

The First Racing Pilots – Part 4

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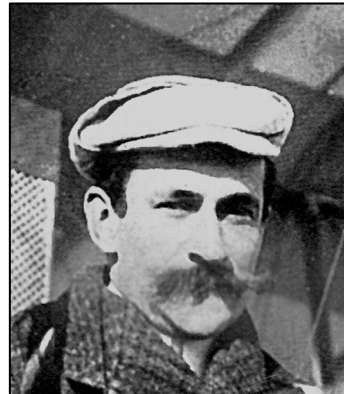
Henri Farman (1874-1958, French licence No.5) was the son of a relatively wealthy English journalist. Like the Wrights he started by selling and racing bicycles. He was French champion in 100 km road racing and he and his brother Maurice was a famous tandem pair. He then went on to motorcycles and cars. He became a

well-known auto racer, winning the Paris-Vienna race in 1902, but switched to aviation in 1907 because he considered it safer. He was the first European to fly, in October 1907. On January 13th 1908 he won the 50,000 francs Deutsch-Archdeacon prize for the first closed-circle flight of a kilometre in Europe. On October 30th, 1908 he made the first cross-country flight, between Mourmelon (Bouy) and Reims. He broke his partnership with the Voisin brothers after they had sold a plane that Farman had ordered to the British flyer Moore-Brabazon. Afterwards he built his own planes with several improvements, for example ailerons, better landing gear and simplified tail surfaces. After his successes at Reims he focussed on the design and production of his planes, and the Farman company survived until it was nationalised in 1937.



Roger Sommer (1877-1965, French licence No. 29) came from a textile industry family. He was an engineer and had graduated from the École des Arts et Métiers. At the age of 18 he was a successful bicycle racer, winning the 200 km "Petit Ardennois" race and becoming champion of eastern France over 100 km. He built two

cars of his own construction and owned a powerful six-cylinder car. Inspired by the Wrights he built a biplane in 1908 and made short flights. He bought a Farman plane in May 1909 and flew it for the first time on July 4th. The next day he made a flight of half an hour and soon made longer and longer flights. On August 7th he flew for 2h 27:15, beating Wilbur Wright's world endurance record. He modified his Farman and started constructing his own airplanes in 1910, one of them carrying twelve passengers using only a 70 hp engine in March 1911. He designed a monoplane that was successful in several meetings across Europe, but in 1913 he closed his business because of dropping sales, having lost an Army contract to Farman. He briefly returned to aviation as a licence manufacturer during WW1, but after the end of the war he left the aviation field for good, concentrating on the family felt manufacturing business.



Baron Pierre de Caters (1875-1944, Belgian license No. 1) was the son of an Antwerp businessman. In his youth he practiced tennis, fencing, cycling and other sports, and after a brief effort at a military career he started an electrical engineering education. In 1897 he unexpectedly inherited an enormous fortune

after a distant aunt. After a three-year court fight with his relatives over the validity of her will, he started using his money on cars, motorboats and aeroplanes. He participated in many automobile races and became a factory driver for Mercedes. His biggest win was the 1905 "Tour des Ardennes" and in 1904 he briefly held the absolute speed record for Mercedes at 156 km/h. His interest then turned to aviation and he became Belgium's first pilot. In 1908 he ordered two planes from the Voisin brothers, one triplane and one biplane, and built a private airfield. During the autumn and winter of 1909 he participated in several meetings and bought four more Voisins. In 1910 he started building his own planes under the name "Aviator" and went on a world tour marketing them. In 1911 he had used up most of his millions and retired from aviation. During WW1 he was commander of a flying school and when he left the armed forces in 1917 he started a company for production of peat fuel briquettes.



Alfred Leblanc (1869-1921, French licence No. 17) was a metallurgical engineer and had flown balloons since 1904, participating in many balloon races and setting several world records. He was a friend of Blériot and become a trusted partner of the famous pilot. He was an

organiser and administrator and it was much thanks to him that Blériot's successful flights and industrial efforts were possible. However, he was also an active pilot and participated in many meetings. He would probably easily have won the 1910 Gordon Bennett Trophy race for Blériot if he hadn't run out of fuel and crashed into a telegraph pole, and he won the great 1910 Circuit de l'Est cross-country race. In 1911 he set an absolute world speed record at 125 km/h in a Blériot XXIII. After service as an instructor during WW1 he returned to the direction of the Blériot/SPAD industries. He died after a heart attack in 1921.