

Paul Cullen reports on the massive international investment taking place at Shannon Aerospace

# Shannon: the silicon valley of aviation?

## CAREERS IN INDUSTRY — AEROSPACE

SHANNON will become to aviation what Silicon Valley is to electronics or Zurich is to banking — that was the proud prediction made by Shannon Aerospace when it was founded in 1990 by a partnership of Guinness Peat Aviation, Swissair and Lufthansa. Since then, to make the dream come true, almost £80 million has been invested in a 63-acre site directly north of Shannon Airport. Green fields and mulching cows have given way to a giant hangar capable of accommodating up to six modern passenger aircraft at any one time.

There is little in Irish industry to compare with the scale of this project, which opens for business on September 19th. Aircraft maintenance will be the sole activity of Shannon Aerospace. Total employment is expected to reach 1,000, including 700 aircraft maintenance technicians (AMTs). On training alone, the company is spending £25 million in the largest programme of its kind ever seen in Ireland.

Together with the Team Aer Lingus project at Dublin Airport, Shannon Aerospace represents a daring attempt to create a large-scale aircraft maintenance industry in this country, where little existed heretofore. The hope is that the two companies will

provide thousands of well-paid and interesting jobs in the cosmopolitan and fast-growing aviation industry, thereby creating the platform for further growth.

So far, 300 AMTs have been taken on at Shannon. Most of the new recruits are school leavers, all with the Leaving Certificate, though a few already have crafts experience. The training programme lasts about two years, and includes on-the-job training for up to a year at Swissair's technical base in Zurich, or one of Lufthansa's maintenance sites at Hamburg, Frankfurt and Berlin.

AMTs perform a wide range of repair and maintenance tasks on aircraft that require servicing, following instruction on job cards. There can be up to 10,000 different job cards for a large aircraft. "So even technicians with 10 years experience will come to jobs they've never done before," says John Horgan, head of human resources at Shannon Aerospace.

Within the training programme there are three specialist areas, hi-tech equivalents of the traditional disciplines of fitter, electrician and mechanic: "Structures and composites", "electrics and avionics" and the largest group, "systems and engines". The structures group, for example, gains as much experi-

ence of working with advanced composite materials such as carbon fibre as it does of handling sheet metal.

Qualified AMTs — the first are due to complete their training from next month — emerge with FÁS and City and Guilds certificates and a guaranteed job. There is, however, a curious stipulation that these qualifications cannot be transferred to other companies, so employees would need retraining before they could work for another employer.

"So far, Lufthansa and Swissair are extremely pleased with our technicians. There hasn't been a single complaint about the quality of workmanship. Lufthansa would even like to hire some of our people — but we're not letting them," says Horgan.

"The hardest part of the training was here in Shannon — at times, it was like a military school," says Jacinta Courtney (20), who leaves shortly for a second stint with Lufthansa in Hamburg. There were no communication problems abroad, since everyone spoke English. "We have a major advantage in the company in that English is the common language of the industry and all the manuals are in English," she says.

From Ruan in Co Clare, Courtney turned down several

college offers and switched from a secretarial career to accept a trainee place in Shannon Aerospace: "This just seemed more interesting." Out of 300 trainees taken on so far, only 14 are women, although the company would like to see more and the proportion of women recruits has risen slightly in recent months.

Colm O Ceallaigh (26), from Kilmaley, Co Clare (about half the trainees come from the mid-west region) worked as a fitter at the ESB's Moneypoint station before leaving to travel the world for a year. Although he's training in the structures and composites group, he says he is now working with "completely different standards, materials and jobs" from those in the ESB. With the safety of hundreds of air passengers depending on the work of each technician, "a lot of the training concentrates on preparing you to take individual responsibility for everything you do," says O Ceallaigh.

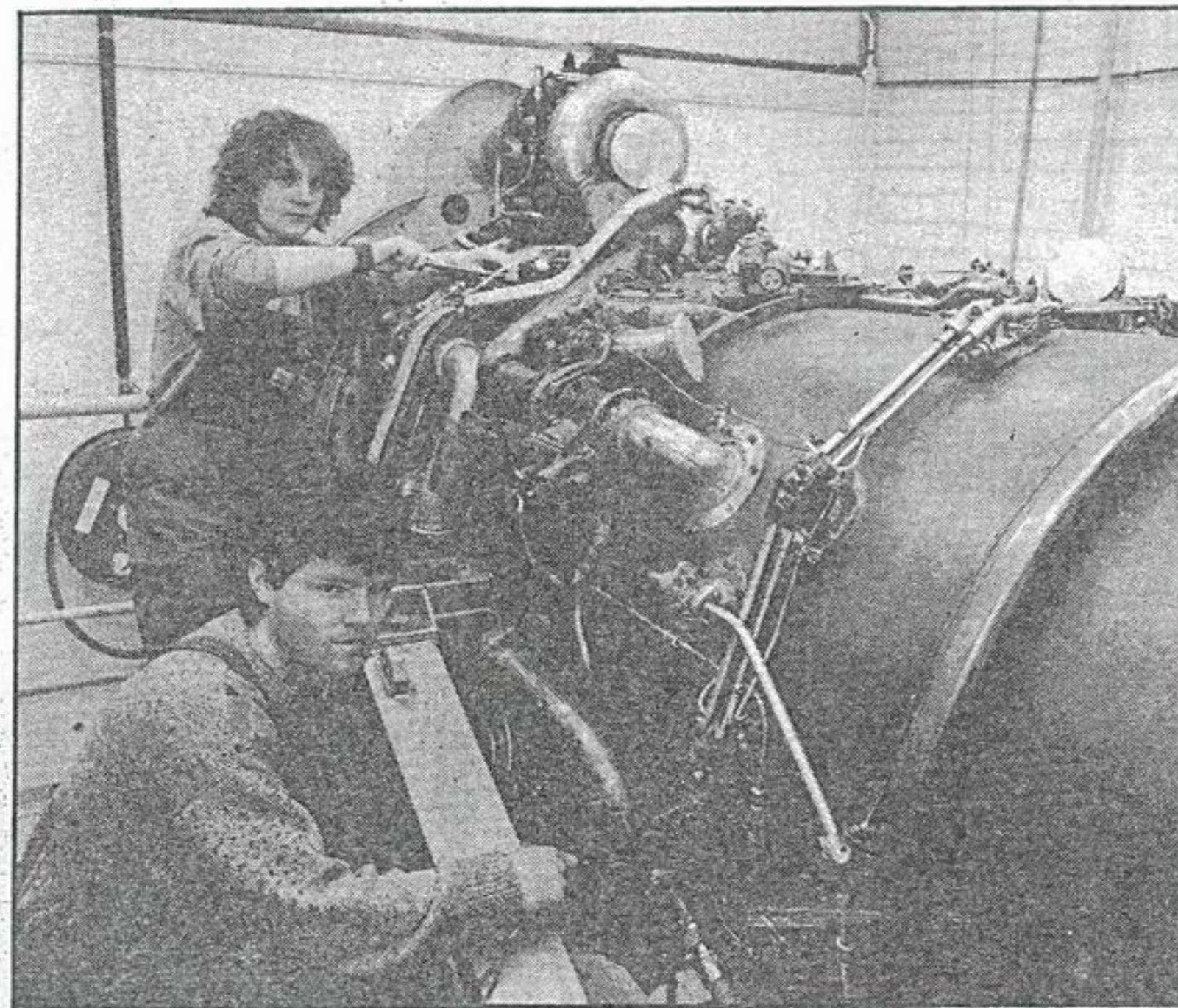
Trainees are paid a FÁS training allowance during their apprenticeship, and then start on a salary of £10,500 per annum, rising to £12,500 over five years. According to Horgan: "The technicians will enjoy excellent career opportunities in a new, expanding company where the management — the supervisors

and instructors on secondment from Swissair and Lufthansa — plan to relinquish their jobs in five year's time."

AMTs will work a 39-hour week on a flexitime basis. "The huge cost of modern passenger aircraft puts great pressure on airline companies to maximise their utilisation. Thus, many aircraft today spend more time in the air than on the ground. It follows that the pressure on each technician in the company to complete multi-million pound maintenance contracts on time will at times be immense.

As well as the AMTs, a complete range of ancillary staff — marketing, sales, finance, planning — is being recruited at Shannon. Since large-scale aircraft maintenance is new to Ireland, many of these positions have had to be filled from abroad. In line with the GPA ethic, executives at Shannon Aerospace can look forward to plenty of hard work — and handsome rewards.

The growth and liberalisation of air traffic, 1992 and political changes in Eastern Europe — these are some of the trends that provided the impetus for setting up Shannon Aerospace. The Gulf War and the ensuing recession means that the company's first years will be somewhat more turbulent than was originally foreseen, but Horgan says Shannon Aerospace still plans to recruit 700 AMTs by 1996. The next round of recruitment will take place later this year.



● Trainees Colm O Ceallaigh and Jacinta Courtney at work on an aircraft engine at Shannon Aerospace

PHOTOGRAPH: PADDY WHELAN