

A Letter from Industry with Capt. Yaw.

A brief history of Aviation in Ghana

When we talk about aviation in Ghana, we often miss the point about how important Ghana has been, and is, in relation to world aviation developments.

I remember first flying to Ghana on a Ghana Airways flight from Heathrow in August 1994. My wife and I, with our two children and a young Ghanaian girl we were accompanying, boarded the wonderful DC10 registration 9G-ANA. As we stepped on board, we were overwhelmed with a sense of Ghana. The colours of the ladies' dresses, the careful and polite assistance from the men, the welcome of the crew that out-rated any European airline and - as our children pointed out - the BIG Ghana flag on the tail of this duchess of the air, elegant and majestically carrying the flag of Ghana across the world.

Little did we know at that point how important Ghana was with regard to aviation history. Over the past 15 years – and many hours of flying over and around Ghana - we have collected many stories (some first-hand, others from a friend's aunt's brother's cousin's best friend's brother's wife's father-in-law who knew somebody... well you get the idea!).

One thing we discover in history, is that anecdotal records are often all that remains of an event, our African story-telling being an integral part of that. Some of the stories are a little too wonderful to be factual, and have to be put into the 'smile drawer', but there remain many amazing, true and believable records of the history of aviation in Ghana, some of which we have collected below. Of course, a story without a moral is not a story! So please bear with me as we consider the story of aviation in Ghana, as I know it! I apologise in advance for any errors or omissions!

In 1903, at Kitty Hawk in the USA, two bicycle-makers produced and flew the first powered, controlled aircraft on Thursday 17th December; and so, Aviation in Ghana can take the name Yaw – which has a double meaning – since Yaw is a name here in Ghana, in aviation the same 'Yaw' is actually pronounced 'Yourr', meaning the left to right movement of the nose-to-tail axis of the aircraft!

In the anecdotal records, we are told that in 1927 there are reports that an aircraft landed in Kintampo, piloted by a lady pilot (does anybody have a photo of this or more information?).

In Germany, in the mid 1930's, a young medical student by the name of Hanna Reitsch learned to fly and wanted to become a flying Doctor in Africa. However, circumstances were such that

she could not, and instead went on to become a pilot of fixed-wing aircraft and the first woman to fly a helicopter, set over 40 aviation records and became a world-renowned aviator.

During the 1939-45 World War, the Gold Coast was a busy transit point for many aircraft and played its role in the air-support efforts to the highest level: something that we should be proud of and remember each year on Remembrance Day (11 November).

In 1957, when Dr Kwame Nkrumah led the Gold Coast into an independent Ghana, a vision of an aviation-aware nation unfolded. Having a probable 65 plus airfields and landing areas established by the British and others, Nkrumah realised the potential for aviation to meet many needs. He also realised, ahead of the pack, that international travel would be necessary for sustainable growth, and thus created what is considered as the first African Airline (Ghana Airways), established and starting operations in July 1958.

All airlines need pilots (as does the Air Force), and both civil and military aviation need young aviation-aware people to enter the gates of aviation careers. Therefore, it was only natural that the Nkrumah Administration went on to show the world how serious Ghana was about aviation by starting the first 'black' African flying school. Hanna Reichst (the German pilot noted earlier) came to Ghana at President Nkrumah's request, and enjoyed living and working here from 1962 – 1966.

At the first Air Force Day celebration in Takoradi, on 24th October 1964, President Nkrumah is recorded as having made the following statements:

“... I am delighted to see two young women among those who are undergoing their [pilot] training. May I extend my special congratulations to them and may their efforts serve as a growing symbol of the womanhood of Ghana....

...I recall that during recent floods in the Northern and Volta Regions, the Air Force together with other military and civilian organisations played an important part in carrying essential supplies and foodstuffs to the affected areas in order to relieve the hardships of the people...

...Recently the Air Force has been assigned the task of helping the Ministry of Health in the campaign for the eradication of malaria which is now proceeding nicely...

...I have also directed that a scheme be established for the use of Ghana Air Force planes in a Flying Doctor Service throughout the country. This will bring quick and efficient medical service to our people by linking hospitals and medical centres throughout the country...”

Please just pause and think for a moment. In 1966 Ghana had 65 landing areas, women learning to fly in the Ghana Air Force, an airline, a flying school, a working airborne relief programme, an active aerial dispersal programme to eradicate malaria, a planned flying doctor service. Wow! What a history... Stop and think for a moment longer: Ghana, in 1966, was ahead of so many countries in so many ways. This cannot be taken away from Ghana and its people and, when we consider what we can do today, we should look at what we already achieved 50 years ago!

The initiatives in place at that point gave many young Ghanaian people exposure to aviation and career ambitions beyond the expectations envisaged by many of the so-called 'developed' nations today. Because of this, Ghana has benefitted enormously from President Nkrumah's short but effective developmental creativity, and many have been touched directly or indirectly by this in a positive way.

Like many countries from 1966 through to the mid 1990's, Ghana's aviation was limited to principally the national airline and the Air Force. Ghana Air Force, I am sure, has an accurate history of its machines and activities, which I hope will soon be published in a suitable format for us all to enjoy. However, the civil and general aviation history for that period is not so easy to find details on over this period (of course some of you know better). I am sure that the reason for this is the loss of vision of how General Aviation has a part to play in development.

This vision was re-ignited in the 1990's when Ghana Air Force established Ghana Air-link providing a reasonable and efficient domestic service. I flew with Air-Link on several occasions and it was a real privilege to be aboard this public/Air Force co-operation venture. Air-link ceased operations after a sad incident around 2000. Nonetheless, it set the scene for the positive development of the sector. Several small planes started operating in the country in corporate and private hands; CTK started a survey company using light aircraft, and an Aero Club called Sankofa started to offer pilot training to the general public. The aero club was apparently growing with many different two and four seat aircraft flying regularly. Operating out of the base at Afiemya, the club closed its doors in 2001 when the facility was no longer made available.

Continuing on the sad note, for various reasons beyond the scope of this history, after a brief struggle in the intensive care unit of airlines, Ghana Airways was folded, and laid to rest for whatever reasons in August 2004.

Of course, we all know that Ghana International Airlines was born in 2005 too! But, lest we forget, so were CityLink and Antrak - both operating since 2003, and both flying with 9G (Ghana) registered aircraft, thus creating growth in the Ghanaian aviation industry and opportunities for Ghanaians to enter the industry at different levels. So, we now have three

airlines in Ghana - that is more than many countries – and per capita is pretty good. We are led to believe that the climate is now right for more to start soon, and we should be pleased to see that competition is coming, since it will make it all the more competitive.

So, now that we are smiling again, and looking at the positives – and that is good to do – let us look at the other developments outside of military aviation that are improving the options here in Ghana.

Kotoka International Airport (KIA) has seen many improvements, is constantly looking to improve, and has over twenty airlines operating to and from its doors weekly. KIA is seen as a major aviation gateway to the sub-region. Accra is a destination of choice for the air-traveller to West Africa and is rated highly among the West African stops by pilots who come here. The American Federal Aviation Administration is currently assessing restoring the coveted '1' rating that will truly put us back where we belong at the top of the tree!

Our regional airports at Takoradi, Sunyani, Kumasi, Wa and Tamale have plenty of room for growth of movements, and are attracting attention for a variety of aircraft movements. We are led to believe that very soon work is to commence at some of these regional airports to further improve their facilities. Ghana Airports Company Ltd is looking at how to make these airports more General Aviation friendly, and thus encourage movements of light aircraft for business, agriculture, medical aviation and tourism in the country.

United Aviation Services is a Ghanaian-owned GCAA-approved Aircraft Maintenance Organisation, based at Kotoka and providing support and maintenance to many companies and individuals with aircraft. With internationally-trained and recognised service personnel and excellent facilities, UAS provides the necessary support to enable flight operations of a wide range of aircraft.

Techiman Municipality in Brong Ahafo has opened its Community Airfield – opening up new opportunities for further development of one of the busiest market towns in West Africa. Inspired young people from Aysitu International School stimulated this development after an Aviation Week at Kpong Airfield, where 17 youngsters aged 14-16 learned about airplanes, meteorology, and the theory of flight - and all took a trial flight. Techiman looks set to become an example of community 'self-development' and should stimulate many more community aviation initiatives across the regions. Already, Maase (near Tafo) has made good progress on its Community Airfield, and hopes to open before the end of the year – others are getting their applications ready – preparing to take advantage of the growth in aviation that Ghana is beginning to enjoy.

Remember, an airfield is a focal point where communities benefit from transport, medical aviation, business and tourism – provided the facility is well-maintained and supported – by the whole community.

A glowing example of this is Kpong Airfield in the Eastern Region, which seems to grow every week with new hangars, more and more aircraft, improvements to the workshops, public viewing areas and is already the second busiest airfield in Ghana with regard to aircraft movements. Over 3000 visitors per year go to Kpong to watch built-in-Ghana aircraft, and many hundreds take their first-ever flight there. With over 70 student pilots currently learning to fly in built-in-Ghana aircraft, Kpong is setting standards for the entry-level class of aviation to international standards.

Medicine on the Move, a British Charity and Ghanaian-registered NGO, will soon start operating its 'Flying Doctor' service out of Kpong using aircraft being built in Ghana, by Ghanaians, and adapted to the needs of the mission...just like was planned in 1964.

WAASPS in the Eastern Region has, and is building, 2- and 4-seat aircraft suitable for a wide range of uses such as personal transport, medical flights, aerial dispersal (treating crops, and public health service applications such as malaria control), banner-towing, amphibian operations (landing on land or water), a new Multi-Role Aircraft for humanitarian relief, and more.

Our Civil Aviation Authority is striving to ensure the highest safety standards, entertains excellent dialogue with the stakeholders, and has started to post NOTAM's (NOTice to AirMen) on the internet to enhance safety information, ahead of many other – not just African - nations.

And so, Ghana is once again striving to lead at the forefront of aviation – at many different levels. So let us rejoice as we realise our potential. That does not mean it is time to sit down and relax - far from it. We must work very hard to reach the top and, when we reach the top, we have to work even harder to stay there – or our demise is more rapid than that of a falling star... Or put another way, a pilot who relaxes and stops flying the plane, simply because he is airborne, will quickly realise that he is on a downward spiral, in a spin! So stay on the controls, keep your wits about you and 'fly the plane, fly the plane, fly the plane' since that is the key to staying on top of the world!

Please just take another moment to consider that these recent developments have taken us to the point where young Ghanaian men and women are learning to fly in built-in-Ghana aircraft; we have growth in the number of Ghanaian air operators, new airfields opening, flying schools, air borne relief programmes, an aircraft factory, maintenance facilities, possibilities of using built-in-Ghana aircraft for aerial dispersal programmes, a Flying Doctor service, and it is all available in Ghana - today.

Consequently, we must jointly and corporately support Aviation in Ghana. We must all support our aviation industry, patronise our airlines and our flying schools, use the services of local aircraft to carry out surveys, banner-towing, etc. If appropriate, order your built-in-Ghana aircraft. Support GCAA by not infringing their lands, avoid leaving rubbish that might attract birds around airfields, avoid loitering near security areas. Support your regional airport by respecting the regulations, especially protecting the fences and perimeters of these essential establishments. Do not cut across little-used airfields, report anybody who tampers with any airfield property, together protect the aviation collateral that we have, and together invest to make it grow into a bigger industry. Together, enjoy watching safe flights taking place in our skies, creating new job opportunities and greater growth potential in the nation.

Wow! What a history, stop and think for a moment longer. Wow! What a future!

(if you have some photo, anecdote or artefact from the History of Civil Aviation in Ghana, please let me know via info@waasps.com)

Capt Yaw is Chief Flying Instructor and Chief Engineer with WAASPS Ltd, Aviation for Development, at Kpong Airfield, near Kpong in the Eastern Region www.waasps.com