

Otto Lilienthal

Otto Lilienthal, (born May 23, 1848, Anklam, Prussia [now in Germany]—died Aug. 10, 1896, Berlin), German aviation pioneer. Lilienthal was the most significant aeronautical pioneer in the years between the advancements of the Englishman George Cayley and the American Wright brothers.



Lilienthal glider

German aviation pioneer Otto Lilienthal piloting one of his gliders, c. 1895.

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Trained as a mechanical engineer, Lilienthal established his own machine shop and flight factory following service in the Franco-German War. Lilienthal began to conduct studies of the forces operating on wings in a stream of air in the late 1870s. The results of that research appeared in 1889 in a book entitled *Der Vogelflug als Grundlage der Fliegekunst* (“Bird Flight as the Basis of Aviation”) and in an important series of articles that provided a foundation for the final effort to achieve mechanical flight. As transmitted by Octave

Chanute, Lilienthal’s friend and American correspondent, the tables of data served as the starting point for the earliest aircraft designs of the Wright brothers.

Having explored the physical principles governing winged flight, Lilienthal began to design and build gliders on the basis of the information he had gathered. Between 1891 and 1896, he completed some 2,000 flights in at least 16 distinct glider types. His career as a builder and pilot of gliders coincided with the development of high-speed and stroboscopic photography. Images of Lilienthal flying through the air aboard his standard glider appeared around the globe in newspapers and the great illustrated magazines of the period. Those pictures convinced millions of readers in Europe and the United States that the age of flight was at hand. Lilienthal broke his back in a glider crash on Aug. 9, 1896, and died in a Berlin hospital the next day.

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