



## First UK MPL holders reach the flight deck

*With all its restrictions, is the MPL the way of the future in flight training? Pat Malone reports*

Britain's first Multi Crew Pilots Licence First Officers got their light blue MPLs at a special graduation ceremony at Flybe's Exeter headquarters in November on what was described as a groundbreaking day for the flight training industry and the airlines.

The six new airline pilots graduated from Flight Training Europe in Jerez, Spain, under the auspices of Flybe, and within days of getting their licences they moved into the right seat of the company's Q400 turboprops.

Thus begins a new experiment in airline pilot training – one which has to be made to work. As the best performing student Claire Jones told the graduation ceremony: "There has been some reluctance (about the MPL) because of the small number of solo hours, but it's up to us to demonstrate that the MPL is better than the traditional licence at creating a foundation on which to build a flying career."

The MPL is a peculiar beast which is a stab at training young people to operate as a team in a modern airliner cockpit – one in which the systems fly the aircraft and the pilots look after the systems. The MPL radically downgrades traditional stick 'n'

rudder skills; a student can obtain the licence, and can progress to the left seat, with as little as ten hours' solo time. This has caused some disquiet among traditionalists who claim the

**Top: Flybe's MPL First Officers, from left, Victoria Auld, Jamie Orr, John Batten, Michael Holmes, Warren McCullough and Claire Jones**  
**Below: Flybe's Chief Operating Officer Andrew Strong holds the new blue MPLs as Chief Pilot Ian Baston looks on**



MPL is just a quick and dirty way of getting people onto the flight deck, but a reappraisal of how professional pilots are trained – the current system is basically unchanged since 1948 – is long overdue. Peter Sadler, Managing Director of Flight Training Europe, told the graduation ceremony the event was the culmination of a ten-year programme which came out of the fact that the flight training industry was spending a lot of time and money teaching students things they didn't need to know.

Unhelpfully, on the morning of the graduation ceremony the *Wall Street Journal* reported on an FAA study, due out early next year, which is said to express concern that today's pilots rely too much on systems and exhibit a marked reluctance to take over from the computers when things start going pear-shaped.

The problem with the MPL is that it is applicable to one type and one employer – therefore the student effectively needs a secure job offer before training starts. That's okay for

airlines like Lufthansa, which train about 300 ab initio pilots a year (indeed Lufthansa was one of the main driving forces behind the MPL) but in Britain most airlines don't pay for basic training – British Airways declined to discuss the MPL on the grounds that it only poaches trained pilots from other airlines. In Britain, Flybe is virtually alone in getting involved in ab initio training, and the number of pilots it helps is small – a few dozen at most. Even so, it must come within an ace of making a commitment to MPL students two years before their services will (or will not) be required. That's a big ask, especially at a time like this.

Andrew Strong, Flybe's Chief Operating Officer, said when they interviewed the would-be students from which this crop of MPL First Officers sprang, every one asked the same question – will you guarantee me a job when my training is finished? Given that they were about to pay large sums of money in order to be trained to fly one type for one airline, and if they didn't get a job with Flybe they couldn't take their MPLs elsewhere, this was not a dumb question.

"The answer was 'no'," said Strong. "But I said to them all, you must accept that Flybe and Flight Training Europe would not do this if it was going to fail."

And so both sides kept the faith; ironically, it could be said that the losers were the part-sponsored Flybe students on conventional integrated courses who, unlike the MPL students, could not be found flying jobs when their courses ended. It must quickly be added, though, that Flybe looks after them, too. Some are working as cabin crew, awaiting their turn as pilot jobs become available. Others are working at outside jobs, while Flybe helps pay the cost of keeping them current. The airline is bent on world domination – it has ordered up to 140 Embraer 175 regional jets and is announcing new routes every five minutes, and there's talk of a stock market flotation, so patience will bring its rewards.

The graduation ceremony was a happy round of mutual congratulation – Robert Pooley presented the Pooley Sword to Flight Training Europe, and Peter Sadler in turn presented it to their highest-achieving student, Claire Jones. Flybe congratulated itself, Flight Training Europe and the CAA, which has got behind this experiment and pulled out the stops to make sure training went smoothly. Flight Training Europe and the CAA congratulated Flybe, and everybody congratulated the new First Officers, especially their mums and dads who came along for the celebration. And indeed, congratulations are in order; it's taken much foresight, effort and risk to bring us to this point. At the recent flight training industry crisis meeting at the Royal Aeronautical Society, the MPL was spoken of as one possible way of keeping flight training alive in the UK; with the government's tax-raising boot pressing ever harder on the



**Above: Bob Pooley (right) presents the Pooleys Sword to Flight Training Europe's Managing Director Peter Sadler**  
**Below: highest-achieving student Claire Jones: 'we must demonstrate that the MPL provides a better foundation'**



industry's windpipe it will certainly take something new and revolutionary to keep Britain in the business. An integrated course with type rating and other expenses costs up to £130,000 in the UK, with no guarantee of a job at the end of it. Unlike other countries, Britain offers no soft loans, subsidies or even tax breaks – in fact it's virtually impossible to

get a bank loan of any sort. After January 1st, tax rises will mean students pay some £14,000 in VAT alone, which cannot be claimed back by the self-sponsored. The three major flight training organisations in Britain have the capacity to produce some 1,200 airline pilots a year, but at the moment they have only 120 British nationals in training. The government's response to the industry's alarm has been dismissive.

Today's MPL will move into the left seats of tomorrow's A380 without being qualified or able to fly a Cessna 152. Does it matter? Is the MPL pilot as safe as the ATPL holder? Ask 20 pilots and you'll get 21 different answers.

One senior figure in the flight training industry said: "The solo flying component of the course is so small that you might as well dispense with it; it's really just there so we don't frighten the passengers. That's fine when everything's going well. The systems on today's airliners are almost foolproof and take into account every possibility that has been thought of, but things that have never happened before happen every day."

Flybe seems to make some concession to these fears – it stipulated that its MPL students should fly not ten, but more than 20 hours solo, and that they should experience asymmetric flight and be able to deal with it in a real aeroplane. But it is not drawing back from the MPL concept – it has six more MPL students about to complete their training at Oxford and six about to start there, and another six halfway through a course in Jerez.

So let us join in the congratulations to Flybe's new First Officers Claire Jones, Victoria Auld, John Batten, Michael Holmes, Warren McCullough and Jamie Orr and wish them all good fortune in their future careers. As general aviation pilots with no ambitions to fly for the airlines, we may look wistfully at the process they have gone through and reflect that the more professional flight training is divorced from GA as we know it, the easier a target we become. ■

**Below: Flybe's new MPL First Officers with Chief Pilot Ian Baston and Chief Operating Officer Andrew Strong**

