



Transair comes of age

A generation of pilots has grown up with Transair, and there can be few AOPA members without some item from Transair in their aircraft or their flight bag – including, perhaps, their flight bag. We look to Transair for headsets and handhelds, study materials and flight equipment, GPS and kit for the panel, books and charts and a thousand more products that make the flying experience richer, safer and more enjoyable.

But in its 21 years, Transair has become much more than a successful provider of pilot supplies in Britain. Today it's a multi-million-pound enterprise stretching across the globe, providing equipment to individuals, military users and governments in more than 100 countries from Indonesia to Africa. It has helped scores of pilots into airliner cockpits and has supported the general aviation industry with marketing expertise and sponsorship, and is a staunch supporter of AOPA – when the association needed money for the independent Helios Report on CAA charges, Transair was one of the first and most generous donors. Owner Tom Moloney takes a 'big picture' approach to general aviation, working to bolster the industry where others simply extract as much money as they can for the lowest overhead, and we all have reason to be grateful to him.

Transair gives aspiring commercial pilots a leg up when they need help most, at that difficult time when they're studying for exams and hour-building. Transair's shop staff are pilots on the way to an airline career, and the company gives them access to training materials, an environment in which they are steeped in aviation, and colleagues who can help them progress. Some have made contacts in the airlines through work, and importantly, they're paid a living wage while they study. Around 40 men and women who have worked for Transair are now flying for the airlines, and many of them drop into the shops occasionally to encourage their successors. The company currently employs seven frozen ATPLs who have an in-depth knowledge of the kit they are selling, understand the industry and talk the pilot's language. Many customers find that buying complex and expensive equipment from a commercial pilot who's able to explain it face to face can be preferable to buying it online and figuring it out from the manual. Transair knows that its shop staff are constantly firing off CVs and applying for airline

It's 21 years since Tom Moloney incorporated a pilot supplies company he'd started in his bedroom, and it's one of the great success stories of UK general aviation. Pat Malone reports



Left: Tom Moloney in his Shoreham office with early Transair catalogues
Bottom left: Transair has 20,000 sq feet of office, warehouse and shop space at Shoreham
Right: the warehouse also carries lines for Moloney's online marine supplies business

jobs, and encourages the practice. Says Tom Moloney: "It's understood that shop staff are with us for a maximum of two or three years, and we're in the unusual position for a retailer of encouraging some of our best people to move on. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement, for our customers, our staff and the company, and working for Transair looks good on a pilot's CV."

Beyond the shops, staff tend to stay with Transair long term. Finance director Peter Burton has been with the company for 15 years, marketing manager Bob Martin started as a 'picker and packer' in the warehouse 14 years ago, sales manager Rob Norman started in customer services and worked his way up.

Tom Moloney always had faith in his vision, although at the outset there was very little else – no experience, no knowledge, and in particular, no money. Tom had effectively been working at odd jobs since the age of 13, desperate to get away from school and out of Hounslow. At 15 he joined the merchant navy to see the world, which he did from the deck of a series of BP tankers. The shipping world's move to cheap foreign labour – something which, heaven forbid, could one day be replicated in aviation – saw him paid off in South America just



Shevers, with whom he has maintained good relations, and from whom he's learned a lot. This was in the days, of course, when a GA pilot who owned a headset was the exception. You used a hand-mike for RT, the distorted voice of ATC crackled from a speaker in the roof, and instructors shouted a lot and went deaf. "I dropped my mike on my first solo," Tom recalls. "I was turning final and scrabbling around under the seat for the mike. Not a position you want to be in."

Tom started importing headsets bought on the grey market in the USA. He took a classified ad in Pilot magazine, calling the business Transair – nobody knows where the name came from, although many years later Tom's brother John unearthed a picture Tom had sketched of a Trident taking off from Heathrow with 'Transair' written on the side. Transair's world headquarters was Tom's bedroom in Feltham, where he would wrap and pack headsets in the evening, then take them to the post office on his way to work. "Margins were reasonable," he says. "In real terms, a David Clark headset today costs less

Before Transair was incorporated in 1986, Tom and his early partner Chris Chanry, who left in 1987 to start up a successful marketing company, travelled across America to "source new products". When they got home their girlfriends pointed out they had ample photographs of beaches, drinking dens and places of entertainment but precious few of aeroplanes. Nonetheless the product lines began to expand. The first Transair item had been Telex headsets; David Clarks followed soon after, and every month Tom tried to add something new. Again reflecting the blithe impetuosity of youth, Tom quit his job and went full-time. "I didn't have a lot to lose," he reflects. "But it was hard to mouth. In the first three years I just took £40 a week out of the company, which wasn't enough to live on. I subsisted on credit cards, and we continued to grow steadily – but when it turns over £10, it's easier to double turnover than when you're dealing with many millions, as Transair does today."

It was a red letter day when Transair moved into a rented nursery unit in the Green Business Centre in Staines. Its first employee was Shaun Mullins, its second was secretary Kay Gunston, now Mrs Kay Moloney, who still works for the company.

As they ran out of room, they'd simply rent the unit next door and knock through. In 1990 they outgrew five units and moved the whole operation to a wooden hut at Fair Oaks.

They quickly filled a 4,000 square foot blister hangar there and had a new 8,000 square foot building erected for themselves, but within two years they'd outgrown that, too. Tom says: "We spent two years working at capacity, without enough room to get one more person on one more seat in there. I'd always wanted to get out of Surrey – costs are too high for a mail order firm there – and I'd looked around all over the country, at Dunkeswell, Truro, Sandtoft... we came close to going to Biggin Hill, but it was difficult to find somewhere that suited all our requirements." Not until 1999 did they settle at Shoreham, with a new 20,000 square foot warehouse and office complex.

Transair pioneered catalogue selling in the UK, and Tom keeps a collection of early issues in his office overlooking the runway at Shoreham. Compared to today's Transair catalogues they look paltry, but they were cutting-edge in their time. Tom says: "We had a small printing press in the office and did all



before the Falklands War and he returned to west London a seasoned traveller, having seen enough of employment to know that he'd rather work for himself. He was 22 years old.

Tom had always been interested in aviation – he lived close to Heathrow, where his father was a baggage handler for BEA, and was an enthusiastic spotter and aviation artist. He got a job with a company called Standard Aero, who then as now provided overhaul and maintenance services across the world. While working to increase their piston-engine business Tom learned to fly with British Airways Flying Club at High Wycombe. His first flight was on July 3, 1984, in a Tomahawk and it cost £40 an hour, dual. "I took to it like a duck to water," he says "I went solo in about seven hours, and I toyed with the idea of a flying career."

Tom did well at Standard Aero, and they sent him to Canada and the USA to learn more about the business. There, he saw how much less expensive pilot supplies were, and among other contacts he met Sporty's founder Hal

than it did 15 years ago – the same goes for a lot of electronic kit." But looking back on it, he was in the perilous position of the young man who doesn't know how much he doesn't know, who does things because nobody's told him you can't do them, and who benefits from risk because he can't evaluate the odds. In the first five years, Transair outgrew three sets of offices but effectively made no money, with revenues ploughed into expansion. Undoubtedly Transair would have been vulnerable to market shocks, but it continued to grow and Tom continued to learn. Running a business is, he says, "largely common sense", perhaps understating the value of that rare commodity. Transair also had another rare asset, an understanding bank manager.



**Left: the Transair Duo, two Jet Provost T5s flown by Bob Thompson and Tom Moloney
Below left: Tom's jet experience includes the Provost and its Strikemaster variant
Bottom: tomorrow's airline pilots man the customer phones at Transair**



the work ourselves. I was working all day, seven days a week. Sometimes staff would come to work and find me still there from the previous day. Then we went colour, and really started to move. Over the years we've published millions of catalogues and they've found their way to faraway places, and of course e-commerce makes it as easy to order from those places as from the UK. We've made huge investments in technology and systems – the best e-commerce systems, mail order systems, we've always reinvested in the product."

Some may find it surprising that throughout the e-commerce revolution Transair has maintained and grown its shop network. Fair Oaks opened in 1990, London Victoria in 1993, Shoreham in 1999, and Gloucester in 2004, and Tom is currently looking for a new site in the north west to take the product to the pilots. "I've always thought the shops were very important," he says. "They are the human face of the company, somewhere a customer can go and test out what they plan to buy and have things explained to them by a fellow pilot. Most people under-use their kit, but our guys can show them how to get the best out of it. Compared to pure e-commerce, shops are an expensive way of doing business, but I think the added value they bring to the customer outweighs the overhead."

The company has had its ups and downs. "Growth was held back by the recession in the

late 1980s and early 1990s," Tom says. "And of course, we were badly affected by 9/11. I was in Cornwall at the time and called the office to ask what was happening. 'Nothing,' they said. What do you mean, nothing? 'Well, nothing – nobody in the shops, and the phones are dead...'. I thought it might pick up after a week or two, but it was six months before we saw signs of life in the market and a year before we were back to normal. We've had to respond quickly – sometimes we've had



too many staff, sometimes not enough, but we've maintained steady and methodical growth over time, and we're continuing to do so."

General aviation has been a tool to assist growth at Transair. "I've always flown around the airfields talking to people," says Tom. "I did a multi-engine rating and got a Beech Duchess, then upgraded to a Navajo. Transair sponsored a pair of T5 Provosts for three years, and I was lucky enough to fly one of them. I've also displayed the Strikemaster at air shows, and my chief joy is aerobatics, for which I keep a Yak 52. I've flown the Hawk and the Gnat, and while I've retired from display flying I haven't totally lost interest in it. I moved into rotary-wing flying for point-to-point travel, which saves time, and I've got about 2,000 hours total time. For me, flying has always had to pay its way – it's part of the business."

In 21 years, the market has changed every bit as much as the company. Electronic kit that wasn't conceived of when Tom was learning to fly Tomahawks now gives the GA aircraft navigational capabilities better than those of a 1980s 747. For Transair there's more competition, and it's more cut-throat. On the positive side, there's an endless supply of new stuff that pilots want. Transair is moving increasingly towards own-brand products like the new TPS-1 flight computer – all of them high-quality, and where possible made in the UK. Together with Oxford Aviation Training, it invested a lot of time and money to produce the interactive CD-ROM study pack for the JAA PPL, which is becoming the industry standard. It has its own research and development department looking at new products. "As always, aviation is changing fast," says Tom. "There are lots of new aircraft now, and there are major challenges facing us, particularly environmental issues, and the maintenance of the infrastructure of airfields in the face of well-funded attacks from property developers. These are some of the reasons I'm a strong supporter of AOPA – general aviation needs someone to fight its corner. I can't predict the future, but we can work together to create a future in which general aviation can thrive. I can predict, of course, that Transair will be there to thrive with it." ■