

Africa's Unusual Attitudes



Melissa (right) flies with a student from the AvTech Academy.

Medicine on the Move Brings Aviation and Hope to Ghana

By Melissa Pemberton, All photography courtesy of the author

Editor's Note: In our March/April 2011 issue we profiled airshow performers Melissa Pemberton and her husband, Rex. As that issue went to press, Rex and Melissa were planning a trip to Ghana in western Africa to work with a group called Medicine On the Move. Melissa was kind enough to provide this update on their recent adventure.

MEDICINE ON THE MOVE (MOM) was developed to create a support and transportation system for humanitarian groups working in western Africa, building a highway in the sky to remote communities. MOM delivers doctors, nurses, needed medical supplies, and medical educators directly to remote villages. They can also transport injured or critically ill patients to medical facilities when required.

MOM is based at a small grass-strip runway in Kpong, Ghana just south of Lake Volta, the largest man made lake in the world. They fly Light-Sport aircraft like the Zenith CH701 and CH801 to ease operations and maintenance in the remote conditions in which they operate.

Lake Volta was created by three major dams that provide an electrical power infrastructure to Ghana, but very few people have access to this power because there is no way to get it to the 1.3 million people living in remote communities around the lake. There are no roads, no power lines outside of the cities, no clean water, and no hospitals for these villages. The lake offers the people of Ghana much opportunity, but the flooding and disease that the lake also brings

are, for the most part, being ignored.

Jonathan Porter, the creator of MOM, moved his family to Ghana from Europe in 1994. He brought along his Light Sport aircraft with a dream to make a difference. He and his son Matthew, 26, are still there 17 years later. Rather than just giving massive amounts of medical supplies, food, water purifiers, and building schools and clinics for the Ghanaian people, he has taken the slower, more sustainable approach of teaching the local people the skills that they need to return to their villages and educate one another. This approach is used to empower the people and to have as little impact on their traditions as possible. It is about finding the right balance between their traditions and a healthy future for their children. To help do this, the AvTech Academy was created. AvTech is a school for Ghanaian women where they learn to become pilots and mechanics over a four-year mentorship. They are literally going from mud huts to the cockpit.

In Ghana, the idea of family is very different than that of our western culture. To them, everyone of similar age is a brother or sister, everyone a bit older is an auntie or uncle, anyone old enough to be your parent is a mother or father, and anyone old enough to be a grandparent is your grandma or grandpa. This strong sense of family and unity is why

MOM has decided to train only local women to become pilots and mechanics. The Ghanaian women have a stronger desire to stay in the country and to pass on what they have learned to their African family. Jonathan first learned about this when he met a young lady named Patricia Mawuli-Nyekodzi. Patricia walked out of the bush



Patricia Mawuli - Nyekodzi prepares to give a local child a flight to remember.

one day asking for a job, and over several years, she went from cutting sticks and clearing runways to becoming the first female to gain the Ghanaian National Pilots License. Today Patricia is an instructor and mechanic at the AvTech Academy for girls.

I first learned about Patricia and MOM when I received an email from Jonathan telling me about a young girl who loved to watch my aerobatic videos on YouTube. He told me the story of how she built an aircraft, became the first girl to hold a Ghanaian pilot's license, and then went to fly the plane that she built all around the country. I was so inspired by her story that my husband Rex and I decided to



Left: Jonathan Porter with some village children during Fly Me Day in March. Middle: Villagers watch as a Medicine on the Move aircraft comes in for a landing. Bottom: Rex and Melissa pose with some local Ghanaian kids.



fuel, or even if the runways were in any sort of condition to land on. Flying cross-country in Ghana would challenge even the most seasoned bush pilot.

During our month-long stay, we lived with Jonathan's family and worked with the young ladies at the AvTech Academy. I had the honor of flying in their annual "Fly Me Day" in March, where we took 100 local village students for their first airplane ride. Rex filmed the entire trip and will be showcasing his documentary, *The Calling*, at EAA AirVenture this summer. While we were there, I focused mainly on teaching the girls about unusual attitudes, spin recovery, and aerobatics. These activities are all currently illegal in Ghana, so all of our teaching had to be done through ground school.

I have decided to dedicate my time this summer to promoting Medicine On the Move. We plan to bring each of the girls to the United States (starting with Patricia) to upgrade their Ghanaian PUP licenses to full FAA Commercial ratings. Right now the PUP license is the highest you can go in Ghana.

I also plan to take each of the girls through an unusual attitudes course – and even a bit more if they are interested. Patricia told me that someday she would like to have a Ghanaian Women's Aerobatic Team represented on the world circuit. I believe that she will do it, too. For now, they have their own local airshow once a year, consisting mainly of fly-bys, rides, and Jonathan's demonstration in their Falcon, which would compare to one of our light sport routines here in the United States.

All of this did not come easily. Jonathan has worked very hard over the years to have general aviation legalized in Ghana. When he arrived, there was no such thing as a Ghanaian Pilots' License, and there was nowhere that you could go to learn how to fly. The process has been long and exhausting, but they have done it in a way that hopefully general aviation is there to stay and to grow. One day, perhaps, there will be a full airshow at Kpong Airfield.

This summer, Jonathan and Patricia will be traveling to EAA AirVenture and Patricia's first visit to the United States. She and I will be



travel to visit them in western Africa for about a month, starting in late February.

When we arrived, I realized what a big feat Patricia had accomplished. The hot, humid environment mixed with the dust from the Harmatan (a wind that blows into the tropics from the Sahara), make for a perfect environment to destroy everything mechanical – let alone trying to build an aircraft. The weather changes in an instant, and the strong winds make navigation by compass and an old topographical map next to impossible. At many of the airports to which Patricia flew, she had no way of knowing if they would have

giving a keynote during one of the Women In Aviation events, and I will be spending a lot of time around the Zenith booth, spreading the word about Medicine On the Move. If you want to learn more about what we are doing in Ghana, please take the time to come and visit. But be prepared, because Patricia will have a lot of questions to ask you in return.

Please visit www.medicineonthemove.org to learn more or to donate. You can also go to <http://vimeo.com/21946586> to view the trailer for Rex's documentary, "The Calling."