



# THE Flyer

P. O. Box 1903, Kitty Hawk, NC 27949  
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Fall 2000

## Actually There Were Seven

By Bill Harris

Most accounts of the first powered flights by the Wright brothers on December 17, 1903, state that there were five witnesses in addition to the brothers. Actually there were seven.

Because of the size and weight of the 1903 flyer, the Wright brothers needed help in moving the machine into position for tests and the crew of the Kill Devil Hills Life Saving Station offered their help. Early on the morning of December 17, a sheet hung on the outside of the camp building was the signal to the station crew that the Wrights were ready to test their flyer. Surfmen John T. Daniels, Adam D. Etheridge, and Willis S. Dough answered the call and joined the Wrights at their camp to assist in moving the flyer. William C. Brinkley of Manteo, who may have been a visitor or a substitute surfman, accompanied the station crewmembers to the camp. John T. Moore, a 15-year-old lad from Nags Head just happened by as the brothers prepared the flyer for flight. These five men helped move the craft into position for the first flight and returned the machine to the starting point for each of the succeeding three flights. Daniels, Dough, Etheridge, Brinkley and Moore were both participants

and witnesses to the most historic event in aviation history.

The Wrights, however, acknowledged that there were two other witnesses of some, or all of the flights. They were not, however, present on site that day, but observed the flights from a distance.

In a November 17, 1905, letter to Carl Dienstbach, the Wrights reported that, "The flights near Kitty Hawk were seen...by the Captain [S. J. Payne] of the Kitty Hawk Station [four miles away], who viewed the flights through a glass." Dr. Marvin W. McFarland, as editor of The Papers of Wilbur and Orville Wright, supplied the name, S. J. Payne,

(Samuel J. Payne) but he was mistaken in that identification. It could not have been Samuel J. Payne since he left the Life Saving Service at midnight on December 31, 1901. A. B. Love Tillett, a Kitty Hawk native and former #1 Surfman at the Kill Devil Hills station,

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**FIRST FLIGHT HONOREE**—Donald Wills Douglas as he appeared on the cover of Time Magazine, November 11, 1943

### **DEC. 16 & 17 SCHEDULE OF EVENTS:**

#### **Dec. 16**

**12:30 pm** FFS Board of Directors Meeting, Dare County Regional Airport, Manteo.

**3:00 pm** AFA NC State Executive Meeting and Kitty Hawk Chapter, Comfort Inn South, Nags Head.

**7:00 pm** Man Will Never Fly International Annual Meeting and Banquet, Comfort Inn South, Nags Head.

#### **Dec. 17**

**9:00 am** 97th Commemoration of the First Powered Flight, Wright Brothers' National Memorial, Kill Devil Hills.

**10:35 am** Fly-over

**12:00 pm** FFS Luncheon and Annual Meeting, Comfort Inn South, Nags Head

**7:00 pm** Wright Brothers' Anniversary Ball, Ramada Inn, Kill Devil Hills.

## Re-Enactments--100th Year

In our last newsletter, we told you about the coming re-enactment events. They occurred starting Friday, September 8 in Elizabeth City, NC where Wilbur Wright arrived by train. That city had memorable events for two days recreating history. Several actors in period costumes played various parts. Three interpretive markers were unveiled at appropriate locations for future visitors. "Wilbur" left Elizabeth City and headed by boat for Kitty Hawk. The harrowing two-day journey was not re-enacted, we're sure that the actors were relieved, but "Wilbur" did arrive in Kitty Hawk for more events on Wednesday, September 13.

The Kitty Hawk events began Wednesday morning at the Bald View Bed & Breakfast Inn located on Kitty Hawk Bay within 100 yards of the actual landing place. Later in the day the many spectators gathered at Jockey's Ridge State Park for the attempts to fly the 1900 glider. While it was a beautiful sunny day, the winds were not strong enough for good flights. But the panel discussion with Dr. Tom Crouch, Rick Young, David Stick and Bill Harris was presented to a S.R.O. crowd.

Several organizations and businesses were responsible for the Elizabeth City events. The

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# It's Flying, Not Falling

By Wynne Dough

Over the last year or two, the Virginian-Pilot, to say nothing of its competition, has published many articles about the First Flight centennial, who's running the show, whether Oshkoshers or Laplanders or whoever are taking over, which politico wants which bureaucrat hanged, and the rest of it. Every time such an item hits the street, someone accosts me in the post office to ask why we're celebrating the centennial in the first place. The usual inquiry is something like, "What's so special about the Wright brothers? My Aunt Gertrude could've flown off a hill that tall."

The point is well taken as far as it goes. Flying off Kill Devil Hill would've been no big deal. Anyone able to get a good running start could duplicate the feat without mechanical assistance.

But that kind of flying, commonly referred to as falling, has limited usefulness. The Wright Brothers regarded it lightly from the beginning of their glider experiments. Their goal was to take flight from level ground, unaided by gravity or big rubber bands. One reason, no doubt, is that level ground is abundant in Dayton, Ohio. The Outer Banks made their short list not because of the impressive hills, but because of the strong, steady wind. Moving loads of equipment hundreds of miles by rail and boat to Kitty Hawk was a chore, but it was easier and less expensive than building a wind tunnel big enough for their purposes.

Glider afford some control over direction, but altitude and speed can be problematic. Being heavier than air, gliders tend to stop when the wind dies or where obstacles intrude. Moreover, getting a stopped glider started again can be difficult if it's in pieces or if the pilot needs medical attention thirty feet up in the branches of a sycamore. The Wrights chose the Outer Banks over other windy places because it offered large expanses of fairly cushiony sand uninterrupted by rocks or trees.

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(SCHEDULE OF EVENTS continued)

## **Reservations & Tickets**

### **MWNFSI Meeting and Banquet**

Reservations, tickets \$35 per person, contact Jim Dadson, ph. 252-428-1822.

**FFS Luncheon**, \$25 per person, contact FFS, P. O. Box 1903, Kitty Hawk, NC 27949, ph. 252-441-1903 or fax 252-449-2223.

**Wright Brothers' Anniversary Ball** \$125 per person, contact Al Jones, ph. 252-449-8189, fax 252-441-4349.

In the 1780s Jacques and Joseph Montgolfier began to solve some of the problems of going up and coming down at will by using balloons, which can be rendered variably lighter than air as long as the fuel lasts and the fabric holds together. But after 120 years of progress, coming down remained notably easier and deadlier than going up. And because balloonists still couldn't control speed or direction, they could miss a target the size of Ireland, such as Ireland, by a wide margin. Some of the Wrights' predecessors and rivals boldly tried to seize control of altitude, direction, and speed all at once by building gliders that could produce their own wind. To this end, they employed propellers turned by engines of various kinds. You have to wonder why no one thought of strapping wings to a philosophy professor, but I digress. The most serviceable of these craft, Samuel Langley's Aerodromes, were too small to carry a human being, and they had to be catapulted skyward. The best of his piloted models were uncontrollable, and they flew about as far and as gracefully as a dropped hammer. Langley was so confident in the airworthiness of his designs that he used a houseboat as a launching pad because water is generally softer than sand. He managed to wreck a lot of machinery anyway.

Langley was secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, however, and his middle name was Pierpont. Sympathetic authorities opined that his most advanced Aerodrome could've borne a pilot aloft if the catapult hadn't malfunctioned and if a host of angels had grabbed hold and flapped in unison.

The Wrights were nobodies with few exploitable connections. They had impudently succeeded in an endeavor that had frustrated their betters. So the federal government withheld the Wrights' first patent until 1906 and for years thereafter mule-headedly recognized "Icarus on the Mall" as the father of aviation. That's why the 1903 Wright Flyer sat under wraps in England until 1948. Sorry, I'm digressing again.

Lack of suitable engines and materials hampered progress, but the worst impediment was bad information. Wilbur Wright once wrote, "Having set out with absolute faith in the existing scientific data, we were driven to doubt one thing after another, until finally, after two years of experiment, we cast it all aside, and decided to rely entirely upon our own investigations." Only by chucking widely accepted figures on drag, lift, and thrust were the Wrights able to make a workable powered glider.

Their epochal achievement at 10:35 a.m. on December 17, 1903, was to take off from a flattish surface in a heavier-than-air contraption on engine power alone—without a catapult, without anyone pushing—then live through a deliberate landing at equal or greater elevation. They didn't fly off Kill Devil Hill. They flew near it. It may be hard for you to believe, but sometimes even journalists get this wrong.

*Wynne Dough is the former Curator of the Outer Banks History Center and a member of the First Flight Society. His work appears regularly in the North Beach Sun, The Coast and other publications. The foregoing article originally appeared in The Coast and is reprinted with the permission of the publisher.*

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## **SEVEN (continued from front page)**

replaced Payne as station Keeper in January 1902.

The view of the flights by Keeper Tillett could not have been very clear to him even with a spyglass, considering that they occurred over four miles away and, judging from photographs taken that morning, it was a very hazy day. Certainly he could not have seen the men moving the flyer, identified the pilot, or known how far it may have traveled. But apparently he did see enough to convince the brothers that he had been a creditable witness.

Robert L. Wescott, the second witness, had a much better vantage point to observe the flights. On the morning of December 17, he was watchman at the Kill Devil Hills Life Saving Station and most likely positioned on the watchtower platform atop the station. The Wright camp was a mile or less from the station and with the aid of a spyglass he could have easily observed the work of preparing the craft for flight, as well as the flights themselves.

Through the years a number of people have stepped forward and reported that they too observed the first powered flights. On careful review of the claims, however, it appears that any flights they may have observed were the 1908 flights, not those of 1903! There is no evidence that anyone other than Wilbur and Orville Wright and the seven other witnesses they identified saw the historic flights of December 17, 1903!

*Bill Harris is acting Treasurer of the First Flight Society and the grandson of Elijah Baum (the boy that helped Wilbur Wright when he first arrived in Kitty Hawk). He is recently retired from the National Park Service and a noted historian on Kitty Hawk.*

# Still Bickering

By Tom Halfhill

In the last issue of *The Flyer*, I commented on the local controversy of just where did the first flight in 1903 occur. When people stick to the documented facts, there should not be a controversy. Unfortunately, some people choose to ignore facts. As stated before, the first powered flights did happen in what was then called Kitty Hawk. The idea and dreams of successful powered flight occurred in Ohio and the two Wright brothers designed and built their various aircraft to achieve that historic event in Ohio and brought them to North Carolina to fly. Why do we still hear the bickering?

Some people in Ohio feel that when the Ohio commemorative quarter is minted, it should include the Wright brothers somehow on the design. North Carolina believes that when their coin is minted—and theirs precedes Ohio's—that it should honor the Wright brothers. Also, North Carolina decided about ten years ago to put the slogan "First in Flight" on their license plates. Again, some people became upset when Ohio decided about four years ago to offer the slogan "Birthplace of Aviation" on some of their plates. Now when you consider the facts, there should not be a controversy as both states are correct in the respective slogans. Well—almost. To be factual, North Carolina's plates should say "First in Powered Flight". but the bickering continues among some of the uninformed in newspapers and at different events. Really, there is plenty of history in both states concerning the Wright brothers that jealousy should not be an issue. Here in the South, I suspect that those who display jealousy of Ohio are inflicted with "yankeephobia" and some in Ohio feel the need to retaliate.

Ohio has and is planning their big celebrations mostly during the summer seasons purposely in order NOT to conflict with the big celebrations planned in North Carolina. That makes good sense as it gives the opportunity to attend events in both locations. So quit the bickering and snide remarks and get on with the show.

## Accommodations offering FFS members group rates:

Ramada Inn  
1701 South Virginia Dare Trail  
Kill Devil Hills, NC 27948  
Ph. 1-800-635-1824 or 252-441-2151  
Fax 252-441-1830

Holiday Inn  
1601 South Virginia Dare Trail  
Kill Devil Hills, NC 27948  
Ph. 1-800-843-1249 or 252-441-6333  
Fax 252-441-2229

Comfort Inn South  
8031 Old Oregon Inlet Road  
Nags Head, NC 27959  
Ph. 1-800-334-3302 or 252-441-6315  
Fax 252-441-2868



**RE-ENACTMENT**—Rick Young flies a replica Wright brothers' glider at Jockey's Ridge State Park in Nags Head as John Harris (right) helps guide the flight during a photo shoot for the Smithsonian book, *Milestones in Aviation*, published in 1989.

## The Art of Flying

During the festivities surrounding the Wright Brother's achievement this December, don't miss an opportunity to visit the Icarus exhibit.

This splendid exhibit which celebrates flight will open December 3rd at Glenn Eure's Ghost Fleet Gallery and Seaside Art Gallery. Both galleries are located in Nags Head, and a shuttle bus will operate between the locations during the reception and awards presentation on December 16th from 7 pm until 9 pm.

This year, artists have submitted work under the theme, *Flying Machines*.

Due to the recent relocation of the Dare County Arts Council Gallery to Manteo, the *Icarus Youth Exhibition* will be held at the Dream Center in Nags Head.

In addition to the annual exhibit and competition, the *First Flight Society* also relies on *ICARUS* to select the artist to paint the portrait of the *First Flight Shrine* honoree. Artist Ardith Starostka of Columbus, Nebraska was chosen to paint the portrait of Donald Wills Douglas to be unveiled December 17th.

**STANDING ROOM ONLY**—Col. Robin Stoddart of Tuscon, AZ speaks to First Flight Elementary School 5th grade parents at the Wright Brothers National Memorial in Kill Devil Hills about the Wright Flight Program. The nine week course has been conducted in more than 30 states, but the First Flight 5th grade class is the first to participate in the program in the state of North Carolina. Funded in part by the First Flight Centennial Commission, the 9 week course educates the students on the principals of aviation and challenges them to improve their grades. Those students passing the course are treated to a free flight in a small plane and a turn at the controls.



***The Flyer***  
 is a Newsletter of  
**The First Flight Society**

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*FFS President Rex Peters, Col. McArthur and NPS Superintendent Mary Doll*

**RE-ENACTMENTS, continued from front page)**

First Flight Society, the First Flight Centennial Commission and Foundation, the Outer Banks History Center and other supporters coordinated the Kitty Hawk events. All of the actors gave outstanding performances and delighted the many attendees. We look forward to re-enactments for the 2001, 2002 and 2003 years.

# McArthur Invited

Although confirmation was still pending at press time, astronaut Col. William Surlles "Bill" McArthur, Jr. has indicated his desire to attend and speak at the First Flight Society Luncheon December 17th at the Comfort Inn South in Nags Head.

McArthur has just returned from his mission aboard the new International Space Station where he participated in space walks and installing equipment. Earlier flights include mission specialist aboard the Space Shuttle Columbia and the space shuttle rendezvous mission with the Russian Space Station MIR.

## Communicate!

The First Flight Society Has A New Telephone Number: 252-441-1903

- Also, please keep us advised of address changes.
- We like to communicate at lightning speed and zero postage. Please send your e-mail address to [dec17@firstflight.org](mailto:dec17@firstflight.org).

### First Flight Society Membership Application

Members of the First Flight Society come from all walks (or flights) of life, but we all share a common bond: our love of aviation. The purpose of the society is to foster and promote a public awareness of, and widespread interest in, the origin, history and future of flight, in all its forms, and to memorialize Orville and Wilbur Wright, first in the world to successfully achieve powered flight in a heavier-than-air machine, December 17, 1903, near Kill Devil Hill, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Join us by completing the information below and mailing your membership check made payable to the First Flight Society.

Name \_\_\_\_\_, Address \_\_\_\_\_, State \_\_\_\_\_, Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**(Mail to The First Flight Society, P. O. Box 1903, Kitty Hawk, NC 27949)**

\$25.00 Renewal     \$25.00 New Member     \$150.00 Corporate Membership     \$300.00 Lifetime Membership



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