The Wright Brothers Demonstrate Their Machine Publicly (1908)

*Another of the great technological developments of the early twentieth century was the invention and successful flight of the airplane. For centuries, people had dreamed of flying, and at the beginning of the new century the dream became a reality. Every experimental flight of the amazing Wright brothers received front-page coverage as Americans marveled at the miracle. It seemed now humans might even reach the heavens.*

“Wright Brothers First Flight”

Orville Wright yesterday afternoon made his first flight in his aeroplane at Fort Meyer. He was in the air a minute and ten seconds, traveled roughly speaking a mile and a quarter and circled the parade ground once and half. His maximum height was about 35 feet. The landing was a little rough and one of the runners of the machine was smashed but the aeronaut was unhurt and the army officers who witnessed the feat were delighted with the performance.

All day had been spent in preparations and in waiting for favorable wind conditions. There was a fifteen mile per hour wind blowing in the middle of the day and while this would not have been enough to have prevented a flight under ordinary conditions it was blowing down the track in the direction the plane would go. This was directly opposed to ideal conditions and the aviator always wants to rise in the face of the wind. He was particularly anxious too that this first flight should be a success for the eyes of the army and indeed the whole world, we[r]e on him and it would have made a bad impression to have bungled the first public flight of the Wright machines in America.

The plane was brought out of the balloon tent about 5 o’clock and paled on the starting rail. The machine rested on the tine wheels not [more] than two inches in diameter.

It was brought up to the head of the starting track an[d] the weight that gives it its impetus was raised. Then the motor was started and whirred loudly for a minute or two. Then something went wrong and the poser was cut off and Taylor the mechanic was sent on a run down to the balloon tent for something that was wanted in adjustment, he came back and the motor was started again.

The signal service office[r]s had warned back the crowd to a semicircle behind the machine and four or five hundred people lined the curving road all curious some skeptical. Few except the signal officers and the few scientists who had gone over to New York for the Farman Flights had ever seen an aeroplane in the air.

The photographers who were out in force were the hardest to keep under control. They wanted to get the machine right in front. Mr. Wright explained as patiently as he could that it was bad enough to work with a crowd around him but that anybody in front of him was not only likely to get killed but interfered with the attention he must devote to the machine.

After almost an hour the motor was started on its final whirl. It had to be started from a storage battery. When it had picked up speed the magneto switched in. There was an instant hesitation as the machine picked up the new firing device and then it settled down to a steady roar the gray propellers making about 300 revolutions to the engines 1200.

Mr. Wright tossed the batteries from under the vibrating machine and climbed into the drivers seat. At a scarcely perceptible noise the trigger of the starting device was sprung. The weights came down to earth with a thump and simultaneously the big silver and white bird jumped down the fifty foot starting track. The start was so easy and smooth that it is doubtful if one person in a hundred of the crowd could say just when the machine left the rails and when it was travelling under its own power.

There was just an instant of suspense as the big bird took to the air. Would it rise or wouldn’t it? For a hundred feet or so it brushed the top of weeds in the field as the momentum of the weights died out and the engine power was taking hold. Then the propellers began to get in their work. The forward edges of the plane dug into the air and the machine began to climb. The slope on the ground favored the flight and a quarter of the way down the field to the balloon tent it was seen that the heavier than air machine was really in the air and traveling.

There was a long indrawn breath from the crowd and then a cheer. And then there was a faint cheer and a handclapping as the machine sped away.

**Source:** *Nashville Star*, September 4, 1908, 1.