Air and ink: the two elements of Antoine de Saint Exupéry

Antoine de Saint Exupéry

Pioneer and Poet

by Maria-Bettina Eich

He made headlines as a pioneering aviator during his lifetime, and as an author his name continues to appear in the pages of literary history. Antoine de Saint Exupéry combined two professions that were, in their innermost essence, inseparably linked. During an important part of his life he lived the turbulent, between-the-wars bohemian scene in Paris, nourished and inspired by an epoch unrivaled in its extraordinary artistic fertility. Saint Exupéry felt at home in this world. He was on familiar terms with many of the era's foremost artists. Though living in what may have been the world's most stimulating city in these exciting years, Saint Exupéry couldn't bear to live without the exaltation of flight, the solitude of the expansive sky, the confrontation with nature, the discovery of exotic worlds and, ultimately, the privations of an adventurer.

Flying wasn't only a passion—it was an existential need. As pilot and poet he was an equally extraordinary personality. Flying had always been a spiritual experience for Saint Exupéry and his writings eloquently express this. He and his colleagues risked their lives daily so that airmail could leap over continents and arrive safely and punctually at its destination. It was a venture that involved more than carrying letters and packages. Saint Exupéry's employer, Latécoère Airlines, was a business full of pioneering spirit. The flight paths of Latécoère's courier aircrafts traced new lines across the unwritten page of the sky, penetrated into the unknown, and accomplished feats that had been thought impossible: "We're young, wild and astonished by our playthings." Saint Exupéry and his fellow couriers established many records and were among the first pilots to risk the daring adventure of night flight. Aéropostale pilots were as much a part of their era's avant-garde as were the painters, writers and musicians who, at this same time, were

Saint Exupéry with Henri Guillaumet, one of his most daring colleagues in the Aéropostale

busily exploring the artistic dimensions of modernism in the world's metropolises.

The fascination that flight exerted on Saint Exupéry and his colleagues was closely linked with the current state of aviation technology. Small aircraft typically carried only a pilot and copilot. These two-man crews were responsible for their own navigation and were directly exposed to the forces of nature. The two adventurers frequently made life-and-death decisions on flight routes and landings at a time when air-traffic infrastructure was still in its infancy. This situation put these individuals into direct contact with an impersonal universe and the capricious elements, which could challenge them to a fight for their lives or lull them into a cozy embrace: "We're free from common slavery, independent of springs and wells, and we fly directly toward our distant destinations." These experiences were central to Saint Exupéry's life, writing, and conception of man. At the same time, he took a highly skeptical view of the increasingly pervasive influence that technology was exerting on life and was deeply troubled by the threats that technology posed to his heartfelt humanitarian values. He regarded the technological progress that transfor-

Saint Exupéry reading "Night Flight"

med aviation during his lifetime as an intrusion that robbed flight of much of its appeal. "Most flights had no story. We peacefully immersed ourselves in the depths of our realm, just as professional divers descend into the sea. Nowadays everything is well known and thoroughly understood. Pilots, mechanics and radio operators no longer dare any adventures, preferring instead to enclose themselves within a veritable laboratory. They obey the play of their instruments and have ceased to obey the course of the landscape." For Saint Exupéry and his colleagues, flight was a bold, maverick experience, inseparably linked with the experience of physical danger: "We've all known flights in which, a mere two hours away from the airfield, something makes us uneasy, inexpressibly lonesome and abandoned, as though we were lost in the midst of India. Every hope of return seems to have disappeared." The American writer Anne Morrow Lindbergh, who was married to the pioneering aviator Charles Lindbergh, recalls a conversation with Saint Exupéry in which the Frenchman identified danger and loneliness as the two factors that most influentially shaped a person's character.

Antoine de Saint Exupéry was born in 1900. When he joined Latécoère Airlines in 1926, he had already been fascinated by flight for more than half his life. He had first flown in an airplane at age 12, paid for his own flight lessons during his period of military service, and received his pilot's license in 1922. As a member of Latécoère's team, Saint Exupéry found himself in surroundings that were custom-tailored to suit his tastes. Having distanced himself from his noble origins—Saint Exupéry's father had held the title of count—he put himself in an atmosphere characterized by daring, camaraderie, and a sense of duty. His colleague Jean Mermoz, who became one of Saint Exupéry's closest friends, numbered among France's greatest pilots and is remembered today as the founder of the airline pilot profession.

Couriers across the Continents

Saint Exupéry flew the Toulouse-Casablanca and Dakar-Casablanca routes for Latécoère in 1927. During this time he developed a passion that would possess him for the rest of his life: he discovered the desert, which would continue to play an important role in his life and writings from this time onward. In a certain sense, the desert was like the sky: unending, unknown and unpredictable, full of hidden beauties and hidden dangers. Saint Exupéry not only had to cope with sandstorms, but also with problematic relations with the local Moors. A pilot who had been forced to make an emergency landing in Moorish territory ran the risk of being taken hostage. Saint Exupéry's affinity with the region and his skillful diplomacy in dealing with its indigenous inhabitants prompted his employers to appoint him director of Cap Juby Airfield, which was situated on a remote cape along the Moroccan coast. The rigors of isolation might have enraged or depressed another man, but Saint Exupéry found his situation artistically inspiring. This period of his life found literary expression in *Southern Mail*, his first novel.

Flying as an existential need:
Guillaumet and Saint Exupéry in 1939

The Aéropostale, the successor to Latécoère Airlines, decided to add a new continent – South America – to its network in 1928. The Aéropostale established regularly scheduled flights across the South American continent and from there across the Atlantic via Africa to Europe. Saint Exupéry was transferred to Buenos Aires in 1929, where he served as director of transportation for Aéroposta Argentina.

South America meant new challenges. Mountains, snowstorms and bone-jarring electrical storms were daily adversities for pilots. Even more dangerous, however, was the introduction of regularly scheduled night flights. These missions were essential for speedy postal delivery, which, in turn, was essential for the business's survival. Without these night flights, the advantages of the greater speed of airplanes would have been lost because slower modes of surface transport by rail or ship would be have been able to catch up

with airplanes during the night. Saint Exupéry's famous novel *Night Flight* recounts the dangers and the heroism that went hand in hand with this risky new undertaking in airmail aviation.

"I too can recall one of the hours when one overstepped the boundaries of the real world"

Saint Exupéry remained in South America for two years. This was a fulfilling and successful sojourn, toward the end of which he met his future wife Consuelo. Saint Exupéry returned to Paris, but was soon stationed again in North Africa, where he resumed his career as an airmail pilot in 1931. He transported water as a pilot of tanker planes between Marseilles and Agadir for a short time, then flew courier flights across Africa. But his beloved career as a mail pilot came to an end in 1932. The Aéropostale had strayed into severe economic difficulties. Precious little of the business remained when it, and other airlines, were incorporated into the newly founded Air France in 1933.

Flying through Turbulent Times

What followed was a restless and frequently dissatisfying period in Saint Exupéry's life. Commissions as a test pilot and propaganda aviator, as well as work on aviation technology (for which he was awarded numerous patents), couldn't surpass the passion and personal fulfillment he had enjoyed during his years with the Aéropostale. In the meantime, however, he had successfully established himself as an author. His novels sold well and were adapted into screenplays for films. Both media brought him fame and fortune. But Saint Exupéry wasn't cut out for a bourgeois existence. Planning for the future and creating a secure situation for himself had never been his cup of tea. His relationship to money occupies a place all its own in his biographies; it expresses Saint Exupéry's passionate, generous and spendthrift temperament. His financial situation underwent enormous variations: there were times when he couldn't allow himself to be seen by his concierge because he couldn't pay his rent, and times when he was able to purchase and fly his own airplane. What he had, he spent. And it was of little help to his financial situation that, one year prior to his death, he published what became one of the best-selling books in history,—*The Little Prince*. Only the *Bible* and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* have sold more copies worldwide.

Shortage of money was just one of the motivations that prompted Saint Exupéry to attempt to set a new record for the route from Paris to Saigon in 1935. An emergency landing in the Egyptian desert nearly put an end to the life of a pilot who had already survived several flight-related accidents. He and his mechanic survived the unplanned landing without suffering any injuries, but they nearly died of thirst during the subsequent three-day hike without drinking water. As luck would have it, they were rescued by a passing caravan. This experience found its impressive literary expression in a prose piece that was first published in a newspaper and then, in slightly modified form, in Saint Exupéry's book *Wind, Sand and Stars*.

"We possessed nothing but wind, sand and stars"

A second attempt to set a record ended with a life-threatening crash. Saint Exupéry had taken off from New York in 1938 on an ill-fated flight to Tierra del Fuego. After a successful landing in Guatemala, his plane suddenly plunged earthward. Saint Exupéry was severely injured in the crash. It took him a long time to recover from this accident and he suffered from its consequences for the rest of his life.

World War II broke out the following year—and Saint Exupéry was drafted to serve as a pilot in a reconnaissance unit. The poet-pilot who deeply loved his country was struck to the quick by the collapse of Free France in 1940. He went into exile in New York in 1940, where he remained until 1943—, tirelessly trying to persuade the United States that it was necessary to enter the war. During this time, among his other works of fiction, he wrote *The Little Prince* –, the last work that he would publish during his lifetime.

As is well known, Saint Exupéry's greatest wish ultimately came true in 1941, when the U.S. entered the war. After the Allies landed in North Africa in 1942, Saint Exupéry longed to participate in the war effort and agreed to be remobilized. He traveled to Algiers in April 1943. He spent the few months before his death in July 1944 as a member of Allied reconnaissance squadrons in North Africa, Italy and Corsica, where, as always, he was consumed by his torturous longing to fly. His urge to play an active role in the war and his spiritually motivated solidarity made it unbearable for him not to actively participate in the war effort. However, at the age of 43, he was really too old to fly as a military pilot. Furthermore, Saint Exupéry wasn't accustomed to his squadron's speedy American Lockheed Lightnings. He repeatedly found colleagues who intervened in favor of allowing him to participate in combat missions, but seldom received permission to actually take off. Many military commanders felt that it would be irresponsible to allow him to climb into an airplane cockpit. A crash landing in July 1943 further damaged Saint Exupéry's reputation as an aviator. He had suffered numerous accidents in the course of his career as a pilot, some of which were attributed to his dreamy and spiritual nature, but now he really seemed to be too old to fly.

The Last Mission

The takeoff on July 31, 1944 was supposed to have been Saint Exupéry's last—and it would have been, even if he hadn't crashed over the Mediterranean. His superiors had decided to end Antoine de Saint Exupéry's career as a military pilot after this final flight. They were planning to share with him the details of the planned Allied landing in Normandy. As bearer of this secret, he would have been barred from further flight missions.

But fate had other plans. The fuel in his aircraft would have allowed him to remain aloft from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. at the latest. When his airplane

Saint Exupéry as a World War Two reconnaissance pilot

failed to return in the early afternoon from its flight to Grenoble, his colleagues feared that they would never see him again. Saint Exupéry had disappeared over the Mediterranean.

Fifty-five years elapsed before further details of Saint Exupéry's final hours became known. Parts of his wrecked aircraft were discovered in the Mediterranean Sea near Marseilles in the year 2000. This wreckage is now on display at the Musée de l'Air et de l'Espace, the big French aviation museum in Le Bourget near Paris. The remnants of his aircraft form the centerpiece of the newly created "Espace IWC–Saint Exupéry." This part of the exhibition was created as a cooperative venture between the IWC watch *manufacture* in Schaffhausen and the company, directed by Saint Exupéry's great-nephew Olivier D'Agay, that administrates the poet's estate. It's an exhibition that celebrates the legacy of a man who brought us a little bit closer to the stars.