

The first Gordon Bennett Trophy pilots

Anders Bruun



Glenn Curtiss (1878-1930, US license No 1, French licence No. 2) started bicycle racing in his youth and built his first motorcycles in 1901. He had great success racing them and set absolute speed records on motorcycles powered by his own engines. In 1907 he was asked by Alexander Graham Bell to provide an engine for airplane

experiments. Curtiss joined Bell's Aerial Experiment Association (AEA), which built four aircraft. He made his first flight in one these, the "White Wing", on May 21st. 1908. The success of the following designs resulted in Curtiss being selected by the Aero Club of America as the US representative in the first Gordon Bennett Trophy. After the Reims meeting he built up his own airplane company, during constant legal battles with the Wright brothers and his ex-partner Augustus Herring. During WW1 Curtiss built thousands of "Jenny" trainers and flying boats. In 1921 he stepped back from active management and turned to real estate development in Florida. He died from complications of an appendicitis operation in 1930, while still involved in a lawsuit with Herring's heirs.



Eugène Lefebvre (1878-1909) was the son of a successful civil engineer and was himself educated at the "Institut Industriel du Nord de France" in Lille. During his youth he was a successful bicycle racer. After his graduation he joined a company that built and installed refrigeration machinery for ships, for which he spent three years

in Russia. After returning to France he was hired as an engineer by Ariel, the French Wright producers. He taught himself to fly the planes when the normal pilots (Tissandier and de Lambert) were not available during a tour in the Netherlands. He made his first flight on July 18th, 1909. His spectacular displays at Reims arguably qualify him as the world's first aerobatic flyer. Unfortunately he survived less than two weeks after the Grande Semaine. On September 7th, 1909 he became the world's first pilot to be killed in an accident when a Wright, which he was testing before delivery, suddenly dived into the ground from an altitude of six meters at Port-Aviation outside Paris. The reason was probably elevator control failure. Lefebvre suffered head injuries and died immediately.

References

- Peter M. Bowers "Curtiss Aircraft 1907-1947" (Putnam, 1979)
- Louis S. Casey "Curtiss – The Hammondsport Era 1907-1915" (Crown Publishers, 1981)



Hubert Latham (1883-1913, French licence No.9) was a cosmopolitan "man of the world" from a wealthy family and had no ambitions of normal work. He had tried ballooning, speed-boating, big-game hunting and made a long expedition in Ethiopia. In early 1909 he was approached the Antoinette company, who offered him the possibility to fly their planes in return for

investing in the company. He learned to fly and became the company's primary pilot. He famously competed with Blériot over who would be first to fly over the English Channel and although he made the first effort he lost out after ditching because of engine problems. After his successes at the Grande Semaine he made a tour of the USA and participated in several meetings. He set another altitude record and made several spectacular flights, for example one in gale-force wind during a meeting in Blackpool, but his performances were probably limited by the Antoinette planes. According to long-time aviation journalist Harry Harper he was the finest pilot of all time. At the end of 1911 he got tired with flying and went to Congo in order to rest and hunt. In June 1912 he was killed there under obscure circumstances while hunting.



George Cockburn (1872-1931, British licence No. 5) was a Scottish sportsman and rugby player. He was the first pupil of the Farman flying school in Châlons-sur-Marne and made his first flight on June 14th, 1909. He had not made any solo flight longer than fifteen minutes before the Reims meeting. Cockburn

belonged to the group of British pioneer pilots that flew from the Salisbury Plains in England. He was a volunteer instructor for the first four British naval flyers at Eastchurch in 1911. He apparently quit piloting soon afterwards, but he remained active in aviation. When the Aeronautical Inspection Department was formed in 1913 he became second in command. He was a pioneer of aircraft accident investigations and in 1915 was appointed to the independent post of "Inspector of Accidents", responsible for the Accidents Investigation Branch (AIB) of the Royal Flying Corps. He also held several positions in the Royal Aero Club during many years until his death in 1931.

(Louis Blériot was presented in BT#48)

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