

The First Woman to Fly in an Aeroplane in America was from Dixon California



San Francisco Call newspaper illustration October 28th, 1909

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Solano County has a very long history of passenger transport on government owned planes with Travis Air Force Base in the county. In fact, Solano County can boost as having the very first woman to fly as a passenger in an aeroplane in the Western Hemisphere. According to an article from the San Francisco Call newspaper dated October 28th, 1909; Mrs. Sarah Van Deman, wife of Captain Ralph Henry Van Deman of the Twenty-First infantry, was the first woman to fly through the air in an aeroplane. She won that honor on October 27th, 1909 when she remained aloft in a Wright aeroplane for four minutes as a passenger in a Wright 1909 Military Flyer machine that Wilbur Wright had sold to the government. The only other American woman who had previously made a flight was Miss Katherine Wright, sister of Orville and Wilbur Wright when she had rode with Wilbur Wright at Pau France. Katharine Wright had flown with Wilbur on February 15th, 1909, for seven minutes and four seconds and again on March 17th, 1909 for 12 minutes 22 seconds. However, Mrs. Sarah Van Deman was the first woman to fly in an aeroplane in America.



Mrs. Sarah Van Deman

Photo courtesy Wright State University Special Collections

Mrs. Sarah Van Deman was born Sadie McCune Rice August 17th, 1880 in Dixon California. There is some confusion about her first name. An account of her family history notes that "Sadie" was not a name that she embraced; hence she later adopted several first names including Sarah and Jaqueline. She was also simply known as "Lady Jack" for short. Sadie McCune Rice was the daughter of Mrs. Jessie Rice of Dixon California and the granddaughter of Senator McCune, one of the oldest residents of Solano County. She spent many of her early years in Santa Cruz California before her 1903 marriage to Captain Ralph Henry Van Deman. As the wife of Captain Van Deman, she had traveled far with her husband and spent several years in the Philippines when her husband was stationed there. It was also reported that Mrs. Van Deman was fearless because she had experience in free ballooning. The Santa Cruz Sentinel newspaper noted after her flight with Wilbur Wright; "She was always a venturesome young lady, fond of outdoor life, and one of her great pastimes was horseback riding.

Her striking personality made her a winner wherever she went, and her popularity has caused her to go soaring upward, both in social circles and in an airship."

Times being what they were, Wilbur Wright would not consent to a flight with a woman passenger without first gaining permission from her husband Captain Van Deman. The Captain and Mrs. Van Deman were daily visitors to the flying fields at both Fort Myer and College Park in 1909 and had been some of the foremost aeronautical fans. Captain and Mrs. Van Deman had lived in the Washington D.C. area since 1905, when he was assigned to the Army War College. Captain Van Deman was the head of the map division at the college. He and his wife were well known in Army circles in the Washington, D.C. area. After the contract with the military had been fulfilled, Wilbur turned his attention toward other things. First among them was to take up Mrs. Van Deman, a friend of Katharine Wright, who had made numerous requests for Wilbur to take her on a flight.

The flight had been arranged beforehand in secrecy and the Captain and Mrs. Sarah Van Deman had come out to College Park before the Capital was awake on the morning of October 27th, 1909. Mrs. Sarah Van Deman went to the aeroplane shed with her husband about 7:30 am in the morning where Lieutenant Lahm explained to her the various parts of the machine. The crowd had no idea that a woman passenger was to be taken up until the green eyed trim little figure in a long gray cloak, black skirt and black hat climbed into the passenger's seat beside the operator Wilbur Wright. Lieutenant Lahm and Wright tied a length of rope around the bottom of Mrs. Van Deman's skirt to keep it down and she had wrapped a veil around her crisp hair and hat to keep it in place. At 7:50 am Wilbur Wright pulled the trigger which sent the machine down the monorail. A little scream was subdued when the biplane struck the earth at the end of the monorail and failed to lift into the air. Mrs. Van Deman made a move to get out of her seat after the failed attempt, but Wilbur Wright told her to remain seated. So she stayed in the aeroplane while it was wheeled back to the starting derrick by nine military enlisted men so as not to impose upon her. At 8:15 am another start was made down the monorail track, this time a successful one.

On the second start, with relatively calm winds blowing on the field, the Wright Flyer soared into the air reaching a height of about 60 feet. The crowd at the aerodrome cheered as Mrs. Van Deman passed the starting derrick the first time around the field and again when the aeroplane returned on the second lap. As the aeroplane flew, the chain and sprocket driven propellers beat the air as the engine chugged furiously and the slipstream howled through the spruce struts. Mrs. Van Deman later said "The engine was spitten' and makin' the doggondest noise". When the second lap was completed, Wilbur Wright called hoarsely to her, "Cut off the engine! And hang on!" Wilbur Wright then allowed the machine to gently glide back to earth after about only four minutes in the air. Mrs. Van Deman immediately jumped down off the aeroplane to a sea of applause. After the flight Mrs. Van Deman said to Mr. Wright, "Oh dear me, it was simply grand. Now I understand why birds sing when they can fly through the air. It is simply ideal. There was no reason for fear. I did not even think of how long I was up, except that I knew the time was too short." Later she said, "With such a skillful

navigator as Wilbur Wright at the helm, I had no thought of fear. I was perfectly sure with Wilbur. I knew Wilbur would take me and bring me back. He was that sort of man."

Captain Ralph Henry Van Deman said to Wilbur Wright after the flight: "I want to thank you, Wright. Now it will be possible to have peace in our home!" Wilbur Wright replied with a quizzical grin: "Oh, that's all right, weren't you afraid to let your wife make the flight?" Captain Van Deman was asked. He replied "Why should I be afraid? I don't think there is any more danger in taking an aeroplane ride than in motoring or horseback riding and my wife does both of those things. She has been awaiting this trip for some time," he said.

The flight made headlines across the country, with Mrs. Van Deman's words—so characteristic of the era—splashed across the front page of every paper. The flight on October 27th 1909 made her the first woman passenger to fly in America. Unfortunately, no photographs were taken of the event. However, there are numerous other photographs taken of the Wright 1909 Military Flyer during that time.



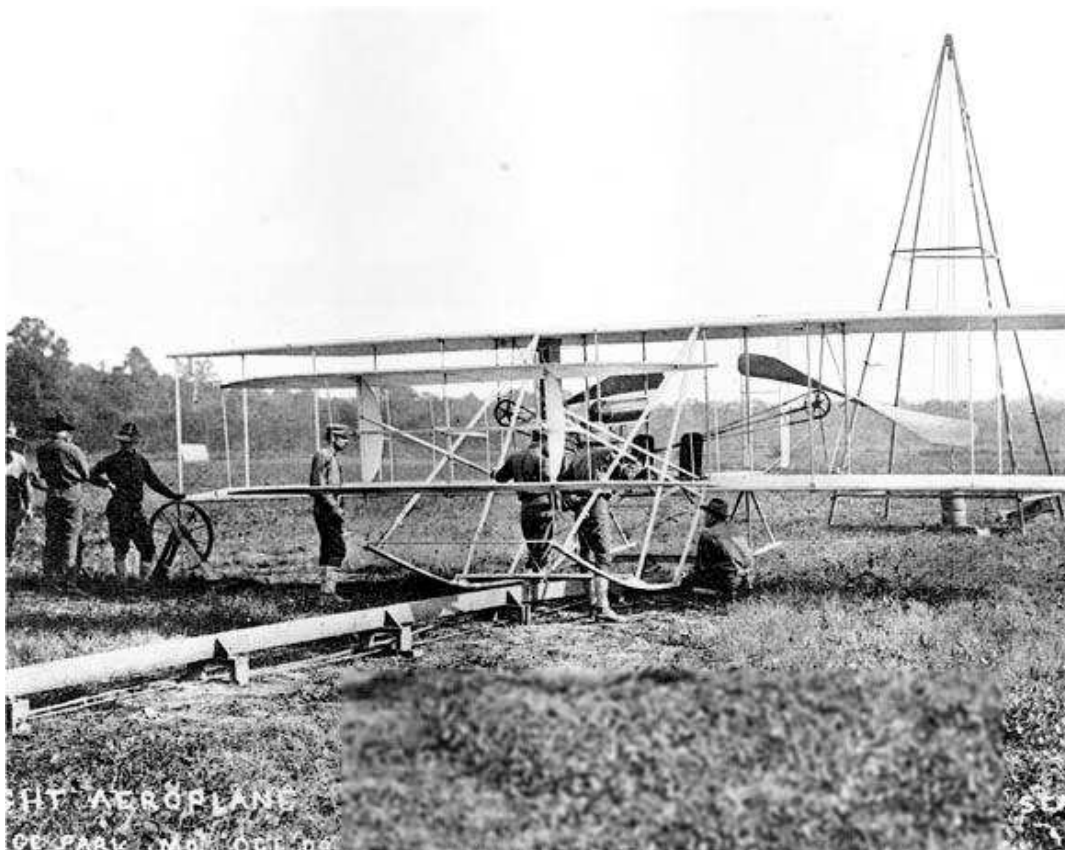
Starting up the Military Flyer engine with personnel from the Army Signal Corp with Wilbur Wright at College Park, October 1909. Photo courtesy of the College Park Aviation Museum.

The first Army airplane was called Signal Corps No. 1 and the Wright Military Flyer. The Wrights proved their machine's qualifications at Fort Myer, a military base in Arlington County, VA. They met or exceeded all of the Army's specifications, including flying at 40 miles per hour, carrying a combined passenger weight of 350 pounds, maneuvering in any direction in the air, landing without damage, and flying for at least an hour non-stop, which was a world record at the time. The Wright's sold their first aeroplane to the U.S. Army on August 2nd, 1909. There remained one final condition of the Wright brothers' military contract and that was the training of two military officers to fly the machine. It was at College Park MD where they taught the first military pilots to fly. Wilbur first took

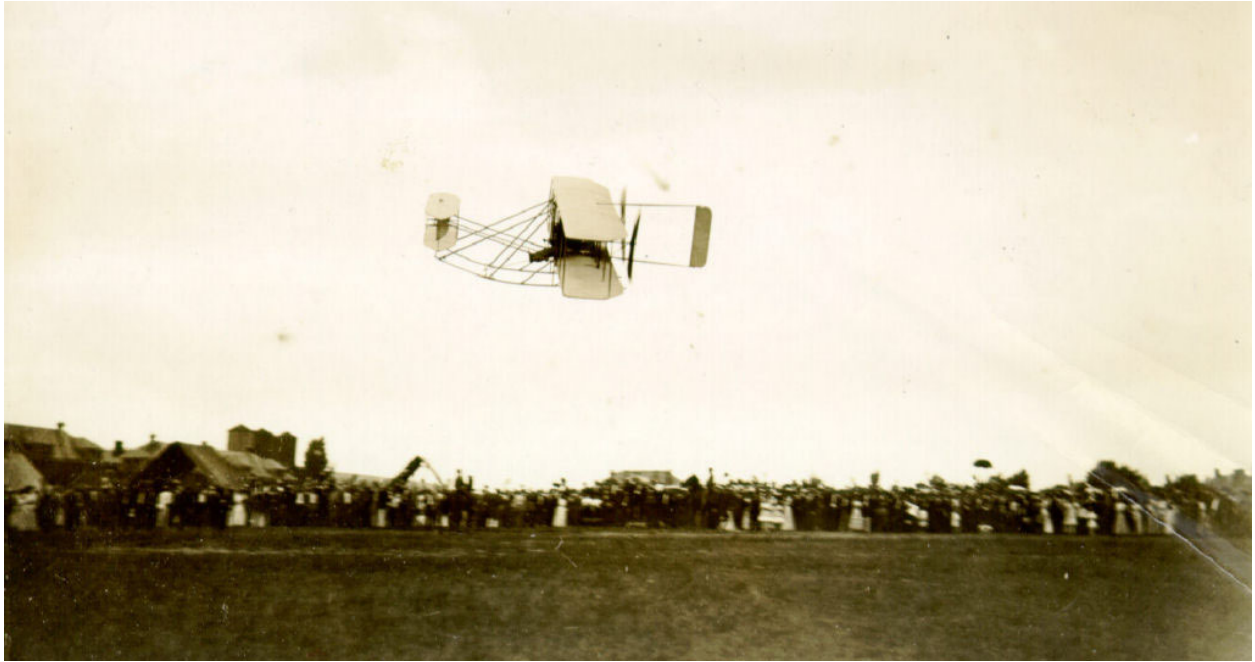
to the air with his students on October 8, 1909 and over the course of four weeks, taught them to maneuver and land the plane.



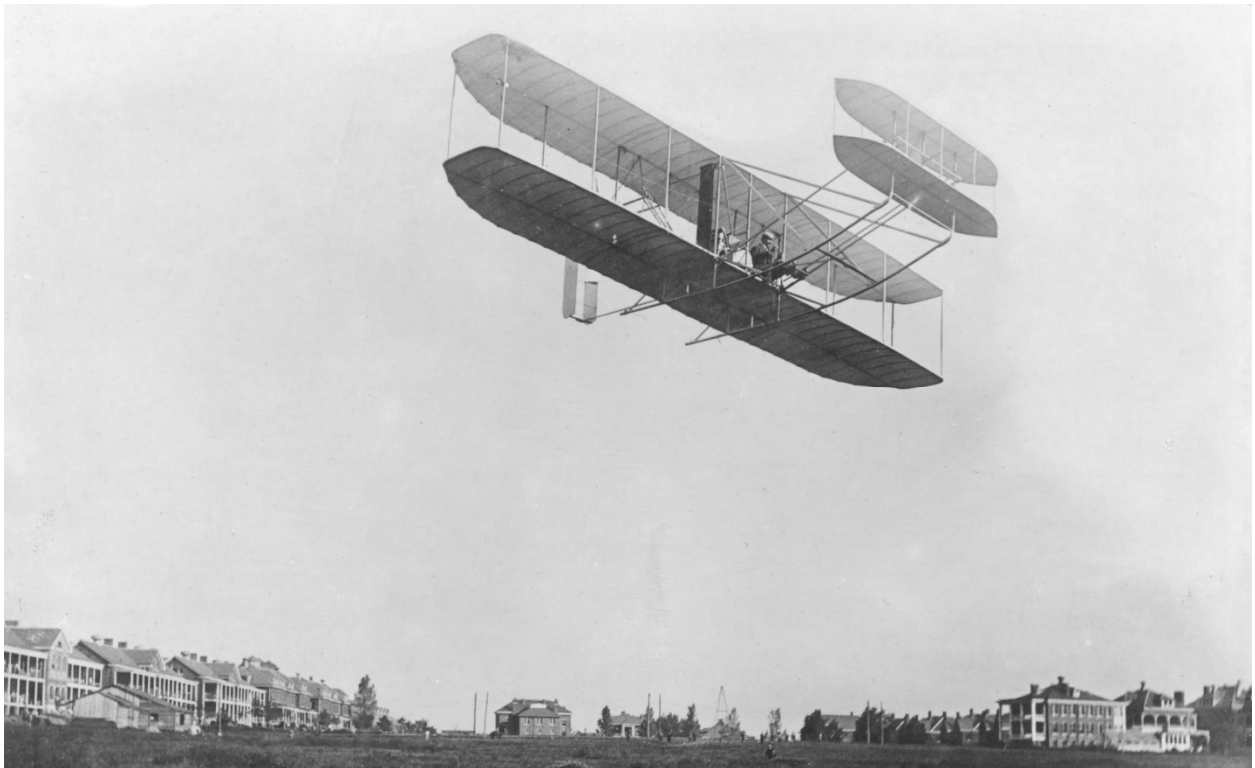
Charlie Taylor pours fuel into the gas tank of the Flyer while Orville goes over the proposed flight route with his passenger, Lt. Frank Lahm.



The Wright Military Flyer is set up on a launching rail at College Park in 1909.



The Military Flyer banking left over the crowds at Fort Myer in 1909.



The Wright Flyer at Fort Myer in 1909



Fort Myer airplane “hangar” 1909

Mrs. Sarah Van Deman later recounted that she had a part in coining the word “hangar”—a place for storage of aircraft. The place where the Wrights kept their biplane, she said, was known simply as “the shed.” The brothers thought they should come up with a more dignified appellation. Because the wheel less biplane was sometimes hung up in a building they thought first of “hanging garage”. That was too long and they wanted something shorter. Next “hanging garage” was shortened to “hang-gar.” But, when Wilbur started to paint “hang-gar” on the end of an apple box to make a sign, he found he had room for only “g” in the word. Hence the place to store aircraft became “hangar.”

Mrs. Sarah Van Deman’s appetite for adventure and travel continued, and Captain Van Deman’s military postings allowed her that opportunity. Captain Van Deman had an illustrious military career and he was advanced to the rank of General, becoming Chief of Army Intelligence prior to his 1929 retirement.

In 1931, under the name “Lady Jack,” she published a book titled “Critters in Africa”, describing her travels in Africa and Egypt in 1927-1928, a journey of more than 24,000 miles. The copyright owner is shown as Mrs. Sarah McCune Lang of Del Monte, California (now Monterey). A digitized version of this entertaining book (with photos) is available online at www.hathitrust.org and at

[https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.\\$b28647;view=1up;seq=30](https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.$b28647;view=1up;seq=30)

“Lady Jack” Lang was interviewed in 1960, then an elderly widow living in Monterey’s San Carlos Hotel just a few months after the death of her second husband, Commander Charles Lang. At that time, she was a widow almost 80 years old, partially blind and partially deaf, living alone in a two-room suite. Within those eyes and ears remained the memory of sights and sounds of her flight over Washington, D.C. in a plane piloted by Wilbur Wright. She was somewhat smug about her “first” flight. She said Alice Roosevelt Longworth was determined she was going up first. She had invited Wilbur and Orville to an exquisite luncheon, but to no avail. Local newspaper accounts of the

time also told of jealous Army wives who wanted to be the first. Reflecting on her almost 80 years of life, the small woman recalled, "I've been a very adventurous person. I've been around the world seven times." She added, "I've flown all over the country. Whenever I go any place in a hurry, I take a plane."

Mrs. Sarah McCune Lang died March 26th, 1967 (aged 86) Monterey County, California. She is buried at the Dixon Cemetery, Solano County, California plot Masonic Section, Lot 143, Crypt III, Grave G/H. Her memorial ID on Find-A-Grave is <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/11856803/sarah-lang>



On the 65th anniversary of the flight, the Smithsonian Institution issued a special cachet stamp cover in its Milestones of Flight Commemorative Series. The stamp featured a sketch of Mrs. Ralph Van Deman flying with Wilbur Wright, "First Woman Airplane Passenger in America, Mrs. Ralph Van Deman October 27, 1909."

