequent need to train for these operations.”

Recently, a marketing team from APPT visited India where it attracted much interest. Again Ezra explained: “There are 325 airports in India but some have very limited facilities and there is a huge need for more pilots. We think there is scope for training new pilots here where the cost is affordable and where we have very experienced instructors.” Transferring commercial pilot licences is more difficult between some countries. APPT flying schools provide assistance in obtaining Canadian visas and other documentation and the group has discussed training opportunities with Indian DGCA and airline representatives. Apart from meeting certain academic requirements, the conversion of a Canadian CPL to India’s DGCA licence requires written examinations and a conversion of a Canadian Radio Licence to an Indian Radio Permit. This is a simple process, however, involving the correct answering of some 25 questions. A local expert is available to provide assistance with preparing for the exams and seeing through the licence conversion.

With a small but very well-educated and sophisticated population, and a world-class aviation legacy, Canada is a country ideally placed to develop its aeronautical services to supply a wider market. Flying training remains an aspect of aviation activity that will always be in demand where the conditions are favourable — and Alberta has that in spades. 



A Bell Jet-Ranger simulator training session at E-Z Air Helicopter Services.