REGIONAL RUSH

– A day in the life of a regional airline pilot

What's it like flying for one of Australia's largest regional airlines? Derek Royal spent a day with a Regional Express (Rex) Saab 340 crew and found out.

WORDS Derek Royal

ALBURY AIRPORT: 1245

Captain Tony Bugden sits at a computer in Regional Express Airline's (Rex) crew room, studying flight plans, weather and NOTAMS in preparation for a busy day. Tony and first officer Andy Hall are rostered to fly four sectors today: Albury/Sydney, Sydney/Orange, Orange/Sydney and Sydney/Albury.

Andy has already pre-flighted 'Papa Romeo X-ray' (PRX), a Saab 340B and one of more than 40 Saab 340s in the Rex fleet. As soon as he returns to the crew room, the two pilots discuss the weather and flight plan for the sectors that lie ahead.

After printing the relevant information, the duo head to the aircraft where flight attendant Teneal Hanigan is busy preparing the cabin. The men greet Teneal before climbing into the cockpit.

Inside the cockpit, Tony and Andy settle into their routine. Tony checks the maintenance release while Andy does flight preparation using the aircraft's Saab Flight Bag (SFB): an in-house-developed tablet-computer that enables pilots to complete the aircraft trim and flight planning and to download and print pre-flight briefings. The SFB was developed to see a more efficient turnaround between sectors, especially at hub airports. Once all the checks are complete, Andy prints a trim sheet from the SFB, which contains valuable information concerning passengers, cargo, fuel, loading, takeoff performance and landing.

Today, there are 31 passengers journeying to Sydney, including one infant; and 26 pieces of checked-in luggage weighing 281 kg.

Before the passengers board, Tony, Andy and Teneal talk through a safety brief. This brief is more complex than the regular brief and is something all Rex crews are required to complete every seven days. The trio discuss in detail four scenarios: emergency landing on land; emergency landing on water; rapid depressurisation/emergency descent and emergency procedures during a hijacking. The crew go through each segment coolly and with the professionalism of a well-oiled machine.

THE CREW: a well-oiled machine (from left) First Officer Andy Hall; Flight Attendant Teneal Hanigan and Captain Tony Bugden.

Brief completed, Tony adds the finishing touches to his pre-takeoff checks, while Andy disembarks and waits at the foot of the stairs leading to the cabin. With a smile he welcomes the Sydney-bound passengers before they climb the stairs, while Teneal meets them at the cabin entrance and amiably directs them to their seats.

Once everyone's on board the 34-seat turboprop, Teneal secures the cabin as the pilots continue to prepare for takeoff, cross-checking systems and talking through departure procedures. With a clearance to taxi to the end of Albury's Runway 07, Tony lines up the 340B, ready to go.

Tony pushes the aircraft's power levers to takeoff power, flooding the plane's two engines with fuel. The powerplants respond immediately and the aircraft gains speed as it roars down the runway. "Eighty knots," calls Andy. "Vee one … rotate," he continues as the aircraft reaches 122 knots. At that, Tony eases the control column backwards and lifts the 340B's nose into the blue Albury sky. "Positive gear up," calls Tony before Andy retracts the gear. "Selected," announces Andy. Local time is 1350 and we're on our way to Sydney.

A 45-year-old training captain, Tony has been with Rex for 15 years and boasts 11,500 hours in his logbook. He is one of Rex's 266 pilots. Starting his aviation career flying charter for Air Groote on Groote Eylandt in the Gulf of Carpentaria, he flew around the Top End, WA and Queensland before scoring a gig as a Metro 23 first officer with Kendell Airlines (which in 2002 merged with Hazelton Airlines to become Rex) in Adelaide.

"I flew the Metro for about two and a half years and then got endorsed on the Saab 340 at Adelaide," Tony says. "After four years there, I re-located to Albury where I earned my (Saab 340) command. I've been living in Albury ever since."

Andy on the other hand, arrived at Rex after a nine year career in banking and a stint as a Toll Express freight pilot. "I flew a Cessna Caravan out of Bankstown but unfortunately the company went bust," the 39-year-old says. "Thankfully I was lucky enough to get a job with Rex."
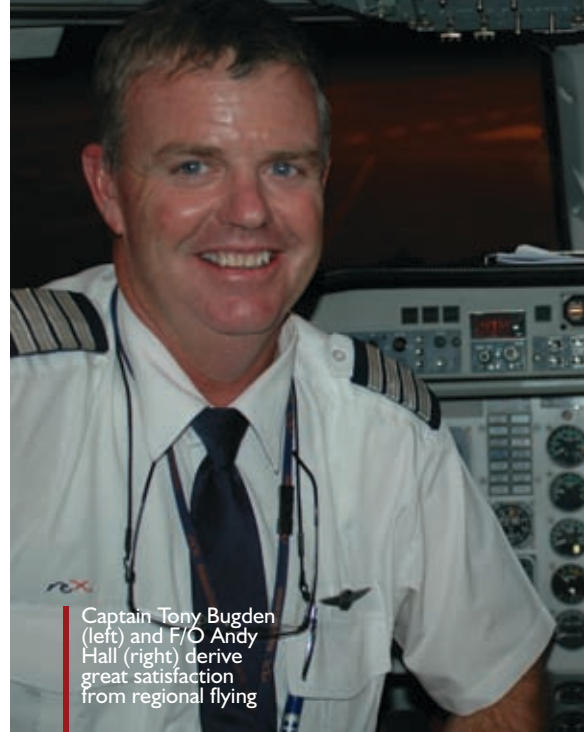
Andy has been working for Rex for two-and-a-half years and funnily enough, Tony was his initial training captain. "We've flown together a few times but you'll see how bad a teacher he was when I fly the Orange/Sydney sector," Andy quips. Both pilots burst into laughter without missing a beat and continue their paperwork. "Now I'm one of the company's most senior first officers, so I guess he's not such a bad teacher after all."

Papa Romeo X-ray has a roaring 40 knot tailwind expediting the journey to Sydney. But unfortunately the additional speed will all be in vain as Sydney airspace is in chaos.

"We've been advised that Sydney's only operating Runway 25, the western runway," Tony says. "There's a lot of traffic in the area so unfortunately we're not going to land as soon as we would have liked. We've got a thirty to forty knot tailwind howling behind us and we still can't beat the Sydney traffic. Ah well, it's a beautiful day and our office (cockpit) has a great view so we might as well make the most of it."

F/O Andy Hall helps load baggage

Captain Tony Bugden (left) and F/O Andy Hall (right) derive great satisfaction from regional flying

'we're visual with the nation's busiest international airport

At about 10 minutes before top of descent, Andy receives the weather for Sydney, where there's some scattered cloud at around 3,500 feet and a 15 knot southerly wind. Tony works out his approach and reviews the relevant approach charts and NOTAMS before briefing Andy on his approach into Sydney.

The pilots also calculate their descent profile and take care of several frequency and altitude clearance changes. Tony then sets the descent profile and altitude restrictions into the Flight Management System (FMS), while Andy provides support, monitors the descent and configures the aircraft for landing. Before long, the city of Sydney looms large and we're visual with the nation's busiest international airport. ATC directs Tony to the coast and eventually clears the aircraft to land on Runway 25. Tony brings the aircraft back to its final approach speed and together the pilots complete the landing checklist. Beneath the aircraft some of the world's most prestigious real estate passes by: Bondi Beach, Vaucluse, Point Piper. The aircraft continues its approach and at 500 feet Andy confirms the aircraft is in a safe position to land.

At 30 feet, Tony flares the aircraft and reduces the power levers to ground idle. The undercarriage touches terra firma and in seconds the team automatically begins after-landing checks. It's 1504 - welcome to Sydney.

Tony shuts down the engines, switches the seat belt signs off and calls for the shut down checklist. Once that's completed, the captain attends to more paperwork, including logging fuel on board and flight time. Teneal and Andy farewell the passengers and in a twinkling the trio start preparing for the next sector: a short hop to Orange.

With less than 40 minutes before takeoff, Tony, Andy and Teneal show just why regional flying is unique. As Teneal vacuums the floor, the pilots pitch in and collect rubbish to make the cabin nice and comfy for the next lot of passengers who are heading to Orange, a destination less than half-an-hour away.

"As you can see, we've got to be multi-skilled to do this job," Tony laughs. "But it's great. We all pitch in and derive great satisfaction out of working in a job that's so hands-on."

So apart from helping with house cleaning, what are the challenges associated with being a regional airline pilot?

F/O Andy Hall checks the prop during his pre-flight walkaround

"As regional pilots we have our own challenges as opposed to jet pilots who fly international and domestic routes," Tony says. "Unlike the majors we rarely have the luxury of flying from ILS to ILS. We fly into small aerodromes in uncontrolled airspace with a lot of light aircraft about. As such, we have to ensure our own separation from traffic. However, the Saab is well-equipped with TCAS (traffic alert and collision avoidance system) and GPS, which allows us to fly straight in RNAV approaches and safely in poor weather conditions."

"The other challenge," says Andy, "is that we do multiple sectors. We take off and land quite a few times a day. Six sectors is the maximum we can fly and if you do that in one day, especially in inclement weather, it can be quite draining."

Rex pilots work a maximum of six consecutive days and have two days off. For their trouble, a captain earns a ballpark figure of around $88,000 base salary, with an additional $12,000 in allowances; while a first officer takes home (again a ballpark figure) a base salary of around $42,000, plus $12,000 in allowances.

Andy, who will again act as support pilot for the next sector, completes a thorough walkaround and within 30 minutes the plane has 27 passengers on board, ready for takeoff. After this sector the pilots will swap roles, with Andy taking over as pilot flying for the Orange/Sydney and Sydney/Albury legs. However, even though Andy will have control from the right-hand seat, the captain remains in ultimate command of the flight.

SYDNEY AIRPORT: 1545

With Tony in command we depart from Sydney's eastern runway and make a right hand turn over Botany Bay towards Sydney's south. Brighton Le Sands, Sans Souci, Sylvania Waters and Cronulla pass by before Tony manoeuvres the Saab towards Orange via Katoomba, where the (Katoomba) township's isolated gravel strip beckons in the distance.

"Another challenge associated with regional flying is sharing airspace with light aircraft at non-controlled aerodromes," Tony says. "The sector to Orange is a short one so life gets very busy on the flightdeck. We'll fly at Flight Level 120 and then at the other end there's sure to be light aircraft doing circuits. I'm planning to fly straight in to Runway 29 but if there's any traffic about we'll overfly the top of the aerodrome, have a look around, and fit into the circuit

Bugden and Hall go through their pre-takeoff checks

F/O Andy Hall during the pre-flight walkaround

pattern. Orange can also be challenging because it's around 3,100 feet above ground level, the runway's short and in summer we're performance limited because of the heat."

Add the fact that there's usually a good load of passengers out of Orange and things can get interesting.

At 1605, just 20 minutes after departing Sydney, Tony commences his descent just east of Orange. Andy makes a radio call and as expected, there's a bit of light traffic using the aerodrome: two Jabirus, an ultralight and a helicopter.

We eventually touch down on Runway 11, right on time at 1613. Flight time: 28 minutes.

ORANGE AIRPORT: 1655

Andy assumes control of the aircraft for the return leg to Sydney and this time Tony completes the pre-flight walk-around before welcoming 24 passengers on board. After taxiing to the end of Runway 11, Andy caresses Papa Romeo X-ray into the sky for the return journey to Sydney.

So what's the most satisfying part of the job?

"I enjoy the challenge of working in a small team and understanding line operations inside out," Andy says. "My role as a first officer includes doing everything from handling boarding passengers to cleaning the cabin, flying the aircraft, pre-flighting the aircraft, working out the flightplan and weather with the captain, even helping load the bags. The job is about being part of the whole operation. And for me, that's satisfying."

"I get enormous satisfaction out of the job for a number of reasons," Tony says. "One, I enjoy working with a great team of people here at Rex: we all do a good job, getting around three million passengers safely to their destinations each year. Two, I enjoy the community spirit associated with flying for a regional airline and serving the rural community. Quite often the passengers are my neighbours or faces I see in the street. Three, the lifestyle: I'm able to live in a regional town, a ten minute walk to work, and it's rare that I'm required to overnight. And four, I enjoy training pilots new to the airline, particularly the cadets, from our Rex subsidiary, the Australian Aviation Pilot Academy. It's great to see those guys coming from low hours graduating as fully-fledged line pilots. So overall, it's a great job. I'm definitely one of the lucky ones."

Indeed he is. Not long after Papa Romeo X-ray shuts down, I disembark and farewell the crew. I'm heading home to Sydney suburbia while Tony, Andy and Teneal prepare for the final homeward sector to Albury. Its been an interesting day and one thing I've learnt is that while regional flying is a unique occupation, it goes without saying that the pilots (and cabin crew) involved at this level are as dedicated and professional as their counterparts elsewhere. ✳