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Aviation Week & Space Technology

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Witnesses To Flight: Aviation Achievements Of The Wrights Described In Recently Discovered Letters Written By Their Contemporaries

Presented by Stanley W. Kandebo
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The time is March 6, 1931. Herbert Hoover is president, and it's been almost a year and a half since the stock market crash on Wall Street. The country is in a severe depression, jobs are hard to come by and it's tough to make ends meet. It's been 27 years since the Wright brothers flew their first powered aircraft at Kill Devil Hills and not quite four years since Lindbergh flew non-stop from New York to Paris. Although it's beginning to emerge from its carnival-like atmosphere, aviation is still a novelty to much of the world.

In fact, aviation is so new that there's still a healthy international debate going on as to exactly who did what and when. Frenchmen still see Ader and Santos-Dumont as the rightful inventors of heavier-than-air flight. In the United States, the Smithsonian is still claiming that title for Samuel P. Langley, although that assertion is losing strength and growing more muted.

With many eyewitnesses to the early pioneering flights still alive, some interested parties have taken it upon themselves to set the record straight, to eliminate the conflicting claims before the passage of time makes it impossible to do so. One of those people is Frank S. Lahm.

Lahm, a businessman living in France and an early supporter of the Wrights, has been active in aviation since before 1900, even serving at one point as vice president of Federation Aeronautique Internationale (FAI). This is the same global body that today certifies and maintains the world's aviation records.

Early in 1931, Lahm got wind of what he saw as a major injustice. The French planned to erect a monument commemorating the first time a circle of one kilometer was flown in a heavier-than air machine. The problem was that the inscription would state the flight had taken place at Issy-les-Moulineaux, France, by Henri Farman on January 13, 1908. Lahm was outraged that the French would do such a thing. After all, everyone knew, or at least Lahm did, that the first aerial circle was flown by the Wright Brothers well before 1908. ¹

To correct this injustice, Lahm formulated a plan. He would contact individuals who had observed flights the Wrights had made at their Huffman Prairie (Ohio) flying field. He would then obtain sworn testimony from them that would establish the Wrights' primacy. As a starting point, Lahm consulted Orville Wright, who supplied the names of several individuals. Each one had seen his brother Wilbur's October 5, 1905 flight, one in which he flew 30 circles over Torrence Huffman's pasture, remaining aloft for more than 39 minutes. ²

That flight was not the first one in which the Wrights had flown a closed circuit-- that had occurred in 1904-- but the 1905 flight was still very special. Not only was it the longest single airplane flight made up to that time, it was longer than the sum total of all 109 flights the Wrights made in 1903 and 1904. ³

Based on Orville's response, Lahm wrote the following to Wilbur's long-time friend Edgar Ellis: ⁴

13 rue Saint-Florentin, Paris

February 18th, 1931
E.W. Ellis, Chief Deputy
Columbus, Ohio

Dear Sir,

I am indebted to Orville Wright for your address. The French have erected a monument just outside Paris, with a inscription saying that "on January 13th, 1908, a French flyer, for the first time in the world made a circle of one kilometer with a machine heavier than air," thus trying to rob the Wright Brothers of the glory that belongs to them and to them alone.

This will sooner or later be brot before the International Aeronautic Federation, and some of the members of the National Aeronautic Ass'n of U.S. seem to think we should have testimonials of some who saw Wright flights, closing a cercle earlier than that date.

If you see no objection would you give me by return letter a statement of what you saw, and if you thought well, have it attested by a notary.

Orville Wright knows nothing of this, it is a move entirely of my own iniation.

Thanking you in advance, I am,
Very truly yours,

F.S. Lahm Ex Vice President Federation Aeronautial International.

It's interesting to note here Lahm's sense of fair play and also how strongly he felt about the Wrights and their accomplishments. It's also noteworthy that Lahm informed Ellis that this scheme to collect documentation was entirely his own idea. As he says, Orville knew nothing of it.

Undoubtedly intrigued, Ellis responded to Lahm's request in a letter dated March 6, 1931:

March 6, 1931
F.S. Lahm
Paris France

My Dear Sir;

This certifies that on October 5th, 1905, I was present on a field east of the City of Dayton, Ohio, and witnessed a flight made by Wilbur Wright in a heavier than air machine which had been constructed by him and his brother Orville. In this flight Wilbur Wright covered a distance of over twenty-four miles traveling in a circle which my best recollection tells me was about three quarters of a mile in diameter.

There were few others who witnessed this flight but among them was the late Bishop Wright, father of the aviators, Mr. Torrence Huffman, also deceased and Mr. T. N. Waddell who at that time was a United States government agent.

Edgar W. Ellis
Chief Clerk, Auditor of State of Ohio
U.S.A.

Edgar W. Ellis being duly sworn, deposeth and saith that the foregoing statement is true and correct.

Wm. V. Miller Notary Public, Franklin County, State of Ohio,
U.S.A.

To supplement this, Ellis also enclosed a signed, typed copy of a letter he had sent to the Aero Club of America in 1906, one that also described this flight. In his earlier letter Ellis stated:

Dayton, Ohio, December 7, 1906

Aero Club of America
New York City, N.Y.

My dear sir:

In response to your request of November 21, I take leasure in telling of my observance of the Wright Brothers' aeroplane.

Early in October, 1905, it was my privilege to witness a very successful flight made by mr. Wright in the aeroplane of their own invention. When I arrived at the appointed place, the air-ship had already ascended and was flying at what seemed to me to be a distance of fifty feet from the ground, and in a rectangular course. That is, the operator was going first north, then west, then south, and then east, guiding and controlling his machine at will.

A distance of twenty-four miles was covered on this occasion, in about thirty-eight minutes. The turns at the various corners of the field in which the flight was made, were made easily and gracefully, and it seemed to be as easy for Mr. Wright to operate it as for anyone else to ride a bicycle. When the machine came to earth at the end of the flight it did so with a gliding motion, giving no perceptible jar or jolt to the operator. I believe that the aeroplane of the Wright Brothers has successfully solved the problem of aerial navigation.

Very truly yours,
E.W. Ellis
Assistant City Auditor

A true copy of my letter of December.

Oddly enough, for the purposes of this paper, one of the most important aspects of these letters is not the eyewitness description of the flight, but the fact that Ellis had one of the letters attested by a notary who also worked as an examiner for the (Ohio) Auditor of State. You see, the notary was William V. Miller, age 38, and it was he, being "a nut on aviation,"⁵ who, with Ellis' help, began corresponding with many of the people who played important parts in the saga of the Wright Brothers and their invention of the airplane. Over the next several years, Miller, who was also a Captain in the Ohio National Guard, would write to, and receive replies from:

- John T. Daniels, surfman at the Kill Devil Hills (N.C.) Lifesaving Station, amateur photographer and self-proclaimed first airplane casualty.
- William J. Tate, postmaster, fisherman, one-man chamber of commerce and North Carolina's first and foremost aviation booster.
- Charley Furnas, sailor, mechanic and the first passenger to be carried aloft in a heavier-than-air machine in the US.
- Reuben Schindler, drugstore clerk, and Theodore Waddell, government agent; both eyewitnesses to Wright flights at Huffman Prairie in 1905.

Broadly grouped, the letters in this collection that are relevant to this paper can be placed into two categories: those dealing with events on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, and those describing flights at Huffman Prairie in Ohio. Letters presented in full in this paper from John T. Daniels, William Tate and Frank S. Lahm are done so with the gracious permission of their descendants.

Perhaps one of the most insightful letters describing the Huffman Prairie flights was penned by one-time drug store clerk and Wright neighbor, Reuben Schindler.⁶

Writing on May 23, 1933, Schindler describes the Wrights and their work in the context of the times. "They were very quiet about it and those that knew them like myself thought they were crazy." In his correspondence, he then goes on to attest to their secretiveness and tells how his own brand of sleuthing finally paid off. "They were so hard to find anything out about. The day arrived for their test flight and by watching and following their father all morning I was one of the few to see it. I fully expected to see them break their necks." With neighbors and friends believing you were crazy and harboring a death wish, it's no wonder the Wrights chose the relative isolation of North Carolina's Outer Banks for their early experiments.

Watching the flight was like watching a miracle unfold, because up to that time, the Wrights were the only inventors who had successfully and repetitively flown a powered, heavier-than-air vehicle.

Schindler was not a highly technical observer and he paid scant attention to the actual mechanics of flight, noting only that at first, the aircraft went "up a little, then higher and faster." He also failed to describe the landing, but he does give a sense of the wonderment that was percolating through the small group of witnesses on the ground. "I will never forget how I stood and watched that thing. It certainly astonished the few that saw it." After the flight, he says that he congratulated the Brothers and, "they asked me not to tell anybody about the details of the plane as they had no patent right yet." Ironically, and somewhat comically after all these years, he then states that when a representative from the Scientific American appeared on his doorstep sometime later, "I gave him my version of what I had seen (of the Oct. 5, 1905 flight)." Regardless of what Schindler told the magazine's representative, however, the publication, in a very public manner, continued to doubt the Wright's aeronautical claims. In one of the most heartbreaking comments to be found in any of these letters, Schindler closes with the comment that he had some snapshots of the Oct. 5, 1905 flight, but that he lost them when the Miami River flooded in March 1913. That was the same flood that damaged many of the photographic negatives the Wrights had taken to document their aircraft development work. And if that wasn't serious enough, the floodwaters also deluged the remnants of the 1903 Flyer, almost carrying away what is now recognized as the first manned, controllable, heavier-than-air machine capable of sustained flight.⁷

Besides the Ellis and Schindler letters, the other eyewitness description of the Oct. 5, 1905 flight in this collection was made by Theodore Waddell, a government agent who was with the U.S. Census Bureau at the time.⁸

Waddell's July 13, 1931, description of the 1905 flight was written when he was an accountant with the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and he quotes an earlier letter for his description of the aircraft.

"I often tell Mrs. Waddell of the letter she received from me shortly following this flight, in which I described the machine in a homely way by saying that 'It looked to me very much

like a street car with all the sides knocked out, with the exception of the uprights, and flying sideways' and I must say that is the picture I have of the machine today.

I think to each and every one of us it was marvelous the way in which, even with this original machine, it was possible for them to bank the corners and make some of the most beautiful turns it is possible with machinery."

After demonstrating that they had a full-fledged, practical airplane in late 1905, the Brothers stopped flying and turned to selling their invention. In the intervening years, they doggedly tried to offer their flying machine to the U.S. government and after being rejected, they turned to offshore customers, also with no success. Their fortunes turned in 1908 though, when both the U.S. Army and a French consortium finally expressed interest in their airplane.

In April, 1908, with demonstrations planned in France and at Ft. Myer, Va., both brothers needed to hone their now rusty flying skills. The place they selected was Kill Devil Hills, and the aircraft they brought with them was the 1905 Flyer, now fitted with two seats and a more powerful motor. Army specifications called for an aircraft capable of carrying a pilot and passenger, so the brothers installed two upright seats in their practice aircraft and new pilot controls to accommodate the change in layout. Up to then, all Wright aircraft had been configured with the pilot lying prone on the lower wing.

Following convention, Wilbur went out first to the old campsite. And after a few days, Charley Furnas showed up on the scene. It's never been established whether the 28-year-old Furnas, who had been bitten by the aviation bug and wanted to be a pilot, was sent to the Outer Banks by Orville, or whether he just showed up on his own initiative. Regardless of exactly how or why, he was there and was put to work by Wilbur as a mechanic and helper.

After Orville arrived, the brothers were able to get down to the business of flying and after each made several flight to familiarize themselves with the new controls, they decided to fly with a passenger. On Thursday, May 14, Furnas first flew with Wilbur and made an abbreviated 22.6 sec. trip. The next flight was with Orville and after making a false start, that journey lasted a little over four minutes and covered about 2.5 miles.⁹ Newspapermen, hiding in the nearby brush and woods, witnessed both flights. They also saw three more false starts made by Wilbur with Charley aboard. With uncooperative winds acting against them, the group of aviators took a break for lunch.

Returning to the business of flying later that day, the Wrights shifted their starting track and Wilbur made a solo flight that ended in disaster. Confusing his elevator control movements, he flew the aircraft straight into the ground at a speed estimated to be about 40 to 50 mph.

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As a result of his accident, a stunned Wilbur had some small cuts, bumps and bruises, but he was otherwise OK. The Flyer, on the other hand, was wrecked. The Wrights gathered up the pieces and departed shortly after.

Furnas recounted those flights and the aftermath of Wilbur's crash in a letter written from the Soldier's Home in Dayton, Ohio on July 22, 1933:

"I made several short flights with first one then the other then one day it was Wills turn to go and we made three attempts to get in the air and failed then they would not let me go again at that time so Will went by himself and was up for about six min. and fell and smashed the mach. so bad that we removed the engine and chains that drove the propellers and burned the rest."

Furnas' account of the activities of May 14, 1905, if accurate, is quite interesting. There's little doubt that his version of the flights that day is correct because, with one exception--the fact that all the flights took place on one single day, not two--they are corroborated by Wilbur's diary entries. But this letter does raise questions about what exactly the brothers did with the combustible remnants of the 1905 Flyer. Most printed accounts have them shipping the salvaged hardware- engine, transmission, etc. back to Dayton and leaving the collected pieces of the damaged airplane at their camp. ¹¹

In 1928, Orville himself provided an inventory of the salvaged hardware he had on hand. ¹² Furnas, however, says the non-metallic remains of the 1905 aircraft were burned. What seems likely is that only the totally wrecked, combustible components such as the upper wing and front framing were burned, and that slightly damaged, or undamaged cloth and wood components, including the lower wing, front rudder and tail, were left at the campsite.

After his time with the brothers on the Outer Banks, Furnas remained in their employment, accompanying Orville to Ft. Myer for the Army demonstrations. On September 17 a failed propeller blade caused Orville to lose control of his aircraft and he and his passenger, Lt. Thomas Selfridge, crashed. Selfridge died of his injuries just hours after the crash but Orville eventually recovered. ¹³ After the crash Furnas seems to have lost his enthusiasm for flight. As he himself wrote about the aircraft in that same 1933 letter:

"it fell at Fort Myer and killed Selfridge and hurt Orville then I came home and did not go out with them any more."

Furnas eventually went on to operate a garage and a movie house in his hometown of West Milton, Ohio. A navy veteran, he spent the last years of his life in the Soldiers Home in Dayton, dying in 1941. ¹⁴ Other letters in the collection deal with flights on the Outer Banks and were written by two North Carolinian personalities that played prominent roles in the Wrights' lives, John T. Daniels and William J. Tate. Tate, a Currituck County commissioner, former Kitty Hawk postmaster (a duty he shared with his wife) and professional fisherman, was prime mover in enticing the brothers to perform their aerial experiments on the Outer Banks. In fact, when Wilbur Wright sent a letter off to the chief of the Kitty Hawk weather station inquiring about the winds, lay of the land, etc., the government agent responded rather curtly. It was Tate who wrote Wilbur a long and informative letter in August 1900, extolling the attributes of Kitty Hawk for aerial experimentation. ¹⁵ And when Wilbur showed up in Kitty Hawk in the fall of 1900, he took his room and board with the Tates until Orville arrived two weeks later. At that point the brothers established a campsite a short distance from Tate's home.

During his time with the Tates, Wilbur worked with Mrs. Tate's sewing machine in their front yard, adjusting and refitting the sateen fabric he had purchased for the wings of the 1900 glider. At the end of the flying season, that same fabric was stripped from the wrecked glider and used to make dresses for the Tates' two daughters, Irene and Pauline.

Tate's half-brother Dan also figured in the saga of the Wrights. Dan Tate assisted them in their gliding experiments as early as 1900, leaving their service just weeks before the 1903 first flight. Dan Tate's son, Tom, also played a role in the Wright saga. At the brothers' request, 12-year-old Tom actually flew in the Wright's 1900 glider when the wind velocity was too low for the aircraft to support the weight of a man.

Bill Tate was a booster of the Wright's from the start and he stayed that way all his life, which ended in 1953, just short of the 50th anniversary of the Wrights' first powered flight. Tate's greatest regret was that he was not present for that flight. Although invited, he felt that the winds were too strong that day for flying and went, instead, to Elizabeth City on

business.

Despite missing that flight, Tate made numerous attempts to memorialize the Wrights and their accomplishments on the Outer Banks, and in 1928 he finally got the citizens of Kitty Hawk to agree to erect a monument to the Wrights. The six-foot high marker was placed on the spot in his old front yard where Wilbur began assembling the 1900 glider. Damaged over the years, a replica of that original monument can be found today near the spot where the original was placed.

Tate also played a role in the construction of the 61-foot-tall Wright Brothers Monument erected on Big Kill Devil Hill, the site of many of the Ohioans' gliding experiments. While the cornerstone was laid on December 17, 1928, the 25th anniversary of the Wrights' epic flight, construction of the Monument did not begin until the hill's shifting sands had been stabilized in 1931. The ceremonial shovel used to break ground at the site was presented to Orville Wright, by Bill Tate, in ceremonies held in Dayton on May 8, 1932.¹⁶ The inscription on the shovel reads:

**WITH THIS SPADE GROUND
WAS BROKEN FOR THE
WRIGHT MEMORIAL
ON
KILL DEVIL HILL
NEAR
KITTY HAWK N.C.
FEB. 4th, 1931
PRESENTED TO MR. ORVILLE WRIGHT
BY THE
KILL DEVIL HILLS
MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION.**

To commemorate the 25th anniversary of the Wrights' landmark flight in 1928, Tate wrote and had printed a 12-page booklet on the Wrights and their achievements. He also took a page to explain how Kill Devil Hills got its name. Entitled "Brochure of the Twenty-fifth Anniversary of the First Successful Airplane Flight, 1903-1928," Tate had 350 copies printed at his own expense and distributed them to VIPs attending the ceremonies held on December 17 at Kill Devil Hills.

Tate retired from government service in 1940, having joined the U.S. Bureau of Lighthouses in 1917. Also in 1917, he was appointed keeper of the Long Point light at Coinjock, NC.¹⁷ Coinjock is on the mainland, about 50 miles north of Kitty Hawk. With exception of 1909-1922, Tate kept in close contact with Orville Wright and the two corresponded regularly. Tate was even one of the honorary pallbearers at Orville's funeral in 1948, as was Lester Gardner, founder of *Aviation* magazine which is known today as *Aviation Week & Space Technology*.

The first Tate letter in the collection is dated May 17, 1933 and is written on Department of Commerce, Lighthouse Service stationery. In it, Tate states that he was the cause of the Wrights coming to Kitty Hawk. Tate's pride in being associated with the brothers is evident in the content and tone.

Dept. of Commerce
Lighthouse Service
Fifth District
Coinjock, NC

May 17 #, 1933

Dear Capt. Miller,

Although I was the direct cause of the Wrights selecting Kitty Hawk as the scene of their early activities, Unfortunately I did not see the first flight. I early learned to respect the Brothers for Their Outstanding characters and their sterling worth. I feel I won Their respect and confidence. This mutual feeling seems to have been the Kind that has lasted through the years. I am glad I was sympathetic towards Them and their Ideas. I believe our friendship has strengthened as the years has rolled by.

Very Truly etc.
W.J. Tate

A follow-up letter in response to a query about how to contact witnesses to the Wright's Outer Banks activities was written on June 7, 1933, also on lighthouse stationery.

Department of Commerce
Lighthouse Service
Fifth District
Coinjock, N.C.
June 7th 1933

My Dear Mr. Miller.

Replying to your letter of June 2nd I will say that as to the names or persons who were present at the Wrights camp during their experiments in 1900-1901-1902-1903, there were many people who at different times visited the camp, but many of them who were men at that time have passed to the great beyond, I refer of course to people who were middle aged men at that time Many small boys of course visited the camp but their juvenile interest at that time was not sufficient to be of any use to You from an historical standpoint. Or the five who witnessed the first flight three are living. J.T. Daniels and A.D. Etheridge both of Manteo N.C. Johnny Moore was a youth who just happened along. He is living and his address is Collington N.C. He was not a very bright boy and of course grew up to be a very illiterate man. One very funny thing happened to him, To-wit. While the ceremonies were going on at the top of Kill devil hill Dec 17th 1928 (laying the corner stone of the Wright Memorial) Johnnys wife was giving birth to a boy at His home on Collington Island two miles away, and after the ceremonies and johnny got home He immediately named that boy ORVILE LINDBERG MORE, If that Kid don't make a flyer it will not be on account of shortage in name.

My brother Dan Tate has been dead some 22 years. I am inclosing the two covers You sent they have both been autographed as You requested.

I shall never forget my trip to Dayton and the week I spent in that City. I certainly have a great appreciation for the City in the way I was treated, not only by Mr Orville Wright but by the citizens in general, I fell in love with Your Buckeye State,

With kindest regards etc
Yours very truly.
W.J. Tate

According to Mr. Bill Harris, formerly of the National Park Service, the boy mentioned in this letter is still alive and living in North Carolina. ¹⁸

The final correspondence is typed on plain white paper.

Coinjock N.C.
June 25th 1933

Dear Mr. Miller.

Belatedly answering your letter of June 12th I will say that Capt Israel Perry, has long since passed to his reward. Both my Daughters are living. One the eldest is Mrs. B.D. Severn, Brigantine N.J. and the other Mrs. Pauline Woodard is of Coinjock N.C.

The Wight Brothers knew these girls as Irene and Lena, They were almost like twins, in fact every stranger thought they were twins, there was only 11 months and three days difference in their ages (which is as near twins as it is possible to make them not to be twins) We named them Irene and Pauline, but later We shortened Pauline to Lena, the similarity of the two names sometimes caused us to make mistakes in designating them.

I am inclosing You a little booklet which You can read and return, it is my first literary attempt also so far it has been my last. I saved photos all the years and when I decided to make some contribution to the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the first flight I had these photos turned into cuts for printing and wrote and had printed the little booklet. I distributed a copy to all the foreign delegates to the International Air Congress, and also copy to all the Gov Officials coming to Kill Devil Hills on Dec 17th 1928 at the laying of the cornerstone of the Wright Memorial and the unveiling of the N.A.A. boulder marker. I printed 350 copies, I financed it myself, I never sold a copy, and this is the only one I have left please care for it well and return it in a reasonable time.

Since the completion of the Monument on Kill Devil Hills I have often thought I would like to enlarge and add to this little book putting other interesting things in it, but I do not feel able from a financial standpoint. I never sold a copy of this little book, I have never made a dollar out of my early association and knowledge of the Wrights. I could not persuade myself to do so, the association was so sacred I could not commercialize it. I am also inclosing two pictures you may keep. It's a picture of the presentation of the shovel used by Major General Dewwitt to remove the first earth in the beginning of the construction of The Wright memorial on Kill Devil Hill Feb 4th 1931. I made the presentation at a banquet tendered Mr Wright and Myself at Dayton May 8th last. You possibly know I was in dayton at that time.

Take good care of my little book and return same. I would appreciate Your opinion of it, and Your opinion as to whether I could get some help financially for a reprint with additions.

Yours very truly etc.
W.J. Tate

The final letter in this presentation was written by John T. Daniels, one of five men (and

boys) at Kill Devil Hills on December 17, 1903, who witnessed the Wrights' four powered flights that day. Not only was Daniels present, he also played a key role in the day's activities, because it was he who snapped the most reproduced photo in the world, the first flight photo of the 1903 Flyer. Daniels was 29 years old at the time, tough and hearty from his work at the Kill Devil Hills Lifesaving Station. Given what happened to him that day, he must have been a rugged man. According to Orville's diary, after the fourth and final flight of the day, in which the Flyer had been damaged by Wilbur in a hard landing, the machine was carried back to the Wrights' camp for repairs. Suddenly, a gust of wind hit the Flyer and started to turn it over. Orville and Daniels grabbed the plane, but with little effect, because the machine started to turn over. Orville let go, but the surferman hung onto an upright from the inside, and was turned over and over in the interior of the somersaulting machine, caught among the bracing wires, flailing chains and the tumbling engine, which had broken loose from its mounts. After traveling nearly 100 yards the machine made its fourth and final turn, and Daniels fell out, emerging bumped and bruised, but otherwise OK. The Flyer, on the other hand, was "badly broken and torn." ¹⁹

Daniels left the government's service in 1918 after receiving a disability pension. After that he worked as captain of a ferry operating in the inland waterways. According to his granddaughter, Lois Pearce Smith, Daniels, like Tate, was proud of his association with the Wrights and regularly attended ceremonies held on December 17 at the big monument on Kill Devil Hill. Speakers often included aviation luminaries such as Jimmy Doolittle and Igor Sikorsky. ²⁰

Daniels and Adam Etheridge, another of the surfmen present at the first flight, were honored guests at several aviation events later in their lives. They traveled together to the Cleveland air races in 1937 as guests of the Early Birds of Aviation, a society of aviators that soloed before December 17, 1916. Appropriately enough, the two old comrades flew to the races from Norfolk. The following year they even traveled together to Dearborn, Michigan, to take part in ceremonies opening to the public the Wrights' Hawthorne Street house and their 1127 West Third Street bicycle shop. The buildings had been moved to Henry Ford's collection of historic structures at Greenfield Village.

In a rather ironic twist of fate, Daniels passed away in January 1948, less than 24 hours after Orville Wright expired. In an extraordinary letter dated June 30, 1933, Daniels, with the spelling acuity of a modern graduate engineer, described the events of December 17, 1903 this way:

Manteo NC
June 30-1933

Dear friend

I Don't know very much to write about the flight. I was there and it was on dec the 17,1903 about 10 o'clock. They carried the machine up on the Hill and Put her on the track, and started the engine, and they through a coin to see who should take the first go, so it fell on Mr. Orival, and he went about 100 feet or more, and then Mr. Wilbur takes the machine up on the Hill and Put her on the track and he went off across the Beach about a half a mile or more before he came Down. He flew so close to the top of a little hill the he Pulled the Rudder off so we had to Bring her Back to the camp, and it was there I got tangled up in the machine and she Blew off across the Beach with me hanging in it, and she went all to Pieces. It Didn't Hurt me very much I got bruised me some.They packed up away everything and went home at Dayton. That Ended the Day. I snapped the first Picture of a Plain that ever flew. They were very nice men and

we all enjoyed Being out at the camp with them mosly every Day.

That accident made me the first airoplane causiality In the world and I have Piece of the uprightthat I was holding on to when It fell. Would be glad to Render any Information at any time you need it.

Sincerely
John T. Daniels
Manteo NC
Box 1W

Obviously, after 30 years, time has played some tricks with his memory and Daniels has combined some events that occurred on December 14, 1903 with those of December 17, 1903. This is something he also did in an interview that was written in 1927 by newspaperman W. O. Saunders.²¹ Daniels has the Wrights taking the machine "up the hill" and conducting the famous coin toss on December 17, events clearly described in Orville's diary as occurring on December 14, the date of Wilbur's aborted flight.²² Daniels, who was a part of the activities on both days, does get the 17th's sequence of flights correct, but the description of Wilbur's brush with a sand dune could be describing the events of the 14th. On the other hand, it could have just been Daniels' vantage point that caused him to describe this as he did. According to Orville's diary, on the 17th, at the end of Wilbur's second flight that day he plunged into a small hummock, breaking up the front rudder after a flight of 852 feet, not the half mile or so that Daniels recalled.²³

Regardless of this minor mix-up over the flights, his other recollections certainly ring true and his willingness to poke fun at himself for being "the first airoplane causiality" certainly adds a strong human element to his tale. One of Daniel's most interesting comments though, is that in 1933 he still has a piece of the upright he was holding onto when he went tumbling across the sands with the 1903 Flyer. Daniels kept this piece of wood all his life as a souvenir of his days with the Wrights, as a totem to help explain his part in their achievements. That piece of wood, now less than half a foot-long, still exists and today is in the possession of his descendants.²⁴

Notes

1. David Wragg, *Flight With Power, The First Ten Years*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1978), p. 41.
2. Marvin W. McFarland, ed. *The Papers of Wilbur and Orville Wright*, 2 vols. (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 2000), vol, 1, p.514.
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