

Engineers Fly First

Two young Canadian Engineers, J.A.D. McCurdy and F.W. Baldwin, piloted the first military demonstration of aircraft flight in Canada at Camp Petawawa, ON. Conducted in July-August 1909 using the Silver Dart and the Baddeck 1, these were the first such flights in the British Commonwealth by a member of the British Commonwealth.



Both McCurdy and F.W. Baldwin were former members of the 2nd Field Company, Canadian Engineers in Toronto who were working with Alexander Graham Bell on the development of powered aircraft. McCurdy was the engineer responsible for designing the Silver Dart, the fourth such aircraft.

The military began to take an interest in the use of aircraft after McCurdy's preliminary trials in Winter 1908-09. A presentation by Bell on the subject of powered flight to the Canadian Club resulted in the Ministry of Militia indicating some support for the work. While declining to provide financial support for constructing the airships, they did offer the use of the army camp at Petawawa for testing.

On 1 July 1909 Baldwin and McCurdy arrived in Petawawa and proceeded to assemble the Silver Dart and Baddeck I. No. 8 Engineer Services and Works Company at Camp Petawawa supported these early demonstration flights. An 'aircraft hangar' was constructed by the Royal Canadian Engineers and they also prepared the temporary airstrip and provided the ground crew.

After four successful short flights to test the engine, the Silver Dart crashed on 2 August during landing on the fifth flight. The engine was salvaged but the structure could not be repaired. Baddeck I was then assembled and flew on 12 August after days of false starts and high winds. In the early evening of 13 August, Baddeck I took off, rose to a height of 15 feet, hesitated, and then crash landed – breaking the propeller and tearing off the rudder. The remains of the craft were shipped back to Nova Scotia. While it was their intention to return to Petawawa within the month to continue the trials, Baldwin and McCurdy never returned.

After the mixed success of these early demonstrations, Major Mannsell, the Director of Engineer Services at the Ministry of Militia headquarters, was assigned to monitor developments. Convinced that flying had a military future, he recommended the formation of an Aviation Section, Royal Canadian Engineers. Despite his persistent championing of military aviation in Canada, the Army proposals were not approved. A single aircraft was actually taken to England with the WW I Expeditionary Force and a fledgling Canadian Air Force was authorized but never effectively created.

During the First World War, Canadians flew with the Royal Flying Corps, the Royal Navy Air Service, and the Royal Air Force. It was only after the war that the Royal Canadian Air Force was authorized in 1920.