

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

By the time this is printed I am sure that the news will already be out. It is exciting to have played a small part in the development of an individual, an industry and Ghana, and to watching this news develop over 15 years... A young Ghanaian lady has achieved her pilots licence on her 21st birthday!

I first saw Patricia Mawuli Nyekodzi, but did not know her name – nor how to pronounce it, just over two years ago when I flew over the area where she lives. There was a group of about five youngsters playing less than two kilometres from the South Western corner of Kpong Airfield, and when they saw our training aircraft fly overhead they would bolt for the trees, or hide in the bushes, for the first few times! Little-by-little they realised that the aircraft was not going to harm them and took more and more interest in the brightly coloured Rotax powered trainer.

Then, one day in June 2007 Patricia plucked up the courage to come and ask for a summer job, whilst she waited for her SSS results (Home Economics). I am not over keen on taking-on young people, you know the expression ‘employ a teenager whilst they still know everything’ and ‘they do not want a job – just a salary’ as well as many more reasons not to employ young (and perhaps female) people. Nonetheless, she was very keen and clearly wanted to work in an area where she could observe the flying machines better and find out more about them. After about fifteen minutes, with some encouragement from my wife, I asked her to write an application, a five hundred word essay on why she wanted to work with us. She asked for a pen and paper and compiled it there and then, in the office, in her own hand without support from others – all original spontaneous thoughts. She put down about three hundred words, well composed and with a spark that, suitably fanned, could become a flame.

After much thought I gave her a job – removing tree stumps from the areas around the runways ready for new taxi-ways, etc. The next morning she was out in the bush swinging a mattock and wielding a cutlass, making stumps give up their hold upon the earth with the ease of a small boy picking sweets out of an open bowl. The male staff members tried to compete.... I do mean tried, because they really struggled to keep up with her – and some abandoned the competition! I was pleased, and thought that she would be able to clear a good area before she gets her results and I would be happy to have had a summer helper who motivated my regular staff into doing their jobs with more gusto!

Then there was a fateful day when this young lady was weeding near the workshop, and the young man on our aircraft engineering training programme at that time was caught ‘thieving’. I am known for not being the quiet type, and that day I was not quiet – not at all, apparently I used some bad words and very loudly! Left without a person to hold the wings being fitted to the aircraft being worked on, I barked at the young lady wielding a machete in her hand. She was clearing the area around the workshop, and I needed someone to hold a wing – not just anyhow, but carefully too. Despite seeing a shouting and not-very-polite boss, who was clearly not in the most convivial of moods, she placed the machete to one side and came to help. Not only did she hold the wing as requested, she watched me put the wing pins in and copied the task perfectly in the area where she was working, to the extent of ensuring the heads were orientated correctly and the locking coils fitted without spoiling them. To cut a long story short, by the beginning of August 2007 she had proven her interest and shown enough effort,

ability and determination for the company to offer her a three-year apprenticeship as a Trainee UL Aircraft Technician.

We regularly ferry aircraft between airfields, for our use or for missions we are asked to carry out, and Patricia was always – and still is - ready to be aboard for the ferry. These ferry flights are often just a short flight from a short bush strip at the factory site to the main training runway, but nonetheless a flight on which she would want to take the controls. Patricia wanted to learn to fly!

Two years on she is not only a rapidly developing and daily skill gaining light aircraft engineer, she is also the first woman to gain the Ghana National Pilots Licence (PUP), on her 21st birthday! All this from starting with a mattock and cutlass in the bush, helping to create a safer airfield environment.

Over my years working in Ghana I have seen many complain at the problems of training in Ghana. It is true – stories like Patricia's are not commonplace – any where in the world... but it is now clearly demonstrated in the above story that young people in Ghana are worth investing in – IF they are prepared to invest in themselves.

Not all young people are worth the time, effort and money – and some do not want the effort made with them - but we have to work as business and right thinking people towards spotting the good ones and opening opportunities to enable these individuals to grow. The growth of our companies, and ultimately the Ghanaian economy, depends on it.

I remember my father telling me a story, supposedly true, about Colgate the Christian businessman and a smart fellow too, probably with great smile from the money he made selling toothpaste!! Apparently when William Colgate's son Samuel wanted to join the company he made him work in the post room – the lowest of jobs. He then made him sweep the factory floors, then work the machines, then repair the machines, work in marketing, sales, purchasing and finance before allowing him to sit on the top floor with the 'big men'. Later, Samuel went on lead the company to great things, because he knew how it all worked. From the bottom up! Moreover, nobody could argue with him about how the job was done – he had done all of the jobs!

I remember sweeping floors, wiping down machine tools and robots, getting covered in hydraulic oil when a line blew, getting cut by sheets of metal, struggling to develop new, better and cleaner cutting sequences, walking for miles in the rain and the snow to get to work, and generally suffering – but all for a 'good cause', that of my development. Consequently, I can talk with confidence *through* experience. One day Patricia will recount her story about digging up stumps and getting blisters on her hands as part of her foundation as a pilot-engineer who gained their first pilots licence on their twenty first birthday...

So, very well done Patricia – you have worked hard, studied your theory, worked on your practical flying and committed yourself to a career in light aviation as an engineer – and now you *are* a pilot – learning and passing your licence in an aircraft that *you* have worked on and maintain! Not many people in the world can make this claim – let alone those in Africa! Just remember, 'fly the plane, fly the plane, fly the plane' and that 'Safety is NO accident' – you have only just begun an adventure of a lifetime.

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