

The World's First Air Races – Part One: The Non-Starters

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1909 is generally agreed to have been the year of the world's first air race. But which was really the first race? I will come to that, but the last BT issue before the centennial year is a good opportunity for an article about some of the non-starters...

There were many different prizes offered for flying during the early years of aviation, by private persons, by flying clubs and by towns and municipalities, but few focussed on speed. Most of the prizes were offered for distance or endurance, or for different pioneering flights, such as the "first flight between A and B". Out of the few prizes that were offered for speed, and which can be considered to have been genuine races, the first three never really happened.

December 8th, 1907: The L'Auto Race

In its October 17th, 1907, issue the French sports daily "L'Auto" announced that they would organise a race for aeroplanes. This, which is probably the first air race ever planned, would take place on December 8th, 1907, and would have rules similar to a drag race: The participating planes would line up side by side and be given the start signal at the same time. The winner would be the plane that first crossed the finish line, after covering a distance of 250 meters (820 feet) without touching the ground. Today, this is of course a pathetic distance, but in 1907 things were different. At the end of that year there were only nine persons in Europe who could make any claim whatsoever of having flown a powered heavier-than-air machine – and that number includes Jens Jacob Ellehammer and Traian Vuia, neither of whom can be credited with any kind of controlled flight. Every flight was an experiment, every take-off was a success and every landing that didn't break anything was a reason for celebration. There were very few planes around in 1907, and this pioneering race of "L'Auto" apparently never attracted any entrants.

1909 – The year when air racing became possible

After that failure it seems there was no activity on the air racing front for a year. Meanwhile, the art of flying moved ahead in Europe. The Wright brothers were of course far ahead of the European flyers. Henry Farman won the 50,000 francs (corresponding to 10,000 dollars or 2,000 pounds, a considerable sum in those days) Deutsch-Archdeacon prize for being the first to fly a closed course of one kilometre on January 13th, 1908. The Wrights had made similar flights long before, in September 1904. However, the Wrights didn't do any flying at all in 1906 and 1907. They were focusing on their commercial interests and they were anyway not interested in racing and records. In the summer of 1908 the Wright brothers came to France in order to make demonstration flights and set up licence agreements and a sales organisation for their planes. The performance and particularly the manoeuvrability of their planes shocked the French flyers, who had not realised the advantages of three-axis control and could only make flat wide turns. But things happened quickly. Towards the end of 1908 particularly Farman, Louis Blériot and Léon Delagrangé were flying regularly.

In 1909 there were finally enough planes around to organise a race. By the end of 1908 the Voisin brothers were firmly established as airplane producers. You could

go to their factory and order a plane, and they also undertook building other peoples' designs. The Antoinette company had taken their first orders and Farman and Blériot would also start production of airplanes during 1909. Special aviation engines, light and powerful, were also becoming available. The Antoinette V-8 engine set a standard for power-to-weight ratio that wouldn't be beaten in several years, and the first installations of the revolutionary Gnome rotary would be made during the spring. Airfields and flying schools were also starting to appear. This was "La Belle Époque", there was lots of money around, the rich were really rich, and flying was highly fashionable. The years 1909 – 1911 can probably be regarded as aviation's first "Golden Age"!

January 3rd, 1909: The Two O'Clock Race

The French "Ligue National d'Aviation" offered three 1,000 francs prizes for five-minute races, to take place on January 3rd, March 3rd and May 3rd, 1909. The races would start at two o'clock and the winner would be the one who had flown longest by five past two. The first of these races was probably intended to coincide with the opening of the Port-Aviation airfield outside Paris, which was originally planned to take place in December 1908. Again, nothing came of these plans – the opening was delayed by snow and the infrastructure of the airfield was anyway not finished until the spring.

January 24th – March 24th, 1909: The Monaco Meeting

The 1909 Monaco meeting must rank high on a list of aviation's biggest fiascos. It was organised by the "Sporting-Club International" of Monaco, which announced the event in December 1908. They offered big prize money; a total of 100,000 francs was to be won - 75,000 francs to the winner, 15,000 for second place and 10,000 for third.



A view over the Monaco race course. The landing strip is hidden by the cliffs at the right. The entrance of the harbour can be seen in the middle of the photo and Cap Martin is the peninsula in the distance. The centre of Monte Carlo is hidden, to the left of the harbour.

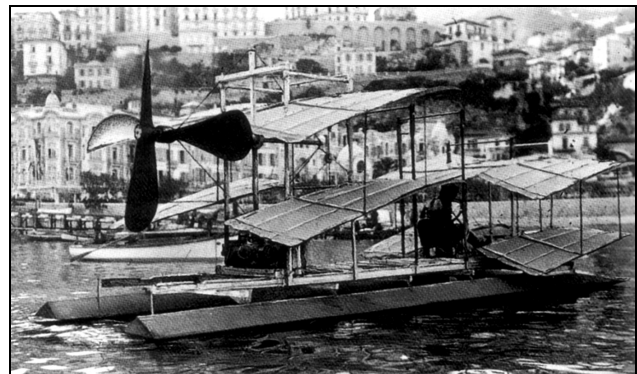
The course was 9.6 kilometres (6 miles), from the Monaco harbour, where the planes would be timed at the harbour entrance, north-eastwards across the bay, around a rounding-point on Cap Martin and back. The course had to

be covered three times during the two-month meeting, on three different days, and the winner would be determined on aggregate time. The race was open to both landplanes and seaplanes. The landing strip for landplanes was on Quai Antoine 1er, a quay which stretches some 400 meters towards the sea from the Rascasse corner of the present Formula One Monaco Grand Prix circuit. The quay was cleared from all obstacles and an airship hangar and four hangars for competing airplanes were built. In order to help the planes to take the jump out over the Mediterranean a five-meter ramp was added at the southern end of the quay. It was a very difficult course for the primitive aeroplanes of the time. Landplanes would have to take off towards the sea, make a tight 180-degree turn into the harbour and then make a 90-degree turn to the right in order to enter the timed course. The course was almost completely over water and the planes had to gain some altitude in order to fly over land when rounding Cap Martin. Although the course in itself was probably not too bad, take-off and landing would require real precision flying, and would probably have been completely impossible in windy conditions. One writer observed that the only pilot who had a reasonable chance to complete the course without special training was Wilbur Wright, who was in France at the time – but he didn't enter. Even though some other famous flyers, notably Farman and Blériot, also decided against participating 36 planes and pilots paid the 100 francs entry fee:

Entrant	Plane
Léon Delagrangé	Voisin
Léon Delagrangé	Voisin
Lieut. Bourgeat	Antoinette
Soc. Antoinette	Antoinette IV
René Demanest	Antoinette V
Louis Breguet	Breguet-Richet 2 bis helicopter
Louis Breguet	Breguet biplane
Baron de Caters	Voisin
Ateliers Vuitton-Huber	Vuitton helicopter
Roger Ravaud	Ravaud Aéroscaphe
Andrew Fletcher	Voisin
Henri Fournier	Voisin
Henri Rougier	Voisin
John Koch	Voisin?
Michel Clemenceau	Wright
Michel Clemenceau	Wright
Ostas Zewski	?
Marquis d'Equévilly	Equevilly-Monjustin multiplane
Brissand	Biplane
Wilkes	Wilkes biplane
Dennisel	Dennisel & Godville Helicoplan
Godville	Dennisel & Godville Helicoplan
Hansen	?
Armand Zipfel	Voisin
Soc. d'Étude d'Aviation	? (biplane)
Levi	? (biplane)
Hornstein	? (biplane)
Antonio Fernandez	Fernandez biplane
Raoul Vendôme	Vendôme monoplane
Henri Fabre	Fabre hydro-monoplane
René Bertrand	Bertrand monoplane
Petit	?
Gabriel Seguin	Seguin?
Sergeant	?
"An Italian flyer"	?
Henry de Puybadet	Voisin

However, many of the pilots were completely unknown and several of the planes were untested, or perhaps not even built. The list of entrants includes some of early aviation's most weird and wonderful machines, such as the Equevilly multiplane and the tunnel-fuselage Bertrand monoplane. Several flyers who would later become well-known, such as Rougier, Fournier, Zipfel and Breguet had only ordered or started building their planes at the time of entry, and were in no way prepared to fly them. M. de Puybadet had to appeal to the race committee in order to be accepted as an entrant – his entry had been delayed by a strike of the telegraph workers and missed the deadline!

In the end it appears that only one plane actually turned up: Roger Ravaud's "Aéroscaphe". This was a rather unusual floatplane with tandem biplane wing cells with a span of only 3.25 m (10 ft 8 in) and a horizontally mounted 50 horsepower Gnôme which drove contra-rotating pusher propellers via a vertical driveshaft. It was actually entered in both the airplane race and in the annual Monaco boat race, also to be run during the spring! Unlikely as it might seem, it crashed during a test flight...



The Ravaud "Aéroscaphe" – try to imagine that as the winner of the world's first air race!

The grand Monaco race came to nothing, and the president of the "Sporting-Club International" is quoted as saying "Monaco is ready for this race, in case the aviators are still not". The failed event was surrounded by quite a bit of controversy. Some people called the flyers cowards for not taking on the insignificant distance of 10 kilometres, especially since it would be safer to make an emergency landing in the water than on land, while other people stated that the proposed course was crazy at the current state of aviation and that the flyers who entered were only cynically exploited for marketing "the Sodom of the Côte d'Azur"...

References

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