

Forging a New Alliance



Glen Buckley has a lot of expertise in his team at APTA. From left to right: Group Head of Safety Andrew Warland-Browne, Group Head of Operations Ermin Javier Jr, Standby Head of Operations Jacqui Armstrong, CEO Glen Buckley and Internal Co-ordinator Laveniya Ruthralingam.

A new style of training organisation, the Australia Pilot Training Alliance, is providing a fast and efficient path to CASA approvals for flying schools. As **Steve Hitchen** found out, their very existence has enabled some to expand and others simply to keep the doors open.

There are any number of people in the aviation community happy to tell you what's wrong with the industry, but very rarely does someone come up with a truly innovative solution that can genuinely be labeled as a "game changer".

Glen Buckley is one person who has, and he's literally bet his house on the outcome.

Buckley is the owner of Melbourne Flight Training (MFT), a small but flourishing school at Moorabbin. MFT had its niche, and with quality, smart training as a weapon, gathered

new business purely through word of mouth. MFT was never going to rake in wads of cash for Buckley, but it did OK and provided employment for several flying instructors.

Then came the day that the CASA threatened to wipe out all of that simply with a change of rules that excluded MFT, and many other flying schools, from 95% of the Commercial Pilot Licence training market. CASA announced CASR Part 142, a complex and costly form of flying school approval that had at its heart the 150-hour CPL course. It

was exclusive to Part 142, so if you didn't have the capital to step up and invest, you were simply out of business.

The aftershocks of Part 142 are still rippling throughout the aviation industry with destructive force, and at the end, only the strongest will still be standing, with the weakest relegated to scrambling for the 200-hour CPL market; a much less attractive option for potential students.

"CASA said 'Right, the 200-hour CPL lives here with the Part 141 schools, and the 150-hour CPL becomes the exclusive domain of the Part 142 organisations,'" Buckley recalls. "But my business gets 95% of its income from the 150-hour CPL,

the flying schools, and it is the extra salaries needed that have proven the largest stumbling block for schools to go forward.

That's where APTA comes into it: they provide an Air Operator's Certificate approved to Part 142 and the expertise required to maintain all the manuals and oversight needed to comply with CASA regulations. Smaller flying schools join the alliance and share the resources. Arm-in-arm they go forward to tackle the 150-hour CPL market together.

"The reason I took all this on is that we had a situation where a Part 142 school could offer the 150-hour PPL and a Part 141 school could not," Buckley points out, "but in actual fact, the

went through the onerous process of getting approval for MFT. However, he understood that it wouldn't be sustainable, and so created APTA to share the load and give other small schools an easier path to CASA approval.

"I moved the Part 142 approval over to APTA, as well as the RTO [Registered Training Authority] and the CRICOS [Commonwealth Register of Institutions and Courses for Overseas Students]. Then I went after the very best people possible to fill the key roles," Buckley recalls.

Buckley has chosen his team astutely, with former Philippine Air Force and Royal Australian Navy officer Ermin Javier taking the key role of Group Head of Operations. Javier's job is effectively group CFI, which means that alliance members don't need a CFI of their own, relying instead on Senior Base Pilots to provide on-the-spot oversight.

Similarly, the appointment of former CASA educator and safety advisor Andrew Warland-Browne as Group Head of Safety has provided APTA with the horsepower to cascade the central safety management

system down to the group members, and with former Qantas operational manager Wes Mason running the documentation system and technical services, Buckley has put together a powerful team at APTA.

And to top it off, even CASA is impressed.

"Despite me being probably the hardest person CASA's ever had to deal with, they are extremely supportive of the concept," Buckley says with a wry smile. "Why? Every school puts their own spin on Part 142, so CASA has to walk into 10 different organisations and do 10 different audits. At APTA, all members run a system called Flight School Manager and it's all paperless.

"Everything from flying hours to maintenance tracking goes into this, which makes it a very powerful oversight tool. Now, we can monitor all group members from head office, and that's why CASA supports the concept."

"APTA has opened doors for us that would normally have been closed"

and on 1 September 2017, the privilege was going to be taken away from my business overnight. It was destined for absolute destruction; there was no way in the world it could survive on Part 141 only."

Buckley is not the sort of person that you'll see taking a lot of steps backward, so in the spirit of "if you can't beat them, join them," he set out to find a way that MFT could stay in the Part 142 market, and on his journey, developed a solution not only for MFT, but for other schools in the same predicament.

He called his solution the Australian Pilot Training Alliance (APTA), and it's now one of the very few training organisations that has Part 142 approval from CASA.

Getting it together

When asked about APTA, Buckley most often falls back on the "IGA" analogy: it's like a group of independent businesses banding together for mutual benefit to take on industry giants.

Part 142's largest burden is the need for top-end staff to service

same instructor could teach at both schools, and deliver exactly the same subjects out of exactly the same manual of standards. Then you get the same testing officer in to test both candidates to identical standards. So why does one business get forced into making one candidate fly an extra 50 hours?"

The paradox is that Buckley believes that the 150-hour CPL is actually a good product, and



LEFT: TVSA Flight Training at Bacchus Marsh used APTA as a fast-track to Part 142.

ABOVE: Under the new rules, Part 141 schools can offer CPL candidates the 200-hour syllabus only.



Avia Senior Base Pilot
Darren Schmidt: "My
logbook is looking a lot
more healthy nowadays!"

It has been a bug-bear of CASA for many years that some arrangements between flying schools—"lending" an AOC—has resulted in remote oversight that has proven several times to be the equivalent of no oversight. According to Buckley, the software and systems within the APTA group mean they can show effective oversight of all members ... and that makes CASA very happy indeed.

Joining up

At the time *Australian Flying* spoke with Buckley, APTA had five members: MFT, TVSA Flight Training, Learn to Fly, Avia Aviation and Flight Standards. There were more knocking on the door as the realities of Part 142 began to bite, but the APTA concept can be scaled up to cope with many more schools coming on board.

Avia Aviation Co-founding Director Charles Gunter committed his company to APTA once he considered that doing so would be to Avia's advantage.

"I'm ecstatically excited about this," he said with a huge grin. "I wish we'd done this long ago.

"Undoubtedly APTA has opened doors for us that would normally have been closed. And there are probably more doors out there that we haven't knocked on.

"The potential upside is enormous for potentially less overhead cost. If you look at the human resources that went into our original AOC, and the changes we had to make for Part 61 and Part 141, I estimate that we spent well north of \$250,000 to achieve those objectives.

"Now our overhead cost with APTA is probably one third of that."

But for schools looking to join APTA, there is one painful duty they have to perform: they must mothball their own AOC, the one they spent a lot of money to get and many long hours making sure they keep. The great advantage to doing that, it that they inherit quality staff from APTA instead.

"We've always been impressed with Glen as an individual, and

also we were surprised at the calibre of people within APTA," Gunter said. "They are people who have a track record in excellence in whatever they're doing. That really impressed the heck out of me!"

APTA membership also brings another opportunity: check and training. Not only is the 150-hour CPL the exclusive privilege of a Part 142 school, but also the right to conduct check and training for charter aircraft over 5700 kg MTOW. Flying schools with charter AOCs have traditionally been approved for this function, but if they stay at Part 141 level, they'll have to farm that out to a Part 142 organisation. Through the APTA membership, there is now opportunity for Avia to branch into the check and training market.

And there is another advantage that current Chief Flying Instructors will immediately relate to.

Avia Senior Base Pilot Darren Schmidt is a Grade 1 instructor with MECIR approval and Flight Examiner Rating. He should

be sitting behind a CFI's desk snowed under with paperwork, but instead, all that is taken care of by Javier at APTA, freeing up Schmidt to spend more time teaching people to fly.

"I'm getting so much more time in aeroplanes now," Schmidt said, "which means I can oversee the students and other instructors so much better. My logbook is looking a lot more healthy nowadays!"

Growth in progress

Perhaps one of the more surprising schools to jump on the APTA train is Learn to Fly. The Moorabbin-based school is recreational only, and so can't benefit from anything that Part 142 brings. However, if you draw back that curtain, there is a clever decision behind it.

School Operations Manager Kai Li has big plans for Learn to Fly, and APTA membership is a key part. The company has facilities also in Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai, and a large expansion into the general aviation training market is planned for Moorabbin. Already they have building approval for a 4400-sqm base to train 60-80 students at one time, and the expansion plans will utilise the best advantages of APTA membership: Part 142, CRICOS, RTO and shared resources.

"We do mainly recreational flying here, but our pilots have been doing some GA flying through MFT," Li points out. "Our target is now students from overseas who want to do CPL, but you can't do CPL on RAAus aircraft [for the 150-hour syllabus], so we needed to get into GA flying.

"We tried to buy an Air Operator's Certificate to get into the market, but the price was going to be too much. And even if we bought one, we wouldn't have the expertise to run it. So it was better to join APTA rather than run our own school."

The economics of APTA also made a lot of sense to Li. The membership fee of \$80,000

looks steep at first, but when you consider the cost of the alternative, it starts to look more like a bargain.

"It's not that much from my point of view," Li reckons. "If I hire a GA CFI I would pay them that much anyway, so why not pay that money to APTA? It saves my time, gives me the Part 142 approval, RTO, CRICOS, management systems and access to the resources of the group."

Learn to Fly has plans for its own GA fleet to be housed in the new training complex, but in the meantime, they can fall back on the resources of other group

"We have an Australian-owned product that actually has more capability than anyone else in the country"

members to realise their ambitions short-term. Planes can be cross-hired; instructors can be allocated from one school to another and their skills, expertise and training with them.

For an organisation starting from scratch in GA training, Learn to Fly's decision to go with APTA can't have been that difficult: everything they needed would come in one neat package.

Fast track to Part 142

TVSA Flight Training at Bacchus Marsh found themselves not only on the Part 142 outer, but also down one critical person: a Chief Flying Instructor. For Director/owner Dan Pearson, the decision to join APTA solved more than one issue.

"We joined APTA because they are a Part 142 approved organisation, and we hadn't yet transitioned ourselves to 142, so they provide all the approvals we need for all the types of training we deliver," Pearson told *Australian Flying*.

"We wanted to make sure we had the best of both worlds [Part 141 and Part 142] and that we had the right key personnel

in place. APTA had all those personnel, plus all the systems and procedures in place ready for us.

"At the same time we were going through a change of CFI and Chief Pilot. Joining APTA meant we could transition to Part 142 pretty easily without having to go through the whole CASA approval process."

But as a business person, Pearson also appreciates that APTA membership can provide more benefits than just the training approvals.

"I think one of the big advantages is that there is other people within the group that we

can get access to. For example, whilst we might not do multi-crew training today, there are people in the group that we can use to gain that capability.

"Also, if we need resources or other people within the group need resources, they can borrow planes or instructors from us, so it's kind of like a sharing of resources and people."

TVSA was facing the same brick wall currently before the eyes of many flying schools around Australia: either shell out the money and time to get your own Part 142 approval, stay at Part 141 and forego a large market, or join in with someone like APTA. Pearson chose the latter, but if the APTA option wasn't there, he and his team had a lot of hard work ahead of them.

"We would have had to put a lot more emphasis on transitioning to Part 142 ourselves and we would have had to employ staff sooner than we wanted to, so APTA gave us some breathing space to employ them on our terms rather than those dictated by industry.

"We would have still made the transition, but it would have been much more difficult and taken a lot longer."

Forging ahead

Buckley sees APTA as an opportunity that goes beyond simply flying school management; his vision includes using the brand as a powerful marketing tool for members.

"We have an Australian-owned product that actually has more capability than anyone else in the country," he stresses. "APTA can offer every single course CASA has approved. Our Head of Operations brings to table multi-crew ATPL flight testing, and most large flying schools can't say that!"


"So if we can go overseas with the APTA brand, we've got a multi-base, Australian-owned business that does everything that any other organisation can do.

"Provided we keep this well-intentioned and keep investing up

top here, I think we'll kick goals."

In future, there may be even be scope for Part 141 flying schools and aero clubs to jump on the band wagon, in the process immediately boosting their own capability and potential. One of the problems plaguing country operations is attracting qualified CFIs to replace those that have moved on. In many cases, schools have had to temporarily cease operations whilst they hunted a replacement that was not only qualified and approved, but also was prepared to move to a regional area. APTA membership can provide the solution quickly and easily.

"I think this is an opportunity for rural areas," Buckley predicts. "APTA will bring a capability to flying schools that they've never had before, and they're never going to get unless they come together like this.

"If APTA can help keep a flying school in business, I would love them to come to us, because that's truly what we're about." 



ABOVE: Learn to Fly's Kai Li has big plans for expansion, helped along by APTA membership.

LEFT: With APTA oversight, Learn to Fly will be able to offer the 150-hour CPL to overseas students.