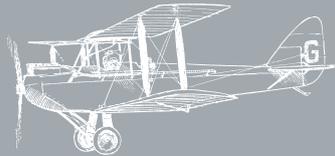


FLIGHT OF THE KIWIS



Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

"The higher we soar," mused philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, "the smaller we appear to those who cannot fly." Since man has possessed the ability to dream, he has dreamt of the ability to take the skies. Ancient Greek mythology offers one of the most tragic dreamers of all, Icarus, who flew too close to the sun only to melt his wings of wax and tumble to his death — a symbolic warning to latter day aeronautical engineers. Fourth century BC philosopher Archytas reportedly flew 200 metres in a flying device named 'The Pigeon'. Eleventh century English monk Eilmer of Malmesbury flew — or more likely fell — around the same distance after flinging himself from a hilltop abbey with wings attached to his arms and legs. For Leonardo da Vinci, flying was an obsession, his sketched bat-like machines as famous as his frescos.

In November of 1783, Frenchmen Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier and the Marquis d'Arlandes became the first men to officially fly, taking to the skies in a hot air balloon. Pilâtre was to pass away soon after, when he crashed while attempting to span the Channel between Britain and France. Brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright have long been credited as the first to pilot a powered plane — which they had also invented and built — in late 1903. That claim had long been disputed by supporters of Kiwi Richard Pearse, a farmer and inventor from Canterbury who some believe first flew his contraption many months prior.

"From the time I was quite a little chap, I had a great fancy for engineering," Pearse told the Timaru Post. "When I was still quite a young man, I conceived the idea of inventing a flying machine." In 1902, aged 25, Pearse mounted a bamboo and linen wing structure to a tricycle frame powered by a two-cylinder engine capable of delivering 25 horsepower. There are witness reports from that year and the next, of Pearse managing to take-off for short distances at low heights, usually followed by minor crashes. But Pearse sets the record straight in the newspaper article. "I did not attempt anything practical with the idea until, in 1904, when the St Louis Exposition authorities offered a prize of 20,000 to the man who invented and flew a flying machine over a specified course," he says. "I did not, as you know, succeed in winning the prize, neither did anyone else." What he did realise, Pearse goes on, was that his invention had potential, and that he was now only weeks away from success. This interview took place in 1909.

So it's back to the Wright brothers then. Or is it? According to the 100th anniversary issue of renowned aviation journal *Jane's All The World's Aircraft*, German Gustav Whitehead (formerly Weisskopf) soared the skies before the Wrights in his plane, the Condor. The journal states on Whitehead's flight that, it must be stressed, was more than two years before the Wrights manhandled their Flyer from its shed and flew a couple of hundred feet in a straight line. Thanks to the meticulous researches of [aviation expert] John Brown... an injustice is rectified with only slight bruising to Wilbur and Orville's reputation. The Wrights were right; but Whitehead was ahead."

Pearse, however, gives it to the brothers. The BBC quotes him in another newspaper article, this time from 1915, as saying: "Pre-eminence will undoubtedly be given to the Wright brothers of America when the history of the aeroplane is written, as they were the first to actually make successful flights with a motor-driven aeroplane." Pearse and his supporters can take pride from, and comfort in, the knowledge that his monoplane with a steerable nose-wheel is a design far closer to modern-day aircraft than the Wrights' biplane. Also, that he inspired generations of New Zealanders to set their dreams high, and that he still does. By 1919, there were almost 300 trained pilots and the following year saw the first flight across the Cook Strait. In 1928 — a year after Charles Lindbergh became the first man to fly solo across the Atlantic — up to 40,000 Aucklanders cheered the landing of Southern Cross, a three-engine Fokker flown by an Australian-lead crew, which arrived from California via Queensland. The 1930s belonged to Jean Batten and her slew of solo record breaking flights such as the 1939 New Zealand to England sprint. Two years prior, Tasman Empire Airways Ltd, or TEAL, was created, later to become Air New Zealand.

And so the wheels — and wings — of progress continue still. July saw Air New Zealand's very first Boeing 787-9 Dreamliner touch down at Auckland airport. The most elegant of machines, kitted out in all black, was greeted by over 50 of the carrier's staff performing the haka. "Being on the flight deck on the delivery of this magnificent 787-9 aircraft to Air New Zealand has been a career highlight," says Captain David Morgan. "Like the Boeing 747-400 in the 1980s this aircraft is a game changer for the airline and our customers." And so it is with a certain sadness that the newest addition to the Air New Zealand family ushers out that iconic 747 'jumbo-jet', also known as 'the Queen of the Skies'. No longer considered economical enough, this month the carrier's last one will make her last round trip to San Francisco. "It's been the backbone of the fleet and deserves its name 'the Queen of the Skies'," Captain Ron Woodward told the *Herald*. "It's still a very pretty aircraft and certainly one of the most distinctive." Former training captain Jack Priest also said that the planes "made the airline a lot of money and rebuilt the reputation," but that it is time for them to go: "They've lasted a very long time and they were a great ship."

And as she looks down on this land of the long white cloud for the final time, 'the Queen of the Skies' will no doubt tip her wing — and crown — in respect to Richard Pearse and his piloting protégés who proved that kiwis can, after all, fly very, very well indeed.

