

# Then came the bureaucrats...



*General aviation has been a boon to Kenya since the 1920s, but new ICAO demands could deal it a fatal blow, says AOPA-Kenya president Harro Trempenau*

It seems that whenever Africa is in the news, it's always about an earthquake, a ferry disaster, a rare disease, military coup, or a tinpot dictator being toppled by mercenaries. Positive stories are rare and even aeroplane crashes seem to happen more often in Africa than most other parts of the world. It comes as no surprise that the insurance companies confirm that flying in exotic places like the Congo, Sudan or Chad brings with it high risk and correspondingly high premiums. Are such generalizations close to the truth, or are they born out of sensationalist media hype, half-truths and the ignorance of pontificating reporters?

The case of aviation in Kenya can serve as an example that supports both extremes of the argument. Yes, flying in Kenya has its risks and a higher than average rate of incidents, but a plethora of reasons for this state of affairs is not difficult to discern. In fact, analysis of the facts could lead one to believe that pilots in Africa do a pretty good job in what is by European or American standards a very challenging aviation environment. Weather forecasts in Africa are virtually non-existent, navigational aids throughout the continent are few and far between or dysfunctional, the Intertropical Convergence Zone (ICZ) throws incredibly extreme weather at the hapless pilots, much of Africa lies at six or seven thousand feet around the equator (with

correspondingly high density altitudes!), fuel in drums is the order of the day, and airfields are hacked out of the bush whilst wildlife lurks nearby on every take-off and landing. These factors, coupled with exceedingly muddy airstrips, and high volume flying due to great consumer demand amidst a dearth of aircraft, pose extreme challenges to operators.

How did it all begin? Kitty Hawk, Le Bourget, Bleriot, the Channel Crossing, the Red Baron... that had all happened without touching Africa in any way. In fact, in the first two decades of the 20th century, there is only a sprinkling of aviation history on the continent. A few aircraft were used by the Germans and British in their battles over Kenya and Tanganyika during the First World War, but on the whole the story began in the Twenties. Only in 1926 was the first private de

Havilland DH 51 aircraft imported to Kenya by John Carberry. He later went on to be one of the first to fly from Nairobi to England, via Khartoum, Cairo and Tripoli. In April 1927, a Royal Air Force Flight, consisting of four Fairey III D's, stopped over in Nairobi on the way to Cape Town. This prompted three ex-air force officers with vision, Jack Green, Hugo Dunkerley, and Freddie Briddle, to meet and discuss the best way to promote aviation in our country. They knew that Kenya was ready and on 31 July 1927 they called a public meeting in Nairobi at which the Aero Club of East Africa was formally constituted. The objectives of the Club were "to promote, encourage and regulate aeronautics in Kenya, and to provide information and advice about aviation to all authorities and persons as might be required". Lofty goals indeed, but to this



Air Portraits

**Top: wildlife lurks nearby on every bush take-off and landing**

**Right: the DH51 owned by John Carberry which was renamed 'Miss Kenya' and became the first aircraft on the East African register; today it still flies with the Shuttleworth Collection**

day, not too far fetched. The Club is now AOPA-Kenya.

The DH 51 aircraft owned by John Carberry and named "Miss Kenya", was the first on the East African Register when it became VP-KAA in February 1929. A few months later, Carberry sold "Miss Kenya" and imported "Miss Africa" – a Fokker monoplane with a Wright Whirlwind engine registered as VP-KAB. In 1929, Captain Tom Campbell-Black flew "Miss Africa" from Nairobi to Croydon in 14 days with Mrs. Florence Wilson and Archie Watkins as passengers. After their return from England in July, they announced the formation of "Wilson Airways" and imported a de Havilland Gypsy Moth, a three-engined Avro Five Saloon monoplane and a Westland Saloon monoplane. In December of the same year, Campbell Black flew the "Knight of the Grail", chartered by two Nairobi businessmen, to Salisbury, Rhodesia. Commercial aviation in East Africa was born.

Whilst Wilson Airways flourished, plying scheduled routes to various parts of East Africa, including Kisumu, Mombasa, Mwanza, Eldoret, the 'goldfields' at Geita, and places in the north, the Aero Club of East Africa continued to grow in parallel. In the early thirties, there were already over fifty pilots flying airplanes in Kenya, with some twenty flying machines on the register. In December 1929, the Club managed to obtain its first airplane, a DeHavilland DH 60 Moth. In the early thirties, most of the pilots in Kenya were trained by the Aero Club of East Africa under a scholarship system subsidized by the Government, and other aircraft were imported by these fledgling pilots.

The thirties were indeed the 'glory years', not only because the Club played an important role in opening up the country, but also because its members took their place amongst the world's aviation pioneers. One must remember that only 30 years after 'Kitty Hawk' aircraft were not as reliable as they are today. Maintenance was minimal and spares were difficult to acquire. People like Beryl Markham, who was the first woman to fly across the Atlantic from East to West, and Tom Campbell-Black, who won the London to Sydney Air Race in 1934, really were on 'a wing and a prayer'. They survived because they had the 'right stuff', together with other less well-known 'icons' who moved aviation in Kenya forward. For example, in 1928, Maia Carberry flew 'Miss Propaganda' from Nairobi to Mombasa in three and a half hours, as compared to fifteen by train. By 1929, Tom Campbell Black flew the 'Knight of the Mist'



on an epoch-making flight from Nairobi to Mombasa and back in "a single day"!

Meanwhile, a company called Imperial Airways connected Kenya and South Africa with Europe. The firm's passenger and mail service was flourishing as early as 1933, with Hercules flying boats touching down at Kisumu and Naivasha on their way to the Cape. By 1937, Kenya boasted 34 Government airfields and nine 'private landing grounds' that were available to the 33 civil aircraft in the country.

Then came the war. Dozens of Aero Club members fought in it and, sadly, 19 of them did not return. In 1940, the pilots trained by the Club were grouped into the 'Kenya Auxiliary Air Unit' and, after incorporation into the Royal Air Force, many made names for themselves in the North African and European theatres. By necessity, civil flying activities came to a standstill at Nairobi West Aerodrome in 1940. The field was transformed into a military base and the Aero Club had to move, lock-stock-and barrel, to a temporary home near, what is now, Nairobi Dam.

By 1947, the Club House was back where it belonged: Nairobi West Aerodrome, its present location. Its leaders were either brave or overly-optimistic, probably both. With government help they bought six Tiger Moth training aircraft in Rhodesia with the kitty (three thousand pounds) that had accumulated during the war, and when the Governor of Kenya handed over the keys to the rebuilt Club House, he commended the Aero Club, stating:

"We all hope sincerely the Club's fine achievements in the past may be greatly widened and developed in the future". With those words, three Tiger Moths, flown by Jack Trench, W. Duirs, and E. Appleby, took to the air. The Aero Club had resumed flying, air rallying, and the training of pilots under its 'Aviation Subsidy Scheme'. The latter took full advantage of the vice called 'gambling'. Many ACEA members learned to fly for free with the proceeds of the one-armed bandits that featured in the bar.

In 1953, the Aero Club had added two Chipmunks to its fleet of Tiger Moths. The latter were phased out in the sixties, and by 1973, the fleet had been rationalised into a combination of two Cessna Aerobats and three Cessna "Rheims Rockets". Throughout its existence, the Aero Club of East Africa has trained literally hundreds of pilots. Unfortunately, the Government subsidies for this purpose have been discontinued, the fruit machines have broken down, and today Kenya is amongst the 'top ten' in the list of the most expensive places in the world in which to learn to fly.

Air Rallies and Navigational Exercises blossomed during the seventies with, for example, thirty aircraft flying to Oasis Lodge in 1974, and with several navexes to other destinations. Flying competitions, were held monthly, with balloon bursting, spot landing, streamer cutting, bomb dropping, 'Gretna Green' races and forced landings often part of the repertoire. Trophies were abundant, and dozens of pilots competed fiercely to ensure that their names were immortalized on them.

### Today...

Today, flying in Kenya is still alive – 80% in general aviation. Only 80 Kenyan aircraft weigh more than 5700 kg AUW. The rest are singles and small twins. Some twenty helicopters are also on the Kenyan register, although they are still viewed with suspicion by the "Security Freaks" that seem to be in control of most Civil Aviation Authorities around the globe. Of course, by world standards the Kenyan aviation scene is

**Top: snow-capped Mount Kilimanjaro towers over the Kenyan savannah**

**Left: an Imperial Airways Armstrong Whitworth Atalanta undergoes routine servicing and refuelling at Nairobi Airport in the 1930s**



British Airways



**Above: AOPA-Kenya's Harro Trempenau flies to the snowline on the Equator  
Right: South Africa's GA fleet dwarfs that of the rest of the continent**

miniscule, but after South Africa where over 8000 aircraft ply the skies, Kenya is No. 2 with 400 planes. Not much, but one must remember that in the fifty countries of Africa, sport and general aviation is virtually unknown, and most flying (except the national airlines and the military) is prohibited. For example, only 40 aircraft are on the Ugandan civil aviation register. Tanzania has about 200 civil aircraft. Places like Ethiopia, Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and Malawi have virtually none. Surprisingly, Zimbabwe still has quite a few fixed wing aircraft, perhaps two hundred, but most are grounded due to the fuel shortages in a collapsed economy.

The majority of Kenyan aircraft are involved in flying tourists around or in relief work in Sudan, Somalia and other less stable places. The main base for these activities is Wilson Airport in Nairobi, where more than half of all Kenyan aircraft are housed and where most aircraft maintenance is done. That notwithstanding, even marginal air sports, such as parachuting, microlights, gliders, aeromodelling and ballooning are still sporadically alive in Kenya. However, the situation looks grim as Kenya, along with most

other African countries, is under pressure by ICAO and FAA to clean up its safety record. Their vision is that safety will follow automatically through a strict regulatory regime that will automatically lead to redemption and stop all accidents. Nothing could be further from the truth, of course, but Kenya has recently succumbed to ICAO and FAA demands and imposed a new set of Civil Aviation Regulations – some 1,400 pages of them. Using the so common but simplistic one-size-fits-all approach that does not differentiate between airliners and microlights, or helicopters and balloons, every aspect of aviation in Kenya is now subject to micro-control, fines and prison sentences.

AOPA-Kenya has objected to this, maintaining that the over 1,400 pages of rules were drafted by relatively unqualified staff who not only require lessons in grammar and

spelling, but also know very little about some of the specialised subject matter of the KCARS. The most frequently heard complaint is that hastily engaged KCAA staff has no idea what some of those devices are that they are ostensibly 'regulating'. "They confuse parachutes with balloons, microlights with para-motors, hang-gliders with paragliders, or gyrocopters with helicopters," cries one depressed pilot. "The only international body that seems to be known to them is ICAO, and possibly IATA. Stakeholder organisations like AOPA or the FAI are news to them. "All KCAA cares about is pleasing the ICAO by having tough rules that in all other countries apply only to airliners and civil aviation, especially on international flights. KCAA does not understand that 80% of flying in Kenya is done by very light aircraft, using tiny bush strips.

Regulations that do not differentiate between airliners and little planes, and between international airports and bush strips, simply make no sense."

The matter is now officially in the High Court, but the new Kenya Civil Aviation Regulations became effective on 5 August 2008. Aircraft operators and pilots maintain that the new regulations are replete with injurious content that will increase the cost of flying and make all aviation much more



difficult and inconvenient. They fear that the huge increase in red tape,

the dozens of new permits, exemptions, letters of no objection, and certificates, will become a Machiavellian nightmare. "Someone has to pay for all the KCAA inspectors and enforcers, and it most likely will be us who have to foot the bill," says one worried operator. ■

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