



U.S. man is first black, youngest to fly solo around the world

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MIAMI (AFP) - A 23-year-old Jamaican-American on Wednesday became the youngest person and the first black pilot to fly solo around the globe as he glided into Miami after a three-month journey he hopes will be an inspiration to inner-city kids.

A crowd of about 2,000 people erupted in cheers as Barrington Irving landed at Miami's Opa Locka airport after flying a few low passes over the tarmac.

"They told me I was too young, they told me there was no way I could do it, they told me I don't have the experience, I don't have the knowledge, I don't have the wisdom ... they told me I would never come back home, but guess what?" Irving said to loud cheers from the crowd.

"I'm home," a jubilant Irving said after alighting from his single-engine Columbia 400, which he built with more than 300,000 dollars in donated components.

"The flight was a long flight that challenged me mentally and physically," he said. "God carried me through."

Irving had initially hoped to complete his voyage in about one month, but took three times as long as he braved sandstorms, snowstorms and monsoons.

The Jamaican-born aerospace student hopes the trip will be an inspiration to children in poor, urban neighborhoods. "I want to show them they can do more with their lives than resort to violence," said Irving.

Irving grew up in a rough Miami neighborhood just behind the Opa Locka executive airport, where he says 24 children were killed last year alone.

He initially hoped to become a football player, but found his inspiration at the aged of 15, when he met a man he now calls his mentor, United Airlines captain Gary Robinson.

Robinson, who is also Jamaican-born, took the teen to see a Boeing 777. Irving was immediately hooked, and turned down college football scholarships to become a pilot.

He started working at the airport in his free time, washing planes in exchange for short flights or money he could use for flying lessons. Every evening he practiced flying on his computer, using flight simulation software.

In 2003, Irving started calling aircraft manufacturers asking if they would lend him a plane for his round-the-world trip. No offers were forthcoming, but the enterprising young man eventually met

with success when he asked manufacturers to donate components to be assembled by aircraft maker Columbia.

He said he'd had his share of detractors, but never let that get in the way of his dream.

Among those who welcomed the young pilot home on Wednesday were several retired members of the "Tuskegee Airmen," the first African-American pilots in the US military, who flew during World War II.

"We were an oddity back then, with perseverance, we overcame," said Leo Gray, who as a lieutenant colonel flew 15 World War combat missions with the squadron formally known as the 322 Fighter Group.

"When we started in 1941 as the first black squadron, they didn't think blacks could fly, and now this young man has gone around the world," said former Tuskegee mechanic Richard Rutledge, 85.