ANDRÉ TURCAT, CONCORDE PILOT - OBITUARY

News / Personalities



André Turcat, who has died aged 94, was the chief test pilot for the Concorde programme and was at the controls of the supersonic airliner on its first flight; a few weeks later he took the jet through the sound barrier for the first time.

The idea of a supersonic transport (SST) was first conceived in the late 1950s and led to an Anglo-French agreement to develop an airliner – Concorde. The project was a venture of colossal proportions developed jointly by the British Aircraft Corporation (BAC) and Sud Aviation.

On the morning of March 2 1969 Turcat and his French crew took off from Runway 33 at Toulouse in Concorde 001 on the aircraft's maiden flight. The 42-minute flight covered general handling and was uneventful, with both the jet's distinctive "droop nose" and undercarriage remaining down throughout. As the test programme for 001 gathered momentum, Turcat invited Brian Trubshaw, BAC's chief test pilot, to accompany him on 001's fifth flight, providing valuable information for Trubshaw before he flew Concorde 002 from its base at Filton near Bristol on its first flight on April 9.

The crew of Concorde 001 (from L to R) Michel Retif, André Turcat, Henri Perrier and Jacques Guignard

The crew of Concorde 001 (from L to R) Michel Retif, André Turcat, Henri Perrier and Jacques

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Guignard Photo: AFP

On October 1 Turcat was at the controls of 001 for its first supersonic flight and he was the first to fly it at Mach 2 (twice the speed of sound). Turcat, as director of flight testing for the project, conducted the rest of the French side of the Concorde test programme with Trubshaw being the chief test pilot on the parallel British side. The two men formed a close working relationship and friendship and in 1971 were jointly awarded the Ivan Kincheloe Award by the Society of Experimental Test Pilots for their work on the Concorde programme.

André Turcat was born in Marseille on October 23 1921 into a family of car manufacturers and educated at the École Polytechnique in Paris. Towards the end of the Second World War he joined the Free French Air Force and trained as a pilot. He remained in the Armée de l'Air after the war.

Turcat (left) and Brian Trubshaw

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Turcat (left) and Brian Trubshaw Photo: UPPA/Photoshot

He flew transport aircraft during the Indo-China War before attending France's test pilot school. Shortly after graduating he took over the test programme for the Nord 1500 Griffon, one of the world's first ramjet powered aircraft. He flew the aircraft at Mach 2.19, the first European to fly in excess of Mach 2, and on February 25 1959 he broke the world speed record over 100 kilometres at an average speed of 1,021 mph (1,643 kph). In 1958 he received the international Harmon Trophy, awarded annually to the world's outstanding aviator and presented to him by President Richard Nixon.

Turcat left the French Air Force as a major at the end of the Griffon programme and joined the state-owned Sud Aviation just as the Concorde programme was beginning. He was appointed Concorde's chief test pilot and Sud Aviation's director of flight testing, posts he held until 1976.

Turcat took early retirement in 1975 and entered politics. He became deputy mayor of Toulouse from 1971 to 1977 and was a member of the European Parliament from 1980 to 1981.

He was the founder in 1983, and first president, of the Académie Nationale de l'air et de l'espace. In his retirement he returned to university and in 1990 he completed a PhD in Christian art.

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Turcat in 2009

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Turcat in 2009 Photo: Rex Features

Turcat was deeply affected by the loss on July 25 2000 of the Air France Concorde bound for New York, which crashed on take off from Charles de Gaulle airport, Paris, killing all 113 people on board. He came out of retirement to defend the aircraft and its designers and was depressed at the outcome of the inquiry and the grounding of the fleet, which ended the era of commercial supersonic travel. He was on board the Air France Concorde during its retirement flight on June 27 2003 when it flew to Sud Aviation's airfield at Toulouse.

Turcat wrote a number of books and in 2005 was appointed a Grand Officier of the Order of the Légion d'honneur.

He was married with three children.

André Turcat, October 23 1921, died January 4 2016

08 JANUARY 2016

SOURCE: THE TELEGRAPH
ARTICLE LINK:
https://ut.50skyshades.com/news/personalities/andre-turcat-concorde-pilot-obituary

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