

Elise Déroche, Aviatrice

by Bruce Grant, Flâneur

Wandering about in Paris recently I came upon this plaque, bolted to a wall at 61 Rue de la Verrerie in the 4th. Wandering about is my favourite activity in Paris. Let others wait in the long lines at the tourist sites (I've done all that) or plunder the shops in Faubourg Saint Honoré (I'll never do that); I wander about.

So, who was this Elise Déroche a.k.a. Baronne Elisa Raymonde de Laroche, Aviatrice? I took the picture and resolved to look her up at home.



Here's a brief outline of the story; I encourage readers to look for her on-line. Many sites relate her story though with some contradictions among the various accounts.

Born into the working class family of a plumber, Elise Déroche became an artist and actress, took the stage name of Baronne Elisa Raymonde de Laroche. She also became the "amie intime" of the artist and aviator Léon Delagrangé who introduced her to his friend Charles Voisin, a builder of airplanes.

There is an interesting chronology that indicates a life full of tragedy, a life that she lived with intensity and audacity: Léon Delagrangé died, January 1910 when the wing came off his Blériot airplane. Elise recovered quickly from her grief and appealed to her new ami intime Charles Voisin to teach her to fly. She won her pilot's licence in March 1910. A crash in July 1910 put her in hospital with 18 fractures. She recovered and returned to flying.

In a car crash in September 1912, Charles Voisin was killed but Elise survived. She married the pilot Jacques Vial in February of 1915, her first marriage. During the war, she was not allowed to fly but served in the military as a driver. In 1918 her only child André (with Léon Delagrangé) died aged 15 of the Spanish Flu. July 1919, she was killed in a plane crash while training to become a test pilot. Audace? Mais oui!

La Baronne Elisa Raymonde de Laroche is buried in Cimetière Père Lachaise in Paris.

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah, my foes, and oh, my friends -
It gives a lovely light!

Edna St. Vincent Millay