

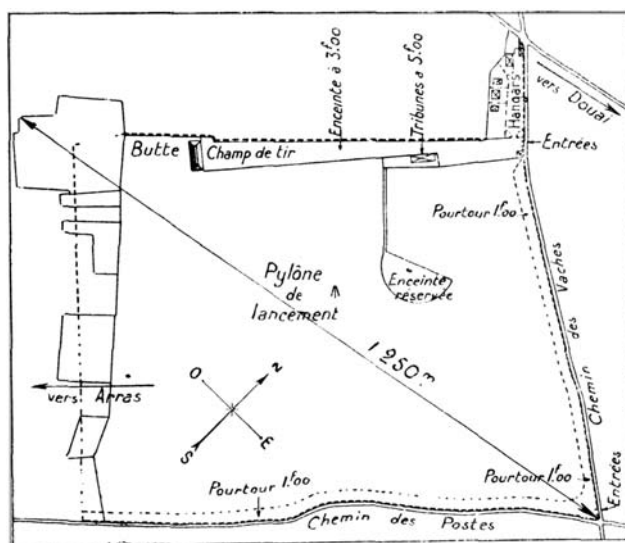
## ***The World's First Air Races – The June-July 1909 Douai Meeting*** ***Anders Bruun***

Douai is an industrial and agricultural town in what was then the coal-mining part of northern France, some 180 km north of Paris. In 1909 it had around 35,000 inhabitants. The Douai branch of the Ligue Nationale Aérienne was one of the earliest, founded on January 10th, 1909. One of the driving forces was Louis Breguet, who was at that time, together with Professor Charles Richet, experimenting with a "gyroplane", a big four-rotor helicopter. In March the town of Douai decided to grant 20,000 francs toward organising a flying competition. The meeting would take place from Monday June 28th to Sunday July 18th, with the main events during the last week included the following competitive events:

- A 3,000 francs speed competition over 2 kilometres (the Prix du Nord, sponsored by the railway company Compagnie du Chemin de Fer du Nord, the regional council of the Nord department and the town of Douai)
- A 1,000 francs speed competition over 1 kilometre (the Prix Mahieu, named after its sponsor)
- A 10,000 francs closed-course distance competition (the Grand Prix de Douai, sponsored by the town)
- A cross-country distance competition to be contested over the flat fields between Douai and Arras, 25 km to the west

Several additional prizes were offered for flights on different days, in order to ensure that the flying would be spread out over the meeting. The total prize money was 26,000 francs.

The meeting was to be held at La Brayelle, 3 kilometres west of central Douai, where an airfield of 72 hectares had been constructed. The hangars for the participating machines were located in a park of around a hectare, which was enclosed by palisades. Inside that park each aviator disposed an area of 30 by 30 metres for rigging and stationary testing. This enclosed area was reserved exclusively for the aviators and their personnel.



Plan de l'aérodrome où seront disputés les concours d'aviation de Douai.  
(Illustration: L'Aérophile)

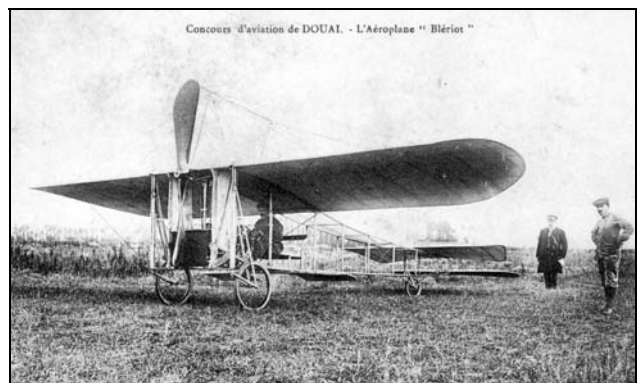
In the last week of April the airfield was struck by a hurricane, which demolished the hangar where the latest

(and last) version of the Breguet-Richet gyroplane was housed. The strange-looking twin tilt-rotor canard biplane was destroyed, but Breguet had already started on a new, more conventional biplane. This was only the first time the weather wrought havoc with an air race – several of the 1909 meetings were similarly struck by storms.

The organising committee received entries for eleven machines:

Louis Blériot	Blériot monoplane
Louis Breguet	Breguet biplane
Pierre de Caters	Voisin biplane
Germe	Germe biplane
Jean Gobron	Voisin biplane
Lasternas	Lasternas biplane
Hubert Latham	Antoinette monoplane
Louis Paulhan	Voisin biplane
Henri Rougier	Voisin biplane
"F. de Rue" (Ferdinand Ferber)	Voisin biplane
Paul Tissandier	Wright biplane

The weather was superb for the opening of the meeting. Louis Blériot arrived on June 28th, and immediately started flying his new model XII, which was equipped with a 50 hp water-cooled ENV V-8 engine. The Blériot XII was considerably bigger than the model XI of English Channel fame and had the pilot sitting below the wing, which was mounted on top of the fuselage longerons. It was the first plane that was specially designed to carry two passengers, on a bench-like seat beside the pilot.



***The Blériot XII, showing off the huge 2.70 metre chain-driven propeller (Photo: E. Baron)***

During the three weeks of the meeting Blériot was extremely busy travelling between different airfields. He left Douai on June 30th for testing his model XI at Issy-les-Moulineaux in Paris, but returned on July 2nd and immediately made several flights.

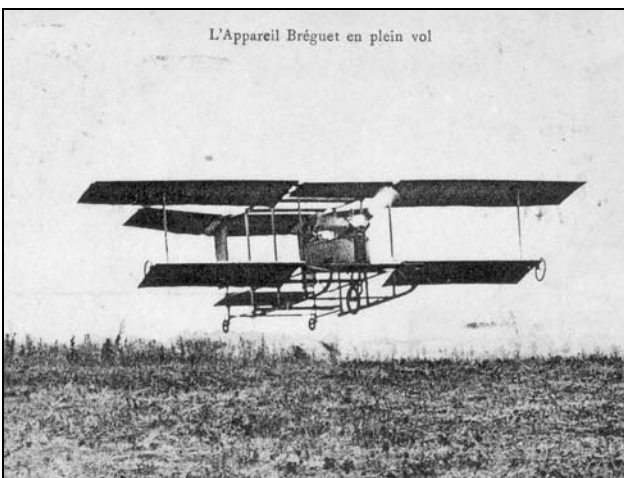
On July 3rd he made a flight of 47 minutes, covering 47 kilometres. Fifteen minutes into the flight the asbestos heat insulation of an exhaust pipe close to his foot worked loose and fell off. Despite the pain of his foot being roasted he flew on for another 30 minutes. He was only forced down when a rod broke and went through the cylinder and the water mantle, causing a great cloud of white smoke, to the alarm of the spectators. Blériot's shoe was completely burned through and he had received third-

degree burns that made doctors fear than he would get gangrene. The painful burns would disable him for two months – but didn't discourage him from flying.



**Blériot rounding a pylon – note the unusual ailerons that were attached to the fuselage like very small lower biplane wings (Photo: La Vie Au Grande Air)**

On July 4th Blériot was at Port-Aviation south of Paris, where he made flight of 50 minutes in his model XI, winning the Prix Archdeacon. On July 9th he was back in Douai, making several successful flights in front of crowds that despite some rain were estimated to 20,000, before leaving again on the evening of July 10th. On July 13th he won the French Aéro-Club's "Prix du Voyage" for a 41 km town-to-town flight between Étampes (50 km south of Paris) and Orléans in his model XI. While all this was going on he was also preparing for his English Channel flight, which would eventually take place on the 25th.



**The first Breguet airplane – it's unlikely that it ever flew much higher than this! (Photo: E. Baron)**

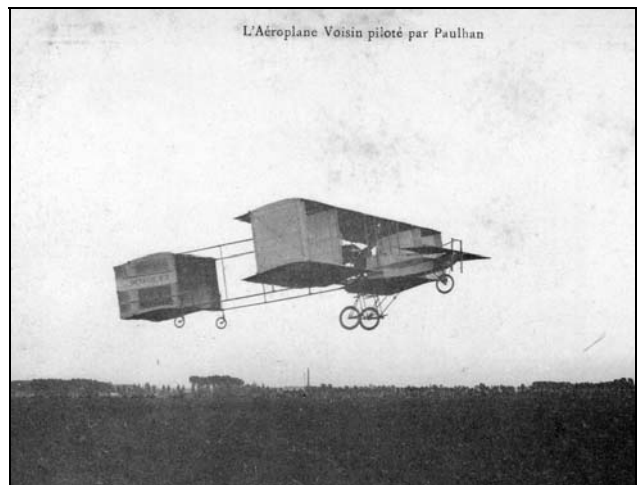
Home-town favourite Breguet made some test flights in his new plane, an awkward-looking but more conventional tractor biplane, powered by a 50 hp air-cooled Renault

V-8. This plane was not very successful and only managed some short hops, without gaining much height.

The Antoinette-powered Voisin of "F. de Rue" (pseudonym for Capitaine Ferdinand Ferber) arrived on July 5th, but it seems that he only made some short flights during the meeting.

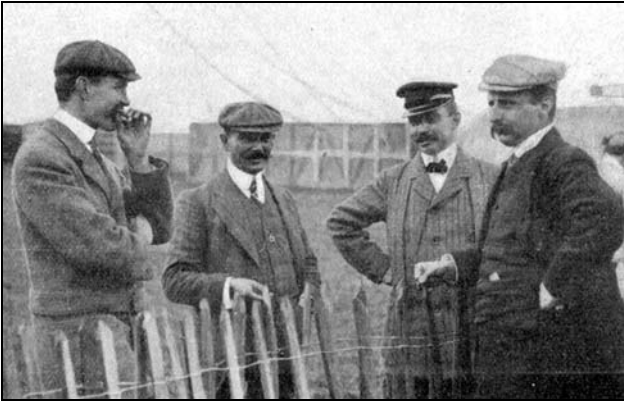
Louis Paulhan also arrived well after the start of the meeting with his Gnome-powered Voisin "Octavie III" and made his first flights on July 10th. Paulhan quickly established himself as a future star. He made several long flights in Douai. The longest was made on July 15th, in front of 10,000 spectators. It lasted well over an hour before he ran out of fuel and it won him the 6,000 francs Grand Prix de Douai. He also made a cross-country flight to the neighbouring town of Arras. On the last day of the meeting he broke the world altitude record, previously held by Wilbur Wright at 110 meters. He easily flew above a balloon that was anchored at 120 meters and reached an estimated 150 meters.

On Sunday July 18th, the last day of the meeting, a world's first occurred – the first time that two aircraft actually raced each other on a course! The pilots were Blériot and Paulhan, who happened to be in the same place while competing for the 1-kilometre Prix Mahieu race.



**Paulhan in his "Octavie III"(Photo: E. Baron)**

The meeting in Douai seems to have been overshadowed by the other events that were taking place at the same time, with Latham, Blériot and de Lambert preparing their English Channel crossings. The reporting in the aviation press is a bit sketchy and only covers the most important flights. It appears that Blériot, Breguet, Paulhan and de Rue were the only flyers to actually turn up. Latham was certainly busy elsewhere – his plans for a Channel crossing were constantly being reported in the press and after some delays he made the first of his two failed efforts on July 19th, the day after the meeting ended. Gobron and Rougier had just started flying and probably didn't consider themselves ready. Tissandier was contracted for the Vichy meeting immediately following the Douai meeting and Belgium's first pilot Baron Pierre de Caters appears to have been in Germany at the time. I have hardly found any information about the rather obscure Germe and Lasternas entries, but the Germe was a Wright-inspired biplane with an Anzani engine.



*Pilots relaxing in Douai – from left to right Breguet, Blériot's employee Alfred Leblanc, Ferber and Blériot  
(Photo : La Revue Aérienne)*

### ***Results***

#### **Prix Mahieu** (1 kilometre race):

1. Blériot 1 min 9 s
2. Paulhan 1 min 37 s

#### **Prix du Nord** (2 kilometre race):

1. Blériot 2 minutes 29 seconds

#### **Grand Prix de Douai** (closed-course distance):

1. Paulhan 48.178 km in 1 h 07 min 19 s (some sources say 1.17.19)
2. Blériot 47.277 km in 47 min 17 s