

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

Season's Greetings! At least that is the Politically Correct or 'PC' term for this time of year! Making this the last 'breath of Fresh Air Matters' before the 'season of which we greet' is upon us. By the time you read Fresh Air Matters next week, the festivities of Christmas will be over, and we will all be readying for a new year of challenges! So "Afehyia Pa!", meaning in rough translation for the non-twi conversant, "May a new season [or year] come to meet us!" or something similar.

This week I received a 'Season's Greetings' card from long standing friends in the aviation business, Nigel and Conrad, as well as the rest of their family who have one of the most interesting operations in aircraft engines and bits and pieces for aircraft that you will ever visit, based in the UK. It is by far the best 'Season's Greetings' card I have ever received and one that will be on my wall all year round. You need to understand the nature of these aviator friends. Nigel is a mechanical mastermind and Conrad, his son, is a 'chip-off-the-old-engine-block' and holds a lot of awards for doing crazy things in Formula One hovercraft racing. They love everything that goes whirr, whizz, bang, moves fast and preferably has the ability to separate itself from the planet earth for as long as possible. Their workshops and stores are testimony to a dedication to mechanical fantasy and conquest that would befit a Steven Spielberg movie about developing a time travel machine or perhaps a private attempt on a mission to Mars! Consequently, it is normal that they like to relate to the world in terms of thrust, drag, lift and weight – and are always smiling, laughing and postulating about their work, their passion and their hobby – in fact, it is a happy-family way of life!

Let me describe to you their "Afehyia Pa!" card that arrived in my PO Box this week. The front of the slightly-less-than A5-sized, glossy white stock card has three aircraft, two of which appear to be rather badly parked to one side of the runway, at dusk, with one brightly-shining star located, I presume, in the East of darkening sky. These two-seater aircraft each have one occupant, and are piloted by gentlemen with long beards wearing 'Nigerian' style dress and gold crowns representing, I presume, the 'three kings'. Only two of the aircraft registrations is visible – G-KNGZ and G-KING, one assumes that the other is also on the UK register, designated by the G. (Ghana has 9G designation.) It is surprising that they do not carry the 5N (Nigerian) designation, based upon their style of dress. Do remember that the British are rather eccentric, which may explain such inconsistencies.

Inside, there is a somewhat familiar picture – well almost. There is a mother, father and new born child, shepherds, a sheep, a cow and a donkey in what may be a barn, or could well be a home in many parts of the world. As I drive from my home each morning I pass my neighbours whose homes offer little more than this scene and, in many cases, less.

To the side of the 'humble beginnings' family group, the three 'wise kings' are standing – having presumably walked from the runway on the front of the card, each with his 'gift' at his feet.

The first wise man, wearing red, has brought an Aircraft Engine. Looking at the sketch, I would say it is a Rotax 912ULS. A fantastic engine and one that is very reliable – I hope he remembered to include the slipper clutch (a must in developing-nation aviation).

The second wise man, sporting a green robe, has brought a case of oil. Not just any oil, but a specific engine oil for the Rotax engine his colleague is gifting.

The third wise man, wearing a grin on his face, has a three-blade propeller. I suspect a fine, well balanced carbon-fibre one.

Now, up to this point, one could be excused for thinking that this must be a Christmas scene. But it clearly is not. The scene carries a most wonderful title-come-question, 'What else would you give a future Pilot?'

When I first opened the card, it made me smile; it raised one of those audible, smiling things called a chuckle (not a full-blooded 'Ho, ho, ho' as might be more appropriate at this time of the year). I continued to stare at the drawing, and it initiated in my mind more thoughts and colours than a kaleidoscope on a bright day, while jumping up and down.

This image made me realise that I am so privileged to live amongst, employ, shop in the market with, and enjoy day-to-day dealings with many people who were - and continue to be - born in a simple dwelling with their animals around them, who may well become future pilots, lawyers, doctors, engineers and, of course, carpenters. It also made me realise that so many people in Europe, America and even the middle and upward-classes in Accra, Lome, Abidjan and other cities in West Africa have forgotten that so many of the people in our region live daily the conditions depicted and glorified on Season's Greetings cards at this time – and they are amongst the happiest people you and I will ever meet.

Nonetheless, for those people in America and Europe, I can forgive those who believe that every child is born in a well-equipped hospital, and that under-five mortality is a rare and exceptional thing. I used to be amongst those narrow-minded people before my enlightenment years (which are still, happily, continuing) of living in, and flying low-level over, rural Africa. I cannot, however, accept that we are developing a mindset in our cities that is blinkered to the rural communities and their needs just a few kilometres outside the city limits.

Most taxi drivers and other people struggling to 'make it' in the city, that I get the opportunity to chat to, avoid going home to 'the village' because 'the family' wants them to take 'plenty gifts'. I understand that, I really do. It is not unreasonable on either side, but a difficult conundrum – and this is the time of year that challenges our rural-urban migratory workers to the maximum.

So, as I think about the 'Season's Greetings' and the stimulus of the need to 'bring gifts to a future Pilot', as designated by this card, I pledge to the people of Ghana to do all I can to make sure that our children have an entry-level aviation industry that is strong and sustainable for the future pilots being born this week to grow up into; so that they can learn to fly and build aircraft in their home-born country, and then be happy and excited to take home gifts to their villages and home towns, along with exciting stories of aviation and its associated developments.

Have a wonderful week and weekend. Whatever your beliefs, remember to believe in our children, and to make sure that they have a future.

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