

Was he Michelangelo Lorenzo or Leonardo Da Vinci?

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Was it Michelangelo or Leonardo? The villagers were not sure; they had no reference books from the Medici Library. They could be forgiven in this tiny enclave of Cree speakers in the Canadian Subarctic. They could read some Latin if they had the books.

So it came to pass, the leaves started to turn after a wonderful summer of warm updrafts of air. The village sage, a mirth-filled man said emphatically, “Leonardo sounds fine to me if he drew the first flying machine to be found in a book. We shall call him our bird, Leonardo Seewop.” The news of Kitty Hawk and the Wright Brothers had not yet reached the limestone-covered shores. It was a full decade before the Spirit of St. Louis took to the sky.

But they had to deal with Leonardo Seewop, who had become convinced that he could and would fly. The villagers lived for the return of the summer birds, knew the flight patterns of long-range flying geese, the swoop of the pelican, the nowhere to be seen fly past of the owl, and the deadly accuracy of the hunting eagle and hawk.

Around their cast-iron stoves they cast questions like sparks from embers. “What did this Leonardo have in mind?” For instance, “even a mudhen runs like crazy to catch an updraft for its flight? How about that wind flapping that low flyers execute to stay in the air, and the humble humming bird which flaps its wings so fast it is impossible to count?” Even for the sage, these were hard questions with elusive answers.

“How come Leonardo Seewop thinks he can fly?” asked a little curious little boy after listening to all these questions. The question went around the village. No one had asked, and Seewop had volunteered no information.

The next round around the pot-bellied stove included the following discussion: “Who among us will ask him?”

Leonardo Seewop kept to himself as that was his nature. He maintained a dwelling on the edge of the old lake bed within the village environs. From there, he could judge the force of the wind coming off the large lake. He was a small, well-portioned man. He came from a long ancestral line of shamans. The villagers had no reason to fear him, but they remained cautious of his knowledge of herbs made from the bark and branches of trees and innocent looking plants that they knew he harvested. They knew enough to go to him to shorten the lingering effects of a prolonged illness. The sage somewhat closed the debate with the observation that Leonardo never mixed species. No explanation was given to the general audience, but those who had a clear view of the long history of shamans agreed that this was a selling point and a tacit agreement was reached. Leonardo could prove that he could fly. Now they could encourage him to follow through on his astounding assumption.

They took turns asking him how he was going to accomplish flying. One inquisitor was shown the thinnest of un-smoked but dried caribou hide. It was so thin that you could see your hand on the other side. The hide could have made a fine handheld Dene drum. Another asked him a short time later, "How are you going to measure your wing span since the bigger the span the greater the lift?" Here the merits of a large avian that stayed afloat for a long time came into speculation. He would have to stitch the caribou pieces together then find the right glue or resin to keep the wing intact. He simply said, "I made the glue." Another person came by to ask, "What did you use to make the frame?" "The lightest wood shaved to flex in the wind without breaking." Others asked: "Will he ride on top of the wing or strap the wings to his body?" Leonardo smiled. He said, "Have you ever seen snow geese glide to stop on ice? They skate and sometimes fall over. On open water they look better." "Where would he have the controls?" But they did not know how to formulate that question. Therefore, one of them drew a sketch on the dust on the road. It showed a man's body below large wings lying on a thin frame holding his feet together. There was a bar-like rib across his chest which he held with both hands. Leonardo rubbed his chin, blinked his eyes and slowly responded, "That is possible."

If you know this village, you will recall it is flat like a pancake. However, it had some old growth tall pines on the lakeshore proper. The objective was to get Leonardo to fly without killing himself. The men who had asked all those questions had an agreement that if he built his flying object, he must live to tell about it. They had to force the issue because if he experimented on his own, he might die. So they appointed a day according to his readiness for the flying experiment. Somebody who was studying the site decided to clear the area of brush and large stones, but kept the grass. They helped him bring his apparatus to the site.

Now here is the situation: He had to get up there, strap himself into the apparatus, wait for an updraft and launch himself with the wind. If he got a north wind, he was not going anywhere, but a west wind with enough power would do the trick. That particular day, the wind was crazy in any direction. The waves were sporting white caps, and the wind was relentless, but it kept changing direction. Leonardo was a patient man. He stood on the highest branch that supported his weight, and with those giant wings he did look like a bird. Now anyone who had ever launched himself from a birch tree bent right to the ground and catapulted to kingdom come, would remember the landing. Sometimes bones were not broken. Someone gathered brush and built a bonfire. Another went home for a kettle and black tea. Leonardo was up there long enough for a pot of tea to materialize.

Then he shouted, "I'm going to jump!" Before they caught the words he came down. He glided a full ten seconds, holding the bar and steering to a belly landing. On impact his wings fell apart, but Leonardo got up immediately and wore that same smile for a week.

The group around the pot-bellied stove was jovial. The description of "Big Bird" Seewop swooping from the tree top to the ground was repeated with relish. There was no mention of its merit. If they had know that on December 17, 1903, Orville Wright had piloted the Wright Flyer at Kill Devil's Hill near Kitty Hawk on the outer banks of North Carolina for a magnificent 120 feet they might have hoisted Leonardo Seewop on their shoulders all the way home for a big whoop-up of praises. But the story was repeated

for over a century, the incident mentioned in one journal. Big Bird Seewop died knowing he had flown.

This story was kept and was repeated for a century in village lore, and is told here to honour a three-generation membership in aircraft maintenance. Starting with Francis Orville Acco, Joseph Philip Acco, Trevor Nicholas Acco, Wesley Emmanuel Acco, David Joseph Acco, and Jo Anne Kim Lan Acco—aircraft maintenance engineers and mechanics.

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Airplanes are vital to the economy of the North. At the same time, they present challenges that a lay person cannot be expected to appreciate. At times, it resembles the challenges of travelling long distances on this continent, a task mastered at so many levels by Aboriginal peoples.