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Dramatic Publishing

The Wright Brothers' First Flight

An Alien Voices Production

An original script by
JOHN de LANCIE and NAT SEGALOFF

A Radio Play



Dramatic Publishing

Woodstock, Illinois • England • Australia • New Zealand

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The Wright Brothers' First Flight

A Radio Play
For a flexible cast
(playing multiple roles, if desired)

VOICES (in order of speaking)

Announcer
Orville
Wilbur
A.D. Etheridge
Father
Mother
Lilienthal
Smithsonian
Langley
Mouillard
Weatherman

The Wright Brothers' First Flight

An Original Script by John de Lancie and Nat Segaloff
An Alien Voices Production

EXT. KITTY HAWK, NORTH CAROLINA— MORNING

There is a slight winter wind, but mostly we hear hammering in the distance as Orville and Wilbur Wright knock the last pieces into place on their "Wright Flyer I" heavier-than-air flying machine.

SOUND: *Wind rushing. Faint hammering, etc.*

ANNOUNCER

(like a sportscaster)

This is _____ reporting from Kill Devil Hill near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Well, today's the day — December 17, 1903. The Wright brothers are going to attempt something that's never been done before. They say they are going to fly. If it works, this will be the first time a self-propelled aircraft has ever lifted off the ground. It's a little after ten in the morning, and it's cold — really cold — and windy. There are only five of us out here. The sand dunes...

SOUND: *Work sound stop.*

Hold on...looks like this is it. Orville and Wilbur Wright have just finished inspecting their biplane which, I'm told, they carted all the way from Ohio. Wilbur is climbing on board. Ladies and gentlemen, this is the big moment! Orville is now walking over to the propeller...

ORVILLE
(calling out)
Ready, Wilbur?

WILBUR
Ready, Orville. Give her a spin!

SOUND: Engine starts, runs for a moment – then begins to sputter...

ORVILLE
(shouting over the roar)
Give it more throttle!

WILBUR
I am! I am!

SOUND: The engine dies.

ANNOUNCER
And the engine has stalled! It has stalled, ladies and gentlemen! The plane never moved! This is quite a setback.

WILBUR
(shouting)
Smells of gas, Orville.

ORVILLE
I know, I know...it's flooded!

ANNOUNCER
(to Orville – getting up close to him)
Mr. Wright, pardon me...Mr. Wright.
What's your plan now?

ORVILLE
(urgent)
My plan's to try it again, as soon as you step aside...excuse me!
(Calling out)
Wilbur, climb on down and give me a hand!

ANNOUNCER

Yes, well...ah, ladies and gentlemen, the brothers are now frantically making a few adjustments to the engine. So why don't we take this time to talk to...ah...to YOU, sir!

(To Etheridge)

You braved the cold weather to be here today. Who are you?

A.D. ETHERIDGE

Name's A.D. Etheridge. Call me A.D.

ANNOUNCER

And what do you do, A.D.?

A.D. ETHERIDGE

I run the Kill Devil Life-Saving Station.

ANNOUNCER

Do you think there'll be a need for your services?

A.D. ETHERIDGE

Well, can't say as I do, but then I ain't the one who thinks he's going to fly!

SOUND: Engine sputters to life and dies.

WILBUR

(o.s.)

Orville, get me some of that baling wire.

ORVILLE

(o.s.)

Dangit! We've had more problems with this stupid...!

ANNOUNCER

(back in his face)

What's happening now, Mr. Wright?

WILBUR

I'm adjusting the spark on the engine.

ANNOUNCER

And what does that do?

WILBUR

Ignites the gasoline! If you'll pardon me, we're a little pressed...

ANNOUNCER

Ah...not at all...carry on. Um, so, ladies and gentlemen, it's now getting on toward 10:15. As we wait for something to happen here at Kitty Hawk, let's find out what brought these two bicycle repairmen to the windswept sand dunes of North Carolina.

SOUND: The b.g. noises stop.

MUSIC: Traditional American folk tune – “Yankee Doodle Dandy.”

Orville and Wilbur Wright. History knows what they did, but few people know who they were.

ORVILLE

(steps up to the mike)

My name is Orville Wright. I was born on August 19, 1871, in Richmond, Indiana. We have two other brothers: Reuchlin and Lorin, and a sister, Katherine.

WILBUR

Our parents figured that one of us should have a normal name so they named me Wilbur.

ORVILLE

Our mother, Susan, kept house. Our father, Bishop Milton Wright, was a traveling minister.

WILBUR

We were known as “Bishop’s Boys.”

ORVILLE

I remember when I was seven years old my father came home from one of his preaching missions – with a present.

SOUND: Screen door squeaks open and slams shut.

FATHER

Orville? Wilbur? Come here. I want to show you something.

ORVILLE

It was a toy bird...

WILBUR

...bat!

ORVILLE

Bird!! And it had wings that flapped. It was made out of balsa wood covered with paper.

FATHER

Now pay attention, boys! I’m going to wind it up...

SOUND: Winding up.

...and...now...watch!

SOUND: Flapping paper wings.

ORVILLE

It flies! It really flies!

WILBUR

Oh, thank you, Father! This is the best toy we’ve ever had!

(Beat)

ORVILLE

Naturally, we broke it...

SOUND: *Crunching wood.*

ORVILLE (cont'd)
(to audience – defensively)
...I was just trying to see how it worked!

ANNOUNCER
In June of 1884, the Wright family moved from Richmond, Indiana, to Dayton, Ohio. Wilbur had to leave school before getting his diploma. His mother was not too pleased.

MOTHER
I hope this won't keep him from getting a good job some day.

ANNOUNCER
Unfortunately, Orville also left school without getting his diploma. Except, *he* had discipline problems.

ORVILLE
What he means is, I quit before they expelled me.

MOTHER
I hope this won't keep him from getting a good job some day.

WILBUR
Dayton was a great place to grow up! I liked sports, and I was pretty swift on ice skates – if I say so myself. We used to skate all the time on the lake near the Soldiers' Home.

ORVILLE
Tell them what happened when you were nineteen, Wilbur.

WILBUR
It wasn't my fault.

ORVILLE

Tell them anyway!

WILBUR

Aw, I got hit in the face with a
baseball bat. But it didn't hurt...!

SOUND: Stick hitting the floor with a THWAK!

Much!

ORVILLE

(goads him along)
Except for the head injury and the
heart palpitations, it was a cinch,
right, Wilbur?

MOTHER

I hope this won't keep him from getting
a good job some day.

ANNOUNCER

Wilbur stayed at home for the next four
years – healing – and taking care of
his mother, who died in 1889 of
tuberculosis.

MOTHER

(coughs)
I hope...(cough)...this...(cough)...
won't...

ANNOUNCER

That was the year Orville and Wilbur
opened a printing shop and started
calling themselves –

ORVILLE & WILBUR

(together, proudly)
The Wright Brothers!

ANNOUNCER

Two years later the printing shop went
out of business.

EVERYONE BUT ORVILLE & WILBUR
(mocking; pointing)
The Wrong Brothers! Ha, ha, ha!

ORVILLE & WILBUR
(indignant)
Hey!!!

ANNOUNCER
(taking control again)
Meanwhile...Orville became interested
in - bikes.

SOUND: VROOM-VROOM of motorcycle.

(turning to the Foley artists)
No, not motorbikes!!! Bicycles!!!

SOUND: Jingle-jingle of handlebar bell.

ORVILLE
So...Wilbur and I opened a bicycle
repair shop, where we fixed our
friends' bikes.

WILBUR
At least, that's what we did for nine
months out of the year.
(Secretive)
The other three months, we closed up
shop and experimented with...

SOUND: Hammering is interrupted by door opening and closing.

ORVILLE
(excited)
Wilbur!

WILBUR
What is it, Orville?

SOUND: Newspaper being opened.

ORVILLE

Have you seen the newspaper? This fella in Germany says he's going to make history!

WILBUR

Let me see that!

SOUND: More rustling.

LILIENTHAL

(German accent)

I am Otto Lilienthal, a daredevil German glider pilot who has flown twenty-five hundred monoplane flights. Tomorrow, August 8, 1896, I will attempt to make the greatest flight of all time.

WILBUR

Orville! Relax! Otto Lilienthal flies gliders. Why, just look at the drawings! And besides, getting in the air isn't the problem, the problem is control. Look at how he steers the thing!

LILIENTHAL

Mein steering technique involves mein dangling below the wings on a harness, and shifting mein weight wherever I want to go. That way, I can take off and land using mein feet!

WILBUR

He straps the plane to his back and jumps off a cliff!

ORVILLE

But twenty-five hundred times! He's an expert!

SOUND: Slow descending whistle. Splat.

MUSIC: Celestial. Glissandos. Very lyrical.

LILIENTHAL

Hallo, again. Dis is daredevil pilot Otto Lilienthal, I'm speaking to you vrom Heaven. My plane zigged ven it should have zagged and I vent kaput!

MUSIC: Stops.

WILBUR

Orville, there's got to be someplace we can learn more about this. There just has to be!

SOUND: Typing.

ORVILLE

Who are you writing, Wilbur?

WILBUR

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. "My Dear Sir: I have been interested in the problems of mechanical and human flight..."

SOUND: Typing continues.

SMITHSONIAN

(reading; overlap)

"Dear Mr. Wright. We are enclosing a list of publications including works by Octave Chanute, and..."

WILBUR

Orville! Can you believe it! Look at all the reading material they sent! There're volumes and...hey, Orville, what's wrong?

ORVILLE

Is there gonna be a test?

SOUND: Drill press (power drill), lathe (egg beaters) and band saws (saw).

ANNOUNCER

Between 1900 and 1903 the Wrights make model after model of heavier-than-air flying machines. And they tried them out in a makeshift wind tunnel they constructed behind their bicycle shop. But they were not alone in their quest for the gold. At the turn of the century, there were two schools of aviation theory. One was represented by Professor Samuel Langley...

LANGLEY

“Powered flight is the only way to conquer the air. And only through powered motion will the traveler get from one place to the next.”

ANNOUNCER

The other theory was held by Frenchmen Octave Chanute and Louis-Pierre Mouillard.

MOUILLARD

(French accent)

“Gliding, hour after hour, just like ze birds – zat is man’s destiny!”

ANNOUNCER

Powered flight versus gliding – machines versus birds. The Wright Brothers had a choice to make and everybody knows they picked...

ORVILLE

Birds!

ANNOUNCER

What!!! But I thought...

ORVILLE

Birds! That’s the ticket! Our gliders will be just like giant birds. And the main thing that gliders need is

(MORE)