

# *The True Story of the Wright Brothers' Contract (It's Not What You Think!)*

by Vernon J. Edwards

Wilbur and Orville Wright made their historic first powered flight on December 17, 1903, from Kill Devil Hill in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. The longest of four flights that day lasted 59 seconds and covered a distance of 852 feet. There were few witnesses to the flights and no reporters — no CNN or nightly news broadcast, no film at 11, no National Public Radio. The telegraph was the fastest generally available means of communication from places like Kitty Hawk. The fastest means of transportation over long distances were the railroad and the steamship. The result was that the world at large would not acknowledge the Wright's success until 1908. It would be four years before even the U. S. War Department would believe that the Wrights had actually flown a heavier-than-air, engine-powered airplane.

After their first flights, the Wrights returned to their home in Dayton, Ohio, to further develop their invention. The 1903 Wright Flyer had been irreparably damaged by high winds after the fourth flight at Kitty Hawk, so the brothers had to construct a new airplane.<sup>4</sup> Throughout 1904 they refined their design and made test flights at Huffman Prairie, near their home. They refined the airframe and controls and developed a new, more powerful engine. By the end of 1904 they had made two circling flights of five minutes each. They believed that they had constructed an airplane that would be of practical use and they had learned many things that would enable them to further improve their design.<sup>5</sup> They had applied for patents in the United States and Europe and had received them from Belgium, France, and Great Britain.<sup>6</sup>

The Wrights began trying to sell their invention in January 1905. The British War Office had been following the Wrights' experiments since December 1902, and sent a representative to visit them in Dayton in October 1904. On January 10, 1905, the Wrights wrote a letter to a British military officer offering to sell an airplane that could carry two men 50 miles without refueling. The Wrights requested no payment until they had successfully completed a series of test flights. They asked for 500 British pounds for each mile covered in the test flight, which, at the exchange rate at the time, meant that at 50 miles the price would be equivalent to \$125,000. The British Royal Engineer Committee wrote back that the Wrights had not yet sufficiently proven the capabilities of their machine, but that the British military attaché in Washington would visit them to witness a test flight.<sup>7</sup>

On January 18, 1905, the Wrights made a similar proposal to the U.S. War Department through their congressman, who had promised to personally deliver it to the Secretary of War. The proposal said...

## *A Letter to the President*

Imagine you are Wilbur or Orville Wright and you have spent two years perfecting your flying machines. You haven't gotten a lot of press or attention for your groundbreaking discovery, but you see your aircraft as a new technology the United States government needs!

Write a letter (as one of the Wright Brothers) to the president of the United States (Teddy Roosevelt), convincing him that the United States Government should buy your invention. Describe at least three strengths your airplane already possesses, and explain at least two reasons why the U.S. government would have any use for the airplane. Be diplomatic and very respectful, but be very convincing! You want to sell your invention!!!

Your letter must:

- be written in the first person as Orville or Wilbur Wright (dated 1905).
- describe in detail at least three strengths of your airplane
- describe in detail at least two reasons why the U.S. government would have use for your airplane invention.
- be very diplomatic, respectful, and mindful of your audience (the president of the United States, Teddy Roosevelt!!!).
- follow proper grammar and conventions of English.
- handwritten legibly on a separate sheet of paper.