

First Flight Not Wright?

Commentary by George W. Earley

Conventional wisdom says that on December 17, 1903, Orville Wright flew the first manned, heavier-than-air craft off a beach near Kitty Hawk, N.C.

If that is so, why do the Germans celebrate August 14, 1901 as the day of the first such flight?

Because, say a small group of Connecticut Yankees who call themselves the Whitehead Research Society, that's the day, a German-American named Gustave Whitehead made four flights [the longest about one and one-half miles] in a flying machine powered by a motor that, like his aircraft, was self-designed and built.

So who was Gustave Whitehead and what do we know about his role in early aviation?

Born Gustav Weisskopf on January 1, 1874, his childhood fascination with the idea of flying caused his school chums in Bavaria to nickname him "the Flyer." At 13, using a glider of his own design -- his grandmother sewed the wing fabric -- 'the Flyer' made an unsuccessful flight from the roof of his grandfather's barn.

When Weisskopf emigrated to America in 1895 and Anglicized his name to Gustave Whitehead, the world was poised on the brink of successful manned heavier-than-air flight.

In the 1890's, such men as Otto Lilienthal, Sir Hiram Maxim, Octave Chanute and Professor Samuel Pierpont Langley, among many others, were flying man-carrying gliders and experimenting with motor-driven models.

When, on May 6, 1896, Langley's steam-powered unmanned "Aerodrome #5" flew over one-half mile [the first such flight of a powered heavier-than-air craft], it seemed all the great scientist needed to do was to scale up his model to carry a pilot.

But it took Langley over 7 years [and more than \$50,000 taxpayer dollars, for the Smithsonian was funding his experiments] to build a full-sized aircraft. In fairness to Langley, it must be noted that, as Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and one of America's leading scientists, he had many responsibilities other than building flying machines.

And that was equally true of the other experimenters. Flying was only a hobby and its practitioners, Whitehead included, had other demands on their time and money.

After arriving in the U.S., Whitehead worked at various jobs in several eastern states, finally settling in Bridgeport CT in 1900 where he began his spare-time aeronautical pursuits in earnest.

Photos exist of some of the airplanes, gliders, motors and other devices built by Whitehead -- there are even photos of Whitehead aloft in his gliders -- but there are no in-flight photos of him flying Aircraft No. 21, the plane in which he allegedly made four flights on August 14, 1901.

Unlike the Wrights, who meticulously recorded their every attempt in journals, diaries, and letters to other experimenters, Whitehead stored his data in his head and applied for no patents.

What records do exist consist mainly of the photographs already mentioned, brief accounts in *American Inventor* and *Aeronautical World* magazines, newspaper articles on both his experiments and his frequent problems with various financial backers, affidavits of those claiming to have witnessed his flights and an awkwardly-written book which attempted, a few years after his death in 1927, to pull all these disparate parts together. It is not the sort of documentation likely to impress museum archivists and those at The Smithsonian Institution, where the Wright Flyer occupies a place of honor, are not impressed with claims [including those advanced by Connecticut politicians] on Whitehead's behalf.

Recognizing this, a small band of aviation enthusiasts -- several of them pilots and/or engineers -- came together a few years ago to build a replica of the flying machine that allegedly made that historic flight on August 14, 1901.

Their replica is a bat-winged monoplane, constructed, as was the original, from wood, canvas, Japanese silk, steel tubing, bamboo, and wire. The fuselage is boat-shaped -- Whitehead allegedly made a successful water landing after a seven-mile flight over Long Island Sound on January 17, 1902. Unlike the Wrights, whose Flyer ran down a wooden track and dropped its wheels as it went aloft, Whitehead designed his plane with powered wheels to assist in

getting up to flying speed. With its innovative powered wheels and folding wings, No. 21 was roadable -- Whitehead could drive it from his house to the field from which it allegedly flew on August 14, 1901.

To date, the Whitehead Research Society has not duplicated that flight, though their replica has flown both as a glider and when powered by chain-saw motors driving modern propellers. Such flights, they feel, clearly demonstrate the inherent soundness of the Whitehead design but they won't be fully satisfied until they fly it using propellers and a motor replicating his designs.

Lacking plans, the propellers and motor, as was the aircraft itself, have been designed using the few photographs that exist of the plane and its parts. That means the authenticity of their replicas can, and have been, challenged by aviation experts.

And, indeed, the Whitehead fans recognize that the Wrights place as pioneer aviators and the fathers of aviation as we know it today, cannot be effectively challenged over 90 years after their flights in 1903. But, they say, give Whitehead his due. Add him to the list of pioneers whose efforts preceded the successes of the Wrights. Let the name of Whitehead be added to those of Langley, Lilienthal, and others whose experiments kept alive Mankind's burning desire to share the skies with the birds.

Columbus was not the first European to arrive in the New World, say the Whitehead enthusiasts, but knowing that the Vikings and others preceded him does not detract from the fact that it was his voyage that changed history. So let it be with Whitehead and the Wrights -- recognizing Whitehead's work does not dim the luster of the Wrights achievement. ...

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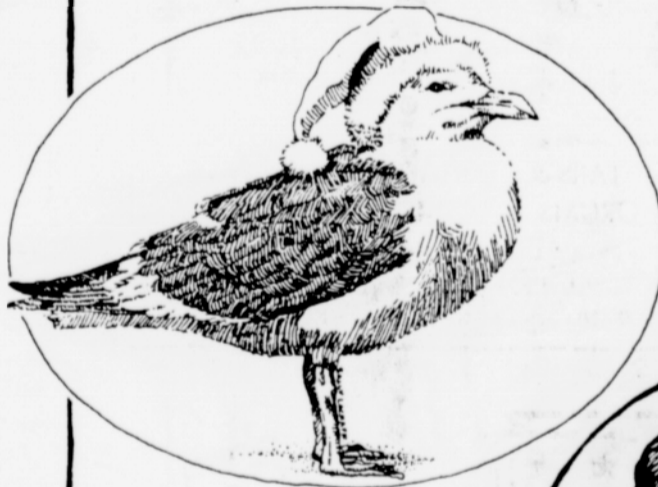
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