

Orville and Wilbur Wright

(Orville: 1871–1948; Wilbur: 1867–1912)



WHY THEY MADE HISTORY Orville and Wilbur Wright made the first piloted flight in a gas-powered airplane. Their role in history as aviation pioneers led the way for this important machine to change the world.



As you read the biography below, think about how Orville and Wilbur Wright persevered to develop a working airplane.

Growing up in Dayton, Ohio, Orville and Wilbur Wright became fascinated with the glider of German engineer Otto Lilienthal. The glider had no engine and floated rather than flew. Nonetheless, the Wright brothers believed they could make a flying machine. With money from their bicycle shop, they financed their experiments.

Beginning in 1899, the Wrights constructed a special kite. In 1900, 1901, and 1902 they built three gliders. The first two gliders failed, so they conducted experiments with their own **wind tunnel**. They used the information they gathered to create tables on wind drift. With this important information determined, Orville Wright designed an engine. The brothers built the engine and attached it to an improved glider.

On December 17, 1903, Orville Wright made the first controlled, sustained flight in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. It lasted 12 seconds. There were three other flights that day. The last flight was made by Wilbur Wright and covered 852 feet in 59 seconds.

With their success, the Wrights returned to Ohio and began more experiments in the seclusion of a cow pasture near Dayton. They built several **biplanes**, and by the end of 1905, they had devel-



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VOCABULARY

wind tunnel a device that recreates wind conditions in order to test the wind's effect on different objects

biplane an airplane with two horizontal wings

prestigious famous, well-known

oped the first practical airplane. Newspapers took little interest in the Wrights' activities, so the brothers were allowed to complete their work in private.

At first, the U.S. government did not take the Wright brothers seriously when they offered their invention to the country. But in 1908 the Wrights signed a contract with the U.S. Department of War to produce the first military aircraft.

The brothers formed the Wright Company in 1909 to build airplanes for the United States. They also made arrangements with companies in France and Germany to produce aircraft. The Wrights became famous as exhibition pilots and gave flying lessons.

In 1912 Wilbur Wright contracted typhoid fever and died. Orville retired in 1915 but continued to serve on several **prestigious** aviation committees.

Orville Wright died in 1948. The original plane that the Wright brothers flew at Kitty Hawk is now displayed in the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Draw Conclusions Why would the U.S. Army have wanted airplanes?

2. Predict How might history have changed if the airplane had not been invented?

ACTIVITY

3. Write a short essay about how you think the airplane changed the world. Be sure to include facts that you have learned from your reading.