

The Wright Stuff

Two inventive brothers began the age of flight—not the Wrights, but the Montgolfiers. As the world commemorates the centennial of the Wright brothers' achievement on the beach near Kitty Hawk, it's worth remembering that airplanes aren't the only way to fly. An unpowered glider can soar through the sky, a helicopter can hover and flit around, and a cannon can even shoot a circus performer in a parabola through the air. This fall marks the 220th anniversary of the first time a human ascended in a flying machine—a hot-air balloon built by Joseph Michel and Jacques Étienne Montgolfier.

Within a decade of that first flight, balloons were used for military reconnaissance in France. In the 1860s, both sides in the U.S. Civil War used balloons to collect military intelligence—and sometimes these spies in the sky dispatched instantaneous reports to the ground through telegraph wires, as documented in Charles Evans's recent book, *War of the Aeronauts*. Throughout the nineteenth century, balloons were used for private amusement and scientific observations, as they still are today.

So what Wilbur and Orville Wright accomplished on December 17, 1903, wasn't man's first flight. It was technically, as described by Wright biographer Tom Crouch, the first time in history that "an airplane had taken off, moved forward under its own power, and landed at a point at least as high as that from which it had started—all under the complete control of the pilot."

But that strictly technical explanation obscures the true meaning of the Wrights' flight. While the Montgolfiers put us in the sky, the Wright brothers put us in *control*. Balloons and dirigibles were good for getting up and down, but heavier-than-air planes would prove easier to steer against the wind, simpler to operate solo, quicker to land and take off—in short, airplanes made it easier to *go places* through the sky.

Since 1903, we've fought dogfights and dropped atomic bombs. We've built jumbo jets that seat hundreds and drones that fly empty. We've sent flying fortresses and stealth planes into battle. We've built thousands of runways and visited hundreds of aviation museums and eaten millions of in-flight meals. We've gone from delivering airmail in rickety monoplanes to checking e-mail in cushy cabins that roar over continents. We've seen planes used for the heroism of Lindbergh and Yeager, and the evil of September 11. It is for this, all this, that we honor the Wrights this year.

It is rumored, as Adam Keiper describes in this issue, that on the Wright centennial President Bush will announce a new plan for the American space program—perhaps back to the Moon, and then to Mars. Such a move would be welcome. As one great balloonist said in 1859, as he planned a flight across the Atlantic, "It is time that one should make a bold push... and endeavor to effect some practical demonstration which shall revive the spirit of inquiry and investigation. If nothing is done but to talk and theorize... the aeronautical art will remain where it is." This December we will celebrate those who moved beyond the theories and ventured boldly into action—and those who may yet do so in the years to come.