



The Wright FlyerSource: *Army History*, No. 114 (Winter 2020), pp. 18-19

Published by: U.S. Army Center of Military History

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26863613>

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NMUSA FEATURE



THE WRIGHT FLYER

The National Museum of the United States Army (NMUSA) exhibits team recently moved an exact reproduction of the 1908 Wright Model A Flyer from the National Air and Space Museum's Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center to its new location in the NMUSA's *Army and Society* gallery. Positioned on a platform near the R-4B Sikorsky helicopter, the flyer symbolizes the Army's early recognition that manned flight would be valuable to the military.

In 1908, Orville Wright began a series of test flights at Fort Myer, Virginia, in a bid for an Army contract. The tests were a major success until September when tragedy struck and the flyer crashed. The passenger, 1st. Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge, died, becoming the first American soldier to lose his life in a flight accident. After the crash, the Wright brothers quickly made improvements and built a new flyer to continue their testing.

According to Paul Morando, exhibits chief at the NMUSA, "when the flight trials resumed at Fort Myer in 1909, the Wright brothers not only met, they exceeded the Army's challenge to develop an aircraft that could maintain a speed of forty miles per hour and remain airborne for one hour with one passenger on board." In turn, the Army purchased the 1909 flyer for \$30,000, making it the world's first military airplane.

Since the 1908 flyer was damaged beyond repair in the crash, no example of the Model A existed until 2008 when Ken Hyde and his team at the Wright Experience built an exact reproduction based on the Wright brothers' original materials and specifications. The flyer's frame is made of aluminized painted wood with metal cabling, and the wings are covered in cotton muslin. A unique, four-cylinder, 31-horsepower, water-cooled engine sits in the middle of the flyer, directly behind the pilot's seat.

While waiting for the NMUSA exhibit space to be ready, the flyer was on loan to the Smithsonian Institution and displayed at the

Udvar-Hazy Center. The three-day move required precise coordination and planning by a team of experts. "By disassembling the flyer at Udvar-Hazy and reassembling at the National Army Museum, I gained an even greater appreciation of what the Wright brothers were doing more than one hundred years ago," Morando remarked. It took a team of people, carefully balancing the forty-foot wingspan on dollies, and a forklift to load the flyer safely into a trailer with only two inches to spare on each side. "Very slowly, the truck backed up to the flyer and we maneuvered it in the tiniest movements, bit by bit, into the trailer," recalled Morando. "It looked as if the truck was swallowing up the flyer into its trailer."

Upon arrival at the NMUSA, the flyer was offloaded and installed in a newly constructed exhibit space that displays other Army innovations such as the FPN-40 Radar and the Liberty Truck. The *Army and Society* gallery focuses on the symbiotic relationship between the Army, its civilian government, and the people. This gallery will introduce visitors to military and civilian advancements which support geography, science, technology, engineering, and math learning activities.

The National Museum of the United States Army is scheduled to open on 4 June 2020.

NOTE

Patrick R. Jennings, "The Big Four' Move In!" *Army History* 106 (Winter 2018): 32-37.



Image: Orville and Wilbur Wright's historic flight at Kitty Hawk, N.C., 17 December 1903



The teams from Udvar-Hazy and the NMUSA carefully maneuver the Wright Flyer reproduction into a trailer.



The Wright Flyer arrives at the NMUSA.



The Wright Flyer is reassembled in the NMUSA's *Army and Society Gallery* near the R-4B Sikorsky helicopter.



A member of the NMUSA exhibits team cleans and prepares the Wright Flyer for permanent installation.



The Wright Flyer on display in its permanent home in the NMUSA's *Army and Society Gallery*