

# Aviation : December 17 started it all

An eternally flowing spring of aviation development, technique, and romance stems from one date: December 17, 1903.

That's when Orville and Wilbur Wright, aided by the staff of a local U.S. Life-Saving Service outpost, made their first powered flights in a piloted aircraft near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina.

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The selection of that date may have been part chance and, ironically, part of the original case of pilots experiencing "get-home-itis."

Increasingly inclement weather and the desire to be back in Ohio by Christmas may have factored in the Wrights' decision to fly that day.



From the Library of Congress, the first photo of Orville Wright in flight, covering 120' on Dec. 17, 1903.

As this is written, only three people on earth were alive when the Wrights flew. Any American reading this was born after that date. We grew up in a world that was always filled with flying machines.

Historians have long pegged December 17, 1903, as a seminal turning point in the history of the world. Travel gained a new and liberating dimension that accelerated all manner of technology in societies around the world.

A scant 42 years later, in 1945, the editor of "The Airman's Almanac" waxed eloquent about the Air Age – a phenomenon

deemed worthy of capitalization. The editor said the world had been reduced to a 60-hour size – no point was more than 60 hours from a given airport.

That was heady stuff to a world still so new to flying. But in 1945, the inexorable turbojet revolution had barely begun, and advances in aircraft speed and range would be phenomenal headline-makers for the next half century.

The cachet of December 17 in aviation circles was not lost. The famed Douglas DC-3 airliner first flew on December 17, 1935.



The timeless Douglas DC-3 airliner first flew on Dec. 17, 1935. More than 30 years later, these DC-3s still carried passengers in the Northwest for West Coast Airlines. (Photo by Frederick A. Johnsen)

Boeing's world-beating swept-wing B-47 Stratojet bomber lifted off from Seattle's Boeing Field on December 17, 1947, on its initial flight.

And the first purpose-built jet-powered military transport aircraft, Lockheed's C-141A Starlifter, roared into the skies over Marietta, Georgia, on December 17, 1963 on its inaugural test sortie.



The number one C-141A Starlifter made its first flight on Dec. 17, 1963, with Lockheed pilots Leo Sullivan and Hank Dees, and flight engineer Bob Brennan, plus flight test engineer E. Mittendorff. The new all-jet C-141 transport was only 60 years removed from the frail Wright Flyer. (Lockheed photo)

From a contemporary newspaper account by Lucille Cohen in the Seattle Post-Intelligencer for December 18, 1947, we learn that Boeing originally set the XB-47's first flight date for Sunday, December 14. But poor weather intervened, and even on December 17, the flight was delayed for three hours and 30 minutes. First, ice at the landing airfield at Moses Lake, Washington, was vexing. Then, clouds closing in around Boeing Field in Seattle prompted delay. Cohen timed the takeoff at 2:02 p.m.



The Air Force sent a film and photo crew to Seattle for the XB-47, as seen in this 1947 photo. Civilian Air Force photographer Gene Furnish, second from left hefting a 4x5 camera, kept this photo in his collection. The XB-47 first flew on Dec. 17, 1947. (Furnish collection via AFTC/H0)

The Boeing test team adhered to priorities more important than the date's history, but the fact that the first flight ultimately took place on the Wright flight anniversary was not lost on reporter Cohen, who referenced the 44th anniversary in her article about the first flight of the XB-47.

We can only imagine the behind-the-scenes effort that went into generating first flights on what is arguably the most significant date in aviation. Flight testers would not be rushed into prematurely making a first flight. And things as diverse as climate, contracts and competition could have far more bearing on first flight dates than would a sense of history.

Still, three American aircraft, all world-beaters in their own way, made their debut on a date that would be unexceptional

had it not been for Orville and Wilbur Wright.

And it's not just first flights that have been associated with December 17. On that date in 1994, a USAF C-5 Galaxy set a U.S. weight lifting record when it took off at a gross weight of 920,836 pounds. That's more than 460 tons heavier than the Wrights' aircraft of 1903.



Orville (left) and Wilbur Wright ensured that Dec. 17 would be etched as a crucial date in aviation history. (USAFM

Collection)

The original Wright Flyer spent many years in England, the result of a disagreement between the Wrights and the Smithsonian Institution. It returned after World War II, and was donated to the Smithsonian in 1948 – on December 17.



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