


The Construction of an Image in Aviation: the Case of René Fonck and the French Press (1917-1926)

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Fonck, « as des as » déchu ? Composition et re compositions d'une figure aviatrice par la presse française (1917-1926)

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TEXT

- 1 The case of René Fonck’s (1894-1953) is quite an exceptional one. Arriving late on the list of WW1 flying aces – after his fifth confirmed success on an enemy plane on May 13, 1917 – Fonck quickly received the praises of the French press due to his military performances¹. This was especially after he had supposedly “avenged” the shooting down and killing of the beloved Georges Guynemer. His place in French imagination thus appeared rather different than that of other fighter aces like Dorme or Nungesser. Ending the war with 75 confirmed successes, Fonck was elected to the Parliament (as a member of the “Bleu Horizon” Chamber) and President of the *Ligue Aéronautique de France*. Similarly to another ace, Alfred Heurtaux²,

Fonck became a “*député-aviateur*” Fonck became all the more interesting for the press in that he seemed to fly from success to success, always extending the horizon of aspiration³ in the context of “the passion for wings”⁴. In early 1919, the 24-year-old pilot confirmed the stereotype of the irresistible airman, a new republican hero incarnating the modernity and the vitality of his nation.

- 2 Fonck’s attempt to fly over the Atlantic in 1926 stimulated exceptional popular infatuation and this was sustained by daily updates in newspapers which provided details of the preparations carried out by the Frenchman in the United States. Disillusion was huge as Fonck’s plane eventually crashed while he tried to take off on September 21, 1926. This was a turning point in the narrative of his life as afterwards he only rarely appeared in French newspapers and in politics until his death on June 18, 1953.
- 3 This explains why the period of his life from 1917 to 1926 is the best-documented. Alongside archives telling of his activities during the war, in Parliament and on airfields, a number of articles with a focus on the pilot published in –specialized or not– French newspapers show how the public image of René Fonck was shaped and reshaped depending on the time of writing⁵. Through words and pictures, we have access to representations of Fonck in the popular imagination and, more globally, to aspects of an aeronautical culture which was still in the making in the early 1920s. As Michel Vovelle was to write, literature is a “support électroscope [qui] frémit et enregistre aussi plus vite les frissons de la sensibilité collective”⁶. Newspaper articles are the most immediate expression of this through the need to characterize news-reporting and oblige reporters to provide impressions at the time of writing. Through their studies made over a short period of time, we can understand the continuities and the changes made to the way René Fonck was represented and how original he is in aerial imagination of this time.
- 4 In war, and later in peacetime, several aspects of René Fonck’s life were to set him apart from the representations made of other pilots. Although he was elected Member of Parliament in 1919, he remained an airman in the eyes of newspaper columnists. His association with the imaginary world above kept him above the man in the street and

excluded him from criticism right up to the time of a failed attempt which was all the more embarrassing as it happened on an airfield.

1. The “Ace of Aces”: a “Knight of the Sky” in the Great Impersonal War (1917-1918)

1.1. Aviation: a cherished topic of the press during the war

- 5 Even before 1914, the image of the pilot came in the scope of a “diversely mobilized patriotic culture”⁷. In Parliament, as well as in newspapers, tributes to fighter pilots had never been subject to debate and they contributed to maintaining the morale of the public and, at the same time, convincing civil society that it was capable of playing a role in the war alongside the military⁸. The difficulties encountered in February 1916 during the Verdun offensive eventually convinced official instances of the interest to lower the level of censure and allow for the identification of aces⁹. They were easily identifiable heroic figures that could be shown to civilians at the time of an impersonal war where the *poilus* were covered in mud in the trenches. The detail provided by journalists on the question of official German losses demonstrates how propagandists took an interest in this means of communication¹⁰. When René Fonck became a fighter ace on May 1917¹¹, he joined a prestigious hierarchy forged both by military command that allowed for the homologations, and by a war press which followed and actively relayed the exploits of these aces¹². A small number of leading actors were used as a way of portraying the war from a positive perspective due partly to the fact that aviation had been considered as a sport before 1914¹³.
- 6 Necessarily violent, death had always been part of the “dramaturgy of the Air”. The adaptation of the first civil pilots to the military context therefore happened quite naturally¹⁴. Aerial warfare is imbued with a profoundly aesthetic dimension that fascinated spectators of these combats, and this was whether they were pilots in their cockpits, soldiers or war reporters on the ground who adhered all the more nat-

urally that they admired the “sublime” reality of these modern fights¹⁵. It is from this perspective that the war experience of these fighter aces was turned into a narrative by French journalists who constructed airborne figures endowed with mythical potential. The aces were very popular both in France and Germany¹⁶.

- 7 The omnipresence of the tales of fighter aces appearing in civilian newspapers – as opposed to those intended for reading by soldiers on the front – was all the more justified in that there was public demand and this opened the way for a reinforcement in the efficiency of the “*bourrage de crâne*” in aerial matters¹⁷. This explains why a relatively independent journal such as *La Guerre aérienne illustrée* headed by the former sport journalist Jacques Mortane participated strongly in the war effort¹⁸.

1.2. How the image of Fonck merged into the myth of the flying ace

- 8 While increasing its autonomy, aviation forged its identity by using iconic figures who incarnated guiding values and principles. Jean Navarre the “*sentinelle de Verdun*”, and later Georges Guynemer, a favorite of the press and first “ace of aces” to be clearly identifiable by the general public – are the two main figures of early French fighter aviation¹⁹. They are – among the other aces – formal variations of the same myth of the flying ace which was identified by Céline Bryon-Portet through the use of mythemes and whose main symbols in had already been constituted in 1917²⁰. These were inserted into reporters’ narratives and were used to construct the image of the new ace, René Fonck
- 9 The pilots who became known as “knights of the sky” as early as 1915 seemingly revived the notion of the noble war which climbed above the industrial and impersonal war where millions of soldiers were crammed into trenches²¹. Stories about aerial warfare used all types of codes associated with this image, especially the more ethical ones. Fighter pilots were described as chivalrous patriots who were rather modest in relation to their successes and their comrades. *Le Petit Parisien* thus explained to the reader in May 1918 that “[René Fonck] had not changed. His 45 victories, his large number of decorations and his fame had not altered his modesty and simplicity. He wears

the ribbons of his medals as little as possible and this includes his *Croix de guerre*.”²² Remaining humble despite his many successes and stating that he was only doing his duty, the young man was the perfect demonstration of the chivalrous ideal. However, demonstrating that there was a gap between the stories which appeared in the newspapers, Fonck’s commandant in the Escadrille 103, Jean d’Harcourt, was later to testify in a file which remains confidential that “Fonck was far from being insensitive to rewards which satisfied his instinct for justice and his legitimate desire for glory”²³.

- 10 The relationship between pilots and their opponents is another means of understanding this difference between the reality of the pilots’ war experience and the way it was slotted into a chivalrous narrative. Just like the knights of medieval times, pilots were supposedly fighting aerial duels on an equal footing in planes which were unstable and agile mounts which sometimes reared and needed to be handled with dexterity²⁴. This explains why Fonck was photographed by *Le Miroir* posing in front of his noble steed and humbly showing the “coat of arms of his victim” In olden days, an opponent’s banner would be taken as to symbolise his defeat²⁵. (fig. 1). This analogy to the past was generally extended to describe attacks from behind as giving the attacker the advantage of surprise when, in reality, it had more in common with an assassination than it had to a proper duel²⁶. This was especially true in the final years of the war, when squadron formation became the standard²⁷.

(Fig. 1)

“Fonck after one of his recent victories”, *Le Miroir*, n° 251, September 15, 1918, p. 15.



- 11 As aerial warfare increased in size, the myth of the knights of the sky gradually fell apart in the later months of the conflict²⁸. Towards the end of the war, Fonck's patrol flew in triangle or in diamond formation to cover the flanks of the "ace of aces" using three or four planes²⁹. The tactic of attacking from behind and/or with the sun in the back that Fonck used to surprise his enemies was therefore covered up by journalists and they used more glorious animalistic metaphors to describe his behaviour³⁰. Fonck, himself, compared his behaviour to a "bird of prey [inspired] by [his] instinct [which] flies very high to let himself fall on the opponent"³¹.
- 12 Forging a distance between the reality of combats and the way they were depicted, these journalistic portraits contributed nonetheless to democratizing war heroism which had previously been the reserve of generals³². Fonck was a young mechanic before the war. However, from the day he became an ace, he became part of an elitist corporation and an "absolute aristocracy among the glorious combatants of the fifth arm"³³. Publications such as *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*

echoed this by explaining to its readers that “fighter force is [...] a universally praised, glorious elite “and that being part of it was like receiving a certificate of distinction attesting the consecration of exceptional qualities. [...] The names of those in the force were held up for the admiration of the crowds and the press enumerates and comments on the victories.”³⁴ This universality and this exceptionality of the image of the ace reinforced its mythical dimension.

13 As they counted the successes of each pilot and described aerial battles, reporters put particular emphasis on the sportive dimension of performances which, in reality, were more like assassinations. Doing so was made all the easier as journalists, who were used to describing the acrobatic and fast sport of flying planes, had moved into war journalism³⁵. Contributing to the modern cult of performance, the competition for victories became a powerful stimulation both for pilots and for the public. For this reason, aerial warfare quickly turned into a sporting and military event where winners were followed intensely. Jacques Mortane – a former sports journalist who became redactor in chief of *La Guerre aérienne illustrée* – contributed largely to spreading the comparison between the ace and a heroic sportsman³⁶. In January 1917, he described aerial combats as “terrifying, harrowing and glorious matches that captivate us today”³⁷. Fonck was later depicted as a competitor, “rival of the *Sous-Lieutenant* Madon with whom he engaged a glorious match to shoot down the *Boches*”³⁸.

14 The number of confirmed successes were ranked and aces appeared on a list of winners at the top of which was always a young and healthy “ace of aces.” After the death of Georges Guynemer (53 victories) and the wounding of Charles Nungesser (43 victories), the position was held by René Fonck who totaled 75 confirmed kills by the end of the war. For the press he became a record holder (“*record-man*”) who became particularly famous after shooting down six enemy aircraft in the same day (May 9, 1918)³⁹. The following month, a photo of Fonck was featured on the front cover of *La Guerre aérienne illustrée* and the photo had been placed inside the dial of a clock showing to the second the alleged time of the victory in order to underline the magnificence of Fonck’s performance (fig. 2)⁴⁰. Placing Fonck alongside other fighter pilots through the use of myth-

emes, journalists also singled out Fonck in readers' minds through the use of special features.

(Fig. 2)

The first sextuplé of René Fonck on the cover of *La Guerre aérienne illustrée* on July 13, 1918.



1.3. Fonck, the “Invincible Avenger”

- 15 In many respects, the image of Fonck ascribed by journalists was quite different to that of the ideal ace⁴¹. While reporters highlighted the spirit and the enthusiasm of Georges Guynemer, or the carefree attitude of Charles Nungesser, René Fonck was depicted as a cold-blooded, methodical tactician who was unbeatable due to his speed in the air. These descriptions were built from the technique he used in combat as well as on the physical aspects and attitudes that reporters could observe during interviews⁴². *L'Illustration* thus reported to its readers that:

Fonck is a man of average stature with broad shoulders, who stands straight, only makes few gestures, looks squat and thin all together. The serious expression of his face contrasts with the youth of his features. He is twenty-two years old, speaks with an equal voice, expresses himself using short sentences taking the time to think about them first. The simplicity of his military uniform, the sobriety of his attitude and his self-control which radiates from his person are lone indicators that he is special⁴³.

- 16 Alongside the classic modesty of the flying ace, Fonck's image is reflected particularly when recalling the thorough method he used to shoot down enemy airplanes. This image was a recurrent topic of comments made about Fonck. Jacques Mortane – with whom Fonck sympathized – used the exceptional visual acuity of the pilot to compare him to a striking eagle. “His look is very peculiar: the eyes that lie behind his creased eyelids are of a rare mobility. When they stare at you, they gleam like the blue of steel. One can imagine what the eagle looks like when it swoops on its opponent.”⁴⁴ Just as the reference to metal reminds us of some aspects of modern warfare, the reader can understand the fusion between the pilot and his plane: a man's eyes merge with the wings of the machine and this paves the way to the metaphor of the noble eagle that swoops on its prey. Another recurrent avian metaphor was the use of the stork. This was symbol used by the *groupe de combat* 12, the name of the unit within which Fonck fought his aerial war. As Fonck's reputation grew inside the unit (the SPA 103) its planes became known as “Fonck's storks” due to their flanks being emblazoned with images of this long-winged bird. (fig. 3). That they did so had a powerful meaning as this migratory white bird was the symbol of the so-called “lost provinces” (Alsace and Moselle) upon which the memory of Third Republic patriotism had been built⁴⁵. Following the death of Georges Guynemer on September 11, 1917 Jacques Mortane was, again, to extend the metaphor writing:

From the thick clouds within which they hid themselves from view, the Storks swooped in a show of wonderful might and beauty; they rushed on to the surprised and panicked black birds. The long beak of the vengeful birds had soon reached the heart of fast sparrow hawks and enormous vultures⁴⁶.

(Fig. 3)
Fonck's stork exposed in the Trocadero Palace on March 1919.



- 17 The thin-beaked storks of the squadron became vengeful and triumphant against the enemy birds of prey that, in the reader's imagination, were dark and sneaky. French journalists – in particular Jacques Mortane and Jean Daçay – quickly concluded that Fonck had avenged the beloved ace Guynemer by killing his killer⁴⁷. In the eyes of the press Fonck became “Guynemer’s avenger” at a time when – as the *Adjutant* Paul Hatin put it – “revenge ennobled”⁴⁸. Fonck’s being named so was exceptional and it established a direct link between the two “ace of aces”. At the same time it maintained the transcendental dimension of a military corps in the making: one which was made up of knights of the air that defended the honor of their fallen comrades. This singularized Fonck while comforting the idea of his invincibility – a notion confirmed by the fact that his plane was never hit by a bullet. The invincibility associated with Fonck was added to an heroic dimension which meant that victory against inferior opposition was almost inevitable.

Nicknamed “the Invincible” [Fonck] is convinced that he is superior to every single enemy pilot and that nothing except luck, or the stray bullet of a panic-stricken enemy, can prevent him from being so. [He is] a thoroughbred [...] a phenomenon, and the exception in a human specialty⁴⁹.

- 18 With the excitement of aerial combat differing from that of the industrial war, the French press constructed the image of René Fonck from preexisting representations and, at the same time, provided him with distinguishing features relating to both his physical appearance and his war record. As a mythical flying ace the Vosgian pilot benefited from a positive public image at the end of the war but this image was slightly altered in the context of peace and Fonck’s return to civilian life.

2. The “député-aviateur”: an expert rather than a dandy (1919–1924)

2.1. The Resetting of the ace’s image in peacetime

- 19 As “Guynemer’s avenger” René Fonck benefited from a great popularity in the first years of peace⁵⁰. Indeed, in a quiz called “*A qui le million?*” (Who should win a million francs?) organized by *La Vie aérienne illustrée*⁵¹ in autumn 1919 readers were invited to decide what amount in prize money they would give to each pilot if a fictional endowment of a million francs were to be given to French aviation. The deceased Georges Guynemer received the most votes (66,767); Commandant Vuillemin was placed second (66,524) and Captain Fonck came third with 66,497 votes⁵². Though his late arrival on the battlefield meant that Fonck was not the reader’s favourite, his likeability meant that his score was respectable and that his popularity held firm among the ranks of politicians and journalists. Indeed, due to his being probably the most decorated French soldier and seen as an example for his fellow citizens to follow, Fonck was given

the role of holding aloft the aviators flag during the Victory parade on France's National Day on July 14, 1919⁵³. Another example of his popularity was his taking centre stage in a photo of surviving aces which was published in *Le Monde illustré* in late December 1919⁵⁴. Fonck also benefited from the ongoing censorship as journalists Berger and Allard reported that they had received instructions to "put an end to any story which would compromise Fonck['s integrity]" during peace negotiations⁵⁵. Thanks to this, Fonck's positive image as a knight of the sky was perpetuated in peacetime by civilian newspapers. The *Potins de Paris* depicted the young man as:

Hiding himself and a row of decorations under his black raincoat Fonck told of his horror of those who would tame flying aces into becoming stunt pilots, and of his lack of enthusiasm towards young men in small bars who styled themselves as aviators⁵⁶.

- 20 Showing only his merits and refusing undeserved compliments from unwise "ace tamers", Fonck's appearance fully reflected what he thought about fighter aces. His beliefs had an impact on the way he behaved and he acted in accordance with the standards he had developed and put into action during the war⁵⁷. He rejected the dandyism and the thoughtlessness often attributed to airmen of the time, and rejected the adventurous character of the airman that was considered a tool of seduction. Despite this, newspapers wrote regularly about the young man's successes. Even the extreme right-wing *Action française* noted during a diplomatic mission in Brazil in 1922 that "the crowd's favorite has been René Fonck. One never ceases to acclaim him in the street. [...] Women set down flowers in front of [his] portrait."⁵⁸ It should be noted, however, that there was a change of tone in the way aviators were depicted: descriptions now focused less on the military exploits of aces during the war and more on the pre-war image of the civilian sportsman⁵⁹. In this respect, as early as October 1919, Raymond Saladin reminded us that Fonck and other fighter pilots "were men before they had become aces and that they had been sportmen in the full sense of the term"⁶⁰. For this reason *Lecture pour tous* chose to present Fonck as one of the French athletes that were going to take part to the celebrations of the 1920 Antwerp Olympics⁶¹. Although he was never presented directly as a soldier on these occasions, pictures of the pilot wearing his uniform and

his decorations – as with the publication of his war memories – inevitably reminded people his (prestigious) past as a soldier⁶².

2.2. Fonck, “député-aviateur”

- 21 Placed second on the list of the Gauche Républicaine Démocratique in the Vosges Department (thanks to Georges Clemenceau taking him under his wing) Fonck was elected as a member of the French Parliament in 1919 without having to give a single speech⁶³. The military prestige from which he benefited gave him access to the “Bleu Horizon” Chamber which was composed mainly of politicians that had fought as soldiers in the war⁶⁴. The press often questioned the ability of such a young man – Fonck was 25 years old – to face these responsibilities but this type of concern was softened by the guarantees that his past offered. The virtues Fonck had showed on the front provided the promise of success. Claude Doret expressed reservations as to Fonck’s election as early as September 1919. He was “highly doubtful that Fonck would find pleasure in taking part in political lobbying and that he would offer his prestigious support to the thousands of schemes that were the principal preoccupation of current-day parliamentarians.”⁶⁵ This quote highlights the common distrust by the common people in the Parliament after the First World War.⁶⁶
- 22 In addition to his parliamentary role, in July 1921 Fonck was elected President of the *Ligue aéronautique de France* (L.Aé.F.). This was a lobby which promoted aviation and which was affiliated to the very high-brow and upper-class *Aéro-Club de France*. In spite of this, in the eyes of the press Fonck remained a flying ace and *Le Petit Journal* was very keen to point out that “Captain Fonck [was indeed] MP for the Vosges, President of the *Ligue aéronautique de France* and – even better – ace of aces of the war”⁶⁷. *Le Journal des débats* also explained after a (rare) speech given by the ace in the *Chambre des députés* that Fonck “was applauded as flying ace as much as he was as a speaker”⁶⁸.
- 23 The image the press gave of René Fonck was therefore only very partially reconstructed after his election. Stiil, Fonck tried to change it in a more technical way. He attempted to associate his past in the *Groupe de combat* “Les Cigognes” with his new civilian functions – posing for instance in a nice suit in his Parisian office handling a

statuette of the stork that was his totem⁶⁹. Though this picture from the archives of the Meurisse agency was perhaps never published, it still illustrates the way Fonck attempted to turn his military past into something more likable by associating it with his new functions and using the press to do so. This was only partly successful as everything written about the MP was contained a reminder of his past. Significantly, Guy Mounereau in the *Écho de Paris* on July 1922 described Captain Fonck “as being as much at ease with administrative files that clutter his desk as with he had been with the aircraft of the Boches in the old days...”⁷⁰ (fig. 4). Not only did the press shape the heroic figure of René Fonck, it also became a relay for his thoughts, a tribune with which aviation could be promoted, and the means of fighting off the fears of Germans that had become an obsession for Georges Clemenceau’s center right-wing partisans.

- 24 The position that Fonck obtained in the *Ligue Aéronautique de France* (L.Aé.F.) – combined with his activities in the Chamber of Deputies – enabled him to organize a conference at the *Société de Géographie* on February 22, 1924. Here, he outlined his vision of a futuristic flight that would take the Parisian between Paris and New York in less than eight hours. This exercise in style – one which fully matched the positive attitudes towards aviation held at the time – was relayed partly, or in full, by several specialized or regional newspapers such as *L’Aérophile*, the *Revue hebdomadaire* (twice) or *Le Bien Public* from Dijon⁷¹. Fonck was very active at the beginning of the 1920s and his thoughts about the necessity of creating a Ministry of the Air and, also, to organize aviation in French colonies were published regularly in specialized newspapers⁷². The general press and newspapers intended for veterans were more interested in his thoughts that warned of the danger of Germany and, in addition to a wider lobbying in favor of aviation⁷³, the necessity of putting in place an effective aerial defense⁷⁴. The prestigious and high-brow *Revue des Deux Mondes* even asked Fonck to write an article in 1924. This demonstrated how Fonck’s reputation as an expert in aeronautical matters had grown even though he had only been a mechanic ten years earlier⁷⁵. For this reason, Fonck benefited from the interest of the press and literature when it came to the question of aviation⁷⁶.

(Fig. 4)

René Fonck on November 24, 1920, press photo from the Meurisse agency.



(Bibliot

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2.3. Were personal failures hidden by the press?

- 25 In the 1920s, the narration of heroic actions carried out by the aces contributed to the making of the permanent myth surrounding the knights of the sky⁷⁷. The recurrence of aerial metaphors was part of a wider aerial imagination of this time and they were used to present pilots as being able to fly above mere mortals, as being the link between gods and humans as well as earth and the sky in a society which was becoming more and more air minded⁷⁸. This partly explained why journalists focused on Fonck's flying as well as the generalized use of aerial lexicon particularly fertile in their wordplay. After his election in 1919, for instance, *Les Potins de Paris* singularly supported Fonck who "vient de monter au Parlement sur l'échelle de ses palmes innombrables. N'ayez aucune crainte qu'il capote. Il ne connaît pas le vertige."⁷⁹ Playing on the dual meaning of "vertige", this

quote shows how people saw the victorious airman: neither gravity nor Parliament could ever stop him.

26 This focus on Fonck's career as an aviator seemed to omit any consideration of the pilot's failures in his personal and civilian life. De facto, only brief mentions of his being thrown out of the *L.Aé.F* at the end of May 1925 were made in the press⁸⁰. Similarly, the loss he suffered in polls in 1924 and the striking commercial failure of Fonck's vehicles – a venture that he started in 1920 – did not appear in a single paragraph⁸¹.

27 It seems that journalists had their heads in the clouds, pointing to horizons that would always be further away and more glorious. They seemed only interested in maintaining the image of the fighter pilot: the one who had formed part of the aerial imagination. This overshadowed the human aspect which was kept out of the field of representations. It is only when the failure popped up in the realization of the myth – when the horizon of aspirations could not be extended any more – that the idealized figure of Fonck in the air broke down.

3. The failed advent of the adventurer of the sky (1925-1926)

3.1. The possibility for Fonck to be part of a new myth: the modern-day adventurer of the sky

28 On March 26, 1926, René Fonck announced plans to fly over the Atlantic from New York to Paris and to pave the way to a regular transatlantic airline⁸² and something which had never been attempted. In June 1919, pioneers John Alcock and Arthur W. Brown had flown “only” from Newfoundland to Connemara over a shorter distance. Nonetheless, their flight was a paradigmatic shift as, for the first time, it had been shown that it was possible to fly over an ocean. The \$25,000 Orteig prize – offered from May 1919 by the great hotel owner Raymond Orteig to the first pilot who would fly non-stop from New York to Paris – stimulated the race for the Atlantic. Because Fonck ran for this prize, his image merged with that of the adventurer

of the sky. He would overreach nature thanks to continuous and unstoppable progress, which was a powerful republican myth when associated with science⁸³. *LeNational* dreamt of a world where people would wonder if the Atlantic Ocean ever existed because it would be so easy to fly over⁸⁴. Edmond Blanc in *Le Petit Provençal* and *Le Républicain du Gard* confirmed the feeling that nothing could ever slow down modernity in progress: flying across the Atlantic “is no longer an exceptional deed. [...] Fonck can do it. If it is not him, it will be someone else.”⁸⁵

- 29 For the *Dépêche de Constantine*, it was the whole of humanity that was progressing through Fonck's venture: “Certainly no one can foresee what will come but everything leads us to believe that [...] space will be once more defeated by human effort and genius.”⁸⁶ One can thus understand the romantic image connected to this modern adventurer: Fonck's success appeared uncertain in facing the dangers and immensity of space but there was no doubt that humanity would eventually succeed. Yet the press reported the common people's fascination to see Fonck's eleven-ton Sikorski S-35 flying. The plane was regularly compared to a “mastodonte” or named “*avion géant*”⁸⁷. This project showed the magic of science in progress which fascinated the public. Vivid descriptions from reporters insisted on the sophistication of the aircraft and the completion of every detail as technical proof. Thus, *L'Écho de la Loire* noted that “the aircraft is a biplane, looking almost like a monoplane because its lower wing flattens itself against the upper one and its light body is covered with a paper pulp which is almost fully waterproof”⁸⁸. *La Dépêche Iséroise* and *La Libre Belgique* went as far as inventorying in their columns the technical details of the aircraft such as its wingspan, its weight per square meter, its weight per horsepower, the volume of fuel on board and its approximate speed (“roughly 200 kilometers per hour”) ⁸⁹. *La Dépêche de Brest* and *Le Progrès du Nord* explained – how marvelously technical – that Captain Fonck and his staff benefited from a “new tool collecting enough water from the air to quench the thirst of the bold airmen.”⁹⁰ While Fonck was still remembered as the “ace of aces”, the press associated him with the new imagination of long distance flights and modern aerial venture. In those days, wireless telegraphy was a useful tool as well as a powerful symbol of modernity. Thus the pilot was photographed in military uniform, wearing his decorations

and holding a receiver. His heroic past – also recalled by the stork painted on his plane – was associated with the pursuit of progress over the Atlantic that this receiver symbolized. The trichromatic print which had been preferred to the black one added to the liveliness and the modernity of the picture (fig. 5).

(Fig. 5)

“Captain Fonck who will fly non-stop from New York to Paris”, *Le Pèlerin*, August 22, 1926.
 (“Le capitaine Fonck qui va voler de New York à Paris sans escale”)



- 30 Fonck's aircraft – his ride – was always considered by the journalists as an extension of Fonck himself. They were fascinated by the plane as much as the sportsman who would take its stick. Thus, the cult of performance appeared all over articles about Fonck which described him as a champion who was going to break altogether “*plusieurs records du monde de durée et d'altitude avec charge utile*”⁹¹ to write “*une fois de plus [his name] au palmarès de l'aéronautique mondiale.*”⁹²

- 31 The modernity of this adventurer fascinated both reporters and readers and this justified the intense media coverage given to this never attempted flight. *L'Intransigeant* explained that Fonck's departure from Le Havre on late April 1926 took place in front of a huge crowd massed on the pier⁹³. Every single thing became a matter of discussion during the preparation of the air raid. For instance, *Le Progrès de Lyon* and other newspapers announced that the pilot would bring along a dinner which had been prepared by one of New York's best chefs. It would be eaten on his arrival in Paris⁹⁴. This is a story which was published in most French newspapers, and was one which annoyed Georges Brighton in *L'Aéauto* in which he took offence at "a hot meal" being a joke played by an "inventive and clumsy informant."⁹⁵ Even the communist newspaper *L'Humanité* – one not supposedly very enthusiastic about a capitalistic competition involving money – talked about the pilot's "sensational crossing"⁹⁶. These are some of the examples that illustrate how much attention was being given by the French press to the modern adventure Fonck was planning. This was generally the case for any attempt to fly across the Atlantic at the time and it reveals the ongoing the popularity of aerial culture on a global scale⁹⁷.

3.2. A Shock Between Aerial Imaginations?

- 32 As the myth of the adventurer of the sky met the myth of the knight of the air, conflicts between their related mythemes appeared. Because he pursued the \$25,000 Orteig prize, Fonck did not appear much chivalrous, whereas abnegation and selflessness should remain his leitmotif. These considerations put the professionalization of pilots in question and demonstrated the latent tension during the 1920s between aviation's origins as a sport, its modernity as a weapon and its commercial perspectives. Serge Veber put this question to the readers of *La Patrie* and asked if "in the aerial game, Sadi Lecointe, Fonck and Pelletier d'Oisy would be highly prized stars."⁹⁸ In the left-wing *La Voix du Peuple*, trade unionists of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) gave mixed feelings which lay somewhere between a rejection of the monetization of sport and admiration for the pilot.

There is no doubt that Captain Fonck is not just seeking glory. This fantastic long-distance flight must be providing him with something else. But do you believe that in undertaking such a mad venture that he will earn as much as some boxers or, even, as much as Miss Lenglen, the tennis champion? Despite his not doing so, René Fonck will risk his life to maintain French supremacy in the air⁹⁹.

- 33 Therefore, the risk taken for French interests justified gains other than the sole honors. The patriotic dimension of the conquest of the air was particularly present in Fonck's speeches sometimes showing the clash between what was seen as chivalrous and what was seen as adventurous. Whereas the adventurer does not know any frontier because he flies over them, the knight only lives to defend the borders of his country. Not without exercising a certain degree of chauvinism, most French newspapers therefore saw this venture as a mostly French performance that was kindly supported by the United States – the funding and the plane came from this country. *La Dépêche de Toulouse* recognized this partnership between the two sides of the Atlantic but described it as a great French achievement among others.

Thus, this is not only a French undertaking [...] but a veritable record attempt which underlines both the energy and the tenacity of a Frenchman and an American. The plane will bear the colors of both countries [...]. There is no doubt that Fonck will take off and add a new exploit to the innumerable French aerial performances¹⁰⁰.

- 34 In the Conservative French press, *L'Intransigeant* also spoke of the patriotic spirit of Fonck who had “left our country to testify in front of attentive peoples [...] that audacity is a quality which is above all French, and that only a Frenchman can make the purest gestures of bravery.”¹⁰¹ On the contrary, not surprisingly, *Le Soir* of Brussels and *L'Action française* are way more critical of the pilot writing of a “very improbable success”.

The French would be unpleasantly embarrassed at seeing he who held the flag of French aviation at the end of the war fly an aircraft built in the United States by a Russian engineer, equipped with English motors (French license), and accompanied by an officer and a navigator who are American¹⁰².

- 35 For the ultra-Conservatives, the French hero should not be involving himself in an international venture – especially in a foreign plane. This reminds us how powerful the association was between a pilot and his aircraft in the popular imagination. In late August 1926, while French pilots Tarascon and Coli also announced their intention to fly over the Atlantic – soon followed by the twice speed record-breaker Arrachart – French newspapers generally took the side of the pilots who remained French and showed national preference in the choice of plane¹⁰³.
- 36 Still certain of his success, Fonck demonstrated his self-belief to the press, something which contrasted sharply with the humbleness he had shown in newspaper articles since 1917. Speaking colloquially and being comforted by the certainties that science provided Fonck claimed that: “I am telling you we will make it. It will be as if I was sat in an armchair.”¹⁰⁴ Fonck’s self-assurance was actively relayed by the French press. This was closer to the image of the dauntless adventurer, sure of his strength and his coming success, than to the myth of the modest knight of the air. This declaration was also a way of calming the growing impatience of observers as the preparations were getting longer and rumors circulated that the flight would be cancelled¹⁰⁵. Whereas a (very optimistic) departure date had been given by some newspapers as July 1926, the attempt was only to take place on September 21 of that year¹⁰⁶. Therefore, there was a tension between aerial imagination – filled with record-breaking speeds – and the reality of a thorough preparation, with its many tests and adjustments of prototypes. Because he overtook space, the airman – who flew between gods and men – had to overtake time too. He had to go fast and to act. *Citius, altius, fortius* as says the Olympic motto... In the *Journal des Débats*, the Member of Parliament Guy de Montjou later castigated impatient journalists to defend his friend Fonck who was the “*victime du bruit fait autour de son projet*” while “*l’opinion publique a été surexcitée par l’attente fébrile d’une tentative sportive hardie.*”¹⁰⁷

3.3. Blatant failure: the broken-down absolute

37 Finally starting off on the morning of September 21, 1926, René Fonck failed to take-off. On Roosevelt Field, Long Island, the axle of the plane's right wheel broke. Then, toppling over, the aircraft burnt to ashes before the eyes of numerous reporters and news cameras which had come to immortalize the event. While René Fonck and his co-pilot Lt. Lawrence Curtin managed to get out of the aircraft, the radio operator Charles Clavier and the navigator Jacob Islamoff were trapped inside and were burnt alive. Filled with fuel, the aircraft's tanks fed the fire. The press was divided when it came to deciding who was responsible for this drama. American newspapers suggested Fonck's misjudgment was to blame whereas the French press highlighted both the speed of the preparation of the American aircraft and the influence of New York and its media¹⁰⁸. *Le Petit Journal* presented a good example of the defence of the French pilot concluding in an interview with Fonck's mother that "a sneaky fate jealous of the audacity of the knight of the air was to deprive a heroic mother of her expectation. Nothing was lost, however, as his honor is assured."¹⁰⁹ Like Icarus who flew too close to the sun, Fonck fell down to the ground. Because the journal evokes the safe honor of the airman, the reader understands the setback to the myth of the knight of the sky. Only the communist *L'Humanité* and the satiric *Canard enchaîné* set themselves apart from the others as they mocked the pilot¹¹⁰. *Le Miroir des Sports* left its readers to draw their own conclusions with a photo of the burning aircraft (fig. 6)¹¹¹. Printing a similar photo, *Le Sport universel illustré* added a second one showing firemen in the ashes of the plane a few hours later. This enhanced how dramatic the situation had been (fig. 7)¹¹².

(Fig. 6)

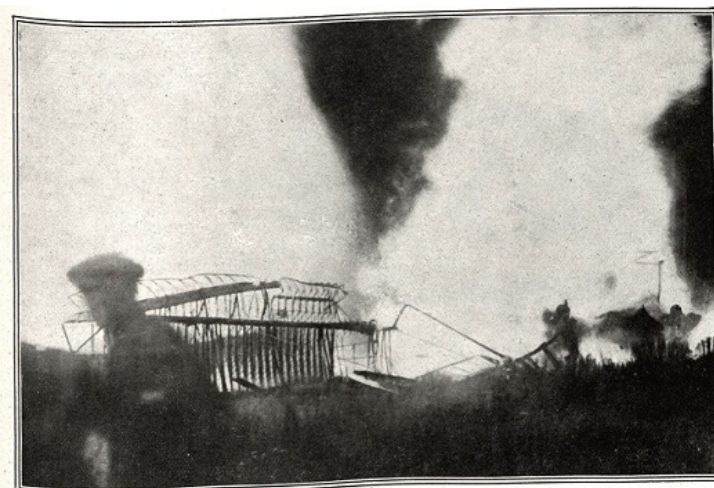
Le Miroir des Sports, 5 octobre 1926, p. 272.



(Bibliot
L'AVION DU RAID TRANSATLANTIQUE NEW-YORK-PARIS, DE RENÉ FONCK, EN FLAMMES SUR LA PISTE DE DÉPART
Voici une photographie émouvante de l'accident du "New-York-Paris" charge de 12 tonnes de l'avion, prend feu au sol. Fonck et l'aide-pilote
qui, après un vain essai de décollage et la rupture d'une roue sous la Curtin ont pu se sauver, mais Clavier et Ismaloff sont carbonisés
[em.zoom](#))

(Fig. 7)

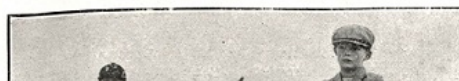
Le Sport universel illustré, 8 octobre 1926, p.671.



Le raid New-York - Paris, que Fonck avait entrepris sur un biplan Sikorsky, s'est terminé tragiquement.
Voici l'appareil en flammes après sa chute dans le Roosevelt Field.



Les sauveteurs à la recherche de
deux des membres de l'équipage
qui périrent carbonisés.



(École Nationale d'Équitation, 2013-97801; <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65806510/f294.item>)

- 38 The images of flames consuming the crashed aircraft and dark smoke had a strong visual impact. Their violence broke Fonck's image through its symbolic extension, that is the plane on fire. On the airfield – a sacred ground between the earth and heaven – Fonck missed his attempt to link humans, who expected unlimited progress, and the horizon that had to be overcome. Showing himself to be fallible, the heroic figure of the airman was no longer reliable. If, in contrast to the *New York Times*, French newspapers reported that the pilot asked for news of his partners immediately after the crash, readers could see that Fonck had burst into tears whereas, before, he had managed to keep his composure¹¹³. As he survived this failure, Fonck left no room for mystery or fantasy which surrounded a brutal but heroic and tragic death. He only appeared weak and fragile – that is, mortal. No longer did he fit the image of the invincible airman that soared above common people.
- 39 René Fonck had great potential to become a myth himself. He, however, missed the blessing the French press was willing to offer to pioneers (Blériot, Lindbergh) and romantic daredevils killed in flight (Guynemer, Nungesser, Mermoz)¹¹⁴. Such a success or death would have led to a myth which was fully autonomous from Fonck's original character¹¹⁵. Because he failed to link the earth and the sky, he revealed his human condition. The disenchanted French press therefore relayed the end of an absolute dream¹¹⁶.

4. Conclusion

- 40 Fonck first entered a system of preexisting images that helped the public to imagine fighter aces through the recurrent use of symbols shaping a knight of the sky. The latter was an invincible gentleman of the air who fought elegant aerial duels. Journalists then wrote about a pilot with specific features that distinguished him from other pilots while associating him with the aerial imagination: he was invincible, never shot but yet victorious, an “ace of aces” and the avenger of his comrades. His case is therefore a perfect example of the way the French press shaped a few heroes from a sample of preexisting representations. The latter were partly reconstructed using the context and certain events in which these new champions were protagonists.

The horizons of aspirations, which were endlessly overcome, made the aces almost divine. As Fonck showed himself to be fallible, it appeared as though he had become a mere mortal. He disappointed the public because he failed his attempt and survived to his failure.

- 41 Fonck missed his transition to the myth of the adventurer of the air and therefore lost the support of the French press. The latter then considered the pilot as merely a glory from the old days, but no longer a fascinating hero. This subtle difference between the future and the past underlines how dependent the aerial imagination was to airmen's successful transcendence beyond time and space. René Fonck would never recover his mythical presence and spent the rest of his life near airfields trying to pass himself off as specialist in aeronautics and in military affairs. Heading several studies on aerial defense and pilot training in the 1930s, he eventually joined Philippe Pétain in Vichy France before dying quite anonymously. This highlights how a flyer without wings was no longer of interest in a country henceforth fully air-minded.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to thank Stephen Rookes for his important editorial work on this article. Yusi Liu and the two anonymous reviewers also deserve my gratitude for their relevant comments.
- 2 Alfred Heurtaux (1893-1985), WW1 ace with 21 confirmed enemy airplanes shot down, was elected the same year for the *Parti Républicain de Gauche*, affiliated to the *Alliance démocratique*.
- 3 R. Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979).
- 4 R. Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination, 1908-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).
- 5 Newspapers collections of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France* – partly accessible online through <http://gallica.bnf.fr> – is the main resource of our study. Alongside, the René Fonck file of the Centre Image Lorraine offers many French and foreign articles published between 1922 and 1928 that the Havas agency collected for the pilot. The association “Mémoire de René Fonck” located in his home-village of Saulcy-sur-Meurthe (Vosges) owns a

way bigger collection of articles from the period 1922-1927. The *Archives départementales des Vosges* in Épinal eventually provides a minor insight on Fonck's electoral campaigns and local newspapers tackling this issue.

6 M. Vovelle, *Idéologies et mentalités* (Paris : La Découverte, 1985), 49.

7 S. Tison, 'Du sportsman au combattant, archéologie de la figure de l'as', in L. Robène (ed.), *Le Sport et la Guerre. XIX^e et XX^e siècles* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2012), 349.

8 B. Wilkin, 'Aviation and propaganda in France during the First World War', *French History*, 28:1 (2014), 60.

9 T. Le Roy, 'Aviation et Grande Guerre, 1916-1919. La fin des sportifs?', in L. Robène (ed.), *Le Sport et la Guerre*, op. cit., 357-358; É. Mahieu, 'L'affirmation de la 5^e arme (1914-1918)', in J.-M. Olivier *Histoire de l'armée de l'air et des forces aériennes françaises du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours* (Toulouse: Privat, 2014), 49-148.

10 B. Wilkin, 'Aviation and propaganda ...', op. cit., 63.

11 Every pilot credited with five certified successes on enemy planes was granted the honorific title of 'ace'. These successes had to be confirmed by witnesses to be registered as an official win after a procedure of homologation. Fonck got these five victories after he spent over 21 months in an observation squadron and eventually got to joined a fighter squadron on April 1917.

12 L. Kennett, *La première guerre aérienne, 1914-1918* (Paris: Economica, 2005), 168-171; B. Wilkin, 'Aviation and propaganda...', op. cit., 51-52.

13 P. Dietschy, 'La guerre ou le "grand match" : le sport, entre représentation de la violence et expérience combattante', in R. Cazals, E. Picard and D. Rolland (éd.), *La Grande Guerre. Pratiques et expériences* (Toulouse: Privat, 2005), 45-54; M.-H. Orthous, 'Propagande sportive et morale de la nation : le traitement du sport dans la presse française pendant la Première Guerre mondiale', in L. Robène (ed.), *Le Sport et la Guerre*, op. cit., 149-157.

14 L. Robène, 'Les sports aériens : de la compétition sportive à la violence de guerre', *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 251:3 (2013), 27.

15 C. Kehrt, "'A Horribly Beautiful Picture". Aesthetic Dimensions of Aerial Warfare', in R. Heil et al. (eds.), *Tensions and Convergences: Technological and Aesthetic Transformations of Society* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007), 337-350.

- 16 P. Fritzsche, *A Nation of Fliers. German Aviation and the Popular Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 76-78. It is actually true for most of the belligerents.
- 17 Bernard Wilkin even spoke of a “popular dependence” in B. Wilkin, ‘Aviation and propaganda...’, *op. cit.*, 64-65; C. Delporte, ‘Journalistes et correspondants de guerre’ in J.-J. Becker and S. Audoin-Rouzeau (eds.), *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre: 1914-1918* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004), 720.
- 18 J.-P. Dournel, ‘L’image de l’aviateur français en 1914-1918. Une étude du milieu des aviateurs d’après la revue : “La guerre aérienne illustrée”’, *Revue Historique des Armées*, 121:4 (1975), 60.
- 19 *Guynemer, un mythe, une histoire* (Vincennes: Service Historique de l’Armée de l’Air, 1997).
- 20 A mytheme is a sequence or a small semantic unit which contains a belief. By recurrence and in association with other mythemes, it contributes to a mythical discourse – a narrative – with characters, situations and settings. Therefore, Céline Bryon-Portet identified the fighter pilot as a myth observable through several mythemes. C. Bryon-Portet, ‘La construction et l’utilisation de l’image du pilote de chasse’, *Recherches en communication*, 28 (2007), 148; G. Durand, *L’imagination symbolique* (Paris: PUF, 2015), 56-58.
- 21 S. Goebel, *The Great War and Medieval Memory: War, Remembrance and Medievalism in Britain and Germany, 1914-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); P. Vennesson, *Les Chevaliers de l’Air. Aviation et conflits au xx^e siècle* (Paris: Presse de Sciences Po and Association pour les Études de la Défense, 1997); G.L. Mosse, ‘The Knight of the Sky and the Myth of the War Experience’, in R.A. Hinde and H.E. Watson (eds.), *War: a cruel necessity? The bases of institutionalized violence* (London: Tauris, 1995), 132-142.
- 22 “[Fonck est resté] toujours le même. Ses 45 victoires, ses multiples décorations, sa célébrité n’ont modifié en rien ni sa modestie ni sa simplicité. Il porte les rubans de ses récompenses aussi petits que possible, et celui de la croix de guerre ne peut tenir que quelques-unes de ses palmes.” in *Le Petit Parisien*, May 25, 1918.
- 23 “Fonck était loin d’être insensible aux récompenses qui satisfaisaient son instinct de justice et son légitime désir de gloire.” Jean d’Harcourt quoted in O. Mazel, *René Fonck (1894-1953), du ciel aux abîmes* (MA Dissertation, Metz: Université Paul Verlaine, 2006), 90.

- 24 S. Audoin-Rouzeau, 'Avions et chars', in J.-J. Becker Jean-Jacques and S. Audoin-Rouzeau (éd.), *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre...*, op. cit., 268.
- 25 'Fonck après une de ses récentes victoires', *Le Miroir*, September 15, 1918, 15. At that time, *Le Miroir* printed between four hundred thousand and one million copies per issue despite its fairly high cost (30 centimes). C. Delporte, C. Blandin and F. Robinet, *Histoire de la presse en France: xx^e-xxi^e siècles* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2016), 76-79.
- 26 T. Le Roy, 'Aviation et Grande Guerre...', op. cit., 350.
- 27 J.H. Morrow Jr., 'Les airs', in J. Winter and A. Becker (éd.), *La Première Guerre mondiale*, vol. 1: 'Combats' (Paris: Fayard, 2014), 383-414.
- 28 É. Mahieu, 'La figure de l'aviateur', *Centenaire.org*, 2015 [online] <http://centenaire.org/fr/espace-scientifique/societe/la-figure-de-laviateur>, accessed 21 Feb. 2017; T. Le Roy, « Aviation et Grande Guerre... », op. cit., 360; L. Robène, 'Les sports aériens...', op. cit., 36-38.
- 29 J. Laffray, *Pilote de chasse aux Cigognes* (Paris: Fayard, 1968), 69.
- 30 See for ex. J. Mortane, 'L'as des as au combat. Souvenirs sur Guynemer', *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, June 6, 1918.
- 31 R. Fonck, *Mes combats* (Paris: Flammarion, 1920), 128.
- 32 L. Kennett, *La première guerre aérienne...*, op. cit., 170.
- 33 "[Une] véritable aristocratie parmi les glorieux combattants de la cinquième arme." in *Le Figaro*, September 1, 1918. The aces indeed obtained 50 per cents of confirmed successes whereas they were only 4 per cents of the total strength. L. Kennett, *La première guerre aérienne...*, op. cit., 175. About air force elitism, see: M. Paris, 'The Rise of the Airmen: the Origins of Air Force Elitism, c. 1890-1918', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 28 (1993), 123-141.
- 34 "La chasse est [...] une élite glorieuse, universellement vantée, officiellement très appréciée. En faire partie, c'est recevoir un brevet de distinction, c'est la consécration de qualités exceptionnelles. [...] Les noms sont jetés à l'admiration des foules : la presse compte et commente les victoires." *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, December 6, 1917.
- 35 L. Robène, 'Les sports aériens...', op. cit., 27.
- 36 S. Tison, 'Du sportsman au combattant, archéologie de la figure de l'as', in L. Robène (ed.), *Le Sport et la Guerre...*, op. cit., 350-352.

37 “Quels matchs terrifiants, angoissants, glorieux que ceux qui nous captivent aujourd’hui.” in *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, January 18, 1917.

38 “Rival du sous-lieutenant Madon avec lequel il a engagé un match glorieux pour la descente des Boches. in *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, January 24, 1918.

39 See for ex. *L'Excelsior*, May 11, 1918; *L'Illustration*, May 18, 1918; *Le Monde illustré*, May 18, 1918

40 *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, June 13, 1918.

41 According to Max Weber, the ideal type is a model that permits to materialize a social type without pretending to systematically find all the features in the reality. In his PhD thesis, Christian Kehrt applied this concept to German pilots echoing the mythemes of Bryon-Portet. The ideal type therefore permits to better understand the flying ace as a socio-cultural reference whereas the myth refers more to the semiological level and the making of symbolic imagery through mythemes. M. Weber, *Essai sur la théorie de la science* (Paris: Plon, 1965); C. Kehrt, *Moderne Krieger, die Technikerfahrten deutscher Militärpiloten 1910-1945* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2010), 91; C. Bryon-Portet, ‘La Construction et l’utilisation...’, *op. cit.*, 148.

42 Corinne Micelli and Bernard Palmieri, *René Fonck. L’as des as, l’homme* (Paris : Economica, 2007).

43 “Fonck est un homme de stature moyenne, aux épaules carrées, qui se tient très droit, fait peu de gestes, paraît trapu et mince tout ensemble. L’expression sérieuse de sa figure contraste avec la jeunesse de ses traits. Il a vingt-deux ans, parle d’une voix égale, s’exprime par phrases brèves, met entre elles le temps qu’il faut pour les penser d’abord. La simplicité de son costume militaire, sa sobriété d’attitude, l’empire sur lui-même qui respire de sa personne, indiquent seuls qu’il est quelqu’un.” In *L'Illustration* quoted by P. Facon, ‘René Fonck, le seigneur de la chasse’, 14-18 *le magazine de la Grande Guerre*, 47 (2009), 42.

44 “Le regard est très particulier : les yeux, derrière les paupières qui se plissent, sont d’une rare mobilité. Quand ils vous fixent, ils luisent comme le bleu de l’acier. On s’imagine ce que peut être l’aigle quand il fonce sur l’adversaire.” in J. Mortane, ‘56 victoires en dix mois’, *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, December 19, 1918.

45 *Les Escadrilles de l’aéronautique militaire française. Symbolique et histoire, 1912-1920* (Vincennes: Service Historique de l’armée de l’Air, 2004), 25;

L. Turetti, *Quand la France pleurait l'Alsace-Lorraine. Les 'provinces perdues' aux sources du patriotisme républicain, 1870-1914* (Strasbourg: La Nuée Bleue, 2008), 107-112.

46 “Des nues où elles se tenaient invisibles, les Cigognes plongèrent et, dans un vol d'une puissance, d'une beauté magnifique (sic), elles foncèrent sur les oiseaux noirs, surpris et affolés. Le long bec des oiseaux vengeurs eut tôt fait d'atteindre le cœur des rapides éperviers ou des énormes vautours.” J. Mortane, ‘L'as des as au combat. Souvenirs sur Guynemer’, *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, June 6, 1918.

47 Fonck would have shot down Oberleutnant Kurt Wissemann aircraft, i.e. the pilot who took pride to be the killer of Guynemer and was glorified as such in German newspapers. Fonck as he was investigating the rests of the Wissemann's plane took his machine gun as a trophy. Newspapers like *La Guerre aérienne illustrée* quickly took for granted that Fonck “avenged” Guynemer. Recent studies however doubted it – establishing that Wissemann had rather been shot down by a pilot of 56 squadron of the Royal Flying Corps and not by the Frenchman as propagandists had found convenient to believe. N.L.R. Franks, F.W. Bailey and R. Guest, *Above the lines* (London: Grub Street, 1996), 232; J. Daçay, ‘Un as : R. Fonck’, *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, January 17, 1918; ‘Un as : René Fonck (deuxième partie)’, *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, January 31, 1918; J. Mortane, ‘Le vengeur’, *L'Intransigeant*, October 8, 1918.

48 J. Mortane, ‘Nos morts : Paul Hatin’, *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, June 14, 1917, 493.

49 “Surnommé “l'Invincible” [Fonck] a la notion d'être supérieur à l'ennemi, à chaque ennemi, et d'être obligé de le vaincre [...] et que rien, sinon le coup de hasard (sic), la balle perdue d'un ennemi affolé, ne peut l'en empêcher. [Il est] un pur-sang [...] le phénomène, l'exception dans une spécialité humaine”. J. Daçay, ‘Un as : R. Fonck’, *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*, January 17, 1918.

50 *Le Monde illustrée* reminded for instance this title of “Guynemer's avenger” when the pilot born in the Nord entered the Panthéon. *Le Monde illustré*, May 6, 1922.

51 This edition followed *La Guerre aérienne illustrée*.

52 ‘À qui le million ?’, *La Vie aérienne illustrée*, November 20, 1919, 742.

53 By the end of the First World War, Fonck was decorated of the *Médaille militaire*, the *Croix de guerre* with 28 palms, got 27 mentions and a star, the

Légion d'Honneur (made Knight in 1917, Officer in 1918), the Military Cross, the Military Medal, the Belgian War Cross, the Serbian White Eagle, the Portuguese and the Spanish War Crosses – only to mention the main ones.

54 *Le Monde illustré*, December 20, 1919.

55 M. Berger and P. Allard, « Dans les coulisses de la Paix », *Marianne*, December 28, 1932.

56 “Timide, sous l'ample pardessus noir cachant ses multiples décorations, il nous dit son horreur de la réclame tapageuse qu'ont voulu lui faire subir certains ‘montreurs d'as’, et son peu d'enthousiasme pour le ‘genre aviateur’, tel que le conçoivent certains petits jeunes gens, pour petits bars à petites femmes”, in « L'as des as !... », *Les Potins de Paris*, December 5, 1918.

57 This idea is confirmed by Pierre Laborie's idea that “men live their history through their idea of it. Systems of mental representations determined their vision of events. [...] These representations form a network of dialectical links between the experienced reality and references taken in an imagination they contribute afterwards to fuel. They guide minds' evolution and weigh on attitudes. ” in P. Laborie, *Les Français des années troubles: De la guerre d'Espagne à la Libération* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001), 237.

58 « La France à l'exposition de Rio-de-Janeiro », *Action Française*, September 7, 1922.

59 As shown by L. Robène, *L'Homme à la conquête de l'air. Des aristocrates éclairés aux sportifs bourgeois* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998).

60 R. Saladin, « Des hommes d'abord ! Des soldats ensuite ! », *La Voix du combattant*, October 26, 1919.

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62 R. Fonck, *Mes combats* (Paris: Flammarion, 1920), 252.

63 The *Gauche Républicaine Démocratique* was a republican and liberal center-right party. Following Georges Clemenceau, it was the second largest group in the Parliament and was included in the wider *Alliance Démocratique*. D. Accoulon, *René Fonck, « As des as » et pilote de la Grande Guerre*, Privat, Toulouse, 2018 ; SHD AI 8 Z 498: interview of Mrs. René Fonck (Irène Brillant), July 8, 1987.

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103 « La traversée de l'Atlantique », *Union républicaine*, August 22, 1926; « New York-Paris en une seule étape », *La Victoire*, August 22, 1926; « Le vol transatlantique », *Courrier du Centre*, August 28, 1926; « New York-Paris en avion », *Populaire*, August 28, 1926; « Le raid de Fonck », *La Gazette vosgienne*, August 28, 1926; and so on.

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de confiance dans la réussite de ce raid », *Réveil du Nord*, August 15, 1926; « Le capitaine Fonck est confiant », *Le Petit méridional*, August 15, 1926; « Malgré les difficultés, Fonck compte arriver... dans un fauteuil », *Lyon Républicain*, August 15, 1926; « Fonck espère arriver 'dans un fauteuil' », *Le Petit Var*, August 15, 1926; and so on.

105 See for ex. « Le raid de Fonck encore une fois remis », *L'Œuvre*, August 30, 1926; « La traversée Paris-New York compromise bien que », *L'Auto*, August 30, 1926; « Le capitaine Fonck ne traversera pas l'Atlantique », *La Volonté*, August 30, 1926.

106 Although Fonck announced he would take off on September as early as his departure from Le Havre – as one can read in *L'Intransigeant* – the *New York Tribune* explained this would happen before July 1st. « Fonck est parti pour l'Amérique », *L'Intransigeant*, April 22, 1926; “Fonck inspects plane for his Europe flight”, *New York Tribune*, April 29, 1926.

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110 « L'Avion de Fonck capote au départ et prend feu », *L'Humanité*, September 22, 1926; « Sur l'Album de la Marquise », *Le Canard enchaîné*, September 22, 1926.

111 « L'avion du raid transatlantique New York-Paris, de René Fonck, en flammes sur la piste de départ », *Le Miroir des Sports*, October 5, 1926, 272.

112 *Le Sport universel illustré*, October 8, 1926, 671.

113 “Fonck Plane Burns, 2 Die At Start Of Paris Flight”, *New York Times*, September 22, 1926. See also for example: *Le Matin*, September 22, 1926; *Le Petit Journal*, September 22, 1926; *Le Temps*, September 23, 1926.

114 For the sole case of Georges Guynemer and his posthumous remembrance, see: *Guynemer, un mythe, une histoire*, op. cit. For significant inter-

war literature on that matter, one should see particularly: M. Nadaud, *Guynemer*, « l'as des as » (Paris: Albin Michel, 1918); H. Bordeaux, *Le chevalier de l'air, vie héroïque de Guynemer* (Paris: Plon, 1920); R. de Chavagnes, *De Guynemer à Fonck: le groupe des Cigognes, l'aviation de chasse* (Paris: Chiron, 1920); M. Rostand, *L'archange: drame héroïque en 3 actes* (Paris: Petite Illustration, 1925); J. Mortane, *Deux archanges de l'air, Georges Guynemer, Jean Mermoz* (Paris: Baudinière, 1937); J. Mortane, *Jean Mermoz* (Paris: Plon, 1937); J. Kessel, *Mermoz* (Paris: NRF, 1938).

115 Raoul Girardet saw a progressive empowerment of the myth from its original model to form “a coherent and comprehensive system of beliefs. In those conditions, it does not claim any other legitimacy than the one of its simple affirmation, any other logic than the one of its free development.” in R. Girardet, *Mythes et mythologies politiques* (Paris: Seuil, 1986), 12.

116 C. Bryon-Portet, « La Construction et l'utilisation... », *op. cit.*, 148.

ABSTRACTS

English

The case of René Fonck is exceptional. The pilot became an ace late in May 1917 but his military performance soon earned him attention in the French press. He was nicknamed “Guynemer’s avenger”, the “invincible *boche* killer”, “knight of the sky”, and the modern sportsman; in other words, he was identified in the general newspapers whereas industrial modernity was impersonal. Elected a “*député-aviateur*” after the war, Fonck extended his aspirations with repeated successes. As a public figure, he seemed to fly over common people and triggered the imaginary of flying, still in the making. Although it later became a weapon, aviation first incarnated constant progress and fascinated the public in the 1920s. However, Fonck’s missed attempt to fly over the Atlantic on September 1926 revealed his limits, which were relayed by the press. The hero now shown as a mere mortal was defeated. This article aims to analyze the way the French press crafted the figure of Fonck from an aerial imaginary that was touched by the absolute.

Français

Le cas de René Fonck est exceptionnel : tard inscrit au tableau des as, en mai 1917, ses performances militaires lui attirent rapidement les faveurs de la presse française. Il devient le « vengeur de Guynemer », « invincible tueur de boche », « chevalier du ciel », sportsman moderne, figure aisément identifiée et représentée par les journaux civils à l’heure de la guerre impersonnelle. « Député-aviateur » après la guerre, repoussant toujours l’horizon des attentes par ses succès, la figure imaginée de Fonck semble évoluer au-dessus des mortels et entretient la fascination du grand public comme de la

presse pour le moyen aérien en constants progrès. Cependant, manquant sa tentative de raid transatlantique en 1926, Fonck affiche ses limites. Les différents journaux prennent parti pour ou contre le héros, déchu car ayant déçu. Cet article vise à analyser la manière dont la presse française a composé la figure médiatique de Fonck à partir d'un imaginaire aéronautique empreint d'absolu.

INDEX

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