

Dr Onalenna Nako, Aerospace Medic

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To mark Black History Month in the UK, in October 2020 we highlighted up and coming aerospace specialists within the Black community. For our first feature, Dr Onalenna Nako-Phuthego tells us about her personal story from an African village in to becoming Botswana's first ever aerospace medicine specialist with a Master's degree.

I am a 32-year-old aerospace medicine specialist working for my country's military organization on aviation health matters, the first and only doctor in Botswana, (possibly in the whole of Africa) hold a Master's degree in Aerospace Medicine, acquired at Kings College UK. I hold a Doctor of Medicine (MD) and degree in teaching Russian Language (Rostov State Medical University, Russian Federation).

I was the first female in my country to join the military as a fully qualified and registered doctor with Botswana Health Professions Council. I am also the first and perhaps the only Botswana to ever visit the European Space Agency (European Astronaut Centre) in Germany, Koln, where I had the privilege to meet astronauts such as Tim Peake. I am a member of the Aerospace Medicine Association (AsMA) and currently actively involved with the UK's Royal Aeronautical Society (RAeS) in improving my professional development.

Per Aspera Ad Astra

I was born in Ramotswa village, South Eastern part of Botswana in Africa. I grew up underprivileged, with a single mother and my amazing late grandmother in an extended family. Like most households at the time, we had no

electricity, running water nor television in the house. Things improved at the age of 12, when my mother acquired a home with all basic life necessities. My source of entertainment has always been books that I initially read through a candlelight. Just going to school meant a 14km walk each day.

These early hardships only motivated me even more to study and excel, keeping in mind the common mantra, “education is the way to a better life” and I applaud my mother for nurturing my ambitions by being a good provider without fail. My basic education began with kindergarten and proceeded to free government education. I never attended private school and I never took for granted the free education opportunity our government provided. I studied hard with the result that I excelled academically and was elected for student leadership roles in school. Because of this, I acquired confidence and a positive mind that propelled me through life.

But this was not without hardship and my high school years were particularly difficult. I had been enrolled in the country’s top high school (St Joseph’s College) where I was now amid academically stronger students. In this new setting, I was unaccustomed to being outsmarted and that became a challenge. I had to develop a survival strategy and I learned that competition can either encourage or demoralise you. It is critical to identify which category you belong to, that can best work for you based on your capabilities to ensure that either way you excel. I realised that it is important to sometimes escape the land of competition, focus on your uniqueness, abilities and your strengths to become the best version of yourself.

From that point on, my goals were dominated by always identifying and focusing on things that were distinct from what everyone else would normally go for, no matter how challenging. Hence why I chose Russia for my medical education after winning a Russian sponsorship, which not only earned me an MD (Doctor of Medicine) but also a Degree in teaching Russian language. Studying medicine in Russia was exceptionally difficult but adjusting back to medical English after returning home presented an even greater challenge. I found myself struggling with speaking and writing English as fluently as before as my vocabulary was insufficient. My confidence was dented and I felt inadequate especially during my medical internship year. However, I didn’t give up, I worked hard the best way I knew how, until my English improved again. Thereafter, I joined the military; something unusual for female doctors in my

country and then choosing a medical speciality that is niche and unfamiliar to most, which I studied at one of UK's top universities.

The start of my aviation medicine career

My interest in aerospace medicine began when I was still in medical school. My thoughts, however, were that, given that in my country and continent, this avenue of medicine is unexplored, underestimated and overlooked, my chances of ever pursuing it were close to zero. Joining the military seemed as the only way to achieving this and in 2016 I was commissioned at a rank of Captain into the Botswana Defence Forces.

However, the road ahead was still unclear and, to realise my ultimate goals, in 2017 I self-funded a flight surgeon course in South Africa. With no clear path ahead of me, my journey at that time was filled with discouragement including words like "it's not a speciality, don't waste your time". However, I didn't deter. Later on, my employer sent me for a Postgraduate Diploma in Aerospace Medicine in UK and my good academic performance allowed for my transfer into the Master of Science programme. What I am grateful for is the opportunity to have studied my dream course in the UK where aerospace medicine is a speciality.

My challenges were further compounded by that I had left my three months old daughter and my fiancé (now husband), to go for my studies. Being post-partum and away from my loved ones, simultaneously pursuing the most challenging course was the hardest thing I have ever done, however, through hard work I managed to successfully complete my Master's Degree.

Aspirations

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My current focus is raising awareness on aerospace medicine and its role in aviation safety. I aspire to work not just within the military but hope to see integration and collaboration between military and civilian aviation medicine in addressing unique health needs of aviation professionals in my region as seen in first world countries. I hope to establish a fully functional Aviation Medicine Society within the organisational structure of SADC Aviation Safety Organization (SASO), ran by rightfully qualified aviation medicine specialists.

I also dream to establish a Centre of Excellence in Aviation Medicine in Botswana, with state-of-the-art and fully-fledged clinic to cater for health needs of our aviation professionals and ensuring a 'unique to aviation holistic approach' to their entire well-being, eventually extending such services to the entire Africa, in accordance with international standards.

I acknowledge how challenging it will be. However, I am counting on the support from international societies of relevance to health and aviation safety, such as the RAeS, to assist in getting my voice heard and my efforts recognised.

My story shows no dream is beyond reach, no matter where you are from in the world. Your background and your past do not dictate your future. All it takes is a dream, determination, hard work towards it and a positive mind. These are the forces that will propel you to your success.

Aerostories #Engineering #Pilots #Operations

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