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Flying High: 33-Year-Old Virgin Islander Pilots American Airlines Flight to St. Thomas, Receives Hero's Welcome

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Captain Adrian Phillip Tutein piloted American Airlines flight 1461 to the Cyril E. King Airport on Friday, Nov. 25, 2022. By. V.I. CONSORTIUM

American Airlines flight 1461, which departed from the Miami International Airport on Friday, landed on St. Thomas at approximately 5:09 p.m. at Gate 3.

That was par for the course.

The exceptional part was the man who piloted the plane with excellence to its landing at the Cyril E. King Airport: Virgin Islander and Crucian Adrian P. Tutein, the 33-year-old captain.

It was a sight — and moment — to behold, as family members, V.I. Port Authority officials, and even the Dept. of Education commissioner, anxiously waited for the flight to hit the tarmac. Once the plane landed, family members and VIPA officials entered the aircraft to greet Mr. Tutein, who was evidently impressed with the hero's welcome home.

Mr. Tutein was born and raised on St. Croix. He is a product of the public school system and attended the following schools: Pearl B. Larsen, Elena Christian Junior High School, and then the St. Croix Educational Complex. He then furthered his education by attending Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University where received his bachelor's in aeronautical science.

In a conference room at the Cyril E. King Airport, officials spoke of the significance of Friday's event. Education Commissioner Dr. Dionne Wells-Hedrington congratulated Mr. Tutein and spoke of how inspiring his success is to young Virgin Islanders aspiring to achieve big goals. "My hair stood up; it was definitely an opportunity that I will never forget and one that we will promote," Mrs. Wells-Hedrington said, referring to the introduction of aviation education at the V.I. Dept. of Education.

VIPA Executive Director Carlton Dowe, who along with VIPA staff coordinated the hero's welcome, also spoke about the impact of Friday's event, stating that the positive outcomes for youngsters territory-wide could not be understated.

Mr. Dowe also brought light to his role in Mr. Tutein's story. He remembered receiving a call from one of Mr. Tutein's family members, relaying that Mr. Tutein had faced some hurdles and was trying to build his flying hours. Mr. Dowe got to work, calling Cape Air, Seaborne and other local carriers. "I don't want to hear no. [You] can't tell me why a young man from this territory can't get hours in the air," he recalled his mindset being at the time. "So when I got the call about two weeks ago [that] Adrian would be flying in on American Airlines, at that moment everything stopped for me," Mr. Dowe added, emotion overtaking his countenance.

The executive director is working with Senator Novelle Francis, who is expected to be the next Senate president, to champion legislation that would provide funding for young Virgin Islanders to attend aviation school on St. Thomas.

For his part, Mr. Tutein expressed deep gratitude for the exceptional welcome. He also revealed that his uncle inspired him to become a pilot.

"Growing up my uncle was a pilot in the Navy, and he would come home every break he got, or if I go up to the states in the summertime, I would stay with him on the different military bases," Mr. Tutein made known. "So that was really my exposure for going into the aviation industry. I was wrapping up high school and was trying to figure out what I would like to pursue, but it was natural to first think of aviation as a career. So I decided that I wanted to train and become a commercial pilot. After receiving my degree, I relocated to St. Thomas for two and a half years to get some more flight [hours]. I am really living out my childhood dream."

Mr. Tutein's uncle, Retired Lt. Commander in the U.S. Navy Singo Sprauve, who is also a pilot for MESA, began his flight career in 1998. He was inspired by the inter-island travel when he was younger. "I am so proud of Adrian, I give him high marks for landing that plane. I was actually on the flight. Adrian inspires me and I learn from him," he said.

Mr. Tutein wants to continue to inspire the next generation and hopes to see many Virgin Islanders take on new challenges and find great success.

