

## Aviation grads take off in many directions

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They come from all over Canada to Abbotsford - aspiring pilots with sage advice from their families: have a backup plan.

What they get when they arrive is an educational experience unlike any other, one that prepares them for work above the clouds and behind the desks of the high-powered international aviation industry.

In 1996, the University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV) and Coastal Pacific Aviation (CPA) launched the first four-year aviation degree in Canada.

Not only do students complete their private and commercial pilot's licenses as part of the intensive program, but they also earn their bachelor of business administration (BBA) degree. All flight-related courses and training are delivered at CPA's **Abbotsford Airport** facility.

**Matthias Morel** - a native of Amherst, Nova Scotia - had boyhood dreams of becoming a pilot, first joining air cadets and then landing a plum high-school job-shadow opportunity in the cockpit of a long-haul flight from Halifax to Heathrow. He was hooked.

He did his research and connected with an alumni "buddy" from the UCFV/CPA program. In 2000, at 17 and straight out of high school, **Morel** moved to Abbotsford to enroll.

On the other side of the country, 17-year-old **Jamie Copeland** celebrated his high school grad in Shawnigan Lake, B.C., and also packed his bags.

Despite having a Navy fighter pilot for a father, **Copeland** arrived in Abbotsford with no flight experience whatsoever. A few "familiarization flights" were all it took to convince him he'd made the right decision.

West Vancouver resident Jeff Martin came from a family of aviators and attended air cadets as a teen, earning his glider license at 15 and his private pilot license at 16. He spent Grade 12 keeping his grades up in the hopes of being accepted into the program. He was.

One of the few women to complete the program, Syona Chuen was raised in Kenya but completed high school in Surrey.

As a teen, her desire to fly was so strong that she joined the local flying club and spent every extra penny accumulating air time. Research during her Grade 12 year led her to the UCFV/CPA program, which she began in September 2000.

**Morel, Copeland, Chuen, and Martin** became fast friends in their class of 17, carpooling, house-sharing, bonding over flying stories, and commiserating over deadlines.

"Coastal offers a stepped approach to learning, starting with your private license the first year, commercial pilot's license the second, multi-engine license and instrument flight rating in the third,

and then finally the 747 simulator program in the last year," **Copeland** said.

"The learning curve is extremely steep and the program highly regimented. Coastal offers one of the highest standards of training in Canada, which has certainly given me a leg up in the real world."

So what's it really like? All four have dealt with friends and family expecting them to go off to flight school and come back as hotshot long-haul 747 pilots in their first few years.

In reality, most aspiring pilots earn their dues working "on the ramp," serving as check-in agents, baggage handlers, fuel attendants, or other ground crew before winning an entry-level opportunity with the flight crew.

Others have been rumored to fly for free in exchange for the opportunity to accumulate enough in-flight hours to move on to their next level of accreditation.

While all credit a love of flight for driving them to the program, these four alumni also share a practical approach to their careers.

"It doesn't take much for your career in the skies to be over," **Copeland** said. "I know of at least six pilots in a group of 60 who have lost or come close to losing their medical certificate in the last two years."

"The market for pilots is so cyclical," **Morel** added. "It's important to have a backup plan."

That's where the business degree comes in, which all of these grads agree was an important selling feature for their parents as well.

UCFV offers specialized business courses such as International Air Transportation and Aviation Management as part of the academic programming to make it even more relevant.

"The business degree is a great differentiator," Chuen said. "It makes you much more marketable and better qualified for just about any job in the industry."

And what jobs might those be? Career paths for BBA (aviation) grads - even among these four - are surprisingly diverse.

The day after their last final exam in 2005, both **Morel** and **Copeland** began new jobs at **Air North**, crediting the connections they made through Coastal and UCFV for the opportunity.

Both started doing counter duty but soon **Copeland** moved into special projects and **Morel** was put in charge of a new Las Vegas operation.

**Morel** has now temporarily shelved his flight log to focus on a specialty marketing consultation business he co-founded. **Altitude Consulting** contracts out to aviation and tourism-related organizations, such as the **Abbotsford Airport** and **Air North**.

**Copeland** took advantage of airline employee interline discounts, heading off to Australia for a visit, and now works in operations for **Air North** in Vancouver and with **Altitude Consulting** and others on business-planning projects. Both are eyeing international markets as part of their future plans.

After his graduation in 2003, Jeff Martin moved to Pemberton, B.C. to fly gliders and tow planes.

"This was probably the best job I have ever had," he recalled, "because I got to live close to home, in the mountains, and finally get paid to fly an airplane!"

Martin then spent three months as a hangar helper with Courtesy Air in remote Buffalo Narrows, Sask. before he was promoted to first officer on a Navajo six-passenger, twin-engine aircraft.

He then trained as first officer on the C-99, and 14 months later, he became a captain on the Navajo.

Now, at 23, he is captain of a nine-passenger Beechcraft King Air turboprop with West Wind Aviation in Prince Albert, Sask., and is also training new pilots on the aircraft.

When Syona Chuen graduated in 2004, she followed her boyfriend - who had completed the program a year earlier - north to Peace River, Alta.

She served pizza for months while waiting for an opening with the airline, and then began as a counter agent and baggage handler.

On Dec. 30, 2005, Chuen received a call offering her a first-officer position on the Jet Stream - a 19-seat, twin-turbine aircraft. The next day, she started ground school.

Today, she is one of five female pilots of the 30 total at Peace Air.

The grads all say that their experience at UCFV and Coastal prepared them well for their careers.

"I would recommend this program to anyone. The combination of great friends, an excellent flying program, and a solid business education on campus at UCFV made for a tremendous experience that I'll never forget," Martin said.