

OUT OF FRANCE

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Those mysterious Parisiens in their flying machines

PARIS — The mysterious pilot who has been flying over Paris rooftops at night for the past three weeks has still not been identified.

To the fury of the Minister of the Interior, Pierre Joxe, 300 policemen equipped with infra-red binoculars, two army Gazelle helicopters and eight radar systems have all failed to spot him. All airfields within 65 miles of the capital have been checked but nothing has turned up.

Flying below the radar ceiling of 1,000ft, and sometimes passing dangerously close to the chimneys and aeries of central Paris, the skilful "Black Baron" — as he is known after a character in a French cartoon — has so far shaken off the pursuit.

In the absence of information there has been no shortage of theories. The plane used has been identified as anything from a "microlight" or powered hang-glider to a twin-engined Cessna 400. *Le Figaro* has decided that there are several Black Barons, perhaps as many as five or six. *France-Soir* has settled for two. The television station, La Cinq, claims to have filmed him in action, although some unimpressed viewers suggested that the Baron's "navigation lights" as seen on television were actually the flash bulbs of a party of Japanese tourists.

The closest the Black Baron came to being caught was on the first week of his appearance, when one of the Gazelle helicopters pursued him from the Jardin des Plantes in central Paris to a point near Orly airport, where the army pilot decided it was time to relinquish the chase for unspecified "safety reasons".

The phantom's exploits have been greeted with amusement despite the fact that an Air Inter Airbus arriving at Orly airport at 11.15pm from Nice is believed to have experienced a near-miss with "an unidentified small plane" which air traffic control said had passed below the Airbus.

So far, the authorities have resisted the suggestion that the French Air Force should deploy one of its 4 AWACS early-warning planes over *la Ville Lumière* and until the Baron is caught the police look-outs will continue to stare out into the night from the top of the Eiffel Tower, the Sacré-Coeur and the Arc de Triomphe.

The latest theory is that the Black Baron never existed, that there was no one flying over the rooftops and that all those who claim to have seen something are suffering from an optical illusion brought on by the searing heat and tedium of a Paris August. According to this theory, the expectant mothers in the

maternity hospital at Port Royal have been imagining the noise and the foreign correspondent in the 7th *arrondissement* who swears that the Baron spends the nights circling over his flat has been eating too much camembert.

Meanwhile the Black Baron does seem to have inspired at least one imitator, who undoubtedly does exist and who has been dubbed "Le Mad Max" — but he is less successful at defying the authorities, perhaps because he is earthbound. Last Sunday night in the northern town of Villeneuve-d'Ascq, two policemen sitting in their little car outside the police station were rammed by a large Mercedes. The Mercedes then drove off.

The policemen climbed out of their car and called some of their colleagues from the station to survey the damage, which was extensive, and just then the Mercedes appeared again and rammed a second police car parked beside the first. Again the Mercedes drove off, but within 15 minutes it had returned to the attack, wrecking a third police car before disappearing once more into the night.

Pulling themselves together and leaping into the only car that was left to them, a small Renault, the police followed the Mercedes, but on finding that they were unable to keep up with it they returned to the station. Before they even had time to unstrap their seat belts the Mercedes reappeared from around the corner and crashed into them violently before driving off for the last time, having dismantled the entire police car fleet of Villeneuve-d'Ascq.

By this time the police had called in reinforcements from Lille. The crews of two large police vans were ordered to block the road which the Mercedes was believed to have taken. Almost immediately the Mercedes appeared, going at full speed, and proceeded to smash into the two police vans, causing them serious damage. Seven policemen then stormed the Mercedes and after a violent struggle pulled the driver out. He was 16 years old, too young to hold a licence, and the Mercedes had been stolen.

Charged with theft and attempted murder, and asked for an explanation, Le Mad Max said: "I was fed up with the police following me by car so I decided to make them follow me on foot."

France is currently considering a new plan to allow people of 16 to hold a driving licence on the grounds that they have fewer accidents. Le Mad Max may well have sunk this scheme single-handed.