

So, You Want to be an Air New Zealand Pilot?

Part One of a five-part series of articles by **Christine Ody**



Above: An Air New Zealand Boeing 737 taking off from Queenstown. The road to a pilot's seat in a jet like this is a long and rocky one—but well worth the journey for those dedicated enough to follow it to the end. Opposite page: Air New Zealand's Boeing 777 simulator at the Aviation Institute's simulator centre at Auckland International Airport.

Are you (or your son or daughter) considering a career as an airline pilot, but your knowledge of the industry and the career path is very limited? Then this article is for you. It is designed to help you understand more about what is required to become an airline pilot with Air New Zealand, and provide some statistics that help describe the size, shape and nature of the professional fixed-wing (aeroplane) aviation industry in New Zealand.

The journey to an airline job is a taxing one: it requires a huge amount of money, hard work, patience and dedication; it will contain setbacks, disappointments and frustrations. The personal commitment and sacrifices required mean that those people with

that somewhat irrational compulsion to fly are far more likely to be the ones who stick with it long enough to reap the rewards. And for someone who has been bitten by the aviation bug, it is those rewards that make all that hard work worthwhile.

Airline Pilot 101

Firstly, some very basic information about the various roles of airline pilots.

On domestic and short-haul international flights, there will be two pilots: a captain (the pilot-in-command, who wears four stripes), and a first officer (FO) or co-pilot, who wears three stripes.

The captain is legally responsible for the conduct of the flight, and for the safety of the aircraft and all its crew and passengers. The first officer is the second in command and must be able to take over the duties of the captain should the captain become incapacitated. First officers contribute actively to the decision-making **process** in flight, but the captain always has the final decision-making **authority**.

Every flight is an exercise in finely honed teamwork. One pilot is designated the pilot flying (PF) and one the pilot monitoring (PM). The PF controls the aircraft's flight path either directly or through the autopilot (so the PF conduct the takeoffs and landings). The PM operates the radios, flaps and landing gear, and attends to other duties such as calling checklists; obtaining weather reports; completing takeoff calculations; communicating with the cabin crew, engineers and company ground crew; and so forth. Usually, PF and PM duties are shared equally between pilots. For example, if a domestic crew has a four-sector duty (i.e. they fly four flights in that work day), the captain and first officer will each act as PF for two sectors.

For long-haul international flights, additional pilots are carried because it is not safe for one pair of pilots to be in charge of the flight for its entire duration without a rest break. The additional pilots carried are called second officers (SOs) (two stripes). SOs can only occupy a pilot seat in the cruise phase of flight when either the captain or first officer is on rest. SOs, therefore, never take off or land the aircraft. SOs are, however, always on the flight deck in the third seat during takeoff and landing (critical phases of flight), where they take the role of an additional PM.

Clearly, airline flying is not a nine-to-five job. Shift work is required, as are nights away from home, but the nature of the shifts and the amount of time away varies depending on airline and fleet.

For domestic pilots (turboprop and jet), there is no "back of the clock" (i.e. midnight to early morning) flying. The earliest sign-on time is around 5:00 a.m.; the latest sign-off time around 10:30 p.m. Maximum shift lengths, and the number of hours of duty and flight time in a given period, are restricted by law and by contract. Pilots can have short days or can be rostered up to 11 hours' duty. In a 28-day roster, turboprop pilots get at least eight days off; domestic jet pilots get at least 10, including at least one weekend off. Generally, pilots get more time off than a Monday to Friday worker—but there

are no regular shift patterns and time off occurs in a random fashion (which, happily, can mean three or four days off in a row). Public holidays are normal work days—but working one earns a day in lieu. Domestic pilots are at home most nights, usually averaging no more than one overnight per week. Overnights provide a great opportunity to get to know other parts of New Zealand if more than the minimum 10 hours of rest is rostered—which is usually the case.

Long-haul international pilots have a significantly different lifestyle, as their tours of duty (TODs) can take them away from home for two weeks at a time (for example, a London return trip). Shorter TODs also occur, as do trans-Tasman days where the crew do not overnight. International pilots do a lot of back-of-the-clock flying, and have to deal with constant time-zone changes—but they get the opportunity to familiarise themselves with a number of overseas destinations. Once home again after a TOD, they have multiple days' rest to reacclimatise before going to work again.

In the jet fleets, annual leave is allocated via a bidding system. Pilots bid once a year for all of the following year's leave, and the amount of prime (school holiday) leave available to each pilot is limited in the first round of bidding. (Access to any "leftover" prime leave is not restricted in the second bidding phase.) Pilots are split into three groups for bidding purposes, depending on their prime leave success in previous years' bids. Pilots in the higher-priority groups have the first bite at the cherry in both bidding phases—but securing prime leave in the first phase moves them down the priority list for the next year's bid. This system ensures that first-priority access to prime leave is shared evenly.





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Above three images: Views of the Air New Zealand Training Centre at Rennie Drive, Auckland.



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Left: The flight deck of a Boeing 737.
 Top: Close-up of a B737 instrument panel.
 Above: A Boeing 737 (foreground) and a B777 at Wellington.

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Starting Roles for Pilots in Air New Zealand Group Airlines

The Air New Zealand Group consists of four individual airlines:

- Air New Zealand (with two "narrow-body" aircraft types: Boeing 737 and Airbus A320, and three "wide-body" types: Boeing 767, 777 and 747)
- Mt Cook Airlines (ATR-72)
- Air Nelson (Bombardier Q300)
- Eagle Airways (Beechcraft B1900D)

Together, Mt Cook, Air Nelson and Eagle Airways are referred to as the Link airlines. They service regional New Zealand. The Link airlines operate turboprop aircraft (aircraft with turbine engines driving propellers).

Air New Zealand services New Zealand's main trunk (Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, Dunedin, Queenstown), and international routes. Air New Zealand flies jet aircraft (turbofan engines with no propellers).

Depending on their experience, pilots can start as SOs on the long-haul jet fleets or with the Link airlines as FOs. Most pilots moving into the Links come from roles in GA (general aviation, the term used to describe a wide range of aviation activities in "small" aircraft). About half of the pilots joining as second officers come from the Link airlines. The other half come from a variety of airline backgrounds, with only a very small number these days coming from the military.



Right: An Airbus A320 lands at Wellington.

Progression within Air New Zealand

Typical new-pilot experience—hours flown per year and time to first command in each of the Air New Zealand airlines—is collated in the table below. The numbers are indicative only, as especially the time to first command can vary greatly, depending on a number of factors. Pilot seniority determines who gets promoted to any command vacancy. (The section on seniority systems in a subsequent article in this series will explain this further.)

Within the jet airline, the phase-out of the Boeing B737 by about 2016 changes a junior pilot's options somewhat. Up until 2010, pilots could join the jet airline as either a B737 FO or a long-haul SO. From time to time, those pilots had the opportunity to move between the two roles. From 2011, new pilots could only join as long-haul SOs and, once the B737 is gone, no sideways movement

will be possible. Without a change in policy, SOs will remain in that role until they are senior enough to move to an A320 FO position. The length of time that will take is very hard to predict—it may be as much as 10 years—but it may also be much less if the retirement rate increases significantly.

Equally, the time to command within the jet fleet is hard to predict. In the medium-term future, Air New Zealand will become an airline of effectively two fleets: the A320 covering domestic and short-haul international flying, and the B777/B787 covering all long-haul routes. This change, along with an uncertain retirement profile, makes accurate predictions of time-to-command difficult: the figures below may prove to be on the pessimistic side in the mid- to long-term future.

Summary of Current Pilot Experience within the Air New Zealand Group

Airline	Typical Experience of New Pilot (hours)	Hours Flown per Year	Time to First Command
Eagle Airways	1500 (FO)	Range: 550–850 Average: 660	Range: 11 months–31/2 years Average: 2 years
Air Nelson	2000 (FO)	Average: 600	Range: 2–6 years Average: 4 years
Mt Cook	2000 (FO)	Range: 700–750	Range: 3–8 years Average: 5 years
Air New Zealand	3000–5000 (SO)	Average: 600	Narrow-body average: 12+ years Wide-body average: 20+ years



Above: A Bombardier Q300 at New Plymouth.



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Above: The author (left) with Captain Ian Davie-Martin working on Christmas Day 2010.

Christine Ody is currently a first officer in Air New Zealand's Boeing 737 fleet and the airline's Aviation Institute Project Pilot.

Brought up on a farm, Christine caught the aviation bug at age 8 after watching a helicopter pilot spray gorse in the early '80s and, by the age of 14, she had decided to be a topdressing pilot.

After completing a BA (in history and Japanese), Christine spent several years working at TVNZ and took her first flying lesson at Ardmore in December 1996; three years later, she became a part-time instructor. At the beginning of her fourth year of instructing (2003), she became a salaried multi-engine IFR B-cat instructor, got married and gave up her full-time job at TVNZ.

In late 2003, she almost gave flying away after failing an interview with Eagle. However, three months later, and with around 2,400 hours total time, she got a job with Air Nelson and spent the next 18 months flying Saab 340s. In March 2005, she applied successfully for a job with Air New Zealand and started flying B737s in September 2005.

Eighteen months after joining Air New Zealand, she was accepted into the company's Business in the Sky programme aimed at developing pilots' business skills. This ran for a year and a half, and involved a lot of group project work in the participants' own time. One of the projects undertaken by Christine's group was looking at options for future pilot supply—which led to her current involvement in the development of the Aviation Institute's partnership with Air New Zealand's five flight training organisations. Christine says she is loving working with the company's partners and having direct contact again with people who are so passionate about flying.

Pay within Air New Zealand

Discussing specific salaries in the public sphere is always a sensitive issue—hence the lack of detail in the figures below. The general manner in which they are presented is necessary to keep the level of disclosure within the airlines' and unions' comfort levels.

Salaries across all ranks increment with years of service up to a maximum after a set period. For example, in the jet airline, the FO pay scales have eight annual steps, while the captains' scales have 12.

Each Link airline has a separate pay scale for FOs and captains. Taking all three into consideration, the minimum starting salary for an FO is in the low \$40,000s and the maximum captain's salary is in the low \$130,000s.

In the jet airline the pay structure is more complex, as there is a separate pay scale for each rank and each fleet (i.e. the pay scale for an A320 FO will be different from that for a B767 FO; a B737 captain's pay scale will be different from a B777 captain's pay scale, and so on.) The lowest salary on offer is in the low \$80,000s; the highest in the high \$200,000s.

These salaries are base salaries—a pilot receives a number of allowances on top of their base pay, depending on flying duties undertaken. Margins are also payable for check and training pilots.

That's the end goal (to whet your appetite). Now to see how you get there... [PW](#)