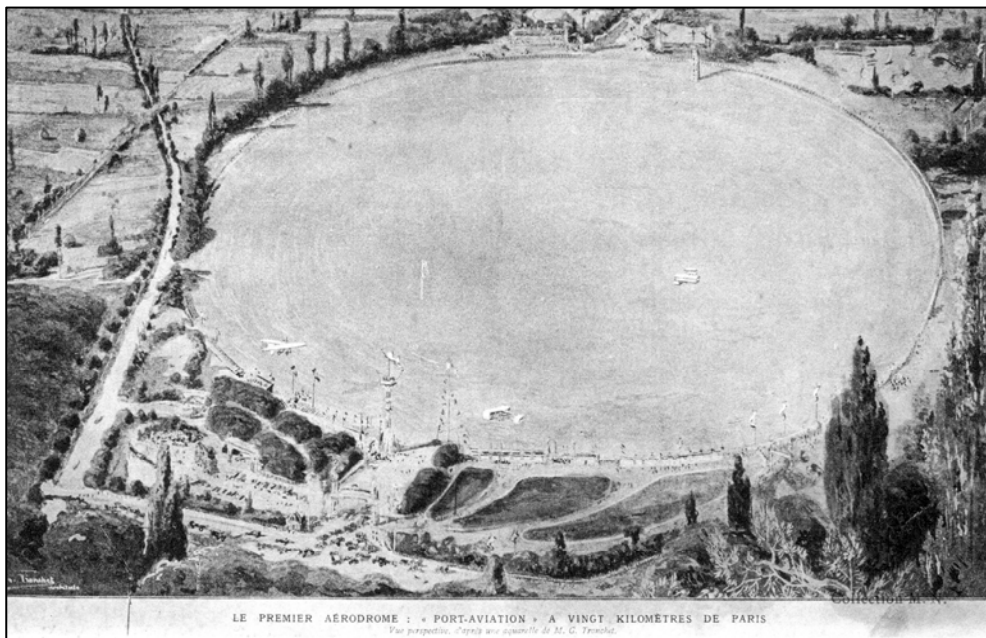


## The May-June 1909 "Port Aviation" Meetings – The World's First Air Races Anders Bruun

In BT#46 I tried to define what an air race is. Using these definitions, it is to me clear what the world's first air races were – the April-May meetings at Port Aviation outside Paris.



### Port-Aviation

"Port-Aviation" was the world's first purpose-built airfield. Its construction was organised by "La Société d'Encouragement à l'Aviation" (SEA), a group of aviation enthusiasts that was formed in the summer of 1908. The site chosen was a park in the "commune" of Viry-Châtillon, some 20 kilometres (10 miles) south of the centre of Paris. The location of Port-Aviation is often given as Juvisy, which is the neighbouring commune where the nearest railway station was situated. The field contained hangars, administration buildings, marked-up race courses and grand-stands. It was the home of a flying school, which was operated by the "Ligue National Aérienne" (LNA) and used a couple of Voisin planes.

### Prix de Lagatinerie, May 23rd, 1909

The official opening of Port-Aviation was held on May 23rd, 1909. The first flights on Port-Aviation had been made during the winter before and it had originally been planned to hold the opening ceremonies earlier, but the infrastructure was not ready. The event was broadly announced in newspapers and on posters, with the result that a crowd that was estimated to be between 30,000 and 60,000 people had gathered on the airfield, expecting to see the most famous aviators compete against each other. The main event of the inauguration was the 5,000 francs "Prix de Lagatinerie". The name of the race was that of its donors - there were two men of that name in the committee of the SEA, the two barons Charles and Bernard de Lagatinerie. The prize was offered to the pilot who covered 10 laps of a 1.2 kilometre (0.75 miles) course in the shortest time. In case nobody completed the distance the winner would be decided by the distance covered. The course was marked by two pylons, 600 metres apart. Stops were allowed, and would be included

in the total time. The contest would start at 2 PM on May 23rd, 1909.

Nine pilots had entered and paid their 100 francs entry fee by the May 17th deadline. However, only four actually showed up:

- Léon Delagrave on the Voisin "Delagrave No. 3"
- Henri Rougier on a Voisin
- Alfred de Pischoff on a de Pischoff et Koechlin
- "F. de Rue" (pseudonym for Capitaine Ferdinand Ferber) on a Voisin

The Voisins were pusher biplanes, powered by 50 hp Antoinette water-cooled V-8 engines. Delagrave's was an earlier model, a veteran of many flights, including a tour in Italy in 1908. Rougier's and de Rue's were new production

models. The de Pischoff et Koechlin was a tractor monoplane, powered by a 20 hp horizontally opposed air-cooled 2-cylinder Dutheil et Chalmers engine.

The five entrants who didn't turn up were two pilots from the Ariel company (the French Wright licensees), Paul Koechlin (de Pischoff et Koechlin), Raoul des Vallières (Voisin) and Henri de Puybadet (Voisin).

The weather was unseasonably hot and at the planned start of the race there was a wind of 3-4 m/s (7-9 mph). These wind speeds would not in themselves have created any problems, but the wind was blowing across the strip that had been mowed in the tall grass, so the start had to be postponed. If the entire field had been mowed so that the planes could take off in any direction there would not have been any problems.



An improvised observation post in the parking area

The spectators had not been informed that the planes would not be able to fly if it was too windy and were getting impatient. In order to keep the crowds entertained a kite contest was started instead, which lasted for two hours.



**The grandstands. The blackboard announces the start of the kite-flying contest at 2.30 PM**

However, the crowd had come to see airplanes, and was not amused by waiting in the baking heat. The situation started to get difficult, so at 4.15 PM Delagrance rolled out his Voisin in order to give them something to look at. At the same time the crowd broke through their enclosure and charged into the field. They quickly surrounded Delagrance and his plane, but at 5.15 PM he was eventually allowed to fly a lap around the field. The crowd cooled down a little when they actually got to see some flying, and it was announced that the race would start later in the day.



**Delagrance taking off. This is his own plane, easily recognisable by the lack of vertical "curtains" between the wings**

The race finally started at 5.45 PM. The first to start was de Pischoff, despite having previously decided to withdraw. However, he could not lift off and stopped after only a couple of hundred meters and took no further part. Delagrance was next in line at 6.20 PM, but already during the rollout he had to abandon his effort due to broken elevator controls. At 6.45 PM it was Rougier's turn. He took off, but on the back straight of the first lap, flying very low, he had to veer in order to avoid a couple of spectators who had been lying in the tall grass and suddenly stood up.. He hit the ground and put his plane on the nose, luckily without any injuries and, thanks to the plane being a pusher, with only minor damage.



**Rougier's plane after the crash**

While Rougier's plane was retrieved Louis Lejeune, who was not entered in the race, tried to fly his plane. This was a small twin-propeller pusher biplane, somewhat similar to a Wright. It was built by de Pischoff et Koechlin and powered by a 12 hp 3-cylinder Buchet engine. However, despite very long ground runs through the grass the plane never managed to take off, it only earned itself the nickname "la moissonneuse" (the harvester)!

At 7.10 PM Delagrance made another effort. Since his own plane couldn't be repaired quickly he had asked for permission to use one of the flying school's Voisins instead of his own. After some discussions he was given permission to use the plane "L'Alsace", on the condition that he paid 4,000 francs of the prize money to the LNA if he won. He made his first lap at an altitude of 5 meters, but later reached 15 meters (50 feet). He managed almost five laps, a total of 5,800 meters (3.6 miles) in 10 minutes 18.6 seconds before he had to land. His average speed was 33.75 km/h (21.0 mph). This sounds incredibly slow, but the 5,800 meters was the geometrically calculated distance back and forth between the two pylons and the actual distance flown was of course much longer. Delagrance really had no hope of completing the race distance, since the engines of the school's Voisins were not equipped with radiators and could not be expected to run any more than 10 minutes before the water in the coolant header tanks started to boil. Rougier had quickly repaired his plane and intended to make another try, but by then the wind had risen again, making further flying impossible. Since de Rue had already withdrawn that was the end of the flying.



**Delagrance's winning flight – but it looks like the plane has been retouched in... They could manipulate photos already 100 years ago.**



***Delagrange's winning flight, in front of the almost empty grandstands (Photo: L'illustration)***

.At 8 PM the race committee met and decided that the Prix de Lagatinerie had been run according to its rules and declared Delagrange the winner. Since he hadn't completed the full distance and there had actually not been any opposition (Rougier's partial lap did not meet the requirement of finishing two laps in order to be classified) they decided to only award half the prize money. Delagrange was carried in triumph and "crazily celebrated" ("follement ovationné"). Those few who had stayed at the field had got to see some flying in the end, but most had left the airfield disappointed long before the winning flight.

Everybody except the most enthusiastic aviation writers regarded the race as a fiasco. The organisers had not taken note of the fact that almost all flying in those days was done in the calmer air of early mornings or late afternoons when they announced the start of the race for 2 PM. There was no alternative program organised in case there could be no flights. The dusty roads to the airfield were jammed with automobiles, horse-carriages, bicycles and pedestrians. The trains were full and didn't stop to take on passengers. Information and services at the field were insufficient. The airfield was not fenced in and there were not enough policemen to keep the unruly crowd in order. The bars and restaurants were overwhelmed and ran out of drinks.

#### ***The second Port-Aviation meeting, May 30th, 1909***

The organisers at Port-Aviation had learned some lessons, which they put to use when La Société d'Encouragement à l'Aviation staged the next race, already the following weekend. The advertising was more low-key this time and the flying was not announced to start until 5 PM. Those who had kept the tickets from the inauguration were given free entrance. The spectators were only allowed on the side of the field where they wouldn't have the sun in their eyes. There were of course no public announcement systems in these days, but the crowd was kept informed on the proceedings by automobiles carrying placards.

Delagrange, Rougier and de Rue once again entered, all in their more or less identical Voisins, powered by 50 hp Antoinette engines. During his first flight, Delagrange was carried towards the grandstands by a sudden gust of wind

and had to make corrections in order to avoid hitting the fence. The time of this flight was 1 min 45.2 s. Shortly afterwards he posted the best time of the meeting, 1:40.6, followed soon after by two laps in a row at an altitude of up to 12 meters (40 feet) – the times were 1:50.6 and 2:18.0 respectively. After a couple of test flights by Rougier and de Rue, Delagrange at 7.35 PM flew three consecutive laps at an altitude of 15 meters (50 feet). Soon afterwards, at 7.45 PM, Rougier flew two laps, timed at 1:53.6 and 1:59.8. At 7.50 PM de Rue flew two laps, the first at 1:41.6. The flying was concluded when Rougier, disappointed with his performance, flew a last lap at 8.45 PM. These were the final results:

1. Delagrange 1 min 40.6 s (Prize: 1,000 francs)
2. de Rue 1 min 41.6 s (Prize: 500 francs)
3. Rougier 1 min 53.4 s

#### ***Prix Stern, May 31st - June 3rd, 1909***

This contest was called "Prix Stern", named after its sponsor Charles Stern. The prize money, a 1,000 francs first prize and a 500 francs second prize would be given to the pilots who by June 3rd had covered one lap of a 1 kilometre (0.6 miles) course in the shortest time. Delagrange and de Rue continued racing. The pilots had complained that the two-pylon course had been too tight and difficult, so the race committee marked up a new four-pylon 1 km course with equal-length 250 meter sides. Delagrange made four flights and de Rue two on May 31st, with the following best results:

1. Delagrange 1 min 18.6 s (45.8 km/h or 28.5 mph)
2. de Rue 1 min 24.0 s

Delagrange flew at an altitude of around 15 meters, while de Rue stayed at a lower 8 to 10 meters. The new course made the actual flying distance much shorter and the turning radius bigger, which explains the much improved speeds. It was observed that since the aircraft were so closely matched the competition was decided by who could fly the neatest turns, closest to the pylons. Rougier made two efforts, but he had problems and never managed to complete the distance.

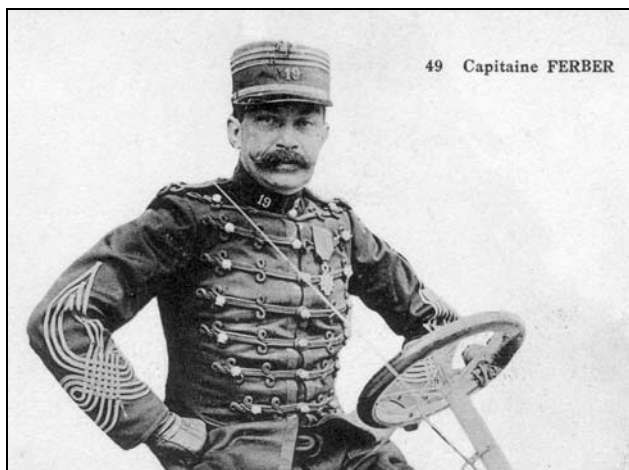
After the weekend Delagrange dismantled his plane in order to transport it to Argentan for a meeting that started on June 7th. Despite several efforts by de Rue during the

next couple of days he didn't manage any further improvements, so Delagrange won the first prize. De Rue offered his prize money for his second place to his mechanics.

### *The pilots*



**Léon Delagrange** (1872-1910, French pilot's license No. 3). Before becoming a pilot Delagrange was a famous sculptor, represented at several exhibitions. In 1907 he became interested in flying and became one of the true pioneers of powered flight. He was the first to order an aeroplane from the Voisin brothers, enabling them to get established as manufacturers. Delagrange was killed on January 4th, 1910, during a display in Croix d'Hins outside Bordeaux, when his modified Blériot XI (equipped with a 50 hp Gnôme engine in place of the 25 hp Anzani) lost a wing.



**Ferdinand Ferber** (1862-1909, French pilot's licence No. 5bis). Ferber was one of the driving forces behind the birth of French aviation. He was an artillery officer and professor at the artillery school at Fontainebleau. In 1898 he became interested in gliding and built his own gliders. In 1905 he started experimenting with powered gliders and eventually built a couple of rather unsuccessful planes of his own design, before buying a Voisin in 1909. He flew

under the pseudonym "F de Rue" in order not to compromise his military career. Ferber was killed on September 22nd, 1909, when he was hit by the engine of his Voisin when it nosed over after hitting a ditch after a landing outside Boulogne-sur-Mer.



**Henri Rougier** (1876-1956, French pilot's licence No. 11) was a bicycle champion who turned auto racer. He participated in several Grands Prix during the 1902-1908 period, with a best result of third in the 1906 Circuit des Ardennes. He became interested in aviation in 1908, bought a Voisin and was very active in meetings during 1909 and 1910, setting a world altitude record at 190 m in Brescia in September 1909. After this spell as flyer and as a partner of the Odier-Vendôme airplane company, he returned to auto racing, where he remained active until the mid-1920s. His biggest claim to fame as auto racer is winning the first-ever Monte Carlo Rally in 1911.

### *Which was the first air race?*

As I said in BT#46, the decision depends on the criteria you choose for defining the word "race". Applying the criteria that I proposed in that issue, the May 23rd Prix de Lagatinerie was the first air race. The coverage in the press at the time makes it clear that it was then considered to be the first event of its kind. It could perhaps be argued that it was a non-event, since no competitor actually completed the race distance. However, the rules of the event covered that possibility and Delagrange was officially declared the winner.

If you don't think the Prix de Lagatinerie can be considered a true race there can be no doubt that the nameless event one week later fulfilled all the criteria for being considered a race!

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If nothing else is stated, the photos are from postcards from the author's collection.