

When Concorde first took to the sky 50 years ago

March 1 2019, by Olivier Thibault



The supersonic jet the Concorde pictured in the sky above Toulouse in France during its inaugural test flight on March 2, 1969

When the misty skies cleared over southern France on the afternoon of

Sunday March 2, 1969, the green light was signalled for the highly anticipated first ever flight of the [Concorde](#).

Journalists had been alerted two days earlier that the test flight was imminent; the world had been waiting since the futuristic aircraft, with its pointed nose and triangular wings, was publicly presented in December 1967.

Here is an account, drawn from AFP reports, of the momentous day in aviation history when the supersonic turbojet first took to the skies 50 years ago.

'She flies!'

Several hundred journalists and spectators were crowded near the runway of the airport at Toulouse, where prototype 001 of the Franco-British aircraft was constructed.

With French test pilot Andre Turcat at the controls and the event aired live on television, the sleek white plane started off down the runway just after 3:30 pm.

She picked up speed, eased off the runway and then powered into the sky, straight as an arrow.

"She flies! Concorde flies at last!" exclaimed BBC commentator Raymond Baxter. AFP sent out a flash alert: "Concorde has taken off."

Concord or Concorde?

It was a source of pride on both sides of the Channel: Britain and France had joined forces in 1962 to build an airliner capable of flying faster than the [speed of sound](#).



French pilot Andre Turcat, who was at the controls for the first test flight of the Concorde, pictured here a few months later in June 1969, in the cockpit of the supersonic jet

In fact Concorde's maximum velocity was more than twice the speed of sound.

The coalition of two governments and two aircraft makers—British Aircraft Corporation (now BAE Systems) and Sud-Aviation, a precursor to Airbus—had encountered a series of hurdles and differences.

Even the aircraft's name, which means "agreement" in both languages,

was a sticking point: English-style "Concord" or "Concorde" in French?

Britain's technology minister Tony Benn settled the dispute in 1967, keeping the "e" for "excellence", "England", "Europe" and "Entente cordiale", as he said.

Proving the plane can fly

For Concorde's maiden flight, Turcat manoeuvred just a simple loop above the Garonne river at reduced speed and with the plane's landing gear out.

The aim was not to break speed records but rather to "show the plane can fly" and "return to the ground", he would later explain.

The roar of the four powerful engines and the silhouette of the aircraft, like a bird of prey in the sky, halted traffic on a nearby highway as people across the region stopped to watch, an AFP report said.



The Concorde, pictured here in 1971, had a number of distinctive visual features, including its triangular-shaped wings

Sweating in the cockpit

Inside the cockpit it was tense. Three of the four air-conditioning systems had broken and the temperature rose quickly.

"Under our helmets, we were soon sweating profusely," Turcat recalled in his book "Concorde" (1977).

When the wheels hit the tarmac for the landing, thick smoke rose from the tyres and a security parachute opened at the rear to brake the 112-tonne machine.

The crowds along the runway broke into applause.

The flight had lasted 27 minutes.

The British [test flight](#) came weeks later, on April 9, with Brian Trubshaw taking off aboard the 002 prototype built in Britain.

On October 1 Turcat would also take the jet through the sound barrier for the first time.



Pilot Andre Turcat pictured in France in 1969 at the controls of the Concorde, which he flew for its first test flight on March 2 that same year

Just the beginning

"This first flight is not a conclusion," Turcat told the hundreds of journalists after that first [flight](#). "It is the beginning of our work."

It would take another seven years and 5,500 hours of test flying before Concorde was authorised to enter into commercial service in 1976 with flights operated by Air France and British Airways.

And in the end commercial passenger services only lasted 27 years.

The gas-guzzling "great white bird" was retired on both sides of the Channel in 2003, brought down by its high costs and a dwindling market, with a 2000 crash outside Paris—in which 113 people were killed—heralding its final demise.

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