

# JEAN CHAPUT

*A biography by David Mechin*

IT WAS IN A PRIVILEGED ENVIRONMENT that Anne Chaput (née Sandrique) gave birth to her son Jean at three o'clock in the morning of 17 September 1893 in 30 rue du Bac, in the 7th arrondissement of Paris. Her husband, Henri Chaput, was a 35-year-old medical doctor who quickly became a surgeon with a national reputation and was decorated with the Cross of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. The family, which included a young daughter named Jeanne, then moved to 21 rue d'Eylau, an address in the affluent 16th arrondissement. Jean's schooling would take place a few blocks from his home, at the prestigious Janson-de-Sailly high school. But if he showed himself to be a talented pupil, the young Jean was not really passionate about studies and thrived only in sports activities which he practiced, not only at school but also, during his holidays, in his father's home village of Tonnerre in the Yonne. He made many boat trips along the Armançon river and, at the age of twelve, had already distinguished himself by going upstream of a weir. During a vacation at Berck, he became passionate about building kites and quickly became fascinated by aviation, as did many young men of the time. Having travelled to England, he developed an interest in rugby, but was equally passionate about mechanics and electronics by tinkering, during 1908, with a small electrical plant that served the water pipes of the city of Tonnerre.

Misfortune struck the family with the premature death of Madame Chaput. Widowed, Henri Chaput would not remarry. He took refuge in his work and had high hopes in his son, who he hoped would become a brilliant surgeon. However, Jean, who now practiced athletics at his high school, dreamt only of becoming an aviator and even wished to abandon his studies in order to devote himself to his passion. There were probably some lively family discussions. Henri Chaput, holding the purse strings, reached a compromise with his son: he would finance flying lessons provided he obtained an engineering degree. This motivated Jean to resume his studies, which allowed him, in 1913 when he was twenty years old, to obtain a postponement of his military service.

On 16 June 1914, the young man went with his father to Issy les Moulineaux aerodrome and the Nieuport flying school. Henri Chaput signed a cheque for 1500 francs to pay for his son's flying lessons of his son and Jean had his first flight on 18 June, with an instructor in a Nieuport monoplane. His instructors found him quite talented and he made his first solo flight on 2 July, gaining his civilian pilot's licence (No.1718) eight days later.

## KICKING HIS HEELS AT ST CYR

In Europe, the international tension was at its peak after the 28 June assassinations in Sarajevo and war was declared by Germany on 3 August 1914. Jean Chaput, who had just obtained his diploma as an electrical engineer, was then called up, on 4 August, into the 36th Infantry Regiment, but his civilian pilot's certificate saw his immediate posting to the 2nd Air Group. On 18 August the unit received orders to

transfer to the aviation centre at Saint Cyr, near Versailles. A couple of friends accompanied Chaput by car and the young man, if we believe the war diaries that he updated daily, gave a passionate back-seat embrace to the young wife of the driver, who was concentrating on the road ahead.

Arrived at St Cyr, he quickly became disillusioned after discovering it to be a rather disordered base where, as simple soldier, he was left without orders. He passed severe judgement on the pilots he met, finding them not very motivated for a fight. He was not assigned any aeroplane and spent his days waiting and trying to perfect his understanding of aircraft engines machine guns. The first two flights he made, on 20 and 24 August, were only as a passenger on a Nieuport VI two-seater.

On 27 August, he attended, with envy, the departure to the front of the newly-formed squadron MS.26, which flew Morane Parasols. But a tragedy occurred at take-off: one machine made too tight a turn and crashed in a spin, killing its crew of Lieutenant Jean Barbier (pilot) and soldier Joseph Dereix de Laplane, two men whom Chaput knew and liked. They would be the first in a long list of missing comrades.

1 September 1914 saw his first war flight, which was made in a completely improvised way. Two days earlier, a lone German Taube flew over the capital, with its crew discharging grenades that caused some casualties among the population, creating outrage. The crews at the aerodromes around Paris

*A 1912 portrait of Dr. Henri Chaput, father of the ace and a surgeon with a national reputation, practicing at the Lariboisière hospital. : Gallica*

