

Perhaps he had time to appreciate the irony that despite his vast study of air currents and his many words written about the dangers of sudden gusts, he had been undone by that very thing which still plagues glider airmen today. Lilienthal's broken bird vertically dived to earth, and the impact broke his spine. He lingered for a day, maybe with the knowledge that his injury would deprive him of ever again experiencing the indescribable pleasures of flight, and died.

Typically Teutonic, Lilienthal's most famous quote about his *raison d'être* was simultaneously dismissive and passionate: "To invent an airplane is nothing. To build one is something. But to fly is everything."



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Did you know...

...that the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum has an original (albeit restored) Lilienthal No. 11 glider, his most successful and popular design which was sold to a few adventurous souls in the 1890's?

...that the only American known to have purchased a Lilienthal glider is William Randolph Hearst, who didn't fly it himself but hired a New Jersey man to do so as a publicity stunt to boost subscriptions to Hearst publications?

...that Lilienthal's exploits inspired the creation of the first glider club in the U.S.?

...that American aviation pioneer Samuel Langley met Lilienthal but was "unimpressed" by one of his gliders?

...that Lilienthal is considered the first, modern mass-media celebrity?

Question for a Century of Flight:

Had he lived, would Lilienthal have beaten the Wright Brothers to powered flight?

The debate on this question differs depending upon which side of the Atlantic you inhabit. German scientists and historians certainly believe that Lilienthal was definitely headed toward a powered airplane and was possibly only a year or less away from achieving that when he died. American aviation historians believe he was "years away" from accomplishing what the Wright Brothers did by building on his work.

Nationalism aside, it did take Lilienthal five years of extensive and painstaking experimentation to reach the bi-wing glider design, a design he considered feasible for mounting a motor. Even if he had taken another five to perfect a glider and engine combination, that would still have put his speculative powered flight at 1901, two years ahead of the Wrights. However, alternative history is the realm of science fiction writers, and what remains true is that the Wrights were inspired and assisted by Lilienthal's work. After all, they used body shifting to steer their initial gliders, incorporated their take on his wing warping design on later models, and put Charles Taylor's engine on essentially a bi-wing glider. On December 17, 1903, they became in America every bit the sensation he had been in the relatively new country of Germany.

But, could he have beat them to powered flight? Quite possibly, but that detracts none from the Wrights' accomplishment. Rather than competitors, I prefer to think of them as his heirs and that he might have felt the same about two men who shared with him the "indescribable pleasure" of flight.

