

FATAL FALL OF WRIGHT AIRSHIP

**Lieut. Selfridge Killed and Orville
Wright Hurt by Breaking
of Propeller.**

MACHINE A TOTAL WRECK

**Increased Length of New Blade
and Added Weight of a Pas-
senger Probable Causes.**

CAVALRY RIDE DOWN CROWD

Rumor That the Machine Had Been

Tampered with Denied by Army

Officers—Not Well Guarded.

Special to The New York Times.

WASHINGTON, Sept. 17.—Falling from a height of 75 feet, Orville Wright and Lieut. Thomas E. Selfridge of the Signal Corps were buried in the wreckage of Wright's aeroplane shortly after 5 o'clock this afternoon. The young army officer died at 8:10 o'clock to-night. Wright is badly hurt, although he probably will recover. The flying machine is a mass of tangled wires, torn and twisted planes, and tattered canvas. The accident was due to the breaking of one of the blades of the propeller on the left side.

Although there had been but a handful of people at the aeronautical testing grounds at Fort Myer during the last few days, fully 2,000 had gathered by 4:30 this afternoon. The aeroplane was still in its shed, but Mr. Wright arrived a few minutes later and ordered it taken to the northern end of the field, to be placed on the starting track in readiness for a flight.

Selfridge In First.

Everybody was ordered back from the machine, and Mr. Wright turned to Lieut. Selfridge and said: "You might as well get in. We'll start in a couple of minutes."

Mr. Wright announced several days ago that he would take Lieut. Selfridge, who was Secretary of the Aerial Experiment Association and an aeroplane pilot himself, in his next flight. The young officer was delighted to have the opportunity. He was to leave Saturday for St. Joseph, Mo., where he was to assist Lieut. Foulis in operating the Baldwin airship at the coming army manoeuvres.

Ever since Monday the wind has prevented any attempt at flight. Each day Selfridge reported at the army post, and each day he returned to Washington disappointed. When the conditions to-day were found to be all that could be desired Selfridge made no effort to disguise his delight.

When Mr. Wright told him to get aboard Lieut. Selfridge jumped into his seat in the machine and looked as eager as a schoolboy for the test to begin. He took off his coat and hat.

Mr. Wright started the motor by means of a storage battery, his assistants, Taylor and Furness, turning the propellers to get them going. At 5:14 o'clock the aeroplane was released. A little over four minutes later it fell. It was noticed that it did not rise as quickly from the ground as on previous two-man flights. Lieut. Selfridge weighed about 175 pounds, making the weight greater than the machine had ever carried before. Soon, however, it gained headway and arose.

Selfridge Enjoyed It Keenly.

As the aeroplane dashed off the rising track Lieut. Selfridge waved his hand gayly to a group of army officers and newspaper men and threw back some laughing remarks that were drowned in the whir of the propellers. As he swept around Selfridge evidently was enjoying himself thoroughly. When the machine sailed above the heads of the crowd at the head of the field it could be seen plainly that he and Wright were holding an animated conversation. Selfridge interrupted this for a moment to wave a greeting to his friends.

The aeroplane had made three complete circuits of the big parade ground and was dashing around a curve at the far end of the field on the final lap of its fourth when the propeller blade broke. It snapped short off close to the shaft and was hurled sixty feet away.

The aeroplane seemed to tip sharply for a fraction of a second, then it started up for about ten feet; this was followed by a short, sharp dive and a crash in the field. Instantly the dust arose in a yellow, choking cloud that spread a dull pall over the great white man-made bird that had dashed to its death.

Crowd Hard to Manage.

From the largest crowd that has yet witnessed a flight there arose a cry that was neither a scream nor a groan. For a moment there was not a movement, and then the people surged across the field. Col. Hatfield, in command at the army post, issued some quick, sharp orders and the cavalry guard dashed forward. The crowd was frenzied and the cavalrymen were compelled to use actual force in many instances in controlling it. To cries of "Stand back, there," the press paid not the slightest attention. Many were friends of Wright or Selfridge, and these insisted upon crowding close.

"If they won't stand back, ride them down," was the order issued. And the troopers obeyed to the letter. None was seriously hurt in the crush of men and horses, but this was due only to a miracle.

While the cavalry was busy policing the spot, officers of the Signal Corps had dashed up and were assisting in extricating the two men from the wreckage. The first taken out was Wright, who was conscious. It was necessary to raise the planes to get at him. At almost the same moment Lieut. Selfridge was removed. He was lying partly under the engine and the fuel tank, and the strength of several powerful men had to be exerted before the mass was taken off him. He was unconscious.

Both the injured men were covered with blood, and their clothing was torn and

primed with dust. Wright's coat was practically torn from his body and his vest was ripped from the collar to the bottom. Lieut. Selfridge wore the regular uniform of khaki, but even this was ripped and torn by the force of the impact. A hurry call was sent to the post hospital for surgeons and an ambulance, but before these were forthcoming several civilian physicians had been found in the crowd. It was almost impossible to make any sort of examination of the injured men because of the excitement, but first aid was administered and both were made as comfortable as possible.

Wright Tries to Talk.

While waiting for the ambulance, Wright looked into the faces that bent above him and smiled a wry, quizzical smile.

"I'd like—" he gasped, and stopped.

"Don't try to talk, old man," said Major Squiers, who was on his knees beside him, using his hat as a fan. "You'll be better in a minute. Take your time."

When the ambulance did finally arrive, the two were lifted tenderly on stretchers. It was decided that they could be removed better by stretcher bearers than by wagon, and accordingly this was done. Down the long stretch of field the mournful procession went, guarded on both sides by mounted men and preceded by a squad of cavalry.

Shortly after the start Wright lost consciousness. The jolting was too much for him, although the bearers of the stretcher on which he lay were as gentle as women.

Lieut. Selfridge did not regain consciousness at any stage.

At the hospital the two were taken at once to the operating room. There it was found that Wright had sustained a fracture of the left thigh and that several ribs on his right side also were fractured. He was suffering from the severe shock, but later the attending surgeons announced that he had rallied well.

Sent for His Mechanician.

Shortly after being removed to the hospital Wright recovered consciousness and sent for Taylor, his mechanic. He was as much at a loss as any one to account for the accident, for he instructed Taylor to examine the chains that transmitted the power from the engine to the propeller shafts. The surgeons would not let him talk to any one but Taylor, and then only a few words were exchanged.

Before Taylor arrived, however, Wright smiled up at Major Squier through his bandages.

"I'm afraid we won't take dinner with Gen. Crozier to-night, Major," he said. The two were to have been guests of the officer, who is Chief of Ordnance.

Among the witnesses was Charles R. Flint of New York, international representative of the Wright brothers. Mr. Flint came over from New York to-day to see the flight, and was accompanied to Fort Myer by Admiral and Mrs. Brownson. Mr. Flint said to-night that the mishap would not cause the Fort Myer flights to be abandoned. They will be resumed, he said, as soon as Mr. Wright has recovered and the machine is repaired.

Several days ago an admirer of the Wright brothers made application to a Washington insurance agent for a life policy in favor of Orville Wright. The agency applied in the regular way to the home office. To-day the agent received a letter from the officials of the company saying that "we cannot issue a policy in favor of Mr. Wright or any one else in his line of work. We consider the hazard too great at this time, but it is possible that in the future aerial navigation will reach a development which may change this view."

Selfridge Expert on Propellers.

Selfridge died at 8:10 o'clock. He sustained a fracture of the base of the skull, and in addition was internally injured. He did not recover consciousness. The young army officer came of a distinguished family that has made a name standing high in the service of the country. It holds a record unique in naval circles, for at one time two Rear Admirals Selfridge, his uncles, held active commands, while a Rear Admiral Selfridge, his grandfather, was on the retired list at the same time. His uncle is the only one who survives. The uncle's present address is not known, but he is believed to be in London.

It is a singular thing that Selfridge designed the propeller of the Baldwin airship, which was considered a marvel for efficiency, and yet met his death by the breaking of a propeller.

The scene around the wreck of the aeroplane was one of wild confusion. Through the heavy, dun cloud of dust men galloped, heading away from the wreckage, men hardly more excited than themselves. Officers were shouting orders that in the excitement were not heard, or if heard were not understood. Automobiles honked through the confusion, their owners proffering them to convey the injured to the hospital, and women called out questions hysterically.

Grief of Wright's Aide.

In the excitement C. S. Taylor, who has been Wright's chief lieutenant and has seen him grow from an obscure bicycle repairer to an international prominence as acknowledged King of the Air, was thrust aside from the pallet on which his employer lay. Taylor seemed dazed. Then, catching sight of Wright's face, he turned, and, throwing his head on his arms, rested them on the broken plane of the machine and sobbed.

Lieut. Creevy of the navy, who has been detailed to the aerial experiments at the fort, and who was a bosom companion of young Selfridge, was brokenhearted. He aided in lifting the unconscious man to the stretcher, and watched over him on the long walk to the hospital. When he learned of Selfridge's death to-night he broke down completely.

Lahm Makes Investigation.

As soon as the injured man had been removed from the field and the crowd had been dispersed, Lieut. Lahm of the Signal Corps galloped back to the wrecked aeroplane. He took measurements of the distance from the broken propeller blades to the spot where the car lay crumpled, and compiled a list of names of witnesses to the accident. Because of the fact that the aeroplane had not yet passed into the hands of the War Department there may be no official inquiry into the accident, but one will be made in the cause of science.

An examination of the wrecked machine disclosed how the two men received many of their injuries. The interior of the aeroplane, the space between the two great horizontal planes where the seat, engine, and gearing are carried, was a mass of twisted wires. Wright and the army officer were held in by these wires, and even if the force of the descent could have been broken, it is not likely that they could have disengaged themselves to have jumped.

The cause of the fatal accident is believed to lie with the new propellers being unable to meet the strain placed upon them. The blades were put on only yesterday, replacing those with which Wright has made his world records. The change was made so that the aviator might determine just to what cause was due his loss in revolutions, a condition that had been bothering him last week.

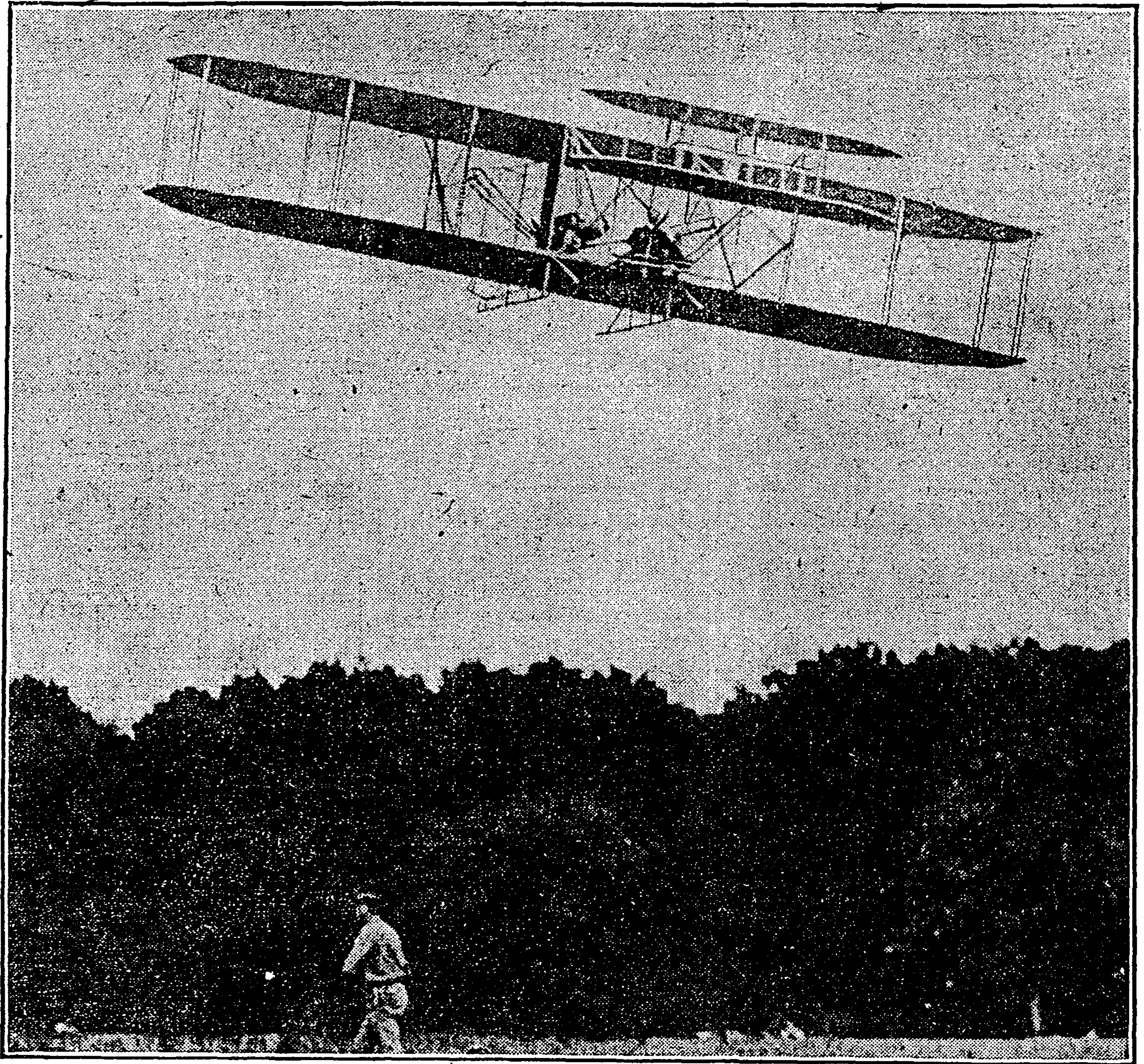
The new blades were sent from the workshop in Toledo, and had not had a tryout except in the usual tests when the machine was anchored. They appeared under these conditions to be safe and without flaws. The new propellers measured 9 feet from tip to tip, whereas the discarded ones were 6 inches shorter.

Increased Length Possible Cause.

This increase in length may have been the reason for the breakage, although it probably will never be known. The aeroplane, on the start, did not rise as well as it has in the past, but struck the ground lightly about forty feet from the end of the rail. Upon touching, it rose abruptly and at such an acute angle that it might have been possible for one of the whirling blades to strike the ground. This may possibly have caused a twist that developed into a distinct break later in the flight, precipitating the machine to the earth.

The fact remains, however, that the

THE WRIGHT AIRSHIP IN FLIGHT AT FORT MYER.



weight carried to-day was greater than ever before was carried in a heavier-than-air machine.

Lieut. Selfridge weighed close to 180 pounds. This, added to the weight of the aviator, the filled tank of fuel, and the engine, made a decided load. Driving this through the air may have been too much of a strain upon the blades, which were set at a less pitch than the old ones.

The wires formed a sort of wide-meshed screen before the aviator and his passenger. In climbing into the seat at the start both men had to crawl back of the wires to get in their places. It was these wires that undoubtedly cut and lacerated the faces and bodies of both when the machine fell with them.

The machine was a wreck of blood-stained wood, wire, and canvas. The broad stretch of planes was broken and twisted. The framework was shattered, and ends of crosspieces had been driven through the canvas, which was practically in tatters. The force of the shock when the machine struck the earth wrenched the forward planes and the horizontal rudder into a shapeless mass of canvas, wires, and wood.

An examination of the broken blade showed that it had been snapped off at a point one-fourth of the distance from the hub. A deep indentation of the broken piece indicated that it had struck some other part of the aeroplane.

Terrific Impact.

The impact when the aeroplane struck must have been terrific, and it is remarkable that both men were not dashed to death at once. The machine was flying at a speed of about forty miles, and this added to the fall of seventy feet gave it a terrible force. Peculiarly, however, the ground did not show signs of the impact, although this is explained by the fact that the ground is hard from the tramping of many feet and baked solid by the hot Autumn sun.

Supt. Magoon of Arlington National Cemetery was probably closest to the aeroplane when it fell. He was standing close to the wall of the cemetery at the turn Wright was making to fly back down the field when the accident came.

"I heard the crash with which the propeller blade was wrenched away," he said, "and then saw the right hand propeller apparently accelerate its speed. From where I stood it looked as though this tipped the machine up, the added force on one side throwing it over just as it was straightening for the race back to the starting point. Wright must have acted almost intuitively, for the motor seemed to stop, and the aeroplane dropped down in gliding fashion for about thirty-five feet. Of a sudden it seemed to dive sharply forward and fall. It came down like a bird shot dead in full flight describing almost a complete somersault and throwing up a dense cloud of dust."

Charles White of White & Middleton, Baltimore, a mechanical expert, said regarding the accident:

"Before the flight of the machine I examined it thoroughly, and saw nothing to be criticised outside of the wood construction of the propellers. Before the machine made the flight I remarked that the wood propellers were not of the proper construction. Three seconds after the accident happened the big machine appeared like a bird with a broken wing. The forward side of the machine struck the ground first. Wright and Selfridge were in their usual position on the seats when they landed. They were not thrown out. All the mechanical devices remained intact, though the braces and canvas work were wrecked. The accident was due entirely to the defective propeller. The aeroplane was under perfect control, and the accident was certainly not due to any fault of operation."

There are many stories of the fall, all differing somewhat. C. S. Taylor, Wright's mechanic, had no theory to offer, but he declared the accident would not have been disastrous had the aeroplane been flying in a direct line.

Tragedy Due to Curve.

"Mr. Wright could have brought the machine down easily," said Taylor to-night, "if it had not been off balance at the curve. It is impossible to glide in either a curve or a spiral, but it is altogether possible in direct flight. Had the accident happened thirty seconds later it would have been merely an experience and not a tragedy."

To those standing at the head of the parade grounds the aeroplane, rounding the second turn of the far end preparatory to coming back, appeared to push its nose into the air before diving. The broken propeller blade was flung far out behind on the short flight after the first turn at the far end of the field, but so great was the speed of the rushing machine that the accident evidently was not realized until Wright had swung his rudder and twisted his horizontal planes for the second turn.

At this moment the horizontal planes in front that control the ascent and descent of the machine evidently were pointed upward, for the aeroplane seemed to jump into the air. It appeared to poise itself therefore a space as long as the taking of a breath, when it dived earthward. Half way down the upper horizontal plane seemed to give way, breaking the lower horizontal. In this fashion the monster fell.

No attempt was made to-night to examine the wrecked machine carefully. It was taken apart and carried back to the aerodrome by men of the Signal Corps. It is being held there under guard until some sort of investigation can be set afoot.

Shortly after the accident a report ran through the crowd that the disaster was due to the machine having been tampered with. Officers declare the rumor to be absolutely groundless, but this phase of the matter may be looked into. No one is willing to believe that such a thing could be possible, however.

There has been great laxity displayed in the safeguarding of the aeroplane. This has been commented upon ever since the tests at the fort began. Before the flight to-day probably 200 persons visited the aerodrome, and although soldiers from the Signal Corps kept watch, as well as Taylor, it was noticed that not one but scores of people prodded the planes, rattled the propellers, and in other ways satisfied their curiosity as to the mechanism of the machine.

Rallying from his severe injuries, Orville Wright to-night sent Lieut. Lahm to find Octave Chanute, the pioneer aeronautist, who aided the Wright brothers,

in their first gliding experiments. Mr. Wright wanted to discuss the cause of the accident with Mr. Chanute, but the physician decided it would be best that Mr. Wright should not exert himself to that extent.

"Mr. Wright has suffered grave injuries, and the injury to the thigh alone will keep him in bed for six weeks," said Dr. Howard H. Bailey, in charge of the Fort Myer Hospital. "His condition is not critical, and he responded readily to treatment. We dressed the thigh with a side splint, and to-morrow a thorough examination of his injuries will be made."

At midnight it was said he was doing well.

Gen. Luke E. Wright, Secretary of War, said:

"It is a very sad happening and one to be deeply regretted. I see no reason why this accident should give any serious setback to the experiments in aeronautics being made by the army. When Mr. Wright recovers, if he desires to try again to fulfill the contract, the opportunity will be open to him. As I understand, the accident was due to a structural flaw, and not to a faulty principle, but this is something which will be cleared up after an investigation and a report are made."