



SUPPLIED PHOTOS

Timothy Atik (Tik) Mason, 43, had a long road before his new life in the skies as a pilot — he previously had a successful career in music, as the bass player for Juno-winning Burnt Project 1.

'Tik' Mason makes history as first homegrown commercial pilot to fly into his community of St. Theresa Point

## NORTHERN MANITOBA'S TOP GUN

MARTIN CASH

**W**HEN Timothy Atik (Tik) Mason landed at the St. Theresa Point First Nation airport as the first officer on a Perimeter Aviation Dash-8 earlier this month, he was welcomed with homemade signs on the tarmac, saying "Welcome Home Atik".

With that flight — one of the very first in his career as a commercial pilot with Perimeter — he became the northern Manitoba airline's first homegrown pilot.

It was a long journey for Mason, 43, who grew up in St. Theresa Point, to get to that day.

It was a journey that was shared by several people at Perimeter and other operating companies owned by Exchange Income Corp. (EIC) which has been publicly working towards engaging more people in its operating businesses from the communities its airlines serve.

"There were some tears after we landed," Mason said the day after the St. Theresa Point touch down. "They were all pretty happy."

After the passengers has disembarked there was a traditional ceremony and prayers on the other side of the airport with his parents and members of the community.

"It was very cool," he said. "It's been a seven-year journey and it was not easy."

As hard as it was and as rewarding as it is for Mason, it may be just as rewarding for David White, EIC's executive vice-president for aviation, and Robin Jacuzzi, head of the company's pilot recruitment program called Life in Flight.

### SUCCESS IN OUR PROVINCE

The company which also owns Calm Air, Keewatin Air, Wasaya Airways and a couple of airlines in the Maritimes has long had the goal of seeing someone like Mason become a pilot and fly into their home community on a Perimeter Dash-8.

EIC currently employs hundreds of Indigenous people in various roles throughout the network including a few Indigenous pilots, but Mason is the first pilot from one of the reserves it flies into.

And not only is Mason's achievement a great personal story of diligence and commitment against the odds, he is a fantastic example of what the Perimeter and EIC are trying to achieve.

"He is a real ambassador," White said. "He will serve his community well as well as EIC in telling his story."

Mason is gracious about his good fortune to have the support of White and Jacuzzi and the officials at Moncton Flight School,

another EIC company, where he spent three years both learning to fly and then, later, as an instructor himself.

He is close to his parents, who were both teachers and still work in St. Theresa Point, and was a little reluctant to have to spend so much time so far away from them.

"But the people at Moncton Flight School made it so easy for me to be able to communicate with them," he said.

He came to realize his passion for flying after a successful career in music — he was the bass player for Burnt Project 1, winners of the 2006 Juno Award for Indigenous recording — and after dropping out of university only a few credit hours short of a degree.



From left: Ken Wood, family friend, Janice Mason (Tik's mother), Tik Mason and Roy Mason (Tik's father) gather on the tarmac in St. Theresa Point.

But after one of his regular customers at the Pony Corral on Grant Avenue, where he was a bartender for 12 years, offered him a ride on his Piper Cherokee, Mason said he then knew that is what he was meant to do.

That's when he started chipping away at his pilot's licence, only able to afford lessons when he had the money "I was working full time. My parents were trying to save money. They fully supported me," he said. "We didn't know how we were going to do it. Flight training is very expensive and we did not have the resources."

That changed after Mason became the first recipient of EIC's Bill Wehrle Scholarship, named after the founder of Perimeter.

"When the Perimeter scholarship came up, it totally changed the game," he said. "All of a sudden I had the resources. Those first three years I would say I was struggling to see whether or not I could actually do the pilot thing... then suddenly I was flying every day."

Mason's personal charm and charisma easily convinced folks he was deserving of the scholarship.

"I still remember first time I met him," said White. "He was a little older than I expected but what really struck me right away was that he was such a great spokesman. I remember walking away thinking he will be such a suc-

cess. Not just successful as an individual but somebody who can truly represent the program and tell the story. It turned out to be so true."

In addition to their pride in seeing Mason succeed, officials at EIC also used Mason's experience to help design their Life In Flight recruitment and training program that now has about 24 people involved.

Jacuzzi said, "Although Tik was never an official member of Life in Flight his experience certainly paved the way for the program. The program was sort of built around his success and his experience."

**T**HAT includes the fact that the program is aligned with a Canadian bank making funds available at attractive rates for the trainees and the fact that EIC is now more mindful of the potential isolation of people from small northern Manitoba communities going off on their own for an extended stay at flight school in Moncton.

Just as Mason himself became an instructor, to build up flying hours and add experience before assuming a pilot position on scheduled flights for the airline, the Life in Flight program now encourages all its trainees to spend time as instructors.

Mason has to complete a few flights with accredited captains to attain the



Tik Mason (left) and Richard Milton, chief pilot at Perimeter.

next level of his certification and then he will take up a position with Perimeter based out of Thompson.

His First Nation ancestry is important to him. He said his medicine name, which he declined to say to a reporter, has to do with music and "father sky" which he saw as another sign that he was making the right decision.

He said it's important to him to be the first member of a First Nation community served by Perimeter to become a pilot with them.

"I want to give the youth of First Nations communities hope that they can actually do something," he said. "When I was growing up there in the late '80s and '90s, there was nothing to do. The youth are bored and tend to get involved in things that are not healthy."

EIC is running a business to make a profit but the company is mindful of the communities where its customers are and strives to be supportive and respectful.

White knows Mason can be a powerful symbol of what the company and the communities can do together.

For Mason, he said, "It's important for me to be in area doing something that may or may not seem unattainable to First Nation youth to show then it is possible."

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