

On the wings of controversy

Who flew first? **Tiffany Fox** looks at a docudrama that challenges the Wright view.

The Wright Brothers' 1903 flight in their Kitty Hawk Flyer is a staple in school history books as the world's first motorised flight but history may be more controversial than it appears.

Who Flew First: Challenging the Wright Brothers looks at research by Australian aviation expert John Brown suggesting German-born US immigrant Gustave Whitehead flew two years earlier than the famed "fathers of aviation".

Using dramatic recreations, interviews and original archive material the powerful docudrama, made by WA's Artemis International and filmed in Perth, Germany and the US, examines the facts behind the popular story, uncovering a controversy that has split aviation experts into two distinct camps. It was one of the last projects for the late co-executive producer Brian Beaton.

Director, journalist and historian Tilman Remme said while the first motorised flight was a vital part of US history, the truth of who was the first to fly was a matter of worldwide interest.



Cyrus Hallam, right, as the young Gustave Whitehead and Flynn Lockwood as Gustave's brother.

He said it was accepted that the Wright Brothers did fly in 1905, and in 1908 there was moving footage of their attempts, but the real story stemmed from 1903 and the evidence supporting their claim of being the very first to

conquer motorised flight. "Especially in American history, the Wright Brothers are very important and they are almost deified . . . but if you look more closely you realise they have been involved in controversies and disputes since the early 1900s," Remme said.

"They were controversial at the time. Their claim to have flown first was not accepted by the authorities and the US government until the 1940s but now they are universally accepted as the ones who flew."

Remme said the documentary had been inspired by Brown's research of recently digitised newspaper archives from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which revealed hundreds of articles on Whitehead's career.

Among them were references to eyewitness accounts from 1901 which described how the German aviation pioneer successfully flew his bat-like plane in Bridgeport, Connecticut,



Australian aviation expert John Brown.

two years before the Wright Brothers.

Opposing Brown were historians who supported the official view that the Wright Brothers flew first and believed the 17 eyewitness accounts were unreliable.

Complicating the issue was the discovery that in return for the right to display the 1903 Kitty Hawk Flyer, the Smithsonian Institution signed an agreement to never concede anyone else flew before the Wright Brothers.

Remme said while researchers had delved carefully into the newspaper articles and "nitty-gritty" of the controversy, the time that had elapsed since those early flights meant the source material was often still ambiguous.

Despite the difficulties inherent in historical journalism, Remme said two issues did become clear and it would be up to the viewer to choose what they believed.

"There is a very strong case that Whitehead flew first but, whether it is conclusive, historians are going to continue to argue," he said.

"There is also a very strong case that the first flight of the Wright Brothers in 1903, as it was documented by them, may not have been as successful as it is made out to be. So there is this issue of credit where credit is due."

Who Flew First: Challenging the Wright Brothers airs on Monday at 9.20pm on ABC.