

Beyond the Sunset #5

By George Fuller

Count Henry de la Vaulx, then president of the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale, arrived at Saint-Hubert airport on 15 April 1930. He had flown from New York City and Albany via Canadian Colonial Airways continuing a promotional voyage, mostly by air, that had taken him from France to Africa and South America. In Montréal he hosted a luncheon at the Mount Royal Hotel given by the Consulate of France. In published interviews he prophesized that for trans-Atlantic passenger flight dirigibles would be superseded by "hermetically sealed" airplanes. He would go on to Ottawa to urge Canadian participation in the F.A.I.

At the Olympic Congress in Brussels in 1905 the Count was one of a small group of prominent persons proposing the formation of an international sporting organization devoted to aeronautics. The Congress requested that the Aéro-Club of France should prepare the necessary statutes. On 14 October 1905 the Fédération Aéronautique Internationale was inaugurated in Paris. Count de la Vaulx became its second president in 1924, achieving world fame in promoting air travel and sport.

In 1927 he made an aerial tour of Europe covering more than 13,000 km and flying in 26 successive aircraft. In January 1929 he was the first passenger on the French airline Aéropostale's new route from Toulouse to Buenos Aires. The first stage by air was to Dakar in Africa followed by the crossing of the Atlantic by fast boat. The last stage was by air from Natal, Brazil to the Argentine capital. After covering 17,740 km in flight he returned to France by ship, reaching Paris at the end of March.



Fairchild 71



Latécoère 28-3

His 1930 travel itinerary was even more ambitious. He would continue the 1929 route to North America then would fly from New York to South America via Florida and Cuba before returning to France. Before coming to Montréal he had visited his friend Doctor Eckener of the Zeppelin Company and Orville Wright in Ohio. He expressed his confidence in the safety of air travel, telling a Montréal reporter that his only injury in an aerial accident had been a broken leg while ballooning in 1908.

Count de la Vaulx boarded a regular scheduled Canadian Colonial Airways flight at Saint-Hubert on 18 April expecting to get to Newark airport via Albany in time to attend a dinner in New York City in his honour. He was wearing evening dress with his Légion d'Honneur insignia. The Fairchild monoplane piloted by John Sollway picked up two more passengers at Albany. They found their destination covered in thick fog and were heard circling for about an hour. Attempting to let down over New Jersey the aircraft collided with and severed a 132,000 volt electric transmission line. Power for a large area was cut off. All aboard died in a fiery crash near the Hackensack River.

France was quick to honour the Count's memory. In May the first all by airmail delivery was made from France to South America. The sector over the South Atlantic from Saint-Louis, Senegal to Natal was flown by Jean Mermoz and his crew in a Latécoère 28-3 floatplane bearing his name.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "George Gille".

Sources:

Contemporary newspapers

Houart, Victor and Edmond Petit, Dictionnaire de l'Aviation, 1964

Munson, Kenneth, Airliners between the Wars, 1919-1939, 1972