

# Flying against the odds

Many school leavers will consider careers as pilots. Paul

Cummins and Sheridan Blackman report on job prospects in the industry and on one young hopeful determined to make it.

**B**REE UMBERS' FONDEST memory is of sitting in the cockpit beside her dad, watching the world below. She was only three.

After her first instructional flight, Umbers, 15, of Trundle, near Dubbo, in central western New South Wales, knew she wanted to become a pilot. Her father was a big influence on her ambition to take up flying as a profession.

"Being an international pilot is my ultimate goal," she says. Her second choice? Crop dusting.

She flies an hour a fortnight during school term and more during the holidays. And when she finishes school, she intends to undertake a Bachelor of Science degree in aviation.

Umbers is likely to face stiff competition when she enters the job market.

The long-awaited surge in the demand for pilots is yet to happen. The market is so tight that only 36 per cent of commercial pilots under the age of 55 maintain their flight crew qualifications. Of those still in the industry, many have only casual jobs in general aviation, their hopes of landing one of the 3,000 or so jobs flying big jets dashed.

Some pilots starting out their careers are flying for free to get their hours up. Others are spending most of their time at work answering phones, refuelling aircraft and sweeping floors in the hope of picking up the odd flying hour here and there.

For many, the only option is to go bush. The jury is still out on the effectiveness of humping the swag around the outback in search of that elusive first job. Others opt for training as instructors before eking out a living on a few hours' paid work a week.

In other developments, a proliferation of budget carriers is forcing down the average wage for pilots and some now require pilots to pay for their own type rating - a cost that runs into tens of thousands of dollars.

And the number of overseas pilots immigrating to Australia exceeds that leaving to work overseas, where barriers to getting jobs are high.

In the financial year to the end of June

2003, CASA issued 805 new commercial pilot aeroplane licences, taking the total number of commercial pilots with current medical certificates to 4,350. CASA issued 387 air transport pilot aeroplane licences in the same period, taking the total with medical certificates to 6,046.

In the previous year, 877 new commercial pilot aeroplane licences were issued, taking the total with medical certificates to 4,577. This compares with 424 new air transport pilot aeroplane licences issued for a total of 5,969.

The numbers of current helicopter pilots, who account for a small section of the industry, remained about steady throughout 2002 and 2003, perhaps reflecting the higher cost of training.

There are 14,000 people trained as commercial pilots but not employed in the profession.

This figure is likely to be an underestimate, however, because it was based on data compiled in September 2001, when Ansett was still operating, although at a reduced level. Many of the pilots previously employed by Ansett have still not found jobs.

Meanwhile, the job prospect matrix compiled by the federal Department of Employment and Workplace Relations rates the chances of getting a job as a pilot as only average.

And although employment for pilots grew by six per cent in the five years to May 2003, unemployment in 2003 was high.

Job numbers do not count people working

part time or in other industries as unemployed. Many "wannabe" pilots fall into this category.

Meanwhile, the downturn in the airline industry caused by SARS and terrorism has forced airlines to cut services.

Qantas has suspended pilot recruitment until mid-2004.

Still, the lure of flying remains irresistible, and many parents will start forking out money on flying lessons for their children this summer. The final bill, for those following their dream of becoming commercial pilots, will amount to tens of thousands of dollars.

Perhaps some young hopefuls should consider the cheaper option of getting their private pilot's licences first, even though PPL instruction carries GST.

If the job market picked up, the young pilots could undertake further training to get their commercial pilot's licences. They would get credits from their PPL training towards the higher qualification.

A third and even cheaper option would be to start flying training on ultralight aircraft. Ultralight training can be counted towards flying hours needed for the issue of a private pilot's licence.

Yet another option is to join the military.

Umbers, meanwhile, is undaunted by the employment statistic, and her chutzpah will probably help get her into the industry.

While many of her friends are afraid of flying, she sees it as a challenge.

"I guess I had more opportunity as my dad flew," she says. "Some people may be scared of flying, but it's a challenge for me."

She says her first flight was frightening and overwhelming, but once she settled into controlling the aeroplane and seeing the familiar landmarks of her hometown, she recovered.

"I'm really amazed at what's happened," she says. "When I started, I had no idea any of this would come about."

*Paul Cummins is a licensing specialist at CASA.*



**Bree Umbers** all systems go

PHOTO: DENIS GREGORY