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A remarkable piece of aviation history

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ONE hundred years ago, in 1903, the course of aviation history was altered by the first sustained flight conducted by the American Wright brothers.

Orville, a bicycle mechanic, and his brother Wilbur Wright, became famous for fulfilling one of mankind's earliest dreams - to soar into the air, like a bird.

Although since the late 1700s people have been "flying" in balloons or in gliders, they still were a far cry from what the "birds" could do.

After several in-depth studies, on Dec 17, 1903, Orville finally demonstrated that it was possible to "fly" when he was kept afloat for 12 seconds in his machine. He covered a distance of almost 37 metres at a speed of some 48km per hour.

Not only was such a huge machine made airborne, more importantly, it could also be controlled.

The heavy machine, called Flyer I, was no more than a biplane without a tail, powered by a gas motor and a propulsion propeller. This is a drastic departure from what used to be imagined then, a machine with "flapping" wings inspired directly from birds.

Five decades before this pioneering attempt, in 1853, the first human-carrying glider was launched by George Cayley, a British aristocrat whom some considered as the father of aviation. In 1799, he had already established the "basic" concept of an aeroplane, with fixed wings and a tail, much like it is today.

Based on this glider model, more experimental flights were attempted, especially by Otto Lilienthal, a German engineer who died on Aug 9, 1896, in a crash during one of the gliding experiments.

It was recorded that the Wrights first became interested after they read Lilienthal's gliding flights in Germany. They reportedly corrected some of the errors in the published data made available to them. They then moved into the next phase in the conquest of airspace.

They later won the contract for the first world's military plane, pushing further the frontiers of aviation research.

Thus, between World Wars I and II, biplanes were replaced by more sturdy monoplanes that flew international distances. By Aug 7, 1939, the first jet flight was made possible using a revolutionary jet engine, a prototype for airplanes today.

And it was not until 1962 that another major milestone was made in air flight when supersonic travel was successfully attempted through the "Concorde Supersonic Transport" project.

Hailed as the future of commercial flight, this joint French and British collaboration was forged to produce a supersonic airliner capable of cruising at a speed and an altitude that only spy planes are capable of.

The sleek plane with a cabin body of less than three metres wide made its first supersonic test flight in 1969. Seven years later, the inaugural commercial flights took off on Jan 21, 1976, for a trans-Atlantic journey in about three hours, cruising at a speed of 2,200km per hour, that is, at twice the speed of sound, and with a cruising altitude of more than 18,000 metres.

But, on July 21, 2000, a major tragedy happened at Roissy airport, Paris, where an Air France Concorde crashed, killing 113 including 100 passengers. The fatal incident cut short the global history of supersonic flights.

Although commercial flight resumed in November the following year, it did not stay up for long. On April 10, 2003, both airlines announced their plans to ground their Concorde fleet for good.

Air France retired its fleet in May, while for British Airway, the curtain finally fell on Oct 24.

On that historic day, the last British Airways commercial flight (BA 002) landed at Heathrow in London from New York, Kennedy airport, carrying the rich and famous from around the world.

It marked the end of the Concorde era, some 34 years after it was initially fly-tested. Thousands turned out to watch the graceful, needle-nosed aircraft make its last touch-down.

While the Concorde had achieved much over the past 27 or 28 years, many are relieved that the Concordes are no longer roaring over their part of the sky. Residents who live close to the airports in both countries could finally find peace in the absence of thundering supersonic sound.

However, it is still possible that the Concorde will remain as a flying piece of history for use in air shows and fly pasts, according to an airline source.

Airbus, the European company, is reportedly interested in maintaining at least one Concorde plane in flying condition. Airbus, which is currently one of the world's two biggest makers of civil aircraft, is in many ways a part of the European collaborative Concorde legacy.

Of late, as the Wrights' hometown celebrated the centennial anniversary of their achievements, it is ironic that after just 34 years the Concorde era has to come to a close. In a similar way, just a week later, Malaysia's aviation history too witnessed the end of an era when the brainchild and prime mover of the ultra-modern Kuala Lumpur International Airport, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, stepped down as the nation's fourth Prime Minister.

In view of this, it is only befitting that KLIA be renamed as "Mahathir Kuala Lumpur International Airport", symbolically acknowledging his many contributions to the country.

Coincidentally, based on the latest announcement by the prestigious Conde Nast Traveller's 2003 Annual Reader's Travel Award, the KLIA was rated number two worldwide, and accorded the best in layout, design, and cleanliness - a distinction that further justifies it being renamed after Dr Mahathir.

\* Recommended site: [www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/494/history/](http://www.geocities.com/CapeCanaveral/494/history/)