

Flying the J430 in West Africa

So I'm not a very good story teller, but some stories need to be told. As a low hour freshly qualified commercial pilot, people don't exactly stand in queue's to offer you that dream job that will let you earn a living from what most people do as a hobby. Flying has always been in the back of my head, and after leaving home at the age of 18 to work as a field guide in the bush I knew that somewhere in my life I would have to make the choice of what my lifetime career would be. So it came that on my 25th birthday my dad agreed that he would sponsor me and I could do my commercial license. But that's enough about me.

I qualified as a Single engine commercial pilot September 2012 and like most fresh commercial pilots it wasn't long before my bakkie pointed towards Botswana where I thought my dream job was waiting for me. To keep a long story short I was in for a big surprise and a week after my arrival my bakkie pointed back towards George. After doing some loose jobs I decided to invest some more money into flying and started my instructors right across from where the Jabiru factory is in George. On day one I got told that Jabiru was looking for pilots to do a survey job in Ghana and like any fresh comm pilot I obviously had a CV with me at all times. Before I knew I was a employed contract pilot for around 30000km lines in Ghana.

The plane we would use was ZU-EBH and was a J430 that has been used by the factory for some time. Never in my wildest dreams did I know about the adventure and learning curve that was lying ahead for me, but mentally and physically I was definitely up for the challenge.



ZU-EBH flown from George all the way to Accra Ghana

After the aircraft arrived in Ghana we had to get clearance from the Ghana CAA to take the aircraft into the Northern part of Ghana to an old military airstrip called Paga, which is just to the South of the Burkina Faso border. Of course at that time all these names were not really relevant to us as 1:500 000 maps in these parts of the world is unknown off. Luckily we had a Garmin as well as a Mobile device that was running Pocket FMS and we managed to find our way straight to our new home for the next few months.



Paga Airstrip 1,6km

Arriving at Paga we had a lot of interest from the locals wanting to ask us about this 'helicopter' thing. To many of them the idea of seeing an aeroplane was unthinkable, and we knew we were going to have a tough time starting and taking off.



Our dedicated crowd making sure we use the right grade of Avgas

Some other obstacles we were facing was hands down corruption, as you could not eat a sandwich without needing a "permit". Luckily this was the clients problem but could still get very annoying at times as reasoning with the police or military regardless of what CAA papers you have is out of the question.

After everything was cleared up with the necessary authorities they were kind enough to give us the use of their terminal building so we could set up office and ground stations without having to work in the sun all day.



Terminal A with duty free shop

Another obstacle was water. On our ferry flight to Paga we had to re-route as there was no way crossing lake Volta and staying within gliding range with solid ground.



The famous lake Volta

Unfortunately I can't show you much about the job itself as we could not take any camera's or electronic equipment on survey. The equipment used will pick up small electronic devices even something as small as a mp3 player. I had to teach myself to have very good discipline, as all the surveys were conducted at 150ft/50m above the ground, following the topography in fairly hilly area's. That height might seem to be fairly high, but believe me when radio/cellphone towers stick out above your head it takes a very finely tuned skill set between your hands feet and eye's to fly (and off course miss) between these towers.

It so happened that in the beginning I would be dead tired after 1,5 hours and would then return to the airfield to rest (After around 50 hours I got "survey fit" and managed an average of 4,5hours per day.)



Brand new shoe's after 100hours of survey. That rudder worked hard as keeping the wings level required flying the aircraft out of balance.

Unfortunately it is quite difficult to put experiences into perspective onto a piece of paper, and after spending three months broadcasting on 123,45 we were very happy when we finished the northern sector and had to move from the North to central Ghana where we would be working from controlled airspace(Which in turn had its own challenges)

After a lot of hard work, malaria, numerous food poisoning and loosing 6kg in weight(and I'm everything but fat) I think the next photo will describe the feeling best when we finished our first 25000km's in our J430.



25000 km's of hard flying in a J430

With the majority of the job behind us we felt rested and got ready to set off to Khumasi, which would've been our next stop for another 3000km's of line's.

Some more photo's of the North...



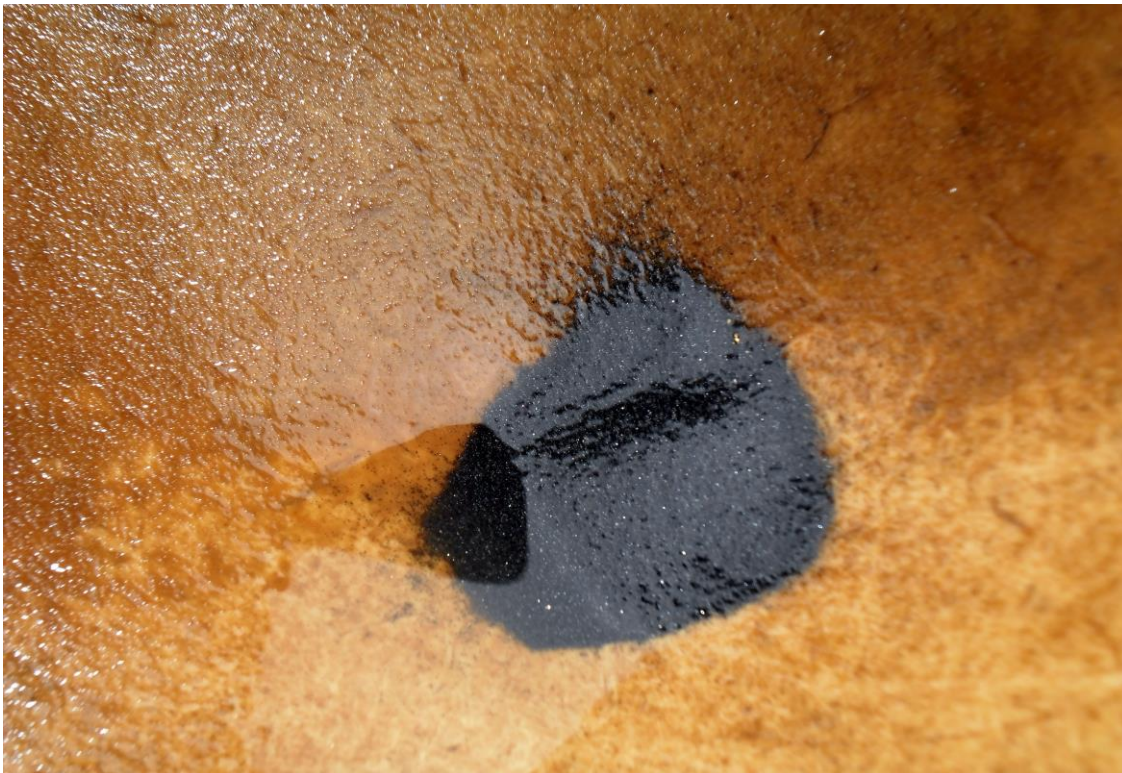
Ghana tourism is extremely safe, they allow you to touch all wild animals. Off-course we did just that.



Theft could also become problematic from time to time



"Surface scratchers" panning for gold.



Earnings after a days work

We eventually got the green light and after refuelling and sending the ground crew by car we took off once again to a unknown area to continue our survey flight. The flight there off course was once again spectacular with millions of water channels running throught the landscape.



One of thousands of channels running from lake Volta



We could see on the way to Khumasi that we were going to have some weather problems as this was a much more tropical climate than what we were used to. The area we did survey on was also very hilly and we had problems with big tall tree's that were sticking out above your head while on survey height. We did a risk assessment flight over the designated area and soon discovered that we would have to lift our height limit to 70m to be able to clear all obstacles in a safe manner.



Typical topography in the Khumasi region

So keen to start and our aircraft in a flying mood(Might be the pilots either way) we landed in Khumasi and quickly made friends with all the authorities to finish our job. The Khumasi region was a lot different and we received a lot of help from everyone even though it was quite a busy airport. So with our Ghana airports Passes we were fitting in just fine and the job continued.



*We even got offered staff transport
Off time was spent in the tower as they had the best wifi*

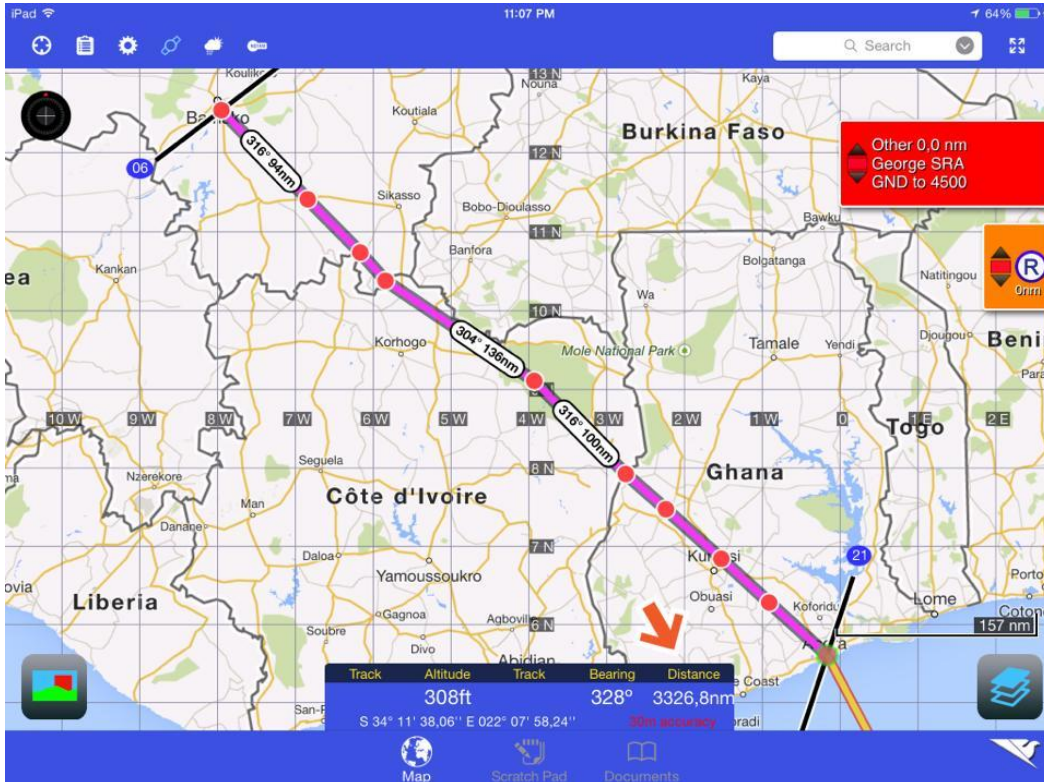
We eventually finished our job in Khumasi, and it was decided that the Aircraft would be hangared in Accra as we had another job coming up in the Mauritanian Desert, which would require a ferry flight over Ivory Coast, Mali and then into the desert.



In total we emptied 27 fuel drums, flew 31000 line km's, roughly 1500km's for ferrying to the lines as well as 8000km's for the ferry pilot to reach Ghana from George. Not bad in my opinion.

So the Aircraft got hangared in Ghana for around 3Months and when all Authority was given I went up with a Technician to go through the engine to make sure everything was hundreds for a operation in an abnormally hot and dry area.

For me personally the main concern was getting the aircraft there



as we now entered French speaking country.

The first leg of out of two to get too Mauritania. We had a 70L ferry tank which pushed our endurance up to 9hours.



The last leg. Also the one that I was the most scared of as you would

see nothing for hours flying over the desert.

We arrived in Ghana spent the first day to prep the aircraft put in new fuel (10\$ for a litre of Avgas) and set back to the hotel. The idea was to get back to the airport at daybreak where we would meet one of the officials, file a flight plan and then set off as quickly as possible. We were quite nervous (Think its normal for any flight) but I assured myself that we've done a lot of planning and everything would be fine.

As we got to the aircraft the battery was flat. Spent another hour trying to find someone to help us with a jump start and we eventually called for start. Engine vitals were looking good and we finally took off at around 9AM. Weather was not looking too good and to find any information for a VFR flight was virtually impossible, so it was decided that if things did not look good we would land in Sunyani before crossing the border as it would be much easier to explain our intentions in English than in French. Other than a bit of Carb icing all went well and as we moved from the coast the weather opened up completely and we were on our way to Mali.



The first stretch of our 7,6hour flight

Except for me getting sick the first flight went very well, and after we landed and struggled to communicate and get fuel we decided that we would only leave a day later and sort the fuel problem after some sleep. Temperatures were high we were a bit dehydrated and we could not think of anything else but having a nice meal.



We mostly gathered under the wing for obvious reasons

The next day we met up with some of our friends flying for SAS and they managed to help us get some Avgas. We refuelled the aircraft to max all up weight and according to some Satellite images the next day was the day to leave. This time my main concern was wind and sandstorms, as we were getting close to their stormy season and wind could exceed 100km/h. Coming

from the wrong direction that could be a problem for us as Mauritania was not exactly overpopulated with airports. Never the less we took off and after the most crazy clearance I got for a VFR departure flying North. East, South and West we got granted permission to set course for Mauritania. The flight was nice and cool at FL085 and I was fairly surprised with temperatures of 25degrees flying over the desert. Little did we know...



The view while on final approach in Nouakchott Mauritania

As we landed we were met by a guy by the name of Alisan, organised by the company we would be doing work for. After he argued for an hour with one of the officials we were given the go ahead to enter the country and we were met for the first time by our ground crew that we would be working with for the rest of the

job.

That evening we discussed the logistic's and it was decided that we would go and have a look at our runway first before landing even further into the desert. It was after all only finished two days prior to our arrival. A whole 500m of it. I was not worried about the landing though as I was more concerned about taking off in very high temperatures.

The runway got our approval and the next day we set off on a short 1,5hour flight to what would be our dusty home for the next month and another 8000km of lines.



Visibility was very poor some days as bad as 3km

After some risk assessment flights and and some more logistic planning the job started. More or less 8 hours of flight was done per day running fairly high oil temperatures because of the very intense dry heat. Nothing over limits though and it was decided that the afternoon flights would be multi crew operation so that one pilot can constantly monitor the engine vitals and the other could focus on the precision flying.

The whole 8000km's was flown in approximately 13 full flying days and some times on landing temperatures would be as high as 45 degrees!! The Aircraft held well with minor problems and another job was finished successfully.



Mobile windsock



Checking the wind in a sandstorm

Most of the job went flawless except for one day when I got stuck in a sandstorm. All our survey lines were flown in a North South direction and all was still fine when heading north. When I turned onto the next line I saw that in the distance something that would make you think of an avalanche in the form of dust was heading my way. The air was getting bumpy and all I could think of was getting the aircraft safely on the ground. I managed to find the airport and the wind was doing an impressive 36kts but every time I crossed the runway and looked back the runway was gone.... It took me no less than four approaches to land and actually see the runway on finals, as luckily for me the wind turned straight onto my nose in the last 200m of my approach.



Sitting waiting for the storm to pass.

The last part of the job the weather was deteriorating and our uniforms was completed daily with some local head scarf's. Its incredible how fine the dust was and was almost impossible to breath properly without this local fashion.



Mauritanian selfie

We got the go ahead that all our data was good and we started

packing. The Jabiru would be hangared in Mauritania as they actually had a small Aero club there with some General Aviation. We were going to head back via Senegal and was really looking forward to that first beer on arrival as in Mauritania all alcohol was illegal and could not be obtained legally.



Last landing in Nouakchott before heading back to SA via Senegal



*Photo taken by the ground crew while stuck in sand storm
Ground base*



The things they fly in other countries when talking about general Aviation. This aircraft was owned by an ex French military pilot.

So that is some of my experiences so far as a commercial pilot in a Jabiru J430. I've come quite a long way from after finishing my license with more and more responsibilities, experience, qualifications and so forth. Seen countries that I never dreamed of seeing. I don't know for how long I will still fly the Jabiru, but what I do know is that I don't want to stop flying it. ZU-EBH has since its left George done more than 40000km's and its been a privilege for me to have been a part of it. There is some more talk about jobs in the pipeline so who knows how many more she will do.

All I know is that I'm a Jabiru pilot, and with statistics like these I'm proud of it!

Kind
Regards
Wynand

