



# U.S. Coast Guard Historian's Office

Preserving Our History For Future Generations

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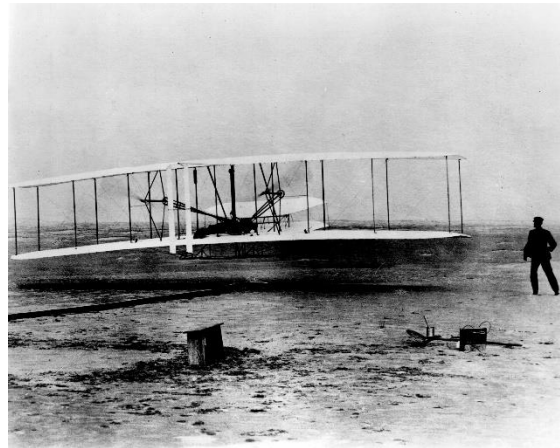
## The Indispensable Men

The U.S. Life Saving Service & the Wright Brothers,  
Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, 1903

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U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters

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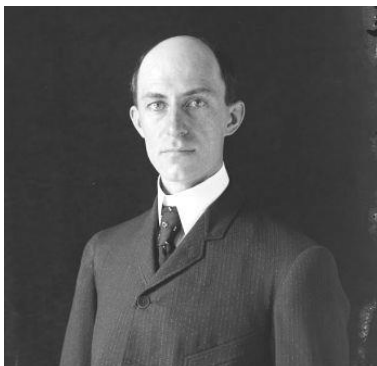
On a cold December day on a lonely beach on the Outer Banks of North Carolina, the sound of a small internal-combustion engine, a sound rarely heard out on these sandy beaches, broke the morning silence. Then, a fragile looking craft with two fabric covered wings perched one above the other, struggled down a wooden rail and ever so slowly lifted off into the air. The few witnesses standing nearby could see the fragile air machine's pilot as he lay prostrate on the lower wing. That pilot had just made history. For the first time ever, a "power-driven, heavier-than-air machine" overcame gravity and took a person off the ground in a "free, controlled and sustained



flight." Just as the flying machine lifted off one of the witnesses pressed a rubber bulb attached to a box camera, capturing for posterity the miracle that occurred near Kill Devil Hill, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903. The man who took that photograph, probably the most famous aviation photograph in history, was Surfman John T. Daniels of the U.S. Life-Saving Service.

As the nation prepared to celebrate 100 years of powered flight in 2003, most recognized the names of the two brothers who made it happen: Wilbur and Orville Wright. Few know about the many other persons who worked behind the scenes and helped them make the brothers' dream of flight come true.

Remarkably, many of these forgotten men worked for the Life-Saving Service, a forerunner of today's Coast Guard.



Wilbur (photo, left) and Orville (photo, right) Wright, two brothers from Dayton, Ohio ran a bicycle manufacturing and repair shop. Not





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content with building and selling bicycles, though, their dreams and aspirations focused on flight. They believed that man could build and fly a powered aircraft and they were determined to be the first persons to do so. They began their experiments using gliders and needed an isolated location that had a steady wind with rolling hills and long flat beaches for launching, flying and landing those gliders. After checking with the U.S. Weather Bureau, they chose Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The postmaster at Kitty Hawk and soon to be a light-keeper with the U.S. Lighthouse Service at the Currituck Sound Lights, William J. Tate (photo, below, right), responded to the Wrights' queries by noting that Kitty Hawk was an excellent place for their experiments. (Note that one source states that his wife was the official "postmistress" and he was simply the "acting" postmaster for his wife in her absence.) Tate wrote, in a gracious invitation, that: "If you decide to try your machine here & come, I will take pleasure in doing all I can for your convenience & success & pleasure, & I assure you you will find a hospitable people when you come among us."

Wilbur arrived at Tate's front door on the morning of September 13, 1900 and the postmaster welcomed him into his home. Orville soon arrived and the brothers began putting together their first glider in the Tate's front yard, using Mrs. Tate's sewing machine to stitch together the glider's wing fabric. Mr. Tate later remembered what the locals thought of the two men from Ohio who dreamed of reaching for the sky:

"The mental attitude of the natives toward the Wrights was that they were a simple pair of harmless cranks that were wasting their time at a fool attempt to do something that was impossible. The chief argument against their success

could be heard at the stores and post office, and ran something like this: 'God didn't intend man to fly. If He did He would have given him a set of wings on his shoulders. No, siree, nobody need not try to do what God didn't intend for him to do. I recall, not once, but many times, that when I cited the fact that other things as wonderful had been accomplished, I was quickly told that I was a "Darned sight crazier than the Wrights were.'"

Harmless cranks or not the locals welcomed the Wrights to their isolated community and the brothers assembled their glider on Tate's front lawn. Then, to the amazement and delight of the locals, the





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brothers began gliding. Orville later wrote to Tate describing what he remembered of the first glider they brought to Kitty Hawk:

"All of the parts [of the glider] were built in Dayton and shipped to Kitty Hawk, excepting four spars, which were made and shipped in from Norfolk. The ribs, struts, hinges, and end bows were all built complete at our shop in Dayton. The wing coverings were also cut and sewed in Dayton, but on account of Wilbur's inability to get 20-foot spars at Norfolk, a change was necessary in the coverings. I remember he said this work was done on Mrs. Tate's sewing machine."

The brothers' experiments were successful that year and apparently left the glider in Kitty Hawk since Orville wrote to Tate later that:

"I do not think that the Department of Justice would expect you to know as much about our other machines as you do about the first one, because you saw more of the first one. As I remember, when we came back to Kitty Hawk in 1901, Irene and Pauline were wearing dresses made from the sateen wing coverings of our first machine."

The brothers, satisfied with the wind conditions and the convenient dunes to launch from, as well as the fact that Kitty Hawk's remoteness kept away prying eyes, returned each fall in the following years to test newer and larger gliders from the sandy dunes of Kitty Hawk with Tate assisting each year. After the 1902 season ended the Wrights were finally ready to begin construction of a powered flying machine.

The brothers arrived back in the Outer Banks in September of 1903 and began construction of a fairly elaborate campsite, including a hangar, among the dunes. They then began putting together their new flying machine while continuing to fly a glider. That year a surfman from the nearby Life-Saving Station at Kill Devil Hills, Adam Etheridge, along with his wife and child, visited the campsite. Etheridge's visit initiated a friendship between the Wrights and the keeper and crew of the station, a friendship that would provide these lifesavers with the opportunity to witness history.

The man in charge, known officially as the keeper-in-charge but referred to as captain, was Jesse Etheridge Ward (photo, right). Ward was born on Roanoke Island in 1856 and grew up on the Outer Banks. He had worked as a fisherman prior to joining the Life-Saving Service in 1880. Ward's first assignment was to the Seatack Lifesaving Station in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Later, the Service promoted him to keeper-in-charge of the Whales Head station (now known as Currituck Beach, North Carolina) on 21 February 1891. In October of 1899 he was transferred and made keeper of the Kill Devil Hills station.





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Captain Ward's crewman, surfmen Will S. Dough, Adam D. Etheridge, Bob L. Wescott, John T. Daniels, Tom Beacham, and "Uncle Benny" O'Neal (photo, left; pictured left to right: Ward, Beachman, unknown, Daniels & Dough.), were not quite sure what to make of these two men from the Midwest who never appeared in public in anything other than starched collars, ties, suits, and hats. But curiosity replaced the initial doubts once the surfmen watched the brothers' experiments. They also noted how the brothers treated the local folk with kindness and respect. Captain Ward, fascinated by the Wrights' attempts to

make history, graciously agreed to help them. He even permitted his crew, when they were not on duty, to assist the brothers.

The surfman began by helping out around camp and delivering mail. Surfman Etheridge noted:

"We assisted in every way and I hauled lumber for the camp. We really helped around there hauling timber and carrying mail out to them each day. It would come from Kitty Hawk by patrol each night. In pretty weather we would be out there while they were gliding, watching them. Then after they began to assemble the machine in the house, they would let us in and we began to become interested in carrying the mail just to look on and see what they were doing. They did not mind us at all because they know where we were from and [knew] us. . .when we got through cleaning up around the [Lifesaving] station some of us would take the mail out to them, staying around and helping around until maybe near dinner time. In pretty weather we would be out there while they were gliding, watching them. Then after they began to assemble the [powered flying] machine in the house they would let us in and we began to become interested in carrying the mail just to look on and see what they were doing. They did not mind us at all because they know where we were from and knew us."

Additionally the lifesavers gathered or purchased food and other supplies for the nascent airmen. Surfman Daniels later recalled: "Besides obtaining mail for the Wright Brothers, Coast Guardsmen often did marketing for them." The brothers reciprocated by inviting the surfmen to dine with them. Both of the men from Ohio, according to the tough Outerbanksmen, were excellent cooks.

As fall stretched into the early reaches of winter, the Kill Devil Hills crew had become almost indispensable. When they needed assistance the Wrights began hanging a red flag from their work shop to alert any off-duty surfman willing to lend a hand. Typically the surfmen helped assemble the aircraft, which became known as the Wright Flyer, and carried it to its launching rail that served as a primitive runway. They were, in fact, the first aircraft ground crew.





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Through fits and starts the brothers continued their preparations. Minor delays, though, including broken propeller shafts, postponed their first powered flight. Captain Ward transported the broken shafts in his launch from the Outer Banks to the coast for further shipment back to Dayton to be repaired. Once these were fixed and returned to the Outer Banks, in early December, the brothers and their machine were finally ready.

On December 14th the brothers tacked up the red flag. The surfman on duty in the station's lookout tower yelled down to the men not on duty that they were needed at the campsite. Orville wrote: "We were soon joined by J.T. Daniels, Robert Westcott, Thomas Beacham, W.S. Dough (photo, left), and Uncle Benny O'Neal of the station, who helped us get the machine to the hill (Big Kill Devil Hill) a quarter of a mile away."

The lifesavers prepared the aircraft for launch under the watchful eyes of two local boys and a dog. The



Wrights' decided who would fly the first flight by a coin-toss. Wilbur won and climbed on the lower wing. Then he fired up the small engine, frightening the two boys so much that they and the dog scampered away.

Before the barely-trained ground crew was ready, however, the Wright Flyer moved down the rail and quickly into the air – and then just as quickly back to earth. Wilbur had stalled it before gaining sufficient speed to achieve stable flight. The left wing struck the ground first, spinning the aircraft around and slightly damaging it. Wilbur cut the engine and emerged shaken but unhurt. But there were to be no more flights that day.

Wilbur and Orville spent December 15th repairing the machine and were ready to try again the following day but this time the weather proved to be

uncooperative – there was no wind. On the morning of the following day, however, the brothers awoke to a cold but clear day and a steady 27-mile-per-hour wind, perfect flying weather. They once again tacked up the red flag and were soon joined by off-duty surfmen Etheridge, John Daniels and Will Dough.

Surfman Bob Westcott was on duty at the station preparing the mid-day meal but ran up to the top of the station's lookout tower and peered through a spyglass to watch the day's





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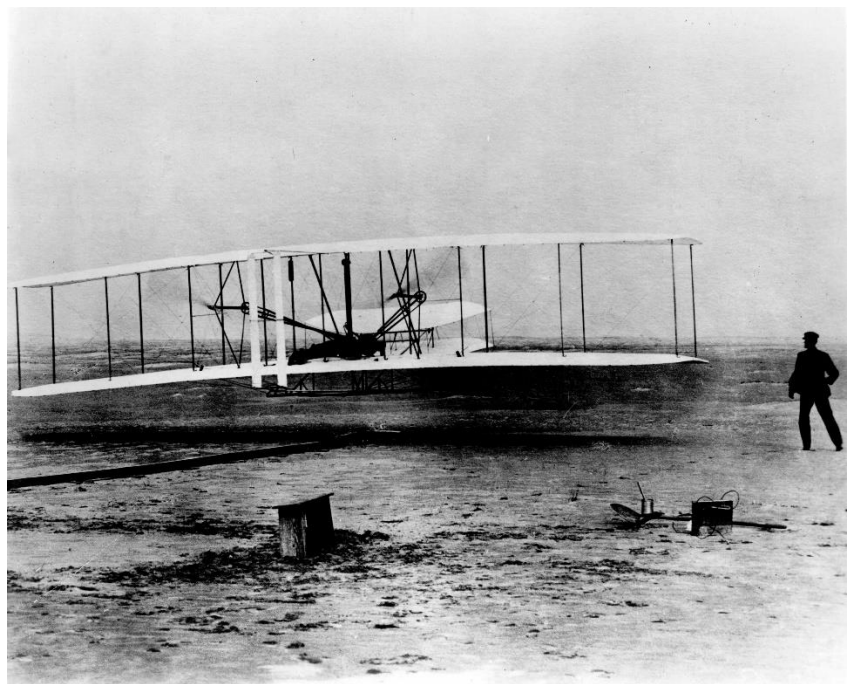
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events. He became so engrossed in the activity that he forgot about the pancakes he left on the griddle—and they were consequently burned beyond recognition. Needless to say there was no lunch served at the station that day.

The men placed the flying machine on the monorail and then the brothers set the engine's ignition and turned the propellers. The engine coughed to life and the Wrights retired behind the whirling propellers and shook hands. One surfman recalled: "we couldn't help notice how they held on to each other's hand, sort o' like two folks parting who weren't sure they'd ever see one another again." This time it was Orville's chance to fly and he laid down on the lower wing. Wilbur set up his Korona-V glass-plate box camera, pointing the lens towards the end of the monorail in what he hoped would be the perfect location to capture the first moments of flight. He asked Daniels to assist him and told the surfman to depress a rubber bulb that activated the camera's shutter the instant the flying machine lifted into the air. Wilbur then hurried back to the machine.

Over the noise of the engine Wilbur shouted to the surfmen to "not to look too sad, but to . . . laugh and holler and clap. . . and try to cheer Orville up when he started" in an effort to calm the nervous pilot. At 10:35 the flying machine started down the monorail and after traveling forty feet it lifted into the air. Everyone let out a yelp of joy and Daniels pushed the rubber bulb, capturing the historic moment on a plate glass negative. Orville's first flight lasted all of twelve seconds and covered a distance of 120 feet—not much of a flight but enough to put the brothers in the history books.

The surfman then helped drag the Wright Flyer back to the start of the monorail three more times, with each flight lasting longer and covering more distance. The fourth flight was the longest, with the machine flying for over 852 feet in 59 seconds. It was slightly damaged after landing, however, and while the brothers discussed repairing it a strong gust of wind blew across the beach and threatened to flip the Flyer over. Surfman Daniels risked his life by jumping on a wing to attempt to hold the Flyer down, but the wind gust was too much and lifted the machine and Daniels



end over end. Daniels finally slipped free from the tumbling Flyer and fell 15 feet to the ground, injuring his ribs and getting a few bruises, but was otherwise unharmed. He remembered: "I found myself



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caught in them wires and the machine blowing across the beach heading for the ocean, landing first on one end and then on the other, rolling over and over, and me getting more tangled up in it all the time. I tell you, I was plumb scared."

Daniels was in one piece, but the Wright Flyer was too damaged to fly again without extensive repairs. So the surfmen helped the brothers carry it back to the work shop-hangar where they crated and shipped the Flyer to Dayton. The Wrights thanked the men for their assistance, gave them copies of a photo they had taken of the surfmen in front of their station (photo, right), divided up the remaining equipment in the camp among the surfmen, and left them five dollars for their upcoming Christmas dinner. They also gave a Wright bicycle to Surfman Daniels and he used it for many years on his lonely patrols along the beach.



The story did not end there. A future Coast Guardsman, A. W. Drinkwater, was working as a repairman for the U.S. Weather Bureau in 1900 out of Currituck Inlet when he first heard about the Wright Brothers. He colorfully recounted that: "while making repair trips down the coast I heard of those two crazy islanders who were at Kill Devil Hills making attempts to fly. I didn't pay much attention to them, everyone considered them nutty."

Three years later, on 17 December 1903, Drinkwater was working at a wreck station set up to monitor the stranded U.S. Navy submarine USS *Moccasin* which had run aground near the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. He had a telegraph line set up that was linked to Norfolk, Virginia. The local commercial telegraph operator apparently could not get through to the mainland "on account of the wire being heavy" so he asked Drinkwater to send a message for the Wrights. Drinkwater agreed, noting "The message was to Miss Katherine Wright, Dayton Ohio, and read as follows, as best as I recollect: 'FLIGHT SUCCESSFUL. DON'T TELL ANYBODY ANYTHING. HOME FOR CHRISTMAS. SIGNED ORVILLE.' This message was given to the Weather Bureau office at Norfolk which handled all commercial messages along the coast from Cape Henry to Hatteras." He also helped the brothers communicate with the outside world when they returned to Kitty Hawk in 1908 to test a newer powered aircraft that unfortunately was wrecked in an accident. Drinkwater later transferred to the Coast Guard when it took over coastal communications from the Weather Bureau in 1929 and recounted this story in 1935.



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In 1935 Etheridge made a cryptic claim regarding the Wrights' first powered aircraft. "[The Wright Brothers] said they were well satisfied with what they had done. That was about the end of the story at that time. At that time they assembled everything they wanted to take away. They said they were going to take the engine back with them. At that time I think they gave Daniels and myself a lot of fixtures out of the camp and gave us the camp too. And the wings of that plane they left with me and I took them over to my home on the beach and later, sometime after that, I got a letter from a man in Philadelphia telling that Wilbur had written and told him that I had the old plane and that he wanted to buy it if I would dispose of it. It was up to me if I wanted to let him have it or not. So I wrote him a letter that I would sell it to him for \$25.00, I believe it was. So they had me pack it up and I took it up to Kitty Hawk and shipped it to him. It went from Kitty Hawk on a freight boat to Elizabeth City and he sent me a check for it, and it is right here I lost a fortune if I had kept it."

Some historians have claimed that Etheridge was mistaken and that he had in fact obtained the wings of the two-seat Flyer built in 1905 which the brothers flew at Kitty Hawk in 1908. Since the Wright brothers realized the historical significance of these first flights, and consequently the importance of the first powered aircraft, it is unlikely they would have left any part of that flyer behind when they packed up and left Kitty Hawk. Etheridge's claim then is probably due to the failing memory of an old lifesaver. In any case, these tough Outerbanksmen were privileged to witness history being made firsthand. Their willingness to assist the brothers with their experiments led directly to those experiments' success and they are therefore worthy of mention in this story of mankind's first heavier-than-air powered flight.

The lifesavers continued to help the Wrights in later years when the brothers returned for other flight experiments. These underpaid, brave and tough government employees became local heroes and were bombarded by the press during the anniversary celebrations over the following decades. William Tate helped place historic markers around the area during the 25th Anniversary celebrations while Daniels even overcame his fear of flying during the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the first flight and took a ride as a passenger on board another revolutionary aircraft, a Coast Guard helicopter. Lieutenant Stewart Graham, USCG, (Coast Guard Helicopter Pilot #2) an aviation pioneer in his own right, was the pilot.

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