



THE VIRGIN ISLANDS DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Office of Public Relations

1834 Kongens Gade, Charlotte Amalie * St. Thomas * U.S. Virgin Islands 00802-6746
Telephone: 340.774.0100 Ext. 8136 Fax: 340.774.1168
340.773.1095 Ext. 7064 Fax: 340.773.4624

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Contact: Cynthia T. Graham
Director, Public Relations & Communications
(340) 773-1095, Ext. 7064
cynthia.graham@vide.vi
www.vide.vi
www.facebook.com/usvi.vide

St. Croix CTEC Aviation Academy Students Complete First Solo Flights

On track to earning private pilot's license

ST. CROIX, USVI – The St. Croix Career and Technical Education Center Aviation Academy is preparing the next generation of aviators. Carlos Alexander, a senior at the St. Croix Educational Complex High School and Cylus Gordon, a senior at the St. Croix Central High School, have been enrolled in the academy for the last three and four years, respectively, and recently completed their first solo flights—an important step toward earning their private pilot's license.

Alexander successfully completed his first solo flight on Oct. 1 and Gordon completed his on Oct. 17. The 30-minute flight consisted of three take-offs and landings, using the standard traffic pattern: 90-degree right turn at take-off, a second right turn, fly parallel to the runway, landing, and taxiing of the aircraft.

“The experience was great,” Alexander said. “I was nervous the first time going up without the instructor and doing the take-off and landing on my own, but I had to pull myself together and realize that this is something I’ve been training for. I had to go out there and do what I’ve been taught and use all the skills that I’ve mastered.”

Gordon shared similar sentiments.

“Knowing that the instructor was not in the aircraft that day, I had to make sure that everything was perfect,” he said. “As I was doing the pattern and getting ready to land, I looked to the right and saw that there was no instructor, and that’s when it hit me.”

Alexander, whose family emigrated from Dominica to St. Croix in 2018, said his interest in aviation first took flight that year while visiting the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., as part of a school trip with Close Up.

“After touring and experiencing the various interactive exhibits, I came to an area Boeing set up with information about aviation,” he said. “I fell in love with it and from that moment, I realized that I should become a pilot.”

As for Gordon, his interest in aviation began closer to home.

“My mom used to work at Seaborne down at the seaport in the Christiansted harbor, and I would always see the aircrafts landing and departing on the water,” he said. “That started my interest because I like aircrafts.”

Instructor Ira Williams, who has been at the helm of CTEC’s Aviation Academy since 2012, is the owner of Yellow Breast Aviation, LLC on St. Croix, which specializes in flight training, aircraft repairs, charter flights, and air tours. His accomplished career has also included work as an aircraft mechanic in the U.S. Navy and locally at Seaborne Airlines.

“Flying was a hobby of mine, but eventually it became a business,” Williams said. “I enjoy sharing my knowledge and skills with our new generation of aviators.”

Williams said CTEC’s Aviation Academy not only provides students the opportunity to explore the aircraft “from the aerodynamics and pilot points of view, but also from the engineering point of view.” He said students learn extensive theory about the various types of aircraft engines and how the aircraft works.

“It is important for them to understand the entire mechanics, electronics, and engineering of the aircraft they operate,” he said. “[CTEC] is the only [local] institution that allows students to do all of that.”

Since completing his first solo flight, Alexander, with Williams in the cockpit, has completed two of several required cross-country flights to St. Thomas and Puerto Rico. On Nov. 17, he scored a 98 percent on the private pilot’s written exam in Puerto Rico, getting 59 out of 60 questions correct. Gordon is currently studying for the written exam.

Praising the students’ accomplishments, CTEC Principal Dr. Vincent Gordon (no relation to Cylus), offered more insight into the school’s successful aviation program.

“Aviation Technology is a four-year program academy training, which produces the most qualified graduates for employment in the aviation global industry and the military,” he said. “Upon completion of the academy, students will be eligible to take the Federation Aviation Administration Airmen Knowledge Certification Exam. Conversations have already begun with Hampton University to see how CTEC can partner with Hampton’s aviation program.”

The two student pilots are aiming to earn their private pilot's license at the end of December or in January. This will require nine additional hours of solo flying, additional cross-country flights, an oral exam, and flight observation by an independent aviation professional.

Alexander and Gordon both plan to study aviation following their high school graduation in May 2022, with the goal of becoming commercial pilots. They encourage their peers to pursue their dreams.

"Just keep pushing for that goal, never give up, and always do your best," Gordon offered.

"Keep following your dreams and remain determined," Alexander concluded.

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