

THE APRIL 29, 1905 FLIGHT OF THE AEROPLANE BUILT
BY JOHN JOSEPH MONTGOMERY OVER SANTA CLARA /

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this century, much credit has been given the Wright brothers as a result of their aeronautic achievements at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in 1903. Few people realize, however, that their success was due in no small measure, to a resident Santa Clara. This man was John Joseph Montgomery, the true father of basic flying. Montgomery's first controlled flight took place on the Otay mesa near San Diego, on August 28, 1883, but his further experiments took place mainly within Santa Clara County. This essay shall attempt to relay on of the most exciting of these experiments; the April 29, 1905, flight over the city of Santa Clara. At the time of this flight, Montgomery was a professor at the University of Santa Clara, teaching aeronautics and building large controlled gliders.

II. THE FLIGHT

The day of the flight was a celebration of President's Day at the University for Reverend Robert Kenna, Montgomery's old teacher. The inventor offered to give a demonstration of the workings of his aeroplane. Only the college students and staff, as well as twenty-five newspaper reporters of the Bay Area, were to be invited. Personal invitations were sent to various newspaper editors, asking them to send their men.

Frank Hamilton and his great hot-air balloon were brought up from Santa Cruz, and space was cleared for them on the college campus vineyard area at the northeast corner of Lafayette and Santa Clara Streets near Montgomery's workshops.

In preparation, a well-covered, deep fire pit was dug. An underground stove-pipe was run some forty feet to the spot where the balloon was suspended from a high pole to be inflated by the pipe outlet. A mingled group of college and high school students was chosen for its strength; it was to hold the tether ropes dangling over the inflating balloon. Several Montgomery helpers had begun assembling the "Santa Clara", Montgomery's glider, early in the morning. Its parts had been brought over from the cliffs at Aptos. Its wing-tips were painted red by Albert de Quevedo, a student, and its name was stencilled on the under-

side of the forward airfoil. It was an encouraging day; the sunshine was brilliant and photos were being taken by teachers, students and professional photographers.

Montgomery had written a special invitation to his mother and to his cousin, Archbishop George Montgomery, newly installed prelate of San Francisco. The Archbishop brought with him the Reverend Richard A. Gleeson, S.J., pastor of St. Joseph's Church, San Jose. Everyone, including Montgomery's mother, accepted the invitations. Twenty-five newspapers sent reporters and photographers.

The big balloon stood nearly 40 feet high and was filled to a maximum width of 27 feet. It formed a huge inverted pear and was soon noticed by neighbors and children who quickly alerted the other townsfolk. Nearly a thousand people can yet be counted in one photograph. Daniel John Maloney, the aeronaut and a close cohort of Montgomery's, was ready in red and white silk aerobatic tights and was photographed beside the aeroplane with John Montgomery, Frank Hamilton, and Associate Judge W.G. Lorigan. Montgomery was directing the setting of the "deadman" anchor-hold and the winch rope which was used to ease the inflated balloon over the aeroplane. Frank Hamilton supervised the inflation of the balloon which was held to a tall post. Buckets of water were handy in case a spark from the fire or underground pipes should ignite the bal-

loon fabric.

William C. Gianera, a primary pupil, later to become president of Santa Clara University, described the scene to Arthur D. Spearman, S.J.¹ in 1964. He watched the thirty or so high school and college students who held the balloon restraining ropes. Reverend Gleeson came forward to bless the enterprise². There was a short prayer that Maloney might make a safe landing, and the undertaking was under way.

Montgomery, poised at the winch, now called to the students to slack the restraining ropes. He slowly eased the great balloon up and over the aeroplane. When the lift-rope was taut, a sudden gust of wind broke the line. Fortunately, Maloney had already taken his place in the fuselage saddle and all gasped as the aeroplane was jerked skyward. Maloney had a hunting knife in a sheath on the vertical strut. It was planned that this knife would be used in cutting the lift-rope when an altitude of 4000 feet was reached. The sudden jerk did no harm except that a small anchor and rope were caught up with the aeroplane and fell from a great height through a neighbor's roof.

Maloney waved to the crowd below. The scene was a combination of the old and the new. The balloon rose more rapidly above old Mission Santa Clara and the college faculty and students, The newspaper reporters and photographers watched the rising aeronaut.

Higher and higher he rose above the old Mission olive and fig trees that linked the scientific and cultural education of Santa Clara College with the past. The Franciscan padres had been the Valley's educators from its founding on the banks of the Rio Guadalupe. They had given a local habitation and a name to the Valley. The Jesuit fathers and John J. Montgomery and his aeroplane were now the pioneers of a modern civilization in the Santa Clara Valley. The balloon rose until it "looked like a basketball high in the sky". At 4000 feet Maloney cut the lift-rope with his knife and the great balloon leapt away to leave him to ride the high air in a frail assemblage of rods, wire ribs and oiled muslin.

The crowd gasped as the balloon sailed away from the aeroplanes. They knew that, in the later Montgomery phrase, "This is it!" Maloney's life hung perilously in the unbelievably frail aircraft of John J. Montgomery. No other man had ever been more bold, or seemingly so helpless. It was the first public high-air flight of man with official witnesses, newspaper observers and photographers. Maloney was the first man to fly maneuvered flight and execute every conceivable movement in high air.

III. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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IV. FOOTNOTES

1 A.D. Spearman, John J. Montgomery, p. 60 .

2 Archbishop Montgomery declined to give the blessing, out of courtesy to his Jesuit hosts.

3 George Gorham's account to A.D. Spearman in March, 1961.