

## Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

Powered aircraft as we know them started out in the early 1900's but did not really catch on until after the middle of the last century. Starting off as a simple 'toy for the rich and eccentric' passing through the 'military asset' and becoming a 'necessity for business' over that same period. In less than 50 years, the aircraft trans-mutated from a singular machine to a flock of metal-birds migrating daily across the globe; from a rare and valuable collectors item to a commonplace icon of international travel. Today they come in all sizes from 'single-seaters' to 'eight-hundred-plus-seaters'; from affordable, functional and efficient to billion-dollar, multi-crew, ostentatious flying palaces.

Although such a growth pattern seems extra-ordinary, it is incredibly pedestrian compared to the mobile phone. In the early days of 'wooden box with handle to wind them up telephones' for the curious, rich and powerful wanting to shout into contraptions rather than talk to people in the late 1870's, to the introduction of the 'mobile' phone in the mid 1970's – barely 100 years elapsed. The mobile phone has transformed from a 'weight-lifters phone' to the slim, annoying, all-singing-and-dancing conversation interrupting device of today. Mobile phones have transformed Africa, from the richest families down to those at the very bottom of the wealth ladder. They have provided communication for the masses – almost. Despite claims that mobile phones 'work' or even 'actually work' along with recent declarations of 'loving you', 'everywhere you go', and 'being part of a family because you have my chip', these are inanimate objects which the users seem to accept incredible shortfalls from – and feed vast sums of money into.

If cars or airplanes were as erratic and unreliable as mobile phones, nobody would be safe: - Cars would suddenly stop working and need to be pushed to the nearest 'signal point' to work again; aircraft would land at the wrong airport, in the wrong country requesting money to be paid due to the networks 'error in administrative practice'. Thankfully the erratic, unreliable and expensive world of mobile phones is totally unacceptable in the automotive and aviation world.

Much as cars have created environmental impact through the millions of hectares of tarmac, parking lots, etc. – it has been to the benefit of all; aviation has little effect on the ground – just a few airports, which generally do not destroy the landscape and have a positive effect on many species of wildlife. Flying around this week, as I do, I have noticed a lot of new telecoms towers sprouting up. I guess that with so many telecoms companies, TV companies and the desire for every company to have their own personal towers, it is inevitable that Ghana's lower airspace is beginning to look like a glorified pin cushion – with all of the steel pins being painted red and white.

From a cockpit perspective, it would be nice to be able to identify each towers 'operator' from a fly-by. I notice that some are painting the fences in company colours – but I would like to have ID plates clearly visible on the lower and upper sections. Such a concept would make ground identification and air identification straightforward and provide the ability to contact the correct owner for 'mis-placing' their tower or not having working lights or, perhaps, not having permissions. A combination of approvals number and GPS location could be a simple, easily administered and implemented system.

The EPA, GCAA and NCA have their work cut out with the overabundance of steel obstacles planted in the soil and growing up to spoil our sky lines, along with their associated application and approvals processes. If you visit Accra, Takoradi, Kumasi or another growing city, you can probably count over 100 towers, from short and stubby to tall and skinny, from almost any outdoor location!

It seems that with more TV stations we will get more towers too – if they cannot share facilities due to ego-issues, and that every ten kilometres alongside the rural roads somebody ‘needs’ a new tower – next to an existing one. In some sort of Freudian manner there seems to be a competition to need to have a ‘bigger one’.

At least on the roads we all share the same road, irrespective of the car type we drive. Imagine that Toyota and Nissan could not drive on the same piece of road – it would be a mess. Airlines all share the same airports – you do not have to land at one airport if travelling with KLM and another if travelling with British Airways. Any half-right thinking individual would tell you that it would simply not work – it would spoil the environment, raise costs and leave scars on the landscape of an unacceptable nature.

As a lover of Ghana’s magnificent landscape and fabulous communities, I have a simple dilemma: We need mobile phone services - they have become an essential tool in business and a lifeline to communities everywhere. However, we also need to protect our environment and airspace – if not for us, then for our children and our children’s children’s children.

All of these red and white pins in the ‘tower-pin-cushion of Ghana’ are going to need painted, serviced, electricity back-up units, security guards, etc. Already there are teams running around just changing the lights at the top of the towers! It must make sense to stop the, literally, thousands of new towers planned to grow into skyline spoiling edifices and to make low-level aviation safer! The current state of affairs is simply not sustainable – as I am sure any seamstress will tell you – you cannot keep on sticking in these pins and expect the pin cushion to last long!!!

It is probably only a matter of time before a tower goes up without permission and causes an incident for an airborne activity. It appears that some tower-hungry companies, in their hunt for profit, coupled with lack of understanding of the use of the air above the ground, start their constructions before they get all of their approvals in a line. From their perspectives, I understand – but if airlines started operating willy-nilly and created and started using new airports without authorization – they would not remain in business.

Sadly, telecoms companies are ‘geese that lay golden eggs’ as far as governments all over the world are concerned. The licence fees, tax revenues and the like from the telecoms sector is a major contributor to the National Purse. Nonetheless, I can’t help getting the feeling that the whole thing is getting a little out-of-hand.

We really do not need all of these towers – and we certainly don’t need all of the promotions with promises of money, houses, cars, etc. If the money spent on ‘games’ were spent on better services and some meetings to share resources, we would all benefit from lower fares, safer airspace and greater coverage. Hey, that is what the airlines have done!

Have a safe week and try to avoid the giant red and white pins that are puncture-ating our landscape.

Capt. Yaw is Chief Flying Instructor and Chief Engineer at WAASPS – The Best Flying Experience in West Africa ([www.waasps.com](http://www.waasps.com))