

The 1909 Wright Military Flyer

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Orville and Wilbur Wright, of Dayton, Ohio, produced the first airplane in 1903 but were rebuffed in their initial attempt to interest the Army in it in 1905. They would not receive a sympathetic hearing until August 1907, when the Aeronautical Division of the Signal Corps was formed with just

three men to take charge "of all matters pertaining to military ballooning, air machines, and all kindred subjects," in the words of Brig Gen J. Allen, chief signal officer of the Army. This event marked the humble beginning of what would become the US Air Force.

The Army solicited bids for an airplane that could pack for transport by wagon, be assembled for operations within one hour, seat two persons (a total of 350 pounds), have a range of 125 miles, attain a speed of 40 mph, and have a flight endurance of at least one hour. The basic cost would be \$25,000, with bonuses or penalties for actual performance. Of 24 bids received, the Wrights' proposal produced the only workable airplane, and they were duly awarded a contract to deliver "one (1) heavier-than-air flying machine, in accordance with Signal Corps Specification No. 486, dated December 23, 1907," according to the agreement approved by General Allen.

Fort Meyer, Virginia, was the site of the official flight trials in September 1908. Orville Wright piloted the prototype for the Army, taking several members of the acceptance committee aloft to show off the capabilities of the airplane. In what turned out to be the last flight of the test series, Orville failed to recover from a dive, and the resulting crash killed his passenger, 1st Lt Thomas E. Selfridge, an official observer and one of the original Army-aviation enthusiasts. Despite this bad luck, the



Army was impressed by the Wright "flying machine" and ordered further tests.

The Wrights improved their design and presented the new "1909 Flyer" for examination at Fort Meyer during 27–30 July 1909. With a length of 28 feet, 11 inches, and a wingspan of 36 feet, six inches, the Flyer stood nearly eight feet tall and weighed in at 740 pounds. Driven by the Wrights' own 30.6-horsepower, four-cylinder engine, the plane could fly 42 mph and stay aloft over 70 minutes. Exceeding specifications, the machine was accepted as Signal Corps Airplane no. 1 on 2 August.

At College Park, Maryland, the Wrights trained several young lieutenants as pilots in October. A latecomer to the class, 1st Lt Benjamin Foulois didn't get enough instruction to solo but took the Flyer with him to his next duty station—Fort Sam Houston, Texas. Between March and September 1910, Foulois literally taught himself to fly, with help from letters from the Wrights. This must surely be the first instance of learning to fly by correspondence! After some 62 flights by Foulois, the Army's first airplane was retired in 1911.

To Learn More . . .

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