

Mount Clemens Public Library

Local History Sketches

Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge

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As far as anyone knows, Thomas Etholen Selfridge never visited Mount Clemens, Michigan, but his name is forever entwined with the history of the community.

Thomas E. Selfridge was born in San Francisco on February 2, 1882. Little is known about his early life. He was graduated from the United States Military Academy at West Point with the Class of 1903. Selfridge ranked 31st in the class of 96 cadets that year; future general **Douglas MacArthur** was first.

After graduation Selfridge was commissioned a lieutenant in the Field Artillery, but his interest clearly lay in the emerging field of aeronautics. In 1907, he met **Dr. Alexander Graham Bell**, who was experimenting with powered flight. Bell was impressed with the eager young lieutenant and asked **President Theodore Roosevelt** to have Selfridge assigned as an official military observer of a flight demonstration he had planned.

As a result of his association with Bell, Lt. Selfridge became a member of the Aerial Experiment Association (A.E.A.), along with **Glenn H. Curtiss**, and two Canadian engineers named **F.W. Baldwin** and **J.A.D. McCurdy**. Selfridge designed the group's first airplane, designated Aerodrome Number One, but nicknamed "Red Wing" because of the red silk covering its wings. Selfridge did not have the opportunity to pilot the "Red Wing" himself; the trials were conducted by F.W. Baldwin. Selfridge's first flight came on May 17, 1908, when he piloted Aerodrome Number Two, nicknamed "White Wing," for a distance of 93 yards at a height of ten feet!

On September 17, 1908, **Orville Wright** was preparing to demonstrate his flying machine to Army officials at Fort Myer, Virginia, when a fellow officer urged Lt. Selfridge to go along for the ride.

Selfridge took his seat next to Wright and the pair took off. A new, elongated propeller, never before tested, had been installed on the aircraft prior to the fateful flight. Excessive vibration caused the propeller to strike a guy wire on the aircraft, tearing the wire from its fastening in the rudder and breaking the propeller off about 2 feet from the end, then sending the aircraft crashing to the ground from an altitude of about 110 feet. Lt. Selfridge fractured his skull when his head struck a strut, and he was rendered immediately unconscious. He was attended by the Post Surgeon at Ft. Myer, but died the same evening without ever regaining consciousness. Wright suffered a broken leg and several broken ribs.

The plane had crashed only 50 yards from the west gate of Arlington National Cemetery, [where Selfridge was buried](#) with full military honors a week later.

In July, 1917, after the government leased an aviation field near Mount Clemens from **Henry B. Joy**, the field was named in honor of Lieutenant Selfridge, who was the first military officer to pilot an airplane, and the first fatality of powered flight.

For more information about Lt. Thomas E. Selfridge, we recommend:

- Larsen, Deborah J. and Nigro, Louis J. *Selfridge Field*. Charleston, S.C. : Arcadia, 2006.
- "Last Flight of Selfridge Bared: 1908 Newspaper Tells Crash Story," *Mount Clemens Daily Monitor-Leader*, October 5, 1953, p.1.
- Musial, Robert. "He Flew, He Crashed, He Lives on at Air Base," *Detroit Free Press*, February 14, 1985, p.4A.
- "Selfridge, Lieutenant Thomas E.," in Longyard, William H. *Who's Who in Aviation History*. Novato, CA : Presidio Press, c1994, pp.171-172.
- "Thomas Etholen Selfridge," in Feeny, William D. *In Their Honor: True Stories of Fliers For Whom United States Air Force Bases are Named*. New York : Duell, Sloan & Pearce, c1963, pp.24-38.
- ["Wright Flyer and Thomas Selfridge."](#) [Report to the Aeronautical Board of the U.S. Army Signal Corps on the Accident to the Wright Aeroplane at Ft. Myer, Virginia, Sept. 17, 1908].
- Use this link to read the First Flight Society Shrine's [biography of Thomas Selfridge](#)
- Use this link to read Selfridge's [National Aviation Hall of Fame biography](#)
- Click here to read about [Thomas Selfridge on Ralph Cooper's Early Aviators site](#).