



**PILOT DEANDRE JAMISON** checks out the *Flying Carpet's* cockpit in Page, Arizona.

## CARRYING THE FLAG

### WHERE ARE THE MINORITY PILOTS?

**B**lack people don't fly." That's what DeAndre Jamison heard, when as a little boy he inquired about becoming a pilot. Although DeAndre and I had never met in person, we'd corresponded for several months when he emailed that he and his wife, Christine, would be visiting friends in Page, Arizona, where they'd lived before moving to Indiana.

Page is only 45 minutes from Flagstaff by *Flying Carpet*, but I hadn't flown there in years. This seemed a perfect opportunity to meet new friends and revisit cherished terrain. Page perches along stunning Lake Powell, on the Utah border. When I wrote, "Can I fly up and meet you for breakfast?" DeAndre responded enthusiastically.

I launched northward for Page that Saturday morning, pleased to be traveling without novice passengers. For although skies were clear, howling southwest winds generated devilish turbulence downwind of the 12,000-foot San Francisco Peaks, and then along the eastern edges of the Grand and Marble Canyons. Soon cobalt-blue Lake Powell filled my windshield, pierced by golden buttes hinting at those of Monument Valley 60 miles away. I wrestled the airplane to a landing, and was opening the door when a young couple approached.

"I'm DeAndre," said the young man, pumping my hand, "and this is Christine."

*How cool, to meet a black general aviation pilot!* I thought. Then I pondered the strangeness of that reflexive response. *Why aren't there more minority pilots?* I vowed to question DeAndre if the opportunity arose.

"How did you get into flying?" I asked, once we'd settled at the Jamisons' favorite breakfast place.

"I grew up near Detroit City Airport," now Coleman A. Young Municipal, DeAndre explained, "and as a child often passed there en route to my grandparents' house. That led to paper-airplane contests with my uncles, Harold and Reggie. Then I

noticed a 'Learn to Fly' sign at the airport, and asked my mother if I could do it. 'Sure,' she said, smiling, 'as soon as you can pay for it.'"

That wouldn't happen anytime soon, but DeAndre's interest reawakened when Bernoulli's Principle came up during fluid mechanics class in engineering school. Then one day while coaching softball, DeAndre and Christine chatted with a parent named Russ Taylor, who happened to be an airline pilot.

"Russ called several weeks later," said DeAndre, "and asked, 'Were you serious about wanting to go flying?'" DeAndre answered, "You bet!" So Russ introduced flight instructor Gil Patton, who owned a Cessna 185. Under Gil's tutelage, DeAndre overflowed his house, the Ambassador Bridge, and other Detroit landmarks. On the way back, they transited Detroit Metro Airport's Class Bravo airspace.

"The bird's-eye perspective of a 747 taxiing through a maze of marked concrete left me craving more," DeAndre said. "On that day I realized I could really be a pilot!"

It took years of on-and-off lessons, but recently DeAndre qualified as a private pilot in a Diamond DA20 at Fort Wayne, Indiana's, Smith Field. I congratulated him—and asked why we see so few African-American pilots.

"One thing that bugs me about the African-American community is there seems to be this feeling that flying, among other things, just isn't for black kids." He told of taking several African-

#### TRAVEL LOG: PAGE MUNICIPAL (KPGA)

**Runways:** 7/25: 2,201 by 75 feet; 15/33: 5,950 by 150 feet

**Elevation:** 4,316 feet  
**Locaton:** One mile east of Page

**Note:** Use 7/25 only during periods of high wind from east or west

Americans for their first-ever airplane rides.

“One was a college student having trouble with math,” said DeAndre. “I used the glideslope concept to help him understand trig.” He also offers to fly many younger kids, “to help them see the bigger world out there, broaden their horizons, and convey math and science concepts through aviation.” DeAndre’s perspectives as an educator and an engineer have convinced him that piloting can empower kids to realize that “the world is mine.”

We discussed the disturbing rarity of minority pilots. I know just two Native American pilots, and a handful of South Asians. But the rarest of the rare are minority women. Part of it may be where I live, but then again even my Chicago friend Leslie Prellwitz—the only African-American woman pilot I personally know—has met only two others like her

George Lucas’ new movie, *Red Tails*—about the Tuskegee Airmen—can help to change that when it premieres in January.

“If my father ever said anything negative about my flight training—or any goal I pursued—I never heard it,” he said. “But sadly, many minority children don’t enjoy the support I had.”

There were also obstacles after he committed to piloting. “I don’t recall encountering a single black flight instructor or student during flight training. Along with the lack of peer role models, the airport, flight school, and hangar environments can be intimidating. I may be better equipped than some at coping with these situations through my college and professional experiences. Math, science, and engineering can be lonely places for minorities; I’ve had my share of experiences being ‘the only one,’ or ‘one of a few.’ Generally I’ve felt welcome.

## **"I DON'T RECALL ENCOUNTERING A SINGLE BLACK FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR OR STUDENT DURING FLIGHT TRAINING."**

(but says she’s heard of one more). How could such a huge percentage of the population never consider entering a cockpit? I mentioned a female Asian-American who captains the USAirways shuttle into Flagstaff. Surely more Asian women pilot airplanes, but neither of us had personally encountered another.

DeAndre believes that lack of exposure disengages minorities from aviation. “When I worked with African-American fifth-graders in an aerospace-themed program, I discovered that few had ever been in an airplane. This lack of personal connection can impact the decision to pursue aviation-related opportunities. Remember, it wasn’t until I met a pilot that I actually looked into flight training.”

He also blamed the absence of peer role models. “Like all children, African-American kids aspire to be what they see on television, hear on a radio, or see on an athletic field. Where are they going to see a minority aviator?” Fortunately, DeAndre’s parents taught, encouraged, and expected him to try new things. Hopefully

Still, the occasional awkward stares I get when flying to different airports can be uncomfortable.”

After talking piloting and engineering, we turned to writing; DeAndre is authoring a book featuring his innovative ideas on education. Time flew by, and all too soon I found myself wheeling homeward over Lake Powell’s azure waters.

Here we are with a declining pilot population, when a world of people out there would love being aviators if only they’re exposed to it. Are we pursuing and embracing them all as sincerely and aggressively as we could? Let’s offer the controls to our friends of all heritages and cultures, along with the support and encouragement every new pilot needs to succeed. And you current minority pilots must get out there and be public role models. DeAndre, ol’ buddy, kudos for carrying the flag! 🇺🇸

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**Greg Brown** is author of numerous aviation books and former National Flight Instructor of the Year. Visit his website ([www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com](http://www.gregbrownflyingcarpet.com)).