

Some people say it can't be done. Others say it can. Captain William J. Tate of the United States Lighthouse Service was a man of action that not only said it could be done, but went out and accomplished it.

William Tate grew up on the sand dunes near the little town of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. In fact, he passed the dunes of Kill Devil Hill every day on his way to school. It was from that very hill on a windy December day in 1903 that history was made, as Orville Wright became the first man to achieve powered flight.

William Tate's wife, Addie, was the postmistress of the Kitty Hawk Post Office in 1900. According to William's recollections, Wilbur and Orville Wright of Dayton, Ohio, were looking for a place to test their gliders and "wrote a letter to the man in charge of the surrounding territory, especially to learn whether there were any sand hills." Addie gave the letter to William to pen a response to the Wright brothers. "As it happened, I had read only a few months before an article in a magazine about gliders and the attempts which then were being made by men to fly. I could tell by the tone of the letter that I was dealing with honest-to-goodness flying machine men and I gave as vivid a description as I could." According to Orville Wright, William had done such a good job describing the surrounding area, including numerous sketches, the two brothers decided at that moment Kitty Hawk was the right place to test their equipment.

Wilbur set out immediately, but did not grasp how isolated Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, was to the outside world. After taking the train to Elizabeth City, North Carolina, Wilbur hired a local trapper to take him the rest of the way to Kitty Hawk. After boating and hiking for 55 hours, including the last 48 hours without food, Wilbur Wright arrived in Kitty Hawk. He knocked on William J. Tate's door and asked to board with him until his brother arrived. William and Addie took Wilbur in, fed him, and gave him a place to stay amongst their five children. Thus the friendship began.

William and Addie Tate helped assemble the Wright's first glider in North Carolina, and Addie even sewed some of the canvas for the wings. The Tates helped and watched many different glider attempts. While they were sure the Wrights would succeed, some of the locals were not so sure. William wrote: mental attitude of the natives toward the Wrights was that they were a simple pair of harmless cranks that were wasting their time at a fool attempt to do something that was impossible. The chief argument against their success could be heard at the stores and post office, and ran something like this: 'God didn't intend man to fly. If he did, He would have given him a set of wings on his shoulders. No, Siree, nobody need not try to do what God didn't intend for him to do.' I recall, not once, but many times, that when I cited the fact that other things, as wonderful, had been accomplished, I was quickly told that I was a darned sight crazier than the Wrights were".

Soon the Wrights began flying every day. While the Tates had other business to attend to, William enlisted the help of his cousin and his co-workers from the Kill Devil Hill Life Saving Station. Day after day the Wrights would hoist a flag from their camp, signaling the men of the station they were ready to make a glider flight. The men would dutifully walk to the site and provide assistance as necessary. Then on December 17, 1903, Orville Wright accomplished the first flight of a heavier than air flying machine.

Through the Wrights, Keeper Tate became a confirmed aviation enthusiast. He became a member of the National Aeronautical Society and studied all things aviation related. He also dreamed of flying himself one day.

In 1915, William was appointed Keeper of the North Landing River Lights in Coinjock, North Carolina. William was responsible for keeping lit a string of 42 lights stretching over 65 miles of waterway. In addition, William was also responsible for maintaining his Keepers Quarters. During his years of service, William J. Tate was cited frequently in the Report of the Commissioner of Lighthouses for saving lives and property, which is no small feat. In fact, he is cited so often that Coast Guard Historian Dr. Robert Browning remarked, "it is truly amazing that any one man would be cited so many times."

*The citations from just his 1917 rescues read as follows:*

- Tate assisted in refloating a gasoline freighter that had gone ashore near his station.
- Tate saved a raft of 25,000 feet of timber from stranding, which had broken from its moorings.
- Tate refloated the gasoline freighter R. C. BEAMAN, which had stranded near the light station.
- Tate refloated the boat MURIEL DEAN and assisted in repairing a disabled motor boat.
- Tate refloated the gasoline freighter R. C. BEAMAN, which had again gone aground near the station.
- Tate piloted the yacht to harbor after it had gotten out of the channel during thick weather.
- Tate rendered assistance to a party of flyers and made repairs to the aircraft.
- Tate towed to harbor a disabled motor boat.
- Tate went to the assistance of a boat that had grounded near the Light.
- Tate rendered assistance to a vessel which ran aground near North Landing River Light Station.

William's hard work did not go unnoticed. He was given over \$400 in raises between 1917 and 1921 to make him one of the best-paid keepers in the U.S. Lighthouse Service.

William's interest in aviation continued throughout his life. Coupling his interest in flight with his duty as a lighthouse keeper, William Tate realized his dream of flying and became the first member of the Lighthouse Service to inspect lighted Aids to Navigation from an airplane. The flight was made in April, 1920. His report states: "This keeper made the trip along the river in an airplane, flying, about on a level with the lights and within 50 feet of the same, and it was easily seen whether they were burning." This eventually led to the formation of the Lighthouse Service Air Arm, which checked Aids to Navigation from the air.

Perhaps, William Tate's greatest notoriety came in 1928 at the 25th anniversary of the first flight at Kitty Hawk. William Tate was asked to verify the spot of the first flight so a monument could be erected. In addition, William made up leather-bound souvenir booklets detailing the Wright brothers' progress and history of the local area. William received great praise from many foreign and domestic dignitaries, as well as the Superintendent of the Lighthouses in Washington, D.C., for his role as an aviation pioneer in the U.S. Lighthouse Service.

William Tate continued to be a popular guest and speaker throughout his remaining years. In 1933, he visited Orville Wright at his home in Dayton, Ohio, to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the first flight. He addressed several Ohio Aeronautical Associations, the governor of Ohio, and several other distinguished guests.

In 1938, Henry and Edsel Ford invited William to Michigan to participate in the 35th anniversary of the first flight and to honor Orville Wright. Not long after, William was the guest of honor at the annual dinner of the Aero Club of Washington.

In 1939, the United States Lighthouse Service was integrated into the United States Coast Guard. Having faithfully dedicated his life for over twenty years of service to his nation, William Tate decided to retire. A forward thinker, William envisioned the great potential of the airplane and how it could be used to monitor Aids to Navigation. To this day, Coast Guard Aviation plays a large role in monitoring and servicing our nation's Aids to Navigation. With a stellar record as a lighthouse keeper, a lifesaver, and aviation pioneer, William J. Tate will long be remembered as a man of action.