

NEWS RELEASE

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First in Flight? Possibly Not the Wrights, Says NC State Filmmaker

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Wright brothers' flight at Kitty Hawk. The country is poised to celebrate the first machine-powered flight and arguably the greatest invention of the 20th century.

But a documentary produced by an NC State employee brings to light a South American competitor for the "first flight" title.

Simone Keith, videographer and editor in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences' Communication Services Department, has produced "Heavier Than Air," a documentary film that tells the story of Alberto Santos-Dumont, a Brazilian inventor who some claim was the first to fly a heavier-than-air machine by means of its own propulsion.

"'Heavier Than Air' is my personal journey to discover who Santos-Dumont really was and why he was overshadowed by the Wrights," said Keith, a countryman of Santos-Dumont who hails from Sao Paulo, Brazil. "It is also a look at how Brazil dealt with its most important national hero and what has become of his legacy today."

The debate on who was first in the air is centered on whether the Wright brothers' famed Flyer of 1903 had any additional help to get airborne. Supporters of Santos-Dumont say that the Wrights used a rudimentary catapult system on an inclined plan to throw their machine into the air. Supporters of the Wrights say that the brothers didn't invent the catapult system used for their airplanes until 1904 – a year after the inaugural flight – and flew their Flyer on level ground. The Wrights later used the catapult system to avoid aircraft damage that occurred taking off from a soft field.

"I set out on my journey to prove that Santos-Dumont was really the first in flight," Keith said. "But as my research developed, I discovered that the differences between the American and Brazilian claims focused primarily in the way people define a 'flight.' It became clear to me early on that was not the way I wanted to go with the documentary. Santos-Dumont was bigger than the controversy, and I wanted people to know who he really was instead of getting hooked on the controversy."

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Santos-Dumont is credited for being the first to fly a heavier-than-air machine in Europe and was the third man in the world to fly a powered aircraft. The First Flight Society has inducted him into its hall of fame.

A wealthy Brazilian aviation pioneer who was born in 1873, Santos-Dumont moved to Paris when he was 18 to live and study. He attempted his first dirigible – a hot-air balloon capable of being steered, similar to today’s blimp – flight in 1897 and had his first successful dirigible flight in 1898. In 1901, he flew his hydrogen-filled airship from St. Cloud, France, around the Eiffel Tower and back. It was the first such flight and won him the Deutsch Prize and a prize from the Brazilian government. In 1902 he attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea in an airship, but crashed into the ocean.

He returned to Brazil in 1928. Depressed over the use of aircraft for warfare, Santos-Dumont committed suicide in 1932.

To tell his story, Keith spent two-and-a-half years researching Santos-Dumont in Brazil, France and the United States. Another semester was spent editing the film for its April 21 debut at NC State Campus Cinema, which drew more than 100 people.

“It is not your typical History Channel piece but it is a historical account of who he was, told by me as the narrator,” Keith said. “There are interviews with aviation experts, as well as with Santos-Dumont’s great-niece who is still alive in Brazil.”

Keith has worked in Communication Services for the past five years. Her background includes work in broadcast news at WFMZ-TV in Allentown, Pa., Asomavision Television in Quito, Ecuador, and UNC-TV.

While at NC State, Keith has been working on her master’s of arts in liberal studies – a program geared toward full-time working adults that offered the flexibility she needed to design her own study program. This film is part of final project for her degree.

“In television, the camera person always works in conjunction with a reporter or producer and because of that, I felt I lacked the writing and production skills most reporters have,” Keith said. “So I decided to go back to school and learn how to properly research, write and produce a documentary or news story.”

Now that “Heavier Than Air” – which was written, edited, filmed and produced solely by Keith – has premiered, she hopes to have it screened at festivals across the country and throughout the state during centennial celebrations of the Wright Brothers flight.

But Keith is not stopping there. She is already at work on her next project – a documentary about Ernie Shore, the North Carolina baseball player who was friends with Babe Ruth and for whom the baseball stadium in Winston-Salem is named. She also hopes to work on a film on American Southerners who, during the Civil War, established a colony in Brazil, just outside the city of Sao Paulo, called Americana.

“I hope that ‘Heavier Than Air’ will help to establish me as an independent filmmaker in North Carolina,” Keith said. “I look forward to producing documentaries that have links between my two countries – America and Brazil.”