

# Going Commercial

To become a commercial pilot you will need to be fit, capable and above all determined. You will also need deep pockets. Philip Whiteman explains the route to the ATPL

**Below** You won't see a simulator as sophisticated as this until you near the end of your training or do a type rating - but what a classroom...

The image of the airline pilot as a glamorous, well paid and respected figure is an enduring one. With the job comes not only the opportunity to travel to far-flung places - sometimes the most interesting and exotic corners of the world - but the responsibility and satisfaction in carrying plane-loads of people there and back in safety. Even if cost reduction now takes priority

over comfort and flight crew no longer enjoy the benefits that were once taken for granted, including the luxury of many days off or on stand-by, the professional pilot's job still remains something special.

The heyday of big airlines and big salaries for top-dog pilots like BOAC's legendary long-haul 'barons' may well be over, but the more reputable small and regional airlines still offer good

money. The first officer pay scale at Flybe, one of the fastest growing and most successful among this new breed, starts at £23,000 p.a. and those at the top of this company's ladder, the training captains, can earn as much as £80,000.

At the moment, as result of the economic downturn there are currently more qualified pilots than there are jobs. Flybe is among the companies that are closed to applications - an indication of how bad the situation is. However, the prospect of demand picking up, especially in the developing economies of China and India, is enough to keep dream of becoming an



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airline pilot alive and the professional flight training schools busy.

### Which training route?

An enormous amount of book work and flying is involved in qualifying for the principal internationally recognised commercial pilot licence, the Air Transport Pilot's Licence (ATPL). For the European JAR-FCL ATPL(A) you must pass fourteen theoretical knowledge examinations, hold a Commercial Pilot Licence and Instrument Rating (CPL/IR) and have a minimum of 1,500 hours flying time, of which 500 must be multi-pilot operations on JAR/FAR-25 Transport or FAR/FAR-23 Commuter aircraft.

Pilots generally emerge from training with what is known as a 'frozen ATPL':

they have passed the theoretical exams and hold the necessary CPL/IR but lack the experience on transport or commuter types. Indeed, before anyone will let them loose on such aircraft, they will need to have obtained a Multi Crew Cooperation (MCC) certificate and completed a type rating. Airlines directly recruiting frozen ATPLs do offer type ratings, folding in the MCC at the same time, but in today's thin job market many individuals are paying to do it on the appropriate aircraft, hoping to make themselves a more attractive prospect in the process.

There are two routes to the ATPL: integrated training, in which a single flight training organisation (FTO) takes you through the whole process; and

**Above** A seat at the sharp end is the ultimate ambition - but getting there is going to cost you anything from £35k to £120k, depending on your initial level of experience and training route.

**Stockphoto**



**Left** A full-motion simulator might look like something from *War of the Worlds* from without, but inside it feels and behaves just like the real thing.

**Air Key Collection** unless stated



**Above** Students practise instrument flying skills in the classroom environment typical of an integrated training provider.  
Via Philie Whiteman

**Below** Competition among the smaller airlines in the low-cost sector has created jobs, albeit less well remunerated ones.

form of cadet scheme, it is with the FTOs offering integrated training. The only route to the new Multi Pilot Licence (MPL), which takes individual from zero hours to a position flying a specific type on an airline operators fleet and is supposedly destined to replace the ATPL, is through integrated training. The integrated course, which is more akin to a military training scheme than study at college or university, will also get you through the flying and exams in minimum time - 65 weeks or so.

However, there are no tax breaks for those undergoing commercial flight training and the UK government does not recognise even those enrolled on integrated courses as students, denying all the allowances that status would entail. Completing an integrated training course is a hugely expensive business, the cost ranging from a minimum of at least £70,000

**"Initiative and determination... two things that may sway the employment decision"**

modular training, where individuals arrange the necessary ground and flight training with any number of FTOs to suit their own circumstances and finances. Integrated training is popular with, but by no means exclusive to, school leavers with no or minimal flying experience, while mature PPLs tend to opt for the modular route.

Where the airlines offer limited sponsorship - and there's rather less of this going on these days - or some

to something like £120,000, when all the expenses, including a type rating and the loan charges, are included.

No wonder that something like 80% of would-be commercial pilots opt for the far cheaper option of spreading their training into modules that can be fitted around otherwise continuing to work a living. The modular route may not be linked to an airline nor be as likely to lead to a job, but it costs half or even one third as much.

**Aptitude and fitness**

Before anybody embarks on ATPL training, they should ask themselves if they are really up to it. The FTOs will

not normally take anybody on for an integrated training course unless they

have passed an aptitude test. Those seeking an independent assessment might care to try their hand at the test run by the Guild of Air Pilots and Navigators (GAPAN), a registered charity. Based on RAF selection, the guild's aptitude test nevertheless has 'a commercial aviation bias'. GAPAN holds selection days at RAF Cranwell once every two months or so, depending on demand. The fee of £175 includes a one-on-one debrief after the test. If you are not yet a pilot or have limited flying experience, this could be money well spent. See [www.gapan.org/career-matters/careers-information/aptitude-tests/](http://www.gapan.org/career-matters/careers-information/aptitude-tests/) for details.

Experienced PPLs will have a much better idea of their own abilities and the modular training route they tend to prefer is, of course, a continued exercise in self-selection - all you need is the money. Having said this, a significant number of pilots and

non-pilots continue to embark on commercial flight training without first obtaining the Class 1 medical required for the CPL and ATPL. More stringent than the familiar PPL Class 2, the professional pilot medical includes hearing and respiratory function tests, and the eye examination is extended to include testing for colour blindness. For the Class 1 the limits to short and long sight are -6 and +5 dioptres - see [www.caa.co.uk](http://www.caa.co.uk) for full details.

Costing £330, the initial examination is made at the CAA's Medical Department at Gatwick. Quite why any would-be commercial pilot should not make this his or her first port of call is something of a mystery. It must be that these people simply assume they will pass the medical examination when they get to it,



ignoring the prospect of failing and discovering they've wasted thousands in pursuing a licence for which they could never qualify.

**CPL/IR to type rating**

The CPL marks a big step on the way to the ATPL. To qualify, you must be over 18 years in age, have logged a minimum of 150 hours and, as a student on an integrated course, received 300 hours of theoretical knowledge instruction (reduced to 200 for those entering the course with a PPL). There is a flying skills test but the nine theoretical exams to be passed overlap with the fourteen that form the basis of the ATPL.

Those following the modular route may complete most of their theory studying at home, under the auspices of one of the distance learning providers recognised by the CAA. This suits the mature student and reduces the cost of the 'ground school' element to £2,000 or less, but the authority still extracts £3,000 or so in exam fees.

The Instrument Rating has the reputation of being the most exacting flight test of the lot. It is conducted under IFR conditions in a twin-engine aircraft and the candidate must demonstrate to the examiner normal flight, asymmetric flight (i.e. with one engine shut down) and 'partial panel' (operation with simulated instrument

failure). Heading and altitude are to be held within prescribed limits, any deviation being corrected immediately and without oscillation. The test includes precision and non-precision instrument approaches; allowing the aircraft to descend below decision height during the latter is an automatic fail.

Once very much the province of the employer, not least because they had specific families of aircraft in their fleets and the appropriate simulator facilities in house, the type rating is now something an increasing number of pilots emerging from integral and modular training alike are paying for themselves. Conducted on full-motion sims, type ratings do not come cheaply but they do add a vital layer of commercial air transport experience to pilots who might otherwise have run up as little as 250 hours in their training. Even for those who have logged more flight time, the initiative and determination demonstrated in going for the type rating may be the thing that swings the employment decision in their favour.

We all look forward to better days ahead, and hope they come sooner rather than later. Commercial pilot training has always had its ups and downs, but there is little sign of air travel losing its allure. Airline flying can be a brilliant career - just go into it with your eyes open.

Under the 'Career Matters' heading of its website [www.gapan.org](http://www.gapan.org) the Guild of Air Pilots and Navigators (GAPAN) sets out a note of caution for those thinking of embarking on a CPL training course. "An eighteen month downturn in airline recruitment has resulted in a large pool of unemployed newly qualified commercial pilots, which far outnumbers the demand for pilots as the airlines themselves struggle to stay in business," warns GAPAN.

"Just two years ago, airlines were finding it difficult to crew their aircraft and as a result graduates from commercial flight training courses were often being offered first officer positions practically before the ink on their licences had dried. But the situation has now reversed and pilot demand is so low currently that some pilots are choosing to sign contracts that effectively require them to pay to fly for their employers. The only alternative for many is to wait for the airline industry to recover in line with a general economic recovery and for pilot recruitment to restart in earnest among Europe's airlines.

"The current pay-to-fly schemes vary from airline to airline. One arrangement is for a pilot to pay for his/her aircraft type rating, which can cost up to £20,000, and then have to wait until they have passed line training before starting to get paid work for their employer - a practice that is common amongst Europe's budget carriers. Other operators are taking the scheme further and are asking pilots to fund not only type rating training, but also their line training and even their first hundred or more hours thereafter, costing in the region of £35,000. For many of these pilots, this further investment, on top of their original licence training costs, provides little or nothing in the way of a guarantee for ongoing employment with the airline once their pay to fly contract is complete."

For another candid and independent overview of the airline industry and job market, much of it sourced directly from seasoned professionals, go online and visit the Professional Pilots Rumour Network ([www.pprune.org](http://www.pprune.org)).

FOR AN INDEPENDENT VIEW...

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