

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

Although I have been a lecturer in advanced ICT, and involved in data communications, robotics, programming and other microprocessor-dependent developments, I really do not like all of this Information and Communications Technology. Ok, so I can programme in a good number of programming languages and have a good understanding of hardware, software, firmware, data-comms and all of those really annoying, time-wasting, supposedly time-saving devices that make modern life so simple and sooooo irritating.

Last weekend my telephone rang no less than 425 times. My computer received over 1,000 e-mails, and I am ready to find a way to integrate my computer and mobile phone with the depths of the lake I look at from my workshop window. I have even wondered about putting the computer and phones on top of a wall and using them for target practice!

Much as these devices make our lives 'easier', they make it more stressful and 'noisier' – driiiiing-driiiiing was the sound of the traditional phone, but not now. Whether it is the poorly-reproduced, non-harmonic rendition of Beethoven's Fifth (I like it, but not as a ring tone), or that insane and incessantly-annoying, scratchy, unintelligible pop-ish song instead of a beep-beep when you call somebody. The computer has its own annoyance with 'you have mail' – even if silently displayed on the screen, it screams incessant interruptions into your conversation and working.

At least when I go flying I can leave them on the ground – but then I get back to 'can you call back, e-mail, respond to, think about, do, do, do'. So, I think that I should stay in the air...

In fact, next weekend (the 21st and 22nd November) is the Annual Air Show at Kpong Airfield; the largest air show in West Africa and, I think, the most family-friendly event of its kind in the region. It is a sword and has two edges. One, I get more calls and e-mails than usual in the lead-up to the Airshow - the less good side of the sword; but the best side of the sword makes up for these interruptions into my wonderful 'rural-Ghanaian-far from-the-city recluse-ship'.

First of all, I get to coach the formation teams – and they are doing well. To see these pilots learning to refine their skills by working together, trusting each other as they hurtle through the sky at speeds and distances they never imagined even a few years ago. I love to 'lead from the rear' in these formations and watch the talent of our home-grown pilots.

I also get to practise my 'landing on a moving car' routine. It is a great routine, and one that nobody else does with this class of machine. Basically, we send a car down the runway, driven by a pilot with a passenger looking through the sunroof. The aircraft is then flown down to the car, speeds matched and the wheel of the aircraft placed on the roof for a split second before soaring up into the sky. It has to be carried out with a lot of planning, safety, cross-checks, escape routes established, etc. But when performed in front of the crowds, it is amazing to watch a couple of thousand people leave their chairs and the shade to stand closer to the show-line fence, their unified mouths open and simultaneous 'ooohhs' and 'ahhhhs'. I have a lot of trust in the engineering team, the driver, the ground radio operator, the marshals, the fire brigade, the medical team and the crowd – and it is worth all of the effort that goes into the display. Of course there are the theatricals that come with a display, and 'tricks of the trade' that you can postulate over, but it is a very mind and body concentrating fifteen minutes of flying.

This year, I will be able to sit back at points during the day as our civilian trained, civilian Ghanaian pilots take centre stage demonstrating their in-Ghana-acquired skills, in built-in-

Ghana aircraft. But I cannot sit back before the event: there is practice, training, co-ordination, final modifications to the display and debriefing, encouraging, supporting – and it is all great, and worth it. You see, if it is not 'hard work' it is not 'worth it'. Put another way, 'if it were easy, why would I bother'!

The air show has a ground show too, first aid tent, the children's aircraft to sit in, displays and lectures and, of course, no air show is complete without some nice new cars gleaming on display in the show ground – and catering ... kenkey, waakye, hot dogs, hamburgers, big-breakfasts, fruit juices, etc. You see, an air show is not complete if it is not for all of the family.

All of these things seem to only increase the e-mails, phone calls and meetings necessary. Once upon a time you could say 'I didn't hear the phone because I was in the garden.' You could even say that the letter had not arrived in the post. But today, the techno-disruption is nearing perfection...

BUT I will NOT answer a phone during the air show, nor look at an email. No, no, no. I will be immersed in the aircraft activity, watching the pilots and planes, listening to the children from Techiman who will explain in JSS terms the way an aircraft functions. I will be able to turn the world back to the barnstorming days of the 1930's on a green field just north of Akuse junction, and watch the faces of children, mothers, fathers, grandfathers and grandmothers as they watch and see the possibilities that Ghana is just learning to embrace and enjoy. If they are smart, they will leave their 'blackberries' and 'i-phones' at home, switch off from the hustle and bustle of the city and enjoy a skyward-looking extravaganza that is based on solid, basic and practically-unchanged engineering methodologies from over one hundred years ago. The technology that brings our friends and families, colleagues and competitors to and from our homeland, but that for one weekend per year is dedicated to providing informative entertainment, and inspiration for a future of hope.

Perhaps the most exciting hope is that of improved health care through appropriate aviation solutions and Public Health activities. Something that can and will save lives – something that, as it is embraced by the authorities, could start to dramatically reduce malaria rates in a matter of weeks. These benefits come from the 'air show' mentality and increased skills of pilots who operate without tarmac or techno-aids to flying. The genesis of the flying doctors and mosquito eradication programmes is sitting waiting to launch into the beautiful and ever-mesmerising skies of Ghana.

I had best get back to the field and listen to the propellers turning in the sky, as the stars of the show put their finishing touches to West Africa's biggest and most family-friendly air show! Join me there on Saturday and Sunday – perhaps put your phone on silent, and enjoy the event even more!

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