



NEWS RELEASE

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

First two enlisted pilots complete solo flights

PUEBLO, Colorado -- Two Air Force master sergeants became the first enlisted Airmen in six decades to complete solo flights, Nov. 3, during Initial Flight Training at the 1st Flying Training Squadron.

Both soloed in a DA-20 Katana at Pueblo Memorial Airport as part of the Air Force's IFT program, which is mandatory for all manned aircraft pilots, combat systems officers, and remotely piloted aircraft pilots.

The Air Force announced on Dec. 17, 2015, the initiative to train enlisted RPA pilots for RQ-4 Global Hawk flying operations. As a result, the Enlisted Pilot Initial Class began Oct. 12 with four students training alongside 20 recently commissioned officers.

"The integration of enlisted RPA pilots into RQ-4 Global Hawk operations is part of a broader effort to meet the continual RPA demands of combatant commanders in the field, ensuring they are provided with intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities in their areas of responsibilities worldwide," said Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James.

Air Force officials selected 12 active-duty Airmen for EPIC. After IFT completion, each EPIC student will progress through the RPA Instrument Qualification Course and RPA Fundamentals Course at Joint Base San Antonio-Randolph, Texas, and the Basic Qualification Training at Beale Air Force Base, California. The entire training program spans almost a full year.

Solo flights by enlisted pilots are relatively rare in U.S. military history. In 1912, one of the first two pilots in the Army Air Corps was a corporal. Thousands of enlisted pilots were trained and served in the military throughout World Wars I and II including future Brig. Gen. Chuck Yeager. The Air Force's Cadet Aviation Program saw enlisted Airmen become commissioned officers upon completion, ending in 1961.

“It’s a great opportunity that we’re getting enlisted pilots back into the full force,” said Master Sgt. Mike, the first EPIC student to fly solo. Mike, a 17-year veteran with extensive flying experience, started his Air Force career in security forces and most recently served as a maintainer.

“There are a lot of opportunities that could become available to enlisted Airmen,” Mike said. “If there is something you really want, it’s achievable. You just have to put in the effort.”

EPIC’s second solo flyer, Master Sgt. Alex, had the determination Mike talked about, but no previous flight training.

“If you would have asked me if I was going to be a pilot when I was an airman first class, I would have told you no,” Alex said after he completed his 20-minute flight. “I would never have thought that possible.”

Alex said that when he was alone in the plane’s cockpit he relied on his checklist and the voice of his instructor pilot playing over and over in his mind.

“I’m the type of guy who, if someone doesn’t like an idea and says ‘that’s not going to work’ and I think it’s a good idea, I’m willing to be the guy who says ‘that’s a challenge, let’s go see if I can do this.’”

Alex said he initially wondered why IFT was so tough on students.

“Now, I understand. Instructors are seeing if you can handle the stress of being able to make your radio calls on time, maintain proper altitude, contacting all your approaches and departures, hitting the right waypoints, getting to where you need to go,” Alex said. “They put you in a lot of stressful situations so that when you get out there you can handle it.”

Alex was relieved to have the solo flight behind him but he isn’t ready to celebrate, despite the excitement of coworkers, his senior leaders and family back at home.

“I was excited that I soloed, but I have to maintain focus. This is not over. I’ve got to keep going and make sure that I get completely through the program,” Alex said.

Editor’s note: Only first names were given because the Air Force limits disclosure of identifying information to first names for all RPA pilots and sensor operators throughout their careers. One of the first four EPIC students was released from training for medical reasons.

For video products from the first EPIC flights, please go to

<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/491059/epic-b-roll>

<https://www.dvidshub.net/video/491058/epic-first-solo-flights>

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