

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom. Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Eighty-Nine

The Wright Brothers

LESSON IDEA

To show how the Wright brothers succeeded, where hundreds of others had failed, in building a heavier-than-air craft that would fly.

PREPARATION

Many pictorial histories of flight are available at your local library. We recommend obtaining one as a visual aid for this lesson.

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SSOME THIRTY-FOUR YEARS AGO, a young aviator wrote a poem that captured the euphoric spirit of flying. It is called *High Flight*, and it goes like this:

Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the sky on laughter-silvered
wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the
tumbling mirth
Of sun-split clouds, and done a hundred
things
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared
and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls
of air. . . .

Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with
easy grace,
Where never lark or even eagle flew —
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
Put out my hand and touched the face of God.

THE YEAR was 1941. The author of that poem, John Magee, was just nineteen years old — an eager and courageous boy who had become a pilot in Britain's Royal Air Force. His enemies were the Nazi invaders. Tragically, however, after seeing combat in the skies over Britain and the Continent only briefly, Magee's plane collided in mid-air with another on a training mission. The bodies of the two young men and jagged hunks of metal tumbled out of the sky.

Like many other men during the Twentieth Century, John Magee had fallen in love with flight. He could think of nothing more exhilarating than to test the limits of his plane, circling through clouds and skimming over mountain peaks. And, as is so obviously expressed in his poem, John was often awed by the wondrous beauty of the sky above him and of the earth below. Oftentimes he felt as though he were face to face with the very Creator of heaven and earth. Perhaps, as he died, he actually *did* put out his hand to God and found himself lifted still higher than man has flown.

It is doubtful that John ever realized how few men had ever experienced flight or how many brilliant men in the past had longed to leave the bonds of earth to soar with the eagles. But it was only in the Nineteenth Century that inventors and scientists started making any real progress in freeing man from his earthbound existence. One major contributing factor was the invention of the gasoline engine. Without a reliable and compact energy source, it was impossible to get an airplane into the

air and keep it there. It was true that men had been sailing in the skies in balloons, but balloons were notoriously unreliable. They were as fickle as the wind which carried them.

THE MOST IMPORTANT breakthrough in man's dream of flight came at a place called Kitty Hawk in North Carolina in 1903.

Oddly enough, though men had dreamed of flying, apparently few really believed such a thing was possible. In fact, no one believed that Orville and Wilbur Wright would ever manage to get their flimsy-looking mass of wires and canvas and girders off the ground. Despite advance notice of the trial, only five persons were present on that bitterly cold, clear day, December 14th, when the Wright brothers prepared to launch their makeshift airplane from a wooden track. The two brothers had been working together on their airplane for years. So they flipped a coin to see who would have the honor of test-flying it. Wilbur won the toss. In later years Orville recalled the event: "I took a position at one of the wings, intending to help balance the machine as it ran down the track, but when the restraining wire was slipped, the machine started off so quickly I could stay with it only a few feet. After a thirty-five to forty-foot run, it lifted from the rail.

"But it was allowed to turn up too much. It climbed a few feet, stalled, and then settled to the ground near the foot of the hill, 105 feet below. . . . In landing, the left wing touched first. The machine swung around, dug the skids into the sand and broke one of them. Several other parts were also broken, but the damage to the machine was not serious. . . . Two days were consumed in making repairs, and the machine was not ready again till late in the afternoon of the 16th. . . . Wilbur having used his turn in the unsuccessful attempt on the 14th, the right to the first trial now belonged to me. After running the motor a few minutes to heat it up, I released the wire that held the machine to the track, and the machine started forward into the wind. . . . *This flight lasted only 12 seconds, but it was nevertheless the first in the history of the world in which a machine carrying a man had raised itself by its own power into the air in full flight, had sailed forward without reduction of speed, and had finally landed at a point as high as that from which it started.*"

AFTER THREE MORE FLIGHTS that day, the brothers stopped to discuss their success. As they were standing near the plane, a strong wind came up and started blowing it down the field. Everyone ran to grab it, but said Orville: "All our efforts were in vain. The machine rolled over and over. Daniels, who had retained his grip, was carried along with it, and was thrown about, head over heels, inside of the machine. Fortunately he was not seriously injured though badly bruised in falling about against the motor, chain guides, etc. The ribs in the surfaces of the machine were broken, the motor injured and the chain guides badly bent, so that all possibility of further flights with it for that year were at an end."

Most of the spectators who had witnessed the flight had no appreciation of what they had seen. And when the Wright brothers tried to get newspaper publicity for their unique invention, they were met with ridicule and disbelief.

The only major account that appeared in the newspaper the day after the flight was in the Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot*, in an article written by H.P. Moore. About ninety-nine percent of his story was exaggeration or pure fiction, but the newspaper at least gave the story front-page coverage.

Moore offered his story to over twenty other newspapers in the country, but only five accepted it and ultimately only three papers published accounts of the event which would ultimately affect the world.

For several years after the event, few newspapers or magazines even discussed the subject. Those that did ridiculed it as a hoax. Even the scholarly *Scientific American* editorialized in its October 1905 issue: "If such sensational and tremendously important experiments are being conducted in a not very remote part of the country, on a subject in

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

In our nation's 200-year history, American inventors have contributed more to the well-being of mankind than all the inventors of all other nations in any period in the past. Man's material progress throughout the world during this century can be attributed mainly to the genius of American inventors. For proof of this, we recommend *The Heroic Age Of American Invention* by L. Sprague de Camp. For an excellent book on the early history of flight, see *The Heritage Of Kitty Hawk* by Walter T. Bonney. We also recommend *The Wright Brothers* by Fred C. Kelly.

