The “Who Flew First” Debate

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The German reproduction of the 1901 Whitehead airframe during its successful demonstrations for the media on February 12, 1998, at Bavaria’s famed Manching’s Luftwaffe military air base. Distances flown ranged up to 500 meters in relatively still air (photo by AP photographer Frank Bsteller).

In late 1963, the dilemma of attempting to determine how Gustave A. Whitehead fit into early powered flight history was more or less thrust upon our then very active 9315th USAF Reserve Squadron in Stratford, Connecticut. The question we were to answer was a tough one: did or did not Whitehead fly with power before the December 17, 1903, events at Kitty Hawk?

Dolan, our squadron became the first to embark on that mission. Dolan felt we should dig into the 1901 accounts of flights alleged to have taken place in and around Bridgeport, Fairfield and Stratford, Connecticut. CAHA (now known as the New England Air Museum) was attempting to chronicle aviation history in Connecticut.

Investigating Gustave Whitehead and the beginning of powered flight
were: why would anyone, or any museum, make an effort to prevent a study of Whitehead? Shouldn't the world know who he was and what he did or did not achieve? Why was there a "moral turmoils" when no formal investigation had ever been conducted by any qualified body?"

It appeared the only individual who tried to uncover Whitehead's history was Stella Randolph, her 1937 book, "Lost Flights of Gustave Whitehead" has long been out of print, so we borrowed a copy from the Bridgeport Public Library. In late 1983, when this scribe located Randolph at her home in Maryland, just outside Washington, D.C., she agreed to be our squadron's guest and to lend us any information not included in her book. We, in turn, would submit whatever we discovered for her upcoming book, "Before the Wrights flew," which was destined for publication in 1986 by G.P. Putnam and Sons.

In a few months, we discovered enough to prove Whitehead was a bona fide pioneer of merit, and the moratorium at CAHA was lifted. CAHA's president, the late Harvey L. Lippincott, submitted our evidence to the head of the Connecticut Dept. of Aeronautics and to the governor of our state. It was easy to have Whitehead recognized as the "Father of Connecticut Aviation," regardless of whether he flew with power or not. He was the first in Connecticut to seriously investi-gate manned flight at an impressive level (considering the state of the art for that period). We were, however, stunned to learn that a number of articles and books about Whitehead were, however, written by Mrs. Arthur Kent Lyon Watson, and she agreed to be our squadron's guest and to lend us any information not included in her book. We, in turn, would submit whatever we discovered for her upcoming book, "Before the Wrights flew," which was destined for publication in 1986 by G.P. Putnam and Sons.

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In flight. The ribs are bamboo poles and are braced with steel wires. The wings are so arranged they can be folded up. The tail rudder, which corresponds to the tail of a bird, can also be folded up and can be moved up and down, so as to steer the machine on its horizontal course. A mast and boom unit serve to hold all the parts in their proper relation. In front of the wings and across the body is a double compound engine of 20 horsepower, which drives a pair of propellers in opposite directions, so as to enable the machine to run on the ground by means of the lower motor until it has the necessary speed to rise from the ground. Then the upper engine actuates the propellers so as to cause the machine to progress through the air to make it rise on its own aerodynamics. The wings are immovable and resemble the outstretched wings of a soaring bird. The steering will be done by running one propeller faster than the other.

Of special interest is where Beach states in his 1939 remarks that he never saw the ground engine that drove the front wheels, yet he claims he took the photos he used in his June 8, 1901, Scientific American report (page 357). The front-view photograph reads: "Whitehead's Flying Machine, Showing Engine and Propellers."

Gustave is seated on the ground under the right wing holding his daughter, Reue, on his lap. Immediately in front of him we can easily see and examine the ground motor used to propel the front wheels via a bicycle sprocket and chain.

"In his enthusiasm, the Brazilian aeronaut forgets also that at the time of his first flight, the ground motor was powered by compressed air and which was constructed by Whitehead in 1903 was the only other photograph besides that of Langley's [scale model] machines of a motor-driven airplane in successful flight. In order at least partially to substantiate their claims, it would seem as if the airplane inventors would show photographs of their machines in flight ..." If the photo Beach mentions as showing Whitehead in flight were to surface, much of aviation history would be substantially rewritten. In 1981, we found a photo at NASM containing the location where Whitehead exhibited his photos. In the background of that photo was a picture of Whitehead's machine in flight. Unfortunately, the non-clarity of the photo rendered it useless.

The Wrights did not produce their December 17, 1903, photos until 1908, that turked publishers and fellow inventors here both and abroad. They held back their famous 1903 photos in an understandable effort to first obtain a patent for their design.

On page 279 of the Scientific American November 24, 1906, issue, Beach wound up his report about "Santos Dumont's Latest Flight" begun on page 278. Beach wrote: "... In his enthusiasm, the Brazilian aeronaut forgets also that at least three experimenters in America (Herring in 1898, Whitehead in 1901 and the Wright brothers in 1903), Maxon in England (1896), and Ader in France (1897) have already flown for short distances with motor-driven airplanes; and yet only practically realizable machines of the kind has as yet been produced and demonstrated ..."

Of course, Whitehead is quoted often saying that his machine was anything but practical. The dream of "a practical flying machine" did not occur at Kitty Hawk in December 1903 either. Flight at that time was made possible only by the 25 to 27mph headwind that aided in overcoming the ground drag the Wrights' underpowered aircraft of 1903 could not have otherwise overcome. Their Kitty Hawk Flyer would never rise from the ground in winds under 20mph. The four liftoffs from their rail on December 17, 1903, were not achieved "by its own power." In fact, many subsequent flights relied upon a weight-driven catapult. To this date, no exact replica of their 1903 Flyer has ever rotated in still air or light headwinds.

Not until the Wrights increased the power of the engine and added a catapult to replace the missing 25mph headwinds did they get to fly their bipedals in and around Dayton during the years that followed. If we are to debate who may have flown "first," let’s argue that game on a level playing field.

But hold on! Turn the pages of the same December 15, 1906, issue to catch what Beach also had to say in his report of that period. Go to the right column, page 447. It is titled: "The Second Annual Exhibition of the Aero Club of America." Beach begins a three-page report, with photos, about who exhibited which aircraft and engines at the airshow. Near the bottom of page 447 he states: "The body of the framework of Gustave Whitehead's latest bat-like airplane was shown mounted on pneumatic-tired, ball bearing wire wheels. Whitehead also exhibited the 25-lident steam engine which revolved the road wheels of his former bat machine, with which he made a number of short flights in 1901." Yet in 1919, Beach (conveniently?) fails to recall that clear credit!

At the bottom of page 446, Beach shows a photo in which you can see the 1901 Whitehead engine in the lower right corner of that exhibit region. The photo legend reads: "Rear End of Body Framework of Whitehead's Aeroplane. The motor and propeller seem belong to a smaller machine" (Whitehead's 1903 engine and propell). Near the top of page 449, Beach shows three photos of aeronautical motors. At left is "The Curtiss 9-Cylinder, Air-Cooled, V-Motor of 30 Horse-Power." The middle photo shows "The Whitehead 2-Cycle Motor" (his 1903-4 motor). The photo to the right is the "Wright brothers' 28 to 30 Horse-Power Aeroplane Motor." The January 25, 1908, Scientific American has Beach’s coverage of when Henri Farman flew his aircraft 1 kilometer in a closed circle at 30mph "... during the last few days of 1907." Farman went
Reproductions of the Pentagon in WWII, was reported to be. Whitehead was not a fraud or a hoaxter using Whitehead's technique, which included the use of animal hide propellers. Gordeuk carved the first copy of Whitehead's 1901 props for Boeing and McDonnell Douglas, discuss the design of the tail for modern engines (in 1997). That, in itself, proved us with a building in which we

To understand the Whitehead design.

Did Whitehead fly first? No one knows for sure. It may not be as clear cut as he may have thought. Or maybe Maxim. That is important. What is important is that sufficient evidence exists for the Wrights to re-examine his iron-clad position on the Wright brothers.

In the end, the Wrights may claim to have been the first to fly in a "powered" airplane. But the first "powered flight"? That is debatable!