



The Story of the Silver Dart and Canada's Early Aviation Inventors

Do you know Douglas McCurdy or Casey Baldwin? No? How about Alexander Graham Bell? No, not either?

Ok, let's change that. Bell was born in Scotland a long time ago, and just like his father he worked as a teacher for the deaf.

Bell was 23 years old when he and his family moved to Ontario in 1870. There Bell started to experiment with electricity and sound.

Soon he was offered to teach at a school for the deaf in Boston (USA). The families of two of his students supported his desire to experiment with sound transmission and gave him a free workshop and later money. Bell always came home to Ontario, and in the summer of 1876 he conducted several tests that were early forms of a telephone call.

In 1888 Bell built a summer home in Baddeck, a small village on Cape Breton Island in Nova Scotia. Here he met Arthur McCurdy, editor of the local newspaper and Douglas McCurdy's father, and they became very close friends.

Douglas McCurdy spent a lot of his time with Alexander Bell who had started to experiment with flying objects. Douglas was inspired and he was only 16 years old when he moved to Toronto to study mechanical engineering.

Four years later he and his friend and fellow student Casey Baldwin started in earnest to work with Bell on flying machines that could carry a person. They invited two more experts to join their team. The first was Glenn Curtiss, an American who built engines. The second was Thomas Selfridge who was a member of the United States Army which had already taken an interest in flying objects that could carry a person, such as balloons and kites.

Soon several machines were built and experimented with. Some test flights took place in the United States, others in Nova Scotia. In 1908 the team was finally ready to try a flying machine with an engine, the Red Wing, named for the red silk used to make its wings. Casey Baldwin was selected to be the pilot and so became the first Canadian, and the third person in the world to fly a plane with an engine.

Soon another plane, the Silver Dart, was ready to be flown. On February 23 1909, so well over 100 years ago, the Silver Dart was dragged out to the lake in front of Bell's home in Baddeck. The lake's frozen surface was chosen as the plane's runway. McCurdy had already flown the Silver Dart a few times and he was excited to do it again, but this time in front of his hometown friends and neighbours.

When the Silver Dart took off, McCurdy made history by being the first person to fly a powered aircraft in Canada. He flew at a height of about 9 meters, covering about 800 meters at a speed of 65km/h. In the months after, McCurdy flew the Silver Dart many more times.

Together with his friend Casey Baldwin, he worked on new designs which they called Baddeck 1 & 2. In August 1909 the two men were asked to demonstrate the planes to the Canadian army in Petawawa,



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Ontario. During its fifth test flight, the Silver Dart crashed while landing and was beyond repair. The Baddeck 1, which was the main version McCurdy and Baldwin wanted to show the military as it could carry two people, suffered a similar fate.

Instead of getting an order for aircraft from the military, McCurdy received a letter from Lieutenant Colonel Sam Hughes, who became Minister of Defence two years later, stating that “...the aeroplane is an invention of the devil, and will never play any part in the defence of the nation, my boy!”

McCurdy was not deterred and continued to be an aviation pioneer who spent his life designing and selling aircraft. He died at the age of 74.