

Primary Source: The Wright Brothers Fly

from The Philadelphia Inquirer, January 7, 1904

Brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright are credited with building and flying the first powered airplane. The first flights took place December 17, 1903 in North Carolina. Below is an article about the historic moment from The Philadelphia Inquirer, January 7, 1904.

FLYING MACHINE HAS COME AT

LAST

Wright Brothers Tell of the Good Results of Their

Invention

Went Over Eight Hundred Feet in
Air, and the Young Men Believe
It is Quite Controllable

DAYTON, Ohio, Jan. 6 – The Wright brothers, inventors of the flying machine which has attracted such wide-spread attention, have prepared the following, which they say is the first correct statement of the two successful trials made by them:

“On the morning of December 17, between 10:30 and noon, four flights were made, two by Orville Wright and two by Wilbur Wright. The starts were all made from a point on the level and about 200 feet west of our camp, which is situated a quarter of a mile north of Kill Devil Sandhill in Dare County, North Carolina. The wind at the time of the flights had a velocity of 27 miles an hour at noon, as recorded by the anemometer at the Kitty Hawk Weather Bureau station. This anemometer is thirty feet from the ground. Our own measurements, made with a hand anemometer at a height of four feet from the ground, showed a velocity of about 22 miles when the first flight was made and 22 1/2 miles when the last flight was made. The flight was made directly against the wind. Each time the machine started from the level ground by its own power, with no assistance from gravity or other source whatever.

Climbs Into the Air

“After a run of about 40 feet along a mono-rail track, which held the machine eight inches from the ground, it rose from the track and under the direction of the operator climbed upward on an inclined course until a height of 8 or ten feet from the ground was reached, after which the course was kept as near horizontal as the wind gusts and the limited skill of the operator would permit. Into the teeth of a December Gale the ‘flyer’ made its way forward with a speed of ten miles an hour over the ground and of 30 to 35 miles an hour through the air. It had previously been decided that for reasons of personal safety these first trials should be made as close to the ground as possible. The height chosen was scarcely sufficient for maneuvering in so gusty a wind and with no previous acquaintance with the conduct of the machine and its controlling mechanism. Consequently the first flight was short. The succeeding flights rapidly increased in length, and at the fourth trial a flight of fifty seconds was made, in which the machine flew a little more than a half mile through the air and a distance of 852 feet over the ground. The landing was due to a slight error of judgment on the part of the operator. After passing over a little hammock of sand in attempting to bring the machine down to the desired height the operator turned the rudder too far and the machine turned down more quickly than had been expected. The reverse movement of the rudder was a fraction of a second too late to prevent the machine from touching the ground, and thus ending the flight. The whole occurrence occupied little, if any, more than one second of time.

The Era of Flying

“Only those who are acquainted with practical aeronautics can appreciate the difficulties in attempting the first trial of a flying machine in a 25 mile gale. As winter had already set in, we should have postponed our trials to a more favorable season, but for the fact we were determined before returning home to know whether the machine possessed sufficient power to fly, sufficient strength to withstand the shock of landing, and sufficient capacity of control to make flight safe in boisterous winds as well as in calm air. When these points had been definitely established we at once packed our goods and returned home, knowing that the age of the flying machine had come at last.

“From the beginning we have employed entirely new principles of control, and as all the experiments have been conducted at our own expense, without assistance from any individual or institution, we don’t feel ready at present to give out any pictures or detailed description of the machine.”

Questions

1. The statement by the Wrights includes phrases such as "the limited skill of the operator" and "with no previous acquaintance with the conduct of the machine and its controlling mechanism." Why do you think the operator had limited skill, and there was a lack the knowledge of the machine?
2. What does *boisterous* mean here: "sufficient capacity of control to make flight safe in boisterous winds as well as in calm air"?
3. How far did the fourth flight go? How long did this flight last?
4. Why do you think the Wright brothers didn't want to give out any pictures or descriptions of the plane?