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A V.I. Girl's Dream Come True: Piloting in the U.S. Air Force

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Orchydia Sackey By. ORCHYDIA SACKEY

Orchydia Sackey's fifteen-year fascination with planes that began in the 2nd grade at Ricardo Richards Elementary School will literally be a dream come true when this 23-year-old native of St. Croix graduates from pilot training at the Columbus Air Force Base in Mississippi this Friday.

Post-graduation, Ms. Sackey will embark on a 4-6 month job-specific training in Oklahoma for her mission in Tampa as a co-pilot for KC-135 stratotanker aircrafts. These planes refuel other aircrafts like fighter jets or bombers mid-air at altitudes ranging from 24,000 to 34,000 feet.

She recounted memories of hearing planes flying overhead from her childhood home in Estate Barren Spot. "I literally used to run outside when I would hear the planes take off," she recalled.

In addition, her father often took her to the airport when military planes came on island and she would revel at how big and cool they appeared.

While attending the St. Croix Educational Complex, Ms. Sackey was a member of the Tuskegee Airman Club and was afforded several off-island opportunities to take part in aviation camps to foster her love for planes.

“I want to fly a plane so I could, on a mission, stop back home and find some kids to come out and speak to some military pilots,” Ms. Sackey said, as she spoke to her motivations and intents in this field.

Although it is unlikely that she will be stationed on St. Croix, Ms. Sackey expressed that it is highly possible for her unit to someday fly into the Caribbean on a refueling mission, so she may return home to share some wisdom and hope with school-aged youth in the territory. As “a girl from St. Croix who graduated from Complex School,” she said that her hope is for her experience to show that they too can accomplish their dreams.

While on this journey to become an Air Force pilot, Ms. Sackey has met young Virgin Islanders like herself whose career takes them beyond the clouds also.

“We exist. There are Black—not just Black—but people from St. Croix and St. Thomas doing it,” she said. With such pride, she recalled that there are other former Tuskegee Airman Club members who currently fly commercially for Cape Air or militarily for the Air Force and Coast Guard.

Her journey up until this point was not without challenges. In October of her senior year of military academy, Ms. Sackey said she felt disappointed upon finding out that her future job was to be an air battle manager, someone who provides tactical intel to pilots. Although she was not tracked to go to pilot training, Ms. Sackey worked out contingency plans to cross-train toward eventually applying for a pilot position. However, by Spring Break of her senior year, the tables turned in Ms. Sackey's favor and she was placed in a pilot position instead.

Overwhelming happiness filled with tears was what she said she experienced. To this victory that set her on the path to pilot training, she gave credit to the power of her mom's prayers.

The obstacles became even greater as she nearly faced being “washed out”, or failing out, of the program, Ms. Sackey said. “It was exceptionally challenging for me. I would make little mistakes,” she revealed. She added, “It was an emotional rollercoaster to say the least.”

“By no means I'm the best flier. I'm not, but I'm a hard worker,” she said in reflection. Her unshakeable motivation did not go unnoticed by her instructors, who were willing to give her additional learning opportunities to strengthen her skills throughout the completion of pilot training.