

Fresh Air Matters... with Capt. Yaw

Nearly doesn't count! It is a phrase I have used more times than I have eaten a hot meal! The year is 'nearly' over – and it is – but 'nearly' doesn't count. There are still three or four good days left to do something amazing in 2009!

I remember a student who sat their Aviation Theory exam and missed the pass mark by just a small percentage. He was pleased with himself saying 'I nearly passed'. This unleashed my sharp and acid-laden tongue. I launched the 'nearly doesn't count' comments, which I will, as my end of year contribution, share with you!

1. When you make it as a pilot, will you be pleased with 'nearly' landing the plane on the runway.... 'Nearly' certainly doesn't count there! Landing is the most challenging phase of flying. Turning at five-thousand feet, you can have an error of a few hundred feet up, down, left or right – and nobody even notices. But if your landing is not right to a very fine precision, it makes a bump, or worse. Would you really expect a pilot to be pleased with 'nearly making the runway' or 'nearly not overrunning the runway'. No! Aviation is about 'making it', not 'nearly making it'. Every time.

At this point 'Mr Wannabe[-a-Pilot]' is looking glum, hoping that I have finished my chastisement, but there is more to come...

2. When you do your fuel planning, and you set off over hostile terrain to carry out a low-level agricultural survey in the Western Region, would you be pleased to have 'nearly had enough fuel to make it to the destination'? It is obvious that making a mistake in fuel planning can be, at the very least, embarrassing; at worst, fatal. Worldwide, poor planning continues to be a cause of embarrassment and disaster every day. Whether it is fuel planning, resource planning, financial planning, or family planning, we all have planning to do. Are we pleased that we 'nearly stopped the company losing fifty-thousand Ghana Cedis'? Are we pleased we 'nearly planned the resources well enough to meet production deadlines'? Did you ever rejoice at 'nearly making it to the destination'? It is not just in aviation that this 'nearly doesn't count' bit holds true. It is a valid component of every part of our lives.

Mr Wannabe, opens his mouth, hoping to beg for forgiveness for his loose tongue, and unwarranted jubilation, but the time has not 'nearly' come yet...

3. Soon you will be applying for employment, whether in aviation or not - will you be happy that you 'nearly' got the job? If you are aiming for something and you only 'nearly' make it, especially if it is something you really need, 'nearly' does not count. Not one little bit. You have no more than when you started. You went into the interview without a job, and came out without a job. No matter how 'nearly' you came, you did not make it. As a pilot, one has to make it, and to make it well; on time, every time. Of course, there are reasons for not, sometimes outside of our control, but we mustn't be happy at 'nearly' - because it does not count. 'Nearly' and 'almost' are 'non-counters' when the chips are down.

Mr [I am not sure that I] Wannabe [any more], manages a quiet, rapid sentence 'But I did my best'. He may as well have thrown a mixture of petrol and TNT onto the fire in my mouth. The return explosion becomes so intense that our

student has a small tremble in his chin and is searching the floor with his eyes for an opening, just a small crack perhaps, into which he may be able to crawl.

4. You did your best? I promise you nobody has ever done their best. Saying 'I did my best' is a poor excuse. I do not believe, and I am sure that - if you search your heart really well - you do not believe either, that any of us ever 'do our best'. We can *always* do better. This may seem rather harsh, but let me explain.

I know that I, and I am sure that you, can always make more effort, do it better if we do it again, ALWAYS. Even if we get one hundred percent in an exam – we know in our hearts that there is more we could learn – and we know that we have weaknesses that may have not been tested at the time! The older we get, the more we realise what we do not know. When you get a licence – be it a Pilot's licence, driving licence, licence to practise medicine or to become a lawyer – it is a licence to learn... The more we accept that we can do better, the sooner we achieve more.

Mr Wannabe is lifting his head and the message is moving meaningfully towards a focal point between his ears amongst those 'little grey cells'.

As Mr [I think I still] Wannabe looks at me, his chin stabilised, and his mind open, I reach out and put a hand on his shoulder.

'You *nearly* made me mad...' I say with a wry smile. His mouth moves from a downward pointing semi-circle, towards a horizontal line with small upturns at each end as he realises that 'nearly doesn't matter'. I go on. 'You can re-sit the exam in seven days, and I expect you to pass with a good margin.' Relieved, he reaches for his bag, hoping to slip away – he 'nearly' manages it - but 'nearly doesn't count'. I reassure and rebuild with 'Remember you can always ask for help and clarification on anything you do not understand – and that is a big part making the effort to learn: learning from others.' He puts down his bag and starts that moment of enlightenment that only comes about because we make a mistake, and we discuss for the next forty minutes the finer points of Air Law, Aerodynamics, Human Performance and Limitations, Airframes and Power-plants, Instruments, Meteorology, etc – the essentials to be understood in aviation to ensure that our theory is not 'nearly good enough' but the 'more than good enough' for the challenges of the tasks to be undertaken, that makes aviation the safe industry that it is.

Mr [I really] Wannabe will study hard over the next seven days, realising that 'nearly' having made enough effort and 'nearly' achieving has no effect in his life and future. I smile as I see another young person who will no longer be satisfied with either 'nearly' or 'almost' and will strive to be a successful individual.

We have few days left of this year. It is not over yet, and we can do so much with the time left in order to achieve what we set out to do, and enter 2010 knowing that we will achieve so much more. Enjoy what is left of 2009, and be ready for what adventures and achievements await you in 2010!

Capt. Yaw is Chief Flying Instructor and Chief Engineer at WAASPS – The Best Flying Experience in West Africa (www.waasps.com)