

The First Cross-Country Flight by Airplane

By FRANK L. BALL *

It was four years after their first flight at Kitty Hawk, N.C., before the Wright brothers could get the United States Army sufficiently interested in heavier-than-air aviation to begin expending some money. The first contract called for a machine capable of carrying the pilot and one passenger at a speed of 40 miles per hour in a 10-mile test and of carrying fuel enough for 125 miles. The second test was a continuous flight for one hour. The tests were to be made at Fort Myer in the fall of 1908. The Wrights' bid was to furnish the machine within 200 days at a cost of \$25,000.

In order to prepare for these tests, the Wrights went back to Kitty Hawk in May, where they assembled their machine in the presence of a number of newspaper correspondents, who had been sent by doubting editors to observe and record the facts. Even so great a newsman as James Gordon Bennett, with his outstanding *New York Herald*, was so skeptical that he sent his best reporter Byron R. Newton to observe the test at Kitty Hawk and to determine whether or not the Wrights were fakers. On May 14, Newton observed Wilbur Wright making a short flight with James W. Furnas as passenger and then Orville made a flight of 4 minutes with Furnas as his passenger. These were the first flights in the history of the airplane carrying two men. Newton was so impressed with what he saw that day that he wrote in his diary, "Some day Congress will erect a monument here to these Wrights." In November 1932 this prophesy came true when the Wright monument on Kill Devil Hill, erected by an Act of Congress, was dedicated.

Later on that year, Wilbur went to France and Orville came to Fort Myer. There had been changes made in the machine, one of which provided for the pilot to sit upright on top of the lower plane. Up to this point all flights had been made with the pilot lying on his stomach. Orville's first flight at Fort Myer was on September 3, 1908. The course he followed lies just south and southwest of the present Fort Myer Hospital and covered a large field on which at that time there was no building except perhaps the laundry. He circled this field counterclockwise. This first Fort Myer flight was witnessed by a great many people, and the crowd was stirred to a very high state of emotion. Some of the many newspaper reporters who criticised him and doubted his claims were so overcome that at least three of the most prominent of them came to him and congratulated him with tears streaming down their cheeks.

Orville continued his flights from day to day, one day setting a new world's record of sustained flight and the next day breaking it by staying

* Who witnessed it.

aloft a little longer. Most of these flights were of few minutes' duration, but he gradually brought them up until on September 12 he stayed in the air continuously for 1 hour and 15 minutes. In one of these flights in 1908, he took his friend Lt. Frank P. Lahm and they stayed up 6 minutes and 24 seconds. This was the first flight of an Army officer in an airplane.

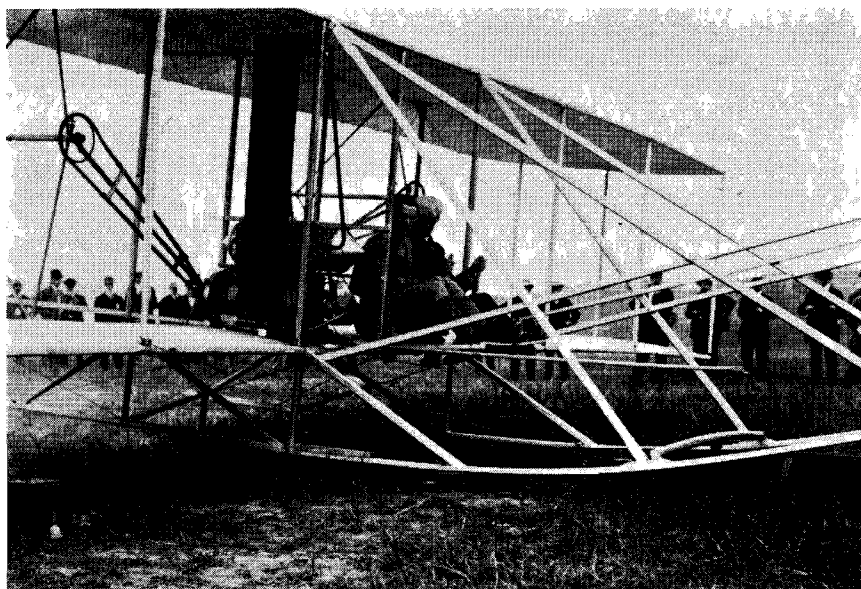
Of course, there was great excitement in Washington, but probably more in the countryside south of the Potomac. From the first flight on, all of us who were living within a few miles of Fort Myer dropped our work in the early afternoon and headed for the field. In fact, we became so enthused that in a sort of a way we adopted Orville Wright as our own boy and looked on him as almost a member of the family. Looking back, I think I must have seen nearly all, if not all, of the 1908 flights with the exception of the one on September 17.

On that date, Lt. Thomas Selfridge begged that he might be assigned as a passenger. His request was granted, and the two rose from the field in good order and were in the air some three or four minutes when something went wrong with the plane and it took a sudden dive. Wright tried desperately to get control, and when almost to the ground the machine began to right itself. However, it did not quite make it and struck with a terrific crash, killing Selfridge and maiming Wright for life. It was Wright's thought that if he had had just a few more feet he could have gotten the machine in position where it would have landed on its skids, and the tragic results to both men might have been avoided. Selfridge thus became the first victim of an airplane accident. A fine monument is erected to his memory in Arlington Cemetery.

Although severely injured, Wright did not lose consciousness. He was taken to the hospital and on the following day his mechanics, Taylor and Furnas, brought to him the broken propeller and other broken parts, and while lying in bed he diagnosed the trouble that had brought about the accident. This is but one example of the intense concentration of this inventor in improving his product.

With the death of Selfridge and the crippling of Wright and the machine, the tests at Fort Myer ended for that year.

In 1909, Orville Wright came back to Fort Myer to finish his tests. His first flight was on June 28; his last on July 30. Between those dates he was up nearly every day, and as in the year before the whole countryside turned out to view the flights and cheer him on. Again I saw practically all the tests. He completed his endurance test by staying in the air more than an hour. He did this by continuously circling the field. There was left only a cross-country test which called for a flight of 10 miles. The course was laid out from the Fort Myer field to Shooter's Hill in Alexandria—where the George Washington National Masonic Memorial now stands, a little west of the Alexandria railroad station. Everybody knew that Wright would make his attempt the first day the conditions were good. Lt. Benjamin



SELFRIDGE AND ORVILLE WRIGHT AT FORT MYER, SEPTEMBER 17, 1908. (PHOTO BY CARL CLAUDY; COURTESY OF SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.)

D. Foulois was assigned as a passenger for this trip. On this test he had to maintain a speed of 40 miles in order to receive his \$25,000 from the Government, and there was a bonus added of \$1,000 for each one mile per hour average speed over the minimum of 40.

On the day of the flight Wright did not keep his audience waiting very long. It was a bright, warm, calm July day. Official Washington turned out in force. The high brass of the Army, many Congressional leaders, Cabinet members, and Washington society by the thousands, led by Evalyn Walsh and Alice Roosevelt, gathered around the north end of the field. The crowd was so terrific that a battalion of the Fort Myer cavalry had to be called on to keep it back behind the lines and in proper order. On that particular day I went to the Fort Myer grounds with the late Dr. Ralph A. Quick, my older brother, E. Wade Ball, now deceased, and my younger brother, Dallas D. Ball, who is now a resident of Washington. Seeing the immense crowd and with full knowledge that we country men did not have a chance among the big boys, we decided to go to the south end of the field along the area where the old railroad track was.

Wright rose and circled the field once, making his turn right over our heads. He then headed straight for Shooter's Hill. There was a captive balloon to mark his turning point and also a temporary telegraph line set up to record the time of the turning and communicate with Fort Myer. About the time he started, however, a strong wind blew up at the Alexandria end and wrecked the balloon and the telegraph station, and so Wright did not

know the exact spot to turn and went well beyond his mark. We watched him as he left Fort Myer until he flew over the Four Mile Run area where there was a depression through the valley and he went out of sight. You cannot imagine a more tense crowd than that composed of all of us as we stood and stared and hoped that he would make the turn and come back safely. This trip was over wooded and rough territory, and there was not a single place where he could have hoped to land safely if anything had gone wrong. We had only a few minutes to wait before the buzz of the engine was again heard and the returning plane came in sight. There went up a terrific hurrah from the crowd and constant cheering from that moment until he landed.

When Wright arrived at the field he feared to land at the north end because of the possibility that the crowd might break through and somebody might be injured. He consequently flew up to the north end, made his turn in front of the crowd, and came directly back where the four of us men were standing and landed in front of us. We rushed over to the plane. My brother Wade was the first person to congratulate him. Dr. Quick, Dallas, and I were right behind him, but before we could quite reach the plane the cavalry charged down upon us and drove us back. You will find in the records that Alice Roosevelt and Evalyn Walsh were the first to receive and congratulate Wright. This, of course, was the story of the correspondents who were up in the crowd at the north end of the field and naturally were glamorizing these two charming leaders in Washington society. As a matter of fact, Wade was the first to get to the plane and the first to congratulate him. I recall very well that Wright had a very small American flag out on the front of the plane. I recall also that he looked at us as we were running out but that his main attention was on his passenger, and apparently both Wright and Foulois were excited and enthusiastically talking to each other. Thus ended the first cross-country flight in the history of aviation by a heavier-than-air machine—perhaps the most famous event in the history of Arlington County.

Wright had obtained a speed of a trifle less than 43 miles per hour. He thus received a bonus for exceeding his minimum. On August 2, 1909, the machine was formally accepted by the United States Government, and Orville, accompanied by his sister Katherine, set out for Berlin to demonstrate the machine to another government.

Wright never recovered entirely from his accident in 1908, but he continued his intense concentration on the development of the airplane, and of course he goes down in history as one of the great inventors of all times.