

Drexel's Cross Chanel Flight July 1910

Tuesday. 19th July 1910 McArdle and Drexel decided to fly back to their New Forest School.

This was considered a very newsworthy occurrence at that time as most aviators would pack their machines up for transport by road to the next point of demonstration. Drexel's trip was especially noteworthy, as he had purchased the Frenchman Morane's double seated Bleriot monoplane and decided to carry Harry Delacombe, a well-known newspaper correspondent, as passenger. This report of his appeared in the 'Morning Post' next day: -

"..... at 4.30 p.m. there was a nasty gust) wind blowing, and Mr. McArdle, considering the conditions quite unsuitable for our attempt to fly over the sea and forest to Beaulieu, suggested postponing the start, hoping the wind might drop. Mr. Drexel thought, on the contrary, that it might become more blustery and was most anxious to be off. It had been arranged that he and I in the double-seated Bleriot monoplane should start first, followed a few minutes by Mr. McArdle on the single-seater, as the latter, with only one person to carry, was sure to travel the faster, and overtake us en route. There was also the possibility that either machine might drop into the sea (where there was no cordon of motorboats and steam yachts as arranged for the over-sea flights to the Needles last week), be perceived by the other, and perhaps be reached sooner from the definite information it could carry to land. As no change in the weather appeared at 6 p.m., we decided to set out. Mr. Drexel thought our safety lay in rising about 1.000 ft. before making the journey and said it would probably be necessary to encircle the aerodrome two or three times to attain this altitude. A single circuit only enabled us to climb to 350 ft. So, round we went again, rising rapidly as we faced the wind, but having great difficulty in keeping our height with the wind astern, the 'lift' being enormously decreased and the position of our machine becoming somewhat like that of a kangaroo sitting on its tail. Mr. Drexel's idea in flying high was: first, the hope of escaping gusts and finding a steadier wind than prevailed below; and, secondly, if the motor should perchance stop, the better chance of gliding down either into one of the few small open spaces among the almost endless trees, or else turning about and planing down for the sea. where we had a far better chance than if descending involuntarily among trees, houses, or marshy land.

"Satisfied at last as to our height, he steered direct from Hengistbury Head towards the Needles, which seemed almost below-us though really some two miles distant. We could see Mr Lorraine's aeroplane with people surrounding it very distinctly on the high land over Alum Bay and as we turned to the left over the promontory of Hurst Castle the view up the Solent as far as Southampton on the left and Cowes on the right was clearly mapped out underneath. All this time the wind had been dead astern, and Mr Drexel had a hard tussle to preserve our altitude to his liking. Once when he asked me if I could see anything of 'Mac' following I turned round, distinguished the aerodrome, but saw no machine aloft. One did however, see that our tail, instead of being horizontal,

was horribly out of the level, and momentary thoughts of head resistance and a backward fall flashed through my mind. The placid smile and cool behaviour of my companion would, however, have reassured the most timid, and I was happy in the sensation of unlimited power conveyed by the regular throbbing of the motor and the mighty beats of our propeller-blades as we soared steadily ahead. Suddenly I heard 'Look! there's old Beaulieu!' Following the direction in which he was gazing, I could distinguish nothing but black forest. A winding road and a peculiar shaped patch of water however, I guessed were his landing marks, and it was with a feeling rather of regret that I saw we were turning sharply to the left, and leaving the friendly sea behind, to fly over country which, from a height of 1,500 ft., looked everywhere literally unapproachable for our frail craft. With a nudge and a grin Drexel put forward the cloche, (sic) and we headed downwards till he was almost standing on his foot tiller, and my feet were pressed against the front part of our little cockpit. Then at last I realised how much we had been leaning backwards during the flight, for we were rushing through the air at about eighty miles an hour at a bigger angle probably than we had previously assumed in the other direction.

At once I could make out the road and hangars of the Aviation School to our right and could see a small crowd of black dots running out on what I had just before mistaken for another patch of murky forest. In three minutes we had glided more than 1,500 ft. downwards, and then came the end of my novel experience, for we landed, and were surrounded by friends, to one of whom I gave the notes I had scribbled on leaves of my pocket-book, signed as blank pages by other friends just before we left the ground at Southbourne.

"Throughout the run I was entrusted with a rubber ball, by squeezing which a constant pressure is maintained in the feed, and I also constantly leant forward and peeped over our bows to keep Drexel informed of our whereabouts. These minor duties, however, did not prevent me from carrying out my cherished hope of proving the practicability of writing legibly during a flight, and my scribbled log of the trip is sufficiently legible to prove beyond any question that trained officers or men could easily do surveying work of the utmost importance and utility at far greater heights than we reached, for with binoculars and a clearer atmosphere I could have distinguished every necessary detail, and transmitted my impressions to paper with explanatory notes in perfect comfort by stooping below the backwash of our propeller and the ordinary rush of air as we raced along."