

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

Ghana always surprises me, and it seems as though this year Ghana had special birthday presents for me. As I make my way through this intriguing labyrinth called Life, it seems that I find that there are far more things that I don't know each year; because, it seems, I realise the world is even bigger than I thought, and that my knowledge, skills and experiences are less than the smallest spec of dust within the Cosmos. It seems that I have also grown old enough to realise that time itself is being eaten by the 'Ghana Time Goblin' – because I cannot believe that we are already almost through September!

However, this year my birthday held surprises that were so special, so ethereal, so transitory and so magnificently unforgettable, that Ghana the country made happen – and it felt like it was *just* for me. The most wonderful thing is that this experience is burnt into my memory with a searing pleasure, not like that of cattle branding, more like that of the scar upon the planet's surface from a large meteorite flashing through the sky and then leaving a screech mark that reminds us of its journey of a thousand years, visible for just a few seconds of visible glory. A mark that must be visited, and revisited, to realise the magnitude of the impact. Consequently, the more I reflect on this year's birthday's events, the more I realise that Aviation, Ghana, it's people and weather are wonderfully beautiful and glorious, and I thank God for it all.

It was a fairly normal Saturday of flying; students, trial flights, onlookers, pilot 'wannabes', children playing and pretending to be airplanes and the hardworking, usually-smiling and oft laughter of the great team of staff who work with me at the airfield.

I should have realised there was something special coming my way, when young Sandra (a 12 year old JSS girl) came with her father for an air experience flight. She had visited with a school group during the week, and won the prize of a short flight (including the amazing opportunity to take the controls of an aircraft). Sandra had not seen a plane up-close before, and had never dreamt of actually flying in one. Her deep brown eyes, smiling out of her little face, perceivably independent of her intense facial posture, worked like skewers waiting to spear every fact that might flow from the lips of those showing her around the plane before she would leave the soft, reassuring grass for the invisible air and wafts of clouds above. It was as if she could catch more words by watching them leave the mouths of her mentors, than by just using her little ears.

Her father, a Pastor, thrilled by the normally unattainable gift that had been bestowed upon his treasured 12 year old princess, filmed everything he could with a small digital camera. Sandra took her seat, was securely strapped in and her headset settled upon her 'short-groomed' head. Her mouth beamed a smile that seemed wider than the cockpit itself, as she struggled to find the right place for her knees each side of the joystick. Unsure of where to hold, it was suggested that she hold her shoulder straps, upon which her hands visibly relaxed at being given their own personal attachment points.

Sandra looked intently in every direction, and at every thing, in order to absorb the moment. We lined up for Runway 19, and she confirmed her desire to launch into the warm, morning air. As the power increased, I explained how the thrust of the engine would overcome the drag of the airframe, and then the speed of the air over the wings would generate enough lift to .... (and with a gentle pull of the stick...) over come gravity... (as we lifted gently into the air)! I think that she actually forgot to breathe for a short while as we rose through three hundred feet, and turned towards the expanse of lake that separates Eastern Region from Volta Region. We looked at the cars, the cows, mango trees and more, and then she took the controls for a few minutes. Obediently, she followed instructions and

manipulated the machine from dive to climb, and rolls to the left and right, before she relinquished her first-ever control of a powered machine.

We landed and she thanked me more times than most for her 'gift'. A 'Gift of Flight' that cannot be stolen, a moment that may change her life forever as it sets the seed of ambition into her little heart and active mind to grow and flourish. Perhaps, and I certainly pray so, she will grow to become the medical Doctor she dreams of, and then fly to the remote areas of Ghana to support those communities who have little ready access to Medicine.

Giving Sandra that flight gave me a birthday gift of satisfaction and pride in the youth of Ghana. Later in the day, just as an aircraft was about to start up for a short lesson, I called to the radio operator to close the field. Rain, unexpected and heavy, could be seen less than 10km away, and the wind direction was changing. It was not sure if the rain would hit the field, but the risk level was just high enough to call a temporary halt to operations for a while. Within five minutes, the rain was heavily drumming on the hangar roof and we all received an early bath as we pushed all but one aircraft away in the stinging, oversized droplets of rain that typifies our region.

Amidst it all, a recently certified pilot arrived. He works in the manufacturing sector and has learned to fly here in Ghana. His face reflected the grey clouds when he thought that he might not fly that day. But then, the sky cleared and a glimpse of blue in the distance signalled a window of magnificent opportunity. No sooner were we airborne than we could see another storm cloud developing. Unexpectedly, it soon covered the airfield with another downpour. We decided to remain in the clear, sunny air and manoeuvring behind the dark cloud, visit Aveyime, and wait for the rain to pass over the landing area.

A small, wispy cloud passed beneath us, morphing a million times per second in the most amazing, awe-defining, shimmering and richer-than-silver forms – just for a few seconds before it thinned out and dissipated. Smoke rose from the rice fields at the Kpong Irrigation Project and hit an inversion layer, producing a flat, seemingly-frozen cloud of smoke, waiting for its opportunity to resume its upward climb. Shortly afterwards, we returned to a wet field, soft-field operations and a no-brakes landing (to avoid skids)- with two grown men wearing smiles as big as little Sandra's, and laughing like school children!

It was Sandra's first flight, and my bizillionth, and yet we were each equally inspired and motivated by the 'Gift of Flight' and the skies of Ghana as the other. We have a beautiful country with beautiful people, and I receive these gifts every week, but my Birthday flights were extra special this year. Maybe it is my age; perhaps I am simply gaining better sight, insight and understanding of my blessings.

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