

The History of Flight

The History Behind it . . .

What is the history of flight?

In 1783 two brothers from France, Joseph Michel and Jacques Etienne Montgolfier, invented the first hot air balloon that could carry people into the sky. Air balloons remained a popular form of flight for more than a century. In 1889 Otto Lilienthal of Germany wrote a book on aerodynamics by studying the flight of birds; in 1891 he was credited with inventing the first glider that could carry a person long distances.

Orville and Wilbur Wright, brothers from the U.S., studied Otto Lilienthal's book on aerodynamics and invented the first airplane, an engine-powered flying device that could carry a man. On December 17, 1903 that airplane flew 120 feet near Big Kill Devil Hill in North Carolina. Today commercial airplanes can easily fly more than 9,000 miles on a single flight, which is more than one third of the circumference of the Earth at the equator (nearly 25,000 miles).

World War I

In 1907 the U.S. Army Signal Corps established a small Aeronautical Division to take "charge of all matters pertaining to military ballooning, air machines and all kindred subjects." In 1909 the Army worked with the Wright brothers to build and test its first airplane, named Army Aeroplane No. 1. In July 1914 the Congress created an Aviation Section within the Army Signal Corps, with their first tactical mission in 1916, scouting Pancho Villa's raiders during the Mexican Expedition.

When the U.S. entered the war on April 6, 1917 a new and enduring chapter began in military aviation; it was the first war to use aircraft for combat operations. The newly formed Army Air Service and the Navy and Marine Corps flying operations expanded quickly. At the beginning of the war, planes were used for observation only; planes were later equipped with basic guns and bombs. By the war's end the Army Air Service accomplished the following: conducted 150 bombing attacks; flew up to 160 miles behind German lines; dropped 138 tons of bombs; downed 756 enemy aircraft; and downed 76 enemy balloons. The Navy and Marine Corps aviators accomplished the following: dropped 78 tons of bombs; flew more than 3 million nautical miles; made 39 attacks against U-boats; participated in 43 missions with the British and French; and flew 14 independent raids behind the German lines.

Aviation evolved rapidly during WW1, with modern and more effective aircraft replacing the basic machines, shaping the way countries fight wars more quickly than any other weapon in military history. Our experience in combat air missions in World War I informed our military to become a dominant air power in WWII. The National Security Act of 1947 created the current Department of the Air Force.

Did you know?

- The first passengers in an air balloon were a sheep, a rooster and a duck? In 1783 that balloon went up to 6,000 feet and traveled more than 1 mile.
- In World War I pilots brought their own guns onto the planes to shoot at other pilots. Later in the war, guns were mounted onto the planes.

Sources

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