Flight Pioneer Took Off on Otay Mesa

John Joseph Montgomery was the first American to leave the ground on wings of his own design.

It happened on a breezy August day in 1884 when Montgomery, then 25 years old, and his older brother, James, lugged a 40-pound glider with a 20-foot wingspan to a slope in Otay Mesa, southeast of San Diego.

James attached a rope to the front of the glider and ran, as if flying a kite. John ran beside the glider, jumping abourt as it began to lift. When the glider reached 15 feet in the air, james released the tether. John flew his aircraft 600 feet to a safe, controlled landing. The flight was witnessed by several local ranchers, as well as James and other members of the Montgomery family.

Montgomery's feat --- the world's first controlled, heavier-than-air flight --- preceded by 10 year the famous glider flights of Otto Lilientahal and by two decades the powered flights of the Wright brothers.

Yet Montgomery, who coined the term "aeroplane," is one of the least-known pioneers of human aviation. For much of his young life, he helped run his father's ranch in Otay Valley, though he was much more interested in how birds managed to fly --- a curiosity that some neighbors ridiculed.

Not suprisingly, Montgomery became secretive about his aerial experiments and his aviation innovations. (He built one glider with hinged surfaces at the rear of the wings, anticipating the invention of ailerons.) As a result, his achievements were generally unknown and unrecognized by the world at the time.

Yet Montgomery was unfazed. He built a series of gliders over two decades, though none were as huccessful as his 1883 model.

In 1905, a tandem-wing glider designed by Montgomery and piloted by Daniel Maloney, a professional acrobat, collapsed in midair, sending Maloney to his death.

Six years later, Montgomery died in much the same way. He was test-flying another glider near San Jose when the craft stalled and crashed. Montgomery suffered severe head injuries and died at the scene. He was 58.