

# First Flight

by Tory Tronrud

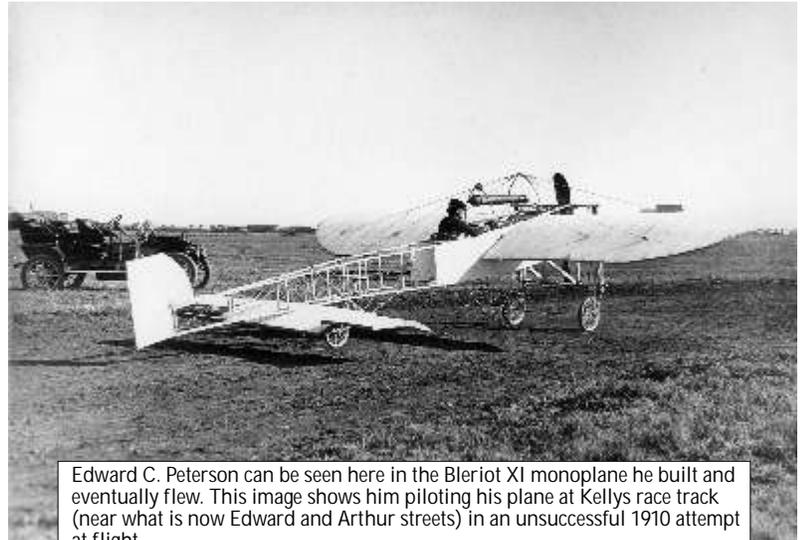
February 2009 marked the anniversary of the first powered heavier-than-air controlled flight in Canada as J.A.D. McCurdy took off in the Silver Dart into the skies over Nova Scotia. But Thunder Bay also played a role in the nations early aviation history.

French aviator, Louis Blériot began experimenting with flight as early as 1900 coming up with some wild designs ranging from kite-like monstrosities to bird-like monoplanes. Most never got off the ground, but others flew short distances. As he quickly ran out of money, including his wife's fortune, he called his eleventh model his "last chance monoplane," gambling that it would win him enough prize money and sales to stay solvent. He succeeded, crossing the English Channel in 1909 (the subject of a PBS documentary) and winning such acclaim that he ultimately sold 800 examples of his plane world-wide.

Among those purchasers was Edward C. Peterson of Fort William. Born in Minneapolis in the mid 1880s, Peterson moved to the Lakehead in 1907 and established EPR Signs. Like Blériot, Peterson and his brother-in-law, Peter Scott, drew up a variety of unsuccessful homemade aircraft designs until, in 1910 he adopted the Frenchman's already successful plans for the Type XI monoplane and, working out of the back of his shop on Victoria Avenue, built his own version. He bought a three-cylinder air-cooled radial engine in New York and bolted it into a steel-tube airframe that sported bamboo wing frames covered in strong linen, no doubt from his sign company. The Chauvier-type style of propeller that was used turned at a paltry 1,400 RPM, hardly sufficient to keep him aloft. His seat was a wicker parlor chair. Unique to his plane was an adjustable gravity-fed gas tank, suspended forward of and above the cockpit, thus ensuring a constant flow of fuel to the engine, a common problem of most aircraft designs of the period, including Blériot's own version of the Type XI.

What is remarkable about the Blériot XI was its landing gear, which pivoted a little allowing for successful landings into crosswinds and at angles other than straight on. This is now called a "castering landing gear". The shape of the wings, also unique to the Type XI, gave the plane a lot of lift at slow speeds but required a great deal of speed to keep aloft. The aircraft was tricky to fly. Turning the plane was done through a combination of rudder and wing warping - moving the stick from side to side to bend the wing, almost like a bird, in order to bank the airplane. After several unsuccessful attempts at flight, including one using skis in the previous winter, Peterson finally succeeded in the summer of 1911 (some say 1910) taking off from Mission Island at the mouth of the Kam River and flying for a quarter mile at an altitude of 30-50 feet. Witnessed by Police Chief W.S. Brown and Peter Scott who also photographed the flight, this was probably the first flight of a single-winged aircraft in Canada. Scott later admitted that the engine probably didn't have sufficient power to stay in the air for long.

Having flown, Peterson went on to other pursuits and was instrumental in building the Scott Highway in 1917. He died in 1940 and is buried in Minneapolis.



Edward C. Peterson can be seen here in the Blériot XI monoplane he built and eventually flew. This image shows him piloting his plane at Kellys race track (near what is now Edward and Arthur streets) in an unsuccessful 1910 attempt at flight.