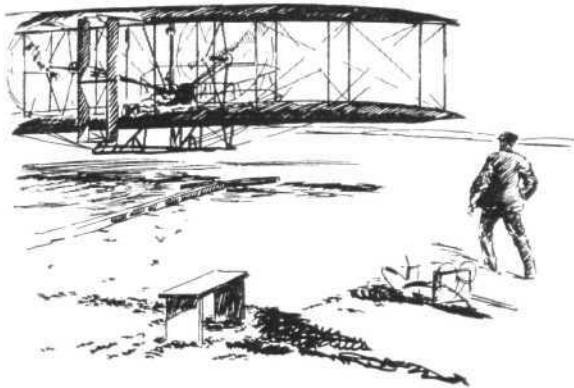


The monument at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, which commemorates the first powered flight. The Wright brothers' achievement, incidentally, is also commemorated in other ways—for instance by the annual Wilbur Wright Memorial Lecture, which (as noted on page 442) was held in London this week



## Visiting Kitty Hawk

BY BOB WHITTIER

**T**HOUGH the Russians would probably dispute the matter (and, indeed, have done so) most people agree that the first powered flight was made by the Wright brothers, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, on December 17, 1903.

Yet, out of all the hundreds of thousands of men (and women) who have been interested in aviation since then, how many have actually made a pilgrimage to the birthplace of flight? Not very many! And, after twenty-five years of aviation interest, I too was among those who had never visited aviation's Mecca.

But recently I made a motor trip from Florida to Massachusetts, during which a gremlin kept jumping up and down on my shoulder and chattering excitedly about the obvious fact that it would not take very long to detour off the main north-south highway for a visit to Kitty Hawk. I had seen many a photograph of the chunky-looking tower atop Kill Devil Hill, but beyond that I could tell you nothing of the appearance and flavour of that Cradle of Aviation. The gremlin won the contest of wills.

We turned off Highway US 17 at a small community bearing the name of Washington, North Carolina, and headed in a general north-easterly direction. Of course my gremlin had seen to it that I had not noticed some small mileage figures on the road map, and only after we had been a good distance along this detour did I chance to notice that it was 150 miles to Manteo, beyond which lay Kitty Hawk!

So we drove and drove, and drove some more, first through flat farming country with tumbledown, weatherbeaten, unpainted old houses and barns sitting lonesomely in vast fields. Then dry upland ended and we found ourselves rolling along through desolate swamp country, with drainage canals running alongside the road for miles and nothing but tall dry grass and stark, dead cedars from horizon to horizon.

Through the hamlets of New Holland, Engelhard and Manns Harbor we went, and finally, feeling like Balboa discovering the Pacific, we saw the light brown, muddy waters of Currituck Sound. You think of sea water as being blue, but not so with this nearly landlocked part of the Atlantic! A very long wooden bridge crosses over it and takes one to low-lying Roanoke Island, a marshy country inhabited mostly by commercial fishermen.

Then you leave Roanoke over another wooden bridge and presently are on a windswept and sandy sea-coast island almost completely covered with a hodge-podge of weatherbeaten and wide-porched old summer cottages, in between which have sprung up starkly modernistic newer ones in faded and monotonous blue and pink. Sidewalk food-vending stands completed the tawdry look. This was Manteo. Driving northwards on the single main road we could catch occasional glimpses of the whitecapped sea to the east, and to the north a rather prominent, moundlike hill on top of which a grey-white tower stood out against blue sky. You forget the mundane sights on each side of the road as you drive north on this coastal road.

Why, you wonder more and more, did Orville and Wilbur Wright choose this utterly remote area for their glider experiments? Indeed, how could those two young men from the far-away Midwest even know about such a place as this sixty years ago, when there were no automobiles, no paved highways and even no bridges over the wide sounds? The answer, of course, is in the history books; when they first began to experiment seriously with gliders in 1900 they felt that a locality characterized by steady strong winds would be desirable. Therefore they wrote to the United States Weather Bureau asking for suggestions. Of the several windy places mentioned by that agency, Kitty Hawk simply happened to be nearest to their home in Dayton, Ohio—even though in those days it was even more inaccessible. The nearest railroad station was at Elizabeth City, many miles to the northwest across Albemarle Sound. Once a week a small sailing boat travelled to Kitty Hawk, then a hamlet consisting of just a score of widely scattered houses. Even today a swift motor trip across the lonely swamp country leaves one with a deep feeling that Kitty Hawk must have been the most improbable of all places in which to launch the air age!

As the car drew closer to the hill we came to a road on the left of the north-south coastal highway. It runs in a westerly direction, and in a few minutes we were on a circular road which goes completely around the base of Kill Devil Hill. A long, winding path ascends the east side of the hill, and we parked the car and made our way up it. As we reached the upper section we