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Willbur Wright, The Man Who Made Flying Possible

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Wilbur Wright, born April 16, 1867 —
died May 30, 1912

WILBUR WRIGHT, the first man to make a flight in a self-propelled heavier-than-air machine, and the father of aviation, died on May 30 at his home in Dayton, Ohio, after four weeks of illness. Thus passes one of the most remarkable men of our era, a man who in a decade rose from the ranks of the unknown to a place among the greatest of great men, and by giving humanity wings, thus realizing a dream which had tantalized the race perhaps since the very birth of intellect, earned for himself a place with the great master builders of civilization — with Watt, Stephenson, Morse, Edison and Bell.

As the story of the achievement runs, Wilbur Wright and his brother, Orville Wright, two men of remarkable characteristics, sons of the Rev. Milton Wright, were presented in their boyhood, thirty-odd years ago, with a toy helicopter, a butterfly-shaped contrivance, consisting of paper wings fitted with a tin propeller, which, when made to revolve by twisted rubber, caused the toy to shoot forward through the air. That toy fired their imagination, and they saw it, in magnified form, capable of carrying a man.

Their attempt to fly large helicopters constructed on the idea of the toy did not bring practical results, and until 1896 they did not give the matter of artificial flight more than passing attention. In the summer of that year, however, the news of the accident and death of Otto Lilienthal,

Wilbur Wright,

the German champion of gliding flight, stirred them to action, and they set themselves to study aerodynamics and the works of Lilienthal, Mouillard, Chanute, Maxim, and Langley, the most prominent experimenters at that time.

Their experiments with a glider began in the fall of 1900 at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. There, on the barren sand dunes of North Carolina, these two intrepid investigators took the theories and tried them one by one—only to find, after two years of hard, discouraging work, that all were based more or less on guesswork. Thereupon they cast aside the theories and patiently put the apparatus through a thousand gliding tests, ever changing, adding, modifying—setting down the results after each glide, comparing and changing again and again, advancing inch by inch, until they had, at last, developed a glider wonderfully exact, which, when fitted with a light motor, also invented by them, made initial flights on December 17, 1903, of from twelve to fifty-nine seconds' duration. That was the birth of the aeroplane, the flimsy, iconoclastic thing which evades Newton's laws, eliminates frontiers, and promises to expand civilization as much as have the steamship, the railway, and electricity.

In 1908 the brothers set forth to conquer the world, Wilbur going to Europe, Orville remaining in America. The world was astonished at the wonder of their invention, and they were fêted by nations, honored by crowned heads and representative scientific bodies, and acclaimed by wildly enthusiastic crowds. Their machines were acquired forthwith for use in the armies of different nations, and there sprang up an army of aviators.

Of late years the interests which have been making capital out of the developments of inventors and professionals who followed the Wrights rose to contest, or refused to acknowledge, the full extent of the value of the contribution of the Wrights, and the brothers, especially Wilbur, with uncompromising tenacity, put up a fight in different countries to establish their rights.

Some of these suits were nearing their conclusion when Wilbur died.