



Corporate Member Profile:

Right On-Track

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Teaching instructors to teach is one of general aviation's neglected skills, but AOPA corporate member On-Track Aviation aims to lift all our standards. By **Liz Moscrop***

company strategy by regular team business meetings and social events.

They are the only school outside of the military to have written and published their own CAA recommended manual "Instructional Techniques for the Flight Instructor" to complement the courses they run. "We couldn't get it published, so we had to become a publishing house with our own ISBN number," says Alan. Now in its third incarnation, the manual has had input from every CAA examiner.

On-Track started life in Oxford but soon moved to Wellesbourne Mountford, which was less crowded than Oxford in the days before Oxford Air Training migrated some of its training to the US. Eventually the airfield offered them a room. Says Alan: "It was mouldy with no electricity and had suffered a massive water leak." Today the premises are warm, clean and bright with well-presented briefing rooms containing magnetic white boards, working models and large flying computers. And – of course – a well-stocked fridge. It is a testament to both Alan and Mark's personalities that their wives and fellow instructors rocked up even on rainy days to help them turn the unpromising quarters into the smart offices in place today.

Military precision

So why would two successful commercial pilots bother to feed biscuits to trainees in Warwickshire? The clue is in their mutual passion for teaching. They really care about

"Would you like a chocolate Hobnob?" smiles Alan Newton, On-Track Aviation's co-founder, proffering a revitalising cuppa after my rainy drive to Wellesbourne. On-Track keeps a serious supply of chocolate biscuits in the fridge and the friendly welcome typifies the company's attitude towards its customers, staff and visitors.

Genuine concern for people pays dividends, winning the company both repeat and new business, primarily from word of mouth. In March this year On-Track was awarded a three-year contract against stiff opposition from other FTOs to train Netherlands Ministry of Defence pilots for the CRI and IRI ratings on multi-engine aircraft. The Dutch MoD approached the company to tender for the work and it won the business because of the flexibility and speed in which it is able to complete training. Says Alan: "Our first trainee was the boss, who was delighted with the fact he finished in 20 days rather than 21 we quoted, which included him going home for four days."

Alan and his co-founder Mark Young are ex-RAF instructors with successful commercial careers. They started out as On-Track PPL Ground Studies in 1997 and the company has evolved into a JAR/CAA approved specialist flight training school offering flight instructor and examiner courses and associated

additional qualifications. Their portfolio now includes instructor refresher seminars, FI/CPL, close formation flying, AOPA ground instructor course and AOPA aerobatic certificate, seaplane and RT training and exams as well as a host of advanced qualifications. On-Track is the only UK school to offer floatplane instructor training. With access to Cessna 152/172s, PA28/34s, Robin 200/2160is and a Husky A-1 Amphibian, as well as a flexible team which includes examiners, the company is able to offer highly tailored individual training.

The pair met in the early nineties when they were instructing at Brize Norton flying club. After they left the air force, they realised they could put their training skills to sound use in the civilian world and teach instructors how to teach. So they wrote a two-day seminar paper in accordance with JAR requirements, took the decision to keep operating costs down by leasing rather than owning aircraft and joined AOPA for the aerobatics training on offer, "and because we want to be part of an organisation that stands up for general aviation in this country". They then obtained the necessary CAA approvals and put together a world-class squadron of ex-RAF instructors, encompassing a staggering array of skills and experience. They retain their staff by paying higher rates than industry norms and involve them in

training. Alan flew in both the Falklands and Gulf Wars and spent many years as a flying instructor on the Tucano and Jet Provost teaching ab-initio and qualified pilots, eventually gaining an A2 Instructor Category. He says: "Many flight instructors just want to get airborne – they are interested in teaching, but not the nuts and bolts. That's where the aviation industry has fallen by the wayside and is sometimes a poor advert for training. If you want to be a schoolteacher you train and get qualifications and then you get supervised at a school and get feedback on how you're doing. Many people go to a flight training organisation get their CPL and IR then use it to build hours. Often you get a young lad or girl teaching and then they're gone after getting a job."

Mark was once commended on the New Year's Honour's List for his voluntary work teaching PPL ground studies. He has instructed all over the UK and his career includes time spent at Oxford Air Training as a CPL instructor and Flight Training Manager for



Opposite: Alan Newton (left) and John Halstead

Above: Shona Bowman with instructor Mark Young

Left: floatplane training is provided on the Husky

Right: Shona gets teaching tips from Alan

Below: a steep learning curve for Christine Bell



modular courses. As well as his flying and engineering background he has a degree in Professional Studies in Education. From the outset he was insistent that On-Track's instructor seminars had to be a valuable resource for participants.

It matters to the team that they teach people how to teach properly and they put in great efforts to maintain their standards. Says Mark: "We have nine staff at our seminars and we encourage every participant to talk. We try to create a safe atmosphere where people can try things out, without giving them advice. We only step in if they are technically incorrect."

"We teach the teacher on the first day. We don't just run the seminars as lectures. We have a theme for the day, which people don't know in advance. We try to make it topical. For example, one time there were quite a lot of controlled flight in to terrain accidents, so we talked about engine failure. We get people to do a 15-minute 'micro teach' – with the emphasis on the word 'teach'."

On-Track's instructor courses are all about learning how to teach. Alan says: "Teaching is breaking something down into small digestible chunks and checking people have absorbed it – it is not cookery demonstrating. We try to put the teaching element across. We are very keen on imparting knowledge. Obviously it has to be commercially viable, but we ask ourselves, 'What are you actually giving the customer?'"

Quite a lot, it would seem from the enthusiasm with which students and graduates talk about their experience with On-Track. One of them, Shona Bowman, an A321 pilot for BMI, drove several miles to talk about the benefits of training with On-Track. "I took a



year off when I fell pregnant and wanted to qualify as an instructor then go back to work part time and instruct part time," she says. "The best aspect of learning with On-Track is their flexibility and ability to do the training and the examination. I could book training days around my needs. I flew with Pat and John, and Alan did the rating".

Shona has since worked as a flying instructor for the British Disabled Flying Association and intends to look for an instructing job near to her home. "I love general aviation and am really looking forward to being back in a GA environment, meeting new students and encouraging people to fly," she says.

Another ex-student, Simon Mitchel, works next door at Wellesbourne Aviation. He says "Employers treat the training with On-Track as

a bonus point. I had great feedback from several schools when I was looking for a job. The structure of the courses is great discipline. I feel I've learned more in the last year from the point of view of operational safety than I have in 15 years of flying." Simon's ambition is to fly for an airline, but he is keen to continue instructing even when he gets his commercial seat.

Graduate Christine Bell felt she had picked up some bad habits in the 14 years since she had trained for her PPL. She found becoming an instructor a challenging but rewarding experience. She says: "For the last four years, nearly all of my PPL hours consisted of glider towing from an unlicensed airfield close to my home. A typical flight would consist of a prolonged period of climbing, followed by glider release. After that I had to nurse a very hot engine back to the airfield as quickly as possible, landing on a non standard circuit with a high risk of a go-round due to the proximity of other gliders."



"On day one I found myself at the bottom of a very steep learning curve, not only in terms of learning to teach, but also in flying to a satisfactory standard. All of the On-Track Aviation instructors are ex-military and are extremely well trained, and have high expectations of their eventual graduates. But at the end of the course, what have I got to offer a flying club? The answer is a very thorough grounding, which in itself has given me a lot more confidence."

Many students describe how the courses have helped them overcome the elements of instructing they were most apprehensive about, such as spinning and stalling. The step-by-step methods On-Track use enables them to approach teaching trickier manoeuvres with more confidence. Says one: "Stalling went from being a subject that I was dreading having to teach to one that I now really enjoy. It's one of those exercises where you can really see the student getting something out of it."

Along with a slew of satisfied customers passing on endorsements, On-Track has more military business in the pipeline. On the civilian side, the company wants to focus on its FI/CPL training. Says Alan, "What we do is give people a technique that works. Our instructors come from a broad background and lots of schools don't have that kind of experience. We have a very high experience level with good variety of backgrounds and the ability to nurture people's natural abilities".

As I prepare to leave a woman walks through the door having heard of On-Track through word-of-mouth. She wants to learn more about the courses on offer. Alan heads for the kettle... ■