

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

Minor 'rainy season' is pretty much over, as are the festivals, and the kids are all back at school; yet, regardless of the season, life at Kotoka International Airport, and the other airports and airfields across the globe, is pretty much the same. We often say that life in Aviation is all about the ups and downs - preferably without any bumps! Airport life is all about comings and goings – every day, every week, and every year. Airports see their unfair share of tears – whether they be tears of sadness at the imminent departure of a loved one on a trip to far away places, or tears of joy at the subsequent reunion. The old John Denver song 'I'm leaving on a jet plane, don't know when I'll be back again' needs to be banned from sound systems in airports internationally in the interests of tear-duct conservation!

The interesting thing is, that the Kotoka airport 'season' is just twenty-four hours long. There is the major 'dry season' over-night, followed by a minor 'rainy season' from dawn to breakfast time, with morning flights landing and departing in a light drizzle-like manner. Then comes the minor 'dry season' over the middle part of the day, with just the occasional sight of an aircraft landing or departing.

Early evening sees the 'major rain' of planes, and the big-birds come in from all over the world; it gets busy and the airport floods with people coming from and going to the five continents. Large tidal waves of people explode from the terminal building about forty-five minutes after each major arrival – they carry with them messages, high-speed chatter of excitement about their trip and bags filled with promise for the children who are greeting them, either at the airport or later on in their homes.

This twenty-four hour season is relentless and requires a mighty team of professionals to make it happen smoothly. Of course, as in our farming activities, there are different tasks at different times. The biggest difference is the timeliness. In farming we can plough, sow, fertilize, weed, harvest and store give or take a few days for most crops. In Aviation, the different tasks are incredibly time-critical and so the team must all be in place, in time, on time, every time if the Aviation harvest is to work successfully.

It is strange that I can see people around the world prepared to wait many hours for a Durbar or football match to start, but get incredibly annoyed when an aircraft departure is delayed (generally for safety reasons) by as little as fifteen minutes. This reflects our expectations of the industry and what they generally live up to.

Talking of festivals, our communities in Ghana love to celebrate their festivals – and quite right too! In Aviation, however, it is more difficult. If you consider that we have four seasons in one year in our farming communities and four seasons every twenty-four hours in Aviation – we should have a festival every twenty-four hours for Aviation. But that is not going to happen – or we would really muck up the timetables! But we can have an Aviation festival in Ghana at least once a year; can't we?

In America, Europe and many other places in the world there are indeed festivals of Aviation; they are called 'air shows'. In fact, in the United Kingdom there is only one other outdoor activity that attracts more people than air shows, that being football. So in the UK, with nearly seven million spectators at air shows annually, the race is on for sponsors and others to support Aviation. Air shows are typified by a number of fly-pasts and simple demonstration flights to please the crowd; then woven into the show come some lectures and the 'stunts' or entertainment-style flights.

In the USA, Britain, France, Italy, Spain, India and Jordan, the national air force has a dedicated display team that provides fantastic formation displays. Each air force formation or stunt display costs the sponsoring nation many tens of thousands of dollars – and it is seen as a good investment for recruitment. The formation and stunt flying are not restricted to the air forces. Indeed not! Landing on a moving vehicle, light aircraft formation, flying to music, precision landings, the bucket drop and more are carried out by pilots from the general Aviation community to the gathered crowd for their enjoyment. A wide range of machines are displayed and all fly hard, within safety limits – and it is a growing industry.

The crowd line is generally buzzing with young and old alike, peering into the sky, watching for the spec of an oncoming aircraft as it grows rapidly, and the drumming of the engine follows it as if trying to catch the image ahead. The plane flies past the crowd line, first at high speed, the image blurred across the retina of the crowd. Then after a long, lazy turn, it comes through so slowly you feel as if you could run along side. When the opposition flights begin (that is, where aircraft fly towards each other in display) the crowd will hold its breath in unison, and let out a single corporate sigh when the planes miss each other as they turn at the last minute. The skill of the pilots, the careful preparation of the engineers and organisers are all rewarded by the round of applause when the planes touch down and taxi past the crowd, the pilots waving to them, just like having scored a goal in football. For those less excited by particular events, there are also ground stands – food, drinks, cars, crafts, etc - all present vying for the attention, and hopefully some business, from the crowd.

Air shows are the source of innovation for so many – not only for those aspiring to be pilots, but also for engineers, air traffic controllers, airfield management and more. Without air shows, the recruitment to civil and military Aviation careers would be dramatically affected.

Air shows are also a great boost to local economies; with hundreds of thousands of people travelling to the events (in the same way that we move to our home town festivals), the increase in trade is noticeable – from food sales to hotel rooms – all boosting the economics of the nation.

Of course, by now you are thinking, 'Well that is OK for those nations, but we will never have that in Ghana'. But you would be wrong...

Next month, Ghana has its fourth 'Light Aviation Air Show', a 100% civilian aviation event, and it will be bigger and better than ever before. I have seen some of the early preparation flights by Ghanaian and international pilots - and I now know that Ghana is on the verge of a real Aviation germination programme - and we will see growth in all sectors.

Sadly, we can't have an 'Aviation Festival' every day, but at least we are having another one this year – and it is impacting on the lives, ambitions, aspirations and motivations of young and not-so-young people from all walks of life.

Well, I must go, because *'I'm leaving on piston-engine aircraft, and I'll be back again... next week!'*

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