It began in the dead of night on Aug. 1, 1909.

Twenty-three-year-old Glenn Martin intentionally chose the time to transport his self-made plane from an old Methodist Church in Santa Ana in order to avoid attention from the locals who thought he was crazy.

Carefully, Martin and his assistants moved the fragile biplane down dirt roads toward a flat bean field on the Irvine Ranch. James H. Irvine had granted Martin permission to test his plane, and after months of research and construction, the time had come to give it a try.

After previous failed attempts, Martin had changed his plane to match the successful design of Orville and Wilbur Wright. The new “pusher” biplane had propellers behind the wings so that the plane would be pushed through the air. This revamped craft worked well, and Glenn Martin piloted his plane over 100 feet of the Irvine Ranch
field, reaching an altitude of 8 feet. It was the first successful flight in California.

This brief, 12 second flight redefined Glenn Martin. He changed from a “Flying Fool” to one of the pioneers of American aviation. He continued to refine his airplane design, studying literature about flying at the Santa Ana Library.

On May 1, 1912, Glenn Martin made history once again.

Martin flew his “flying bird cage” from Newport Harbor to Catalina Island. The 37 minute trip was the first over-water flight in history. Fog and overcast skies made navigation difficult and Martin was forced to rely solely on his compass and barometer. After landing amid crowds near Avalon Pier, the Santa Ana Register headline read: “Greatest of Overwater Flights: Glenn L. Martin Yesterday Became World Famous.”

A year later, Martin gave one of his earliest supporters the thrill of a lifetime. James H. Irvine was the passenger on a flight over the vast acreage of his ranch. The 20 minute flight impressed Irvine who said he had “never seen so much of his land at one time before.”

Later, Martin tried to impress James Irvine’s beautiful daughter Kathryn by dropping bouquets of carnations from his plane as he flew over the Irvine family home. According to Orange County historian Jim Sleeper, Miss Irvine was not impressed with the famous aviator and pronounced that Martin was “some kind of nut.”

Throughout his lifetime, Glenn Martin continued to make advances in the field of aviation. He eventually founded the Martin-Marietta Corporation.

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By ELLEN BELL | Orange County Register
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