
THE WORLD'S LARGEST FLYING BOAT

During the thirties, the world power France demonstrated its engineering prowess with enormous flying boats such as the Latécoère 521.

31.62 metres long, 9.07 metres high and a wingspan of 49.31 metres: even from today's point of view, it is not difficult to imagine what an impression the Latécoère 521 "Lieutenant de Vaisseau Paris" must have made on people during the 1930s. The enormous flying boat was designed in Toulouse in 1929 under the supervision of French aeronautical engineer, Marcel Moine, at the technical department of pioneering aviation company Société des lignes Latécoère, which was founded in 1918 by Pierre-Georges Latécoère. At the time of its completion in 1935, the Latécoère 521 was the largest aircraft ever built in France.

The development of the flying colossus coincides with a time of progress when the world powers were confidently celebrating their technological achievements, as they did at the legendary New York World's Fair in 1939. Similar to today's ability to launch satellites into space, the operation of a transatlantic air link guaranteed international prestige and recognition. Rigid airships had been in service on the North Atlantic route since the 1920s. However, the Hindenburg disaster of 1937 brought an abrupt end to their use for passenger transport. Flying boats such as the Latécoère filled the gap. The American aircraft manufacturer Boeing produced a similarly impressive model, the "341 Clipper".

The Latécoère 521 was designed as a one-and-a-half-decker, a variant of a double-decker which combines a large upper wing and a pair of lower wings with a much smaller area and wingspan. This construction not only allows high stability and thinner wing profiles, but the passengers also have a better view of the ground. Six powerful Hispano-Suiza 12Ydrs piston engines with an output of 890 hp per unit provided the necessary lift. The hull of the flying boat was made of Duralumin, a specially hardened aluminium alloy. It comprised a generous lower deck and a more compact, narrower upper deck. On the lower level, there was a saloon with 20 armchairs and tables, a bar, a kitchen, as well as six luxurious cabins with private bathrooms. The saloon was furnished with light and elegantly designed furniture. In addition to comfortable armchairs near the windows, salon tables in the carpet-covered aisle invited the passengers to linger and relax. Food was freshly prepared in the on-board kitchens and served on tableware specially made for the Latécoère 521. On the transatlantic route, passengers enjoyed a level of luxury that easily surpasses that of a first-class flight on one of today's modern airliners.

On 14 July 1939, the national day of France, the Latécoère 521 set off for the first non-stop crossing of the North Atlantic by flying boat, thereby accomplishing a major feat in the conquest of the North Atlantic. Captain Henri Guillaumet piloted the "Lieutenant de Vaisseau Paris" on this flight. The flying boat covered the 5875 kilometres from New York (Port Washington) to the Lac de Biscarrosse in France in 28 hours and 27 minutes, with an average cruising speed of 206 km/h. An airship would have taken two to three times as long to cover the same distance. Also on board was Antoine de Saint Exupéry. At his heartfelt request, the French Minister of Aviation, Guy La Chambre, had nominated him as an "additional pilot" for this test flight. The famous passenger was not only interested in the technical features of the Latécoère 521, he also kept the crew entertained with funny stories, illusionist displays and card tricks. Shortly afterwards, Saint Exupéry returned to New York as a passenger aboard the "Lieutenant de Vaisseau Paris".

The Atlantic crossing left a powerful impression even on such an experienced pilot as Antoine de Saint Exupéry. During a radio interview with NBC, he said that it was not just the feeling of having breakfast one day in New York and lunch the next in France that struck him. The journey also illustrated something to him that he said he had often considered in connection with aviation. Thanks to modern technology, it seemed to him that humankind was moving towards a kind of simultaneity. And, more so than time itself, it was the distances that were gradually disappearing, noted the author of "Vol de Nuit" ("Night Flight").

With the outbreak of the Second World War, the Latécoère 521's use as a passenger aircraft came to an abrupt end. It had carried passengers on the transatlantic route a mere twelve times. The era of giant flying boats is all the more fascinating today because not a single one survived the destructive force of the war. Just like its four successors, the Latécoère 521 was irreparably destroyed. The Latécoère Foundation now works to preserve the legacy of these fascinating flying boats. Alongside this, the photographs of Antoine de Saint Exupéry's journey, as well as his invaluable accounts as a time witness, make sure that this thrilling chapter of aviation history remains alive to this day.

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