

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

When I was younger I learned a great song to sing on school outings; it went like this: "Stop the coach, I need a wee-wee. Stop the coach, I need a wee-wee". That was the first, second and third verses. In fact, it was all two hundred of the verses – and it really annoyed the bus driver with fifty-two kids in the back of his coach, singing in unison.

Of course, in many of the developing nations, the 'need to relieve' is less of a problem than in some areas of the world. In the USA and most of Europe, you cannot just 'Stop the coach for the wee-wee'; absolutely not – you may even get arrested. You have to find the nearest public convenience, and possibly even pay a few pesewas for the privilege of taking relief in a porcelain receptacle.

In Ghana, we are more pragmatic about the fact that 'What goes in, must come out', and we find the general populace exercises the right of personal exposure with pressure-relief-valve function, at the roadside, around villages and in cities, ad-nauseam. Now, don't get me wrong; 'free-range' is not a bad thing when you are at the far end of an airfield and the need has reached the point of affecting your knees. The concept of 'visiting the old man in bush' is not always one of consideration for the elders or about social interactions in remote locations; but more one of localised irrigation. Such an activity tends to be discrete, and generally appropriate. However, I do take offence at people 'pouring used liquids' next to or even against a purpose-built location, designed for 'Pointing Percy at the Porcelain'.

Why all of this 'toilet talk' from the Captain? Well, this week I witnessed the most incredible act, carried out by a four-year-old in Accra. Please imagine this scene with me. You see a cute-as-nine pence little girl, dressed beautifully by Mummy for the day. She has obviously seen some older woman doing the 'legs across the drain and make a contribution' method, and felt it was her time to try. So she puts one foot each side of the concrete drain, her little legs straining and making her wonder if she could actually sustain the stretch for the duration of the performance. She carefully starts the stream of relief, and then decides it is time to check whether her aim is accurate. This little mite is about to demonstrate the amazing flexibility of mind and body of our youth, as she bends over - the inverted top of her head just below her knees, and her nose close to the 'danger zone' of the firing range. Mission accomplished, she re-balances and 'hops' off the drain. Amazing, intriguing - and this girl should be in the Ghanaian Olympic team for Gymnastics...

Ok, so it is time to go back to World War I. The open cockpit biplanes used a Castor Oil-based lubricant in an open-vented, crank-case piston engine, positioned less than two metres in front of the inhalation zone of the pilot. During the long missions, the fumes of castor oil entered the bodily system of the pilot. As we all know, castor oil is a laxative. You may not realise, but most small planes (like most small cars), do NOT have a place to get up and stretch your legs or to relieve bodily needs. Consequently, when the pressure got too much, the pilot had two choices: soil yourself, or land and use the soil... Of course, the latter was a better option. Once in a better frame of mind, a visit to the local farm for a quick glass of water, and back into the air he went.

Of course, airliners are blessed with several public conveniences, and that avoids the long-haul transatlantic flights being 'diverted' for communal labour; i.e., everybody gets out and does something, at an unscheduled stop – such is the need of the larger aircraft in the interest of efficiency.

Small planes, however, do not have such a luxury. I try to plan (like a car journey), a stop every three to four hours. But sometimes that is not possible – especially when carrying out extensive surveillance flights in an aircraft with ten hours autonomy. Consequently, we

pilots have to find new and innovative ways of dealing with the challenge of the bodily function. Before you say it; no, we do not 'go' out of the window. That comment is heard regularly, but would equate to 'going' out of the window of a car at 150km per hour – not practical and, if attempted, embarrassing. So, please, do not try it, even if you are a flexible four-year-old girl with gymnastic tendencies.

In fact, the two most popular methods are Pampers and a bottle. The Pampers are basically disposable nappies designed for larger children or incontinent, older people. They are comfortable and allow rapid relief in a 'dry environment' for a limited time. I cannot say that I like the idea of the Pampers method.

The more popular method is the bottle. It takes some co-ordination, to fly the plane and fill the bottle. Fortunately, we have the pilot's special bottle called the 'Little John' or the 'J'. The 'J' has a wide neck and a convenient shape... for men. Of course, all men are blessed with a natural 'flow-director' to allow them to use the convenient shape that denies women the ease of facility. Consequently, we also have the 'Lady J', designed for the gentler sex to enable them extra comfort on long, cross-country flights. Of course, you don't believe me, so I will quote from a website promoting such a device:

'The Lady 'J' is a Female urinary director adaptor. It is a portable, unbreakable plastic urinary director for every woman on the go. The Lady 'J' solves the problems of unsanitary restroom facilities that are poorly maintained, or just plain unavailable. With it's director spout the Lady 'J' actually lets women get relief while standing. Just press it against the body and go. No need to get completely undressed, or perform a balancing act. Ideal for women in the late stages of pregnancy, disabled or bedridden, the Lady 'J' has been used successfully by girls as young as three years old.'

I guess that our innovative four-year old would work it out! Does all of this have a purpose as a discussion? Yes! You see, that view of the child being creative with a pressing need called to my mind that 'Necessity is the mother of invention'. Often, because we do not *need* to find a solution to an everyday challenge, we just muddle (or in the above case puddle) through; but if we really do need to do something about it, we will all be as creative as a four-year old – and contort ourselves and our minds - even in the face of danger - until we are satisfied with the result.

That was a relief. Have a good week and think about what you are doing because it is easier than developing a better, working solution. We have to – we fly!

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