

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

About 10 days ago there was a lot of excitement in Ghana about seeing a certain celebrity from the USA (a chap called President Obama). This excitement and media coverage including repeats of repeats has continued! For some of us there was a bigger interest than the 'main-man' – the amazing and beautiful celebrity group that came in with him. No, not Michelle and their two lovely children. My interest was not in the people, the security and the likes – no, not at all – but rather in the fleet of varied, outstandingly maintained and well-equipped aircraft.

I must confess to a certain feeling of 'WOW' when I got to see first hand 'Air Force One'. This rather old Boeing 747 sitting on the tarmac just a couple of hundred metres from me, majestic, elegant, incredibly clean and well presented, made me so weak at the knees I could metaphorically ask that plane out on a date! The 747 is a beautiful machine any day, but this one is a bit special – not because of who flies in it, but how it is equipped.

Further down the apron were some real stars that missed out on their TV slots, machines which I hope not to see doing their real work in Ghana. The C17 Globemaster - machine of distinction. Those who were near the airport could not miss the very high T-tail of the C17, those who were around when it flew will never forget the silhouette of the machine in the sky and droning of the engines as it leaps skywards like an obese, lovesick angel. The C17 comes into its own in the war and relief theatres. Capable of moving vehicles, troops and amazing amounts of food aid, the C17 is the celebrity that local and international networks missed out on during the visit. For me, the C17 was the REAL star of the show.

My 'pin-up' carries 77 tonnes of food-aid (1,500+ bags of rice) or equipment, at 800+km/hr, operates from runways less than 2,000m long and is the 'flexible-air-juggernaut' of choice for relief operations throughout the world. Much as this machine is impressive, it has drawbacks making it unlikely to be a machine we will see on West-African Air Force fleets. Not only is it a teeny-weeny bit costly at an estimated quarter billion dollars a pop (GHc375,000,000), it is not cheap to maintain and you would not want to pay the insurance! Taking nearly twenty man-hours of maintenance for one hour's operations and consuming fuel at rates per hour that could run a fleet of our GAF Fokker 27s for the week, this beautiful, capable and outstanding machine is something at which we should 'look and don't touch', as our mothers might put it.

I am sure that our young men and women of the Ghana Armed Forces enjoyed the C17 visit, and dreamed of having one in the hangar at a GAF facility (or at home in their back gardens) and we all dream of owning things that are beyond our means - which is not a bad thing, if kept in perspective.

How many business people would love to own their own 20-tonne truck because it would be easier than the movements they do with their current 2.5-tonne KIA? How many would desire to own a 52-seat bus but currently have a 15-seat tro-tro? How many would want to live in a 20-bedroom mansion but still live in a 3-bedroom house? Dreams help us to aim higher, but we must be realistic and not go beyond what is appropriate in our choices in relation to our operations.

If the C17 were so wonderful and so capable, why then did the USA send so many different types of machines? The reason is simple – appropriate machines for appropriate applications in line with the depth of the pocket.

It would not have been impossible to visit Cape Coast with the C17 or Air Force One 747 – unless we built a massive runway for a one-off application. No, they used helicopters – perhaps more and a lot bigger than they needed to, but they could afford it and they do have certain security issues to take into account, which are far beyond the scope of this musing!

Similarly, our businesses with a 2.5-tonne truck can be flexible since the vehicle fits into the same category as cars for purposes of driver licensing, consume fuel at rates that can be afforded even if moving a smaller load, and can do two or three trips for loads beyond its one-trip capacity (because we do not overload in Ghana). Same story for the tro-tro owner and for those with ambitions for a 20-bedroom mansion in line with the Nigerian Movie representation of a small family home. Whatever we have we must be able to afford, maintain and operate. I look at many of the big and successful companies and realise that they have an approach that respond to these three criteria. Most fleets operate motorcycles, cars, pick-ups, small trucks, etc. Nobody would dream of sending an important document in an A4 envelope across town in their 20-tonne truck – they would use a motor-cycle or saloon car – preferably a Tico! Likewise, there is little point in owning a 20-tonne truck that is really only needed twice a year, it would be smarter to hire one when necessary. Just because we can afford something it is not the reason to do it, especially in these economically uncertain times! Prudent, appropriate acquisition, maintenance and operation are essential to long term success.

I guess I would love to have my own C17 Globemaster, but my runway is only 800m long – and it would not fit in any of my hangars either – nor do I have (even afford) the appropriate licence to fly it, and I do not think that TOR would want to run the fuel to Kpong Airfield everyday either! Therefore, I will continue to operate with my beautifully made in Ghana two- and four-seat Short Take Off and Landing aircraft that can do most of the things I need, fly to any point in Ghana in less time than other transport methods, be maintained locally to high standards, flown on local licences, use readily available automotive fuels, land on the shortest unprepared landing areas and create jobs and prosperity in rural areas. I would not use them to fly to America, but I don't go there often! I do go to Sunyani, Takoradi, Techiman, Kumasi, etc regularly and my machines can do that cheaper and more effectively than other transport methods and so I am happy with my choice and level of operation – and can maintain them!

It is good to dream, but it is also important to make the most use of what we have in appropriate, affordable, cost-effective, maintenance aware ways, using third-party solutions when we need to.

Have a good, safe, dream-filled and vision-led week considering each acquisition on the principles of 'afford, maintain and operate' for sustainable, safe and appropriate growth.

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