

The Columbus Dispatch

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Then, now and tomorrow

Re-enactment follows route of first cargo flight a century ago with symbolic haul instead of silk



ED MATTHEWS DISPATCH PHOTOS

Spectators at Rickenbacker Airport get a close look at a replica of the Wright brothers' Model B plane that made the first cargo flight.

By Frank Thomas THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Rich Stepler and Mitchell Cary had nothing beneath them but some wood, fabric and 2,000 feet of thin autumn air. They sat yesterday in a plane specifically designed to look and feel old. They didn't have a cockpit or a windshield. A 15-mph tailwind slapped them from behind.

It got cold.

"That's why I'm dressed like the Michelin man. It's a little chilly today," Stepler said. "Historic airplanes are safe because we use some modern technology, but they're not necessarily comfortable."

Cary and Stepler set off yesterday morning from Wright-Patterson Air Force Base near Dayton. After a short fuel stop at the Madison County airport, they continued to Rickenbacker Airport.

Their flight retraced one of aviation's great first flights a century earlier. On Nov. 4, 1910, Phil Parmelee flew a Wright brothers Model B airplane on the first cargo flight from Dayton to Columbus carrying 200 pounds of silk.

A replica of the plane flown by Parelee, Cary and Stepler's didn't carry silk. Instead, it held concept models of tiny spy aircraft that the military is developing for future service. The odd cargo symbolized the future of aviation.

The Wright plane symbolized flight's humble origins, said Joe Sciabica, executive director of the Air Force Research Lab, which provided the cargo.

"We've come so far in just a little over 100 years," he said, adding that it is important to remember the original spirit of aviation.

“We are limited only by our will and fear of pursuing our dreams,” he said.

The original Wright brothers’ flight was little more than a promotional stunt masterminded by Columbus business owner Max Morehouse. The brothers took the epic silk-delivery job but didn’t see much potential in air cargo, said Amanda Wright-Lane, their great-grandniece.

However, they did know how to answer when opportunity knocked.

“They charged Mr. Morehouse \$5,000 to return his own silk to Columbus after he delivered it to them in Dayton,” Lane said. That is equivalent to about \$120,000 today.

But the real star of the day was the courageous pilot, Parmelee, who had been flying for only two months, she said.

Thousands of people turned out to watch him land after his 68-mile, 61-minute flight, but few, including Parmelee, fully understood what it meant.

“This would have overwhelmed him,” said Phillip McKeachie, great-nephew of Parmelee. “(My uncle) was a dreamer ... but he couldn’t have predicted what his flight began.”

fthomas@dispatch.com



Pilot Rich Stepler prepares to take off from the Madison County airport in the replica of the Model B.



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Fans watch the Model B replica after takeoff from the Madison County airport, where it had stopped to refuel. The plane followed the 1910 flight path from near Dayton to Columbus.