

Gorman

By JAMES GORMAN

On Dec. 17, 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright made their famous flight at Kitty Hawk, N.C. The end result, almost 100 years later, is La Guardia Airport, which, if Dante were alive today, would be bound to have a place in his Inferno.

I can see the lithograph now: the damned sitting for eternity in overheated lounges with nothing left to read; AirHades personnel announcing over and over again that the flight for heaven will leave as soon as really cold weather sets in.

Airplanes are not the only things that fly, however. About 2,400 years ago, give or take a few hundred, somebody in China sent the first kite, probably of silk and bamboo, into the air. The end result, as near as I can see, is that Phil Napier and his friends are having an awful lot of fun.

Mr. Napier is a kite flier or, as he happily refers to himself, a kite geek. I met him at a small kite festival at Jockey's Ridge State Park in Nags Head, N.C., just down the road from Kitty Hawk.

I watched Mr. Napier, who has won a couple of national kite-flying competitions, trace patterns of diamonds and squares and stars in the air with his kite, make it dance to music and coax it to stall just above the ground and gently land, upright, on the surface of a dune. It would rest there, poised, until, with a twitch of the lines

THE OUTSIDER

Taking Flight, Tension-Free



James Gorman/The New York Times
Inquirer

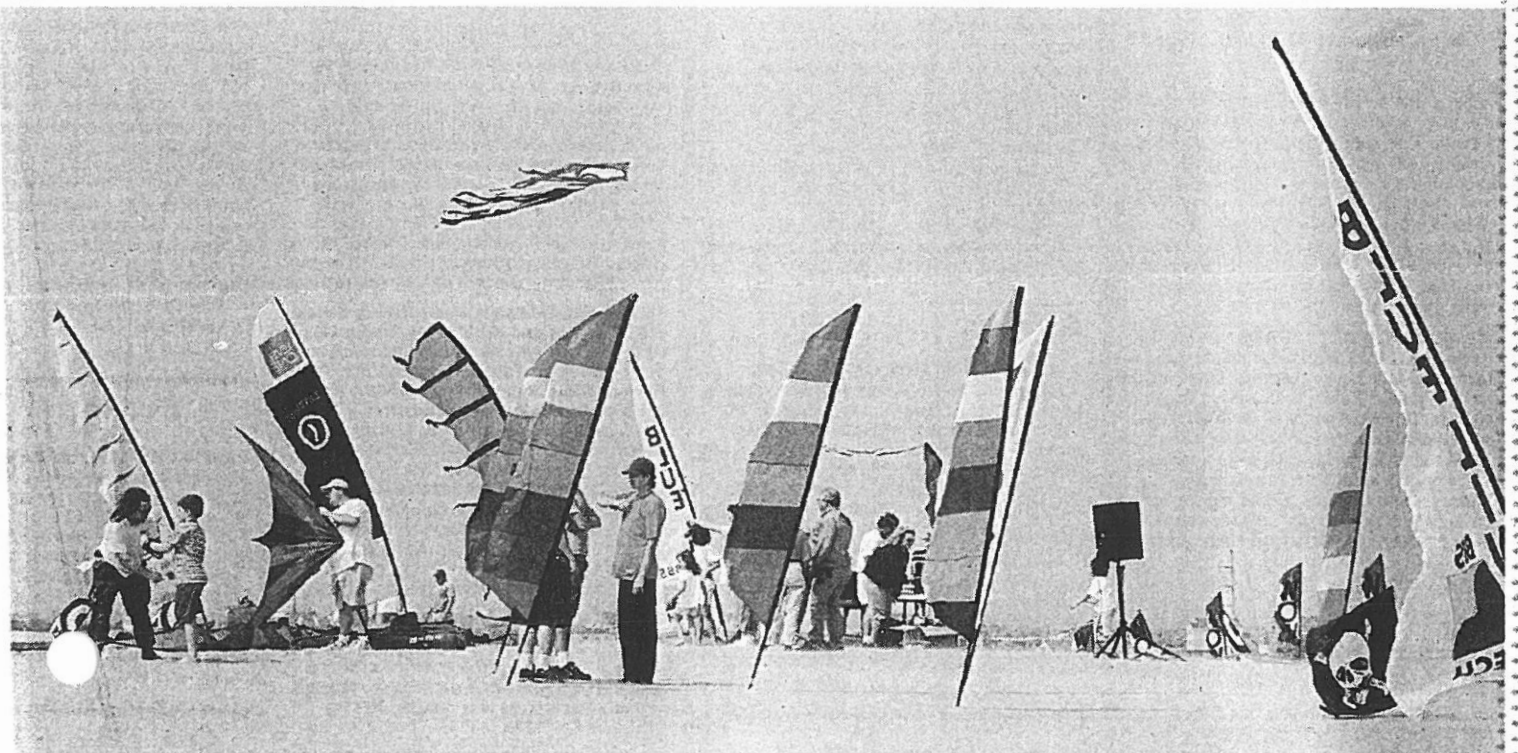
THE NEW YORK TIMES 4-27-01

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MAY 29 2001

OPERATIONS

The Kite Crowd, Experts in Making Flight a Tension-Free Experience



Photographs by James Gorman/The New York Times

in his hands, he would launch it again. No flights were canceled, none delayed.

When Mr. Napier gave his demonstration, and when Terry Murray, a teammate of Mr. Napier's on a synchronized kite-flying team, did a similar, more lyrical flight, the kites seemed alive and full of emotion, like abstract airborne puppets — not quite like birds, more like the idea of birds.

I know it's not fair to compare the deadening experience of flying on commercial airlines with having fun with kites. Kites don't have to carry people to business meetings or Disney World. And I stacked the deck by flying to the festival from one of the worst airports.

Still, I'm not the only one who has been moved by kites to think twice about what the Wright brothers did for the world. When I called David Gomberg, head of the American Kitefliers Association (also known, in what I guess is kite-geek humor, as the A.K.A.), he described the pivotal moment in the history of kites this way:

"Almost exactly 100 years ago, a couple of guys from Dayton, Ohio, went down to Kitty Hawk, took the strings off their kites and ruined the whole thing." Or

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The basket-shaped kites known as
bols at a festival in Nags Head, N.C.

maybe they liberated kites. Until that time kites were serious business. Their origin seems to have been in China. No one knows exactly when, but there are historical records of an engineer in the fourth century B.C. who invented a flying wooden bird. Kites spread from China to become enormously popular in Japan and throughout Asia. They were used for pleasure and cultural celebrations. Fighting kites were developed in India.

The Chinese also began a long history of building big, powerful kites that could carry people aloft, sometimes to spy on other armies. Today, so-called power kites are used to pull beach buggies or let kite surfers soar into the air above the waves.

European and then American experimentation with kites followed much later. But by the 18th century kites not only were playthings for children but also were used by the

military and as tools for scientific research. Benjamin Franklin's experiment with electricity in 1752 is probably the most famous example.

"The Penguin Book of Kites" by David Pelham (called simply "Kites" in new editions) is full of this sort of fascinating lore. My favorite story in the book involves Samuel Franklin Cody. He was not Buffalo Bill. That was Col. William Frederick Cody. Samuel did imitate the more famous Cody as a Western showman for a while but made his real mark with kites — really big kites.

Among his feats was a crossing of the English Channel in 1903 in a boat drawn by kites. Eventually Cody was recruited by the British Army to become (I did not steal this title from Monty Python) chief kite instructor at Farnborough. Unfortunately, he wasn't satisfied. He turned to powered flight, and died when one of his flying machines crashed.

As the work of Orville and Wilbur sank in, kites lost ground as tools for spying, war and science. In midcentury they were thought of mostly as children's toys, at least in this country. But then modern materials like fiberglass and ripstop nylon, and later carbon fiber poles, made strong, lightweight, mass-produced kites appealing to adults.

Stunt or sport kites started to become popular in the 1970's. In the 90's, Mr. Gomberg said, power kites became all the rage. These are big parafoils (kites with no frame) that pull buggies along the beach and lift kite surfers into the air. That is not to mention hang gliding and parasailing, both kitelike activities.

As with everything else in America, kite flying can be competitive. And, as is the American way, teams and fliers often have sponsors, and behind every kite festival there is usually a kite store. But none of this seems to have taken the fun out of kites.

At Jockey's Ridge, for instance, one of the events was the running of the bols. Children pulled large, colorful bols, basket-shaped kites that usually twirl decoratively in the wind near ground level, toward the finish line.

Or consider the mass ascension. For kite people, this is not the moment when believers are beamed up to the mother ship, but rather the moment when a lot of people launch kites at the same time. They don't even seem to mind the tangles. In fact, a member of the Wings Over Washington club told me that untan-

Banners sprouted from the sand at Jockey's Ridge State Park in Nags Head, N.C., this month during a kite festival. At right, a kite with "line laundry" twirling beneath it.

gling kite lines is a nice way to meet people and make new friends. I believe kite people are friendly and all, but I have my doubts about that one.

Kite flying is definitely a social activity, however. Mr. Napier is part of the Richmond Air Force, a kite club, and the Pelican Brothers, a kite-flying team that also includes Terry Murray. Not only do he and his team members travel and practice together, but they also have sewing workshops. To make kites and banners, of course.

Mr. Napier won the novice championship in individual precision flying of sport kites in 1997, and in 1998 he won in intermediate individual ballet. He didn't mention this, however. His friends told me.

Naturally, I had to try my hand at flying. It's fun to watch the experts, but the real point of kites is to fly them yourself. Mr. Napier gave me some instruction on a two-line kite — you pull with your right hand and the kite goes right, left and it goes left. Then I bought a beginner's sport kite and brought it out to the dune.

I had some tangles and tribulations, but after a few minutes I got

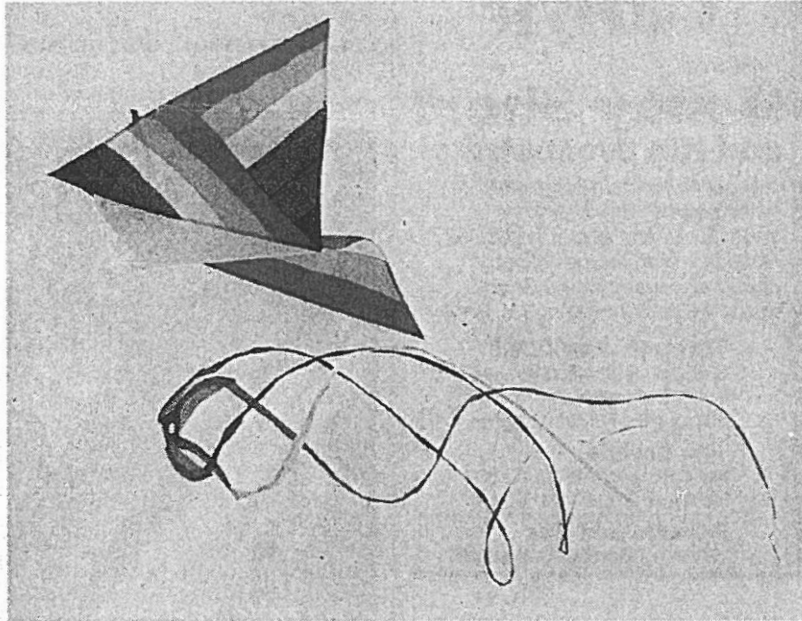
Grab a Line, Catch the Wind

One good source of information about kites and kite festivals is the Web site of the American Kitefliers Association (www.aka.kite.org). The association has declared April and a little bit of May to be National Kite Month, even though kite fliers themselves say the steady winds of summer are better than the changeable winds of spring.

The Web site has listings of kite festivals and other events nationwide. Today through Sunday, one of the bigger festivals, the Maryland International Kite Exposition, takes place in Ocean City, Md. It includes displays, demonstrations and kite-flying and kite-making competitions.

More information is available at the association site or at www.kiteloft.com/expo.asp, or from the Ocean City Chamber of Commerce, (410) 213-0552.

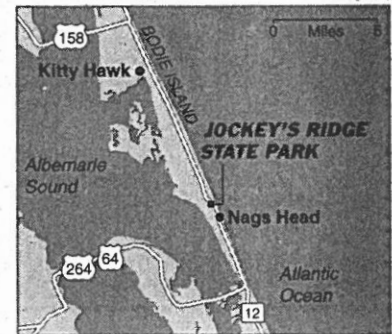
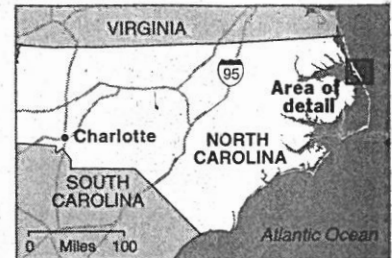
Another festival, one of the nation's largest, takes place in Wildwood, N.J., May 25 to 28. More information is available at the association Web site.



the kite into the air. I flew it left. I flew it right. I dove and I shot up straight to the sun. I had never been thrilled by simply sending a kite up at the end of a string, but with this kite I felt that I had the wind in my hands. The kite made the air palpable. I think flying a kite provides a hint of what birds or sailors feel. But your feet remain on solid ground. Unless you're launching yourself with a kite, it's a flirtation with the

wind, not a commitment. When my kite crashed, as kites do, there was no harm done.

I left the festival thoroughly satisfied and planning to enjoy the spring and summer winds at home. A few miles north, I stopped at the site of Orville and Wilbur's flight. On a plaque there was the legend, "They taught us to fly." No, I thought, they taught pilots to fly. They taught the rest of us to take bottled water, nov-



The New York Times

els and picture ID's to the airport.

My flight home was canceled. I was switched to a different flight on a different airline, AirPurgatory. I think it was. But it was a short flight. How bad could it be? I had let myself fall asleep musing on kites soaring in the wind when my knee drifted into the aisle and a flight attendant rammed it with the beverage cart.

Fortunately, you can still fly a kite when you're lame.