

Meet the Aéropostale pioneers who lived and died carrying France's first airmails

by JANE HANKS

WE TAKE air transport and flights for granted nowadays but the early days were fraught with danger. In France the first international service was established in Toulouse as a post-service between Africa and South America and became known as the Compagnie Générale Aéropostale, the forerunner to Air France.

Its existence was made possible by the foresight of industrialist Pierre-Georges Latécoère and the bravery of its pilots, three of whom have become French heroes and who all died in the cockpit: Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Henri Guillaumet and Jean Mermoz.

Now enthusiasts in the Mémoire d'Aéropostale Association are determined to keep the memories of this period of aviation history alive and plan a museum to the birth of the international air post and its heroes.

Retired postman Jack Mary is a member and said: "We hope to open a museum in Toulouse on December 25, 2018, to mark the centenary of the first flight from Toulouse to Barcelona by Pierre-Georges Latécoère, who founded the air postal service."

His company was called Lignes Aériennes Latécoère and it was a pioneer of international flight.

"It is difficult to sum up its 15-year history in a few words but it is important to remember that period at the very beginning of commercial air lines and which was started by very brave pilots, mechanics and entrepreneurs who risked their lives to cross borders and seas with early planes. "We forget how dangerous and daring it was at that time."

The air postal service was born at the end of the First World War when planes which had been built for the military were no longer required in active service.

Industrialist Latécoère had been building train carriages in Toulouse but during the war was asked to divert resources to make planes, being commissioned in September 1917 to build 1,000 Salmons 2A2 aircraft.

By Armistice Day his Montaudran, factory near Toulouse, had built 800 and he was left with a fleet of small planes with no further use – plus a team of mechanics and pilots who no longer had any war work.

Mr Mary said: "It was then he had a stroke of genius. His planes were too small to carry people but they could carry letters and there was a need to supply the North African colonies



The Aéropostale pilot chats to a tribesman as staff unload his plane at Lake Chad in 1930-31

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Brave pilots, mechanics and entrepreneurs risked their lives to cross borders and seas.

Jack Mary
Mémoire d'Aéropostale

with post from France and he had everything at his disposal to do so."

At that time it was difficult to fly for 500km without problems so going further afield seemed impossible but on Christmas Day 1918 the first flight to Barcelona took place and Lignes Aériennes Latécoère was created.

By 1919 there was a regular service between Toulouse and Rabat, the capital of Morocco, then to Senegal.

At that time business was opening up in South America and it was in France's interest to have a speedy postal service. But setting it up was difficult and in 1926 Latécoère went to Buenos Aires where he met French businessman Marcel Bouilloux-

Lafont, who had a huge empire in South America including banks, ports and railways.

In 1927 Latécoère sold the company to Bouilloux-Lafont.

Air transport was vital in a country with a poor infrastructure and the airline was renamed Compagnie Générale Aéropostale.

Bouilloux-Lafont supplied it with modern radio navigation and it became the first commercial flight to fly at night, across the Andes and the Atlantic Ocean, had the longest flights in the world and it had the best pilots.

It was the pilots' bravery that made it work. They had to fly increasingly long journeys across inhospitable terrain – oceans, deserts and mountains.

If they crashed they might fall into the hands of unfriendly locals. In the Sahara the Moors frequently took pilots hostage and demanded a ransom to secure their release. Their exploits turned them into heroes.

The early journeys were in three sections. Toulouse to Dakar by plane; Dakar-Natal (Brazil) by boat as planes did not yet cross the Atlantic, then from Natal by plane to Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, Buenos-Aires in Argentina and Santiago in Chile.

The service was then expanded to Bolivia and Venezuela and eventually the post was flown across the Atlantic.

In Africa, the service was extended to East Africa.

By the end of 1930 the Compagnie Générale Aéropostale exploited a 17,000km network, employed 1,500 people including 80 pilots and 250 mechanics and had 200 aeroplanes.

However, the stock market collapse in 1929 hit it hard and in 1931 it was put into liquidation and taken into the new national company, Air France, which was created on August 30, 1933. Bouilloux-Lafont was ruined and died in poverty in Brazil in 1944.

The Mémoire association already has several temporary Aéropostale exhibitions on three continents and the Toulouse museum, called La Piste des Géants, will be at Montaudran.



A Latécoère 17 plane like the one which was found near Toulouse

Chip of paint is vital clue to Latécoère planes

AN AIR historian has found remains of an Aéropostale Latécoère 17 plane nearly 90 years after it crashed near Toulouse killing all five on board. It is the only one in France and is a reminder of how hazardous those early flights were.

Gilles Collaveri, who created the Aerocherche amateur aviation archaeology group, said: "It was on August 1, 1927 when the plane was coming from Rabat in Morocco via Alicante in Spain. Five people were on board, two pilots, a mechanic and Rabat base manager Alfred Brangier and his wife, Hélène.

"The aircraft was descending in very bad weather and low cloud. The 34 year old pilot, Alexandre Bury, thought he was close to his destination and flew lower. Unfortunately, however, the aircraft had just passed Saint-Gaudens where the hills are 300m high.

"The Latécoère 17 catches a tree and crashes in a small wood. The plane explodes and no one survives."

The bodies were recovered and the air-

craft remains in the wood but nearly 90 years later Mr Collaveri and Aerocherche were allowed to search the area and found small fragments which have a "huge historical interest".

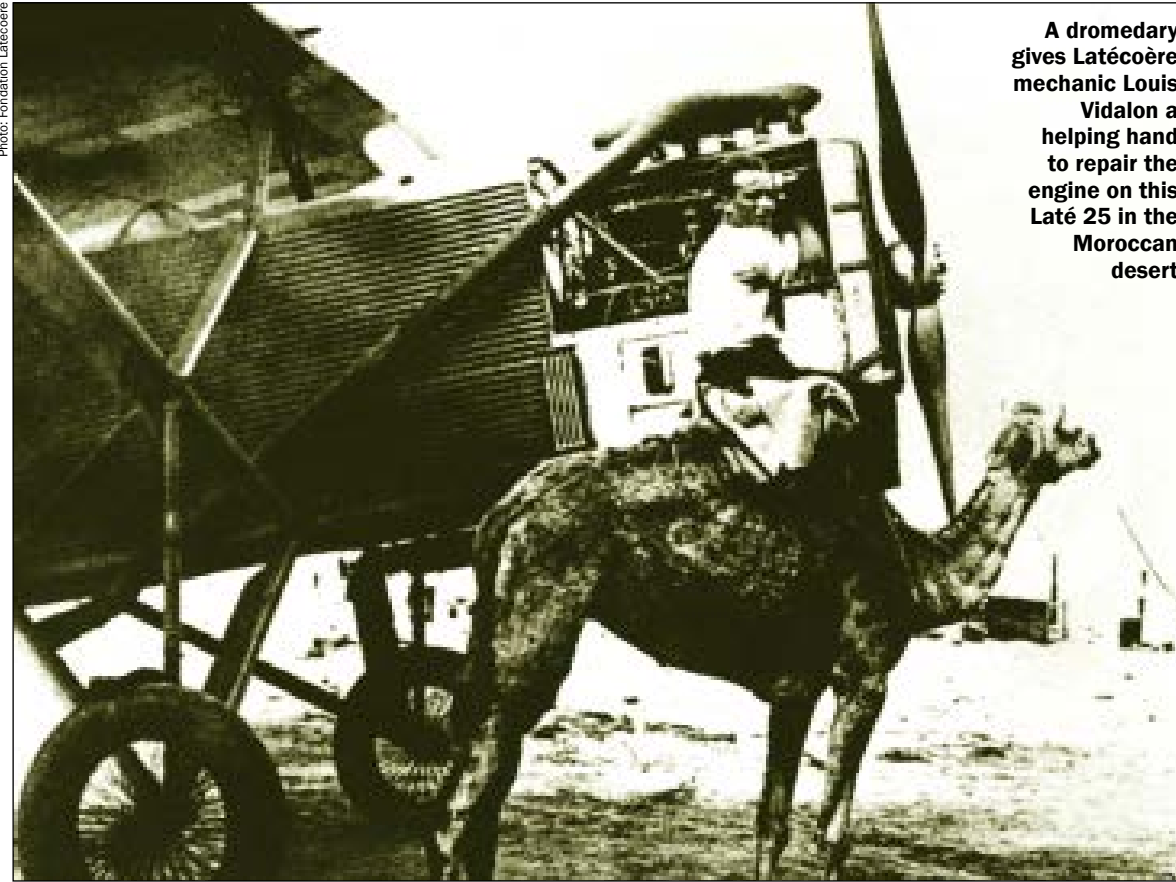
Among them were small parts of the engine and frame and on one piece there was a very small red chip of paint.

"It is the famous Aéropostale red colour, which has totally vanished today. We now have a record of the exact colour of this and other Latécoère aircraft."

He also found personal belongings such as a belt buckle and the lid of a toothpaste box on which you can read 'dentifrice Gibbs Paris'.

Mr Collaveri said the work took months but it was "fascinating and very moving. Aéropostale and Latécoère are mythical names to all aviation lovers and to touch actual parts from one of those planes is incredible."

The parts will be put on show at the new La Piste des Géants museum in Toulouse in two years.



A dromedary gives Latécoère mechanic Louis Vidalon a helping hand to repair the engine on this Laté 25 in the Moroccan desert

Friendship and duty at the heart of pilots' lives

JEAN Mermoz nearly failed his entry exam with Latécoère when he was asked to show his flying skills and did some stunts – but director Didier Daurat told him: "We don't need acrobats, we need bus drivers." To teach him a lesson Daurat hired him as a mechanic.

Born in 1901 in Aubenton, Aisne, he had been in the air force and Latécoère soon recognised his skills. He flew Toulouse-Spain and Casablanca-Dakar. In 1926 he crash-landed in the desert and was imprisoned by tribesmen and only freed a few days later after a ransom was paid.

Like Mermoz, Henri Guillaumet was an icon. Born in 1902 at Bouy in Marne he saw some of the first aircraft being tested at the nearby Camp de Châlons.

In 1908, watching Henri Farman start the first cross-country flight – of 30km – made him decide to be a pilot. He joined the air force in 1922 and when demobilised in 1926 his friend Mermoz suggested he join the company.

He flew Toulouse-Barcelona-Alicante and then Casablanca-Dakar where he met and became best friends with Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.

He had several extraordinary adventures and in 1928 received the Légion d'Honneur for helping save captured Uruguayan pilots.

In 1929 he flew the Buenos-Aires to Santiago du Chile route but on June 13 1930 a snow-storm forced him to land in the Andes. He walked for five days in the snow until saved by a shepherd.

He told Saint-Exupéry "What I have done, I swear to you, no animal would have done."

Saint-Exupéry told the story in *Terre des Hommes*, his 1939 book on Aéropostale pilots' and dedicated it to Guillaumet.

Guillaumet continued to push farther, crossing the Andes 393 times to be nicknamed the Angel of the Andes.

In 1934 he crossed the South Atlantic for the first time, with Mermoz, and did so a further 45 times. Later, when Mermoz was missing over the Atlantic, he searched for him for two days.

In 1938 he crossed the North Atlantic in a seaplane, one of 12 crossings.

He died on November 27, 1940 when flying the new high commissioner to Syria. He was shot down by an Italian plane but Britain was initially blamed.



Jean Mermoz and Henri Guillaumet in Rio

He became chief pilot and moved to Argentina where he made the first night flight from Buenos Aires to Rio.

In 1929 he flew across the Andes with Henri Guillaumet, opening up yet another hazardous route.

Becoming Inspector General for Air France in 1935, he went missing about 800km from the African coast the next year. After problems at take-off he returned for repairs and then set off, worried he would be late in delivering the mail. His last reported words were "Quick, let's not waste time anymore."

Carrier pigeons were link to safety

ONE of the first pilots to join Lignes Aériennes Latécoère in 1921 was Paul Vachet and a book on his life was written by Jack Mary, of Mémoire d'Aéropostale. Vachet was just 24 when he joined but already had an exceptional war record, having been awarded the Croix de Guerre.

Mr Mary quotes Vachet who told of the difficult conditions they flew in: "There was no closed cabin, but simply two open holes, one which was narrow for the pilot and another a lit-

tle longer for the two passengers; these two holes were protected by a very small windshield.

"In these conditions, pilot and passengers were subjected to all sorts of bad weather encountered on route and the outside temperatures were often very low in winter, due to the altitude."

Paul Vachet was not given much time to learn about the company. Only 12 days after joining he was sent to fly the Alicante-Malaga route to replace a pilot who had been killed when his plane crashed 30km from the airfield.

Conditions for pilots were very difficult. They had to cope with tornadoes, storms, heat, driving rain and faulty material which had just been through a war. Mr Mary found records of an incessant list of repairs to leaking radiators, broken oil circuits, propellers out of alignment...

Vachet was given a new mission – to cross the Mediterranean from Alicante in Spain to Oran in Algeria, a

distance of 350km, a perilous route as it was across the sea.

Poor equipment led to numerous breakdowns aboard the seaplanes and there was no radio communication ... so if he got stranded he depended on carrier pigeons to take messages to a rescue boat!

Next was South America where new routes were being opened. On January 14, 1925 three pilots, including Paul Vachet, were given permission to fly 2,300km from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil to Buenos-Aires in Argentina over two days. They needed regular stops to refuel as the Breguet 14 biplanes

they used could only fly for 500km at a time.

The only map they had was a 9m long marine map showing ocean depths – and it had to be folded and placed on one of the pilot's knees.

On one sector Vachet's radiator sprang a leak forcing him to land on a beach at 6pm as night was falling and fix the 30cm hole by candle light.

At the next refuelling stop one of the planes crashed on landing and its pilot was forced to abandon the journey.

It took 36 hours but two planes reached Buenos-Aires and the journey was shown to be much faster than the four-day trip by sea.

Vachet continued to work in South America for Aéropostale, opening up more lines and then for Air France. He enjoyed a long career and died in 1974.



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From trailblazer to beloved author

ANTOINE de Saint-Exupéry, the most well-known of the French aviation pioneers, is best-known today as author of *Le Petit Prince*. He was born on June 29, 1900, at Lyon.

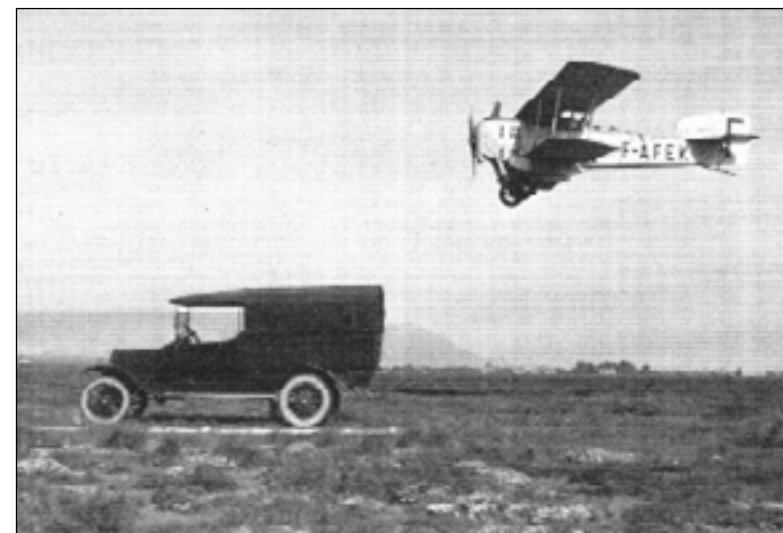
He learned to fly with the French air force and joined Aéropostale on the Toulouse to Dakar route where he was awarded the Légion d'Honneur for negotiating the release of pilots taken hostage by the Moors. In 1929 he was transferred to Argentina to survey new air routes.

His books on the pilots' exploits, *Terre des Hommes* (*Wind, Sand and Stars*) and his novel, *Vol de Nuit* (*Night Flight*) published in 1931 mirrored his experiences as a mail pilot. It was the book which established him as a rising star in the literary world.

He had several crashes, including one in 1935 when trying to break the Paris-Saigon record with navigator André Prévot. Miraculously, they survived but were lost in the desert until saved after four days by a Bedouin on a camel.

During the Second World War he flew with the French air force and in 1940 went to New York to ask the US to join the war. Three years later, despite being 43 and over age he joined the Free French to fight with the Allies.

In 1944 he took off on a reconnaissance mission from Corsica and never returned. His death has always been seen as a mystery as his body was never found. In 2000 a local diver, Luc Vanrell, found the wreck of Saint Exupéry's plane. It is thought he was shot down by a German pilot.



A Breguet 14 lands at Oran beach, Algeria, in 1923 as a post van waits



Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was a hero pilot and author