

GEORGES MADON

The French Red Baron

by David Méchin

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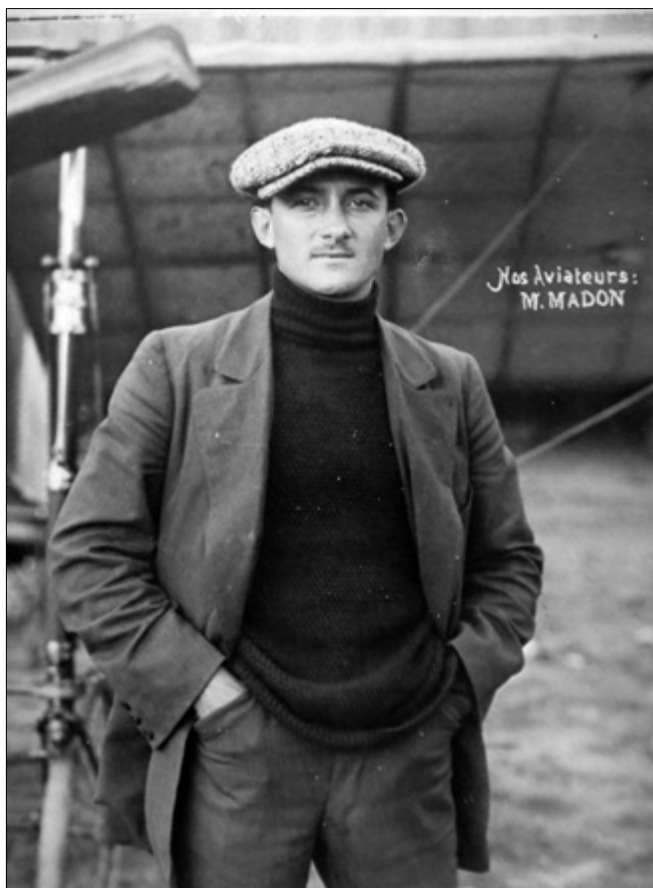


GEORGES MADON, with his 41 official victories, ranks as the 4th highest scoring French ace of the Great War. His personality was unique in more ways than one: he was one of the rare aces of the war to be a military pilot before the outbreak of hostilities, he was the pilot with the most unconfirmed victories and, before Richthofen, his aeroplane was painted red, which earned him a great reputation among his peers ... both French and Germans.

EARLY INTEREST IN AVIATION

Georges Félix Madon was born in Bizerte (Tunisia) on 28 July 1892, into a wealthy family of *pieds-noirs* (French settlers in North Africa). His mother was of Italian origin. The young boy soon proved to have a sporting temperament and he obtained his *certificat d'études* (certificate of elementary primary education). But, in 1907, he was a victim of malaria attacks and had to interrupt his studies for treatment at home. It was there that, according to his recollections, he became passionate about aviation and so both read technical magazines and created flying models by 'borrowing' springs from clocks in the house. He also fixed wings on his bike and

Photo taken in 1911 at the Blériot flying school in Etampes. Madon was then only 19 years old.



ended up in a ditch. Then performed 'flight tests' with the assistance of his 11-year-old young sister. The young aviatrix had a fall, to the anger of the parents, who immediately halted the flying experiments. But the teenager Georges Madon was persistent. He invented an aerobus by fixing a table on a swing and employed a team of 'test pilots' from among his young friends; they ended in the dust. Far from becoming discouraged, he began to make hot-air balloons, in which neighbouring cats became the first balloonists. His health improved, he developed an active life and wanted to become a mechanic by taking an apprenticeship in workshops.

CIVILIAN LICENCE IN 1911

He kept his dreams of flight in his head and it was then that an airman named Bouvier made an exhibition in flight over Tunis on 19 April 1911. For Madon, it was the spark: he wanted to become an aviator. He then deceitfully suggested to his parents that a trip to Paris would be better for his health and his wish was granted. Once there, he rushed to the pilot schools to realize his dream and learn to fly. This was the epoch of the exploits of Vedriner and Garros. One morning he went to the Blériot d'Etampes school: *A white sweater, a well-padded cap on my head, hands carelessly stuffed in the pockets, a cigarette in the corner of the mouth, seemed to immediately give me the desired appearance, that of the old air wolf.*

He started his first lesson on an instruction plane, which, at the time, did not yet have wings clipped but, instead, had a limiter on the throttle. This limiter broke and the aeroplane left at full throttle and took off to a height of 30 metres. Madon then started a rodeo ride in his machine, and narrowly avoided a collision with a train. His Blériot, which carried only 5 litres of petrol, ended up running out of fuel. Madon managed to put it into a glide and landed without damage. 19 lessons later, he obtained his pilot's licence (No.595) on 8 September 1911; he was barely 19 years old.

While he finished his lessons at Etampes, two organizers of flying meetings presented themselves on the aerodrome, in search of pilots for an exhibition that they planned to organize at Nogent-le-Rotrou. The young Madon was engaged and participated in his first flying meeting on a 25hp Anzani-powered Blériot, a very unreliable plane which had been provided by the organizers. The young airman made an impeccable take-off in front of the crowd, then a short flight in the vicinity. But the aeroplane climbed to 20 metres and, on return, finished in a row of trees at the edge of the aerodrome. With no other injury than that to his self-esteem, he had delighted the audience of the meeting, who were in search of sensations! His reputation as an aviator was made and he received the offer of an engagement in America and another in Germany, which he had to decline because his military service had to be carried out that year. He decided to return to Tunisia and reassure his mother, who was worried by reading about stories of air accidents in the press. However, on the spot, he learnt that the Turks were looking for mercenary