

# A Little-Heralded French Kite Pioneer

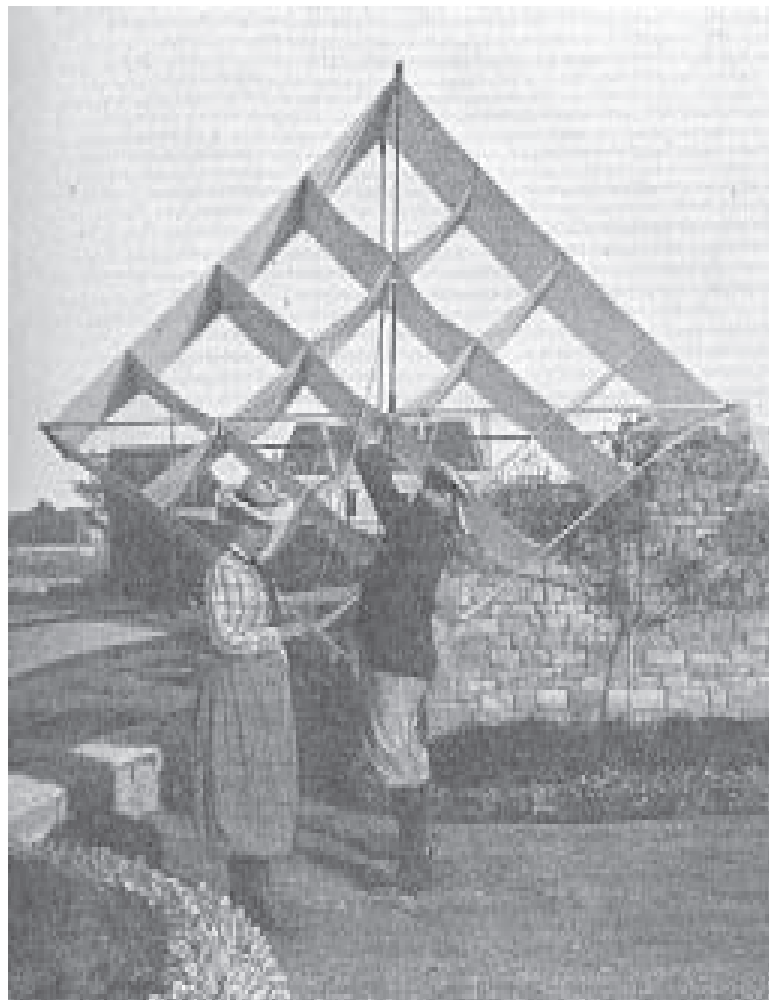
Joseph LeCornu Wrote Important Flight Manual in 1902

Editor's note: Joseph LeCornu was among the leading pioneers of flight in France at the turn of the 19th century. Following is a brief biography of him by a great-grandnephew, who used the memoirs of three members of his family as well as his own extensive research to put together this study. Note that while the family spelled its name Le Cornu (with space between the words) from the 17th century on, a registration error at his birth gave Joseph LeCornu a one-word name. A great-nephew changed the family name back to the traditional two-word Le Cornu in 1910, but since this was at the close of Joseph LeCornu's kiting career it seems appropriate here to use the spelling LeCornu himself used in his lifetime.

By Jean Le Cornu

Joseph Louis LeCornu was born in Caen, Normandy, on March 13, 1864, the seventh of eight children. His father was a lacemaker by trade. Following the father's death in 1878 when LeCornu was 14, he and his seven siblings were raised by their mother.

An early achiever, LeCornu received a prize in philosophy from his lycee in Caen at age 9 and four years later was included in a delegation from his school sent to Paris to attend the burial of writer Victor Hugo. The following year he was admitted to L'Ecole Centrales des Arts and Manufactures.

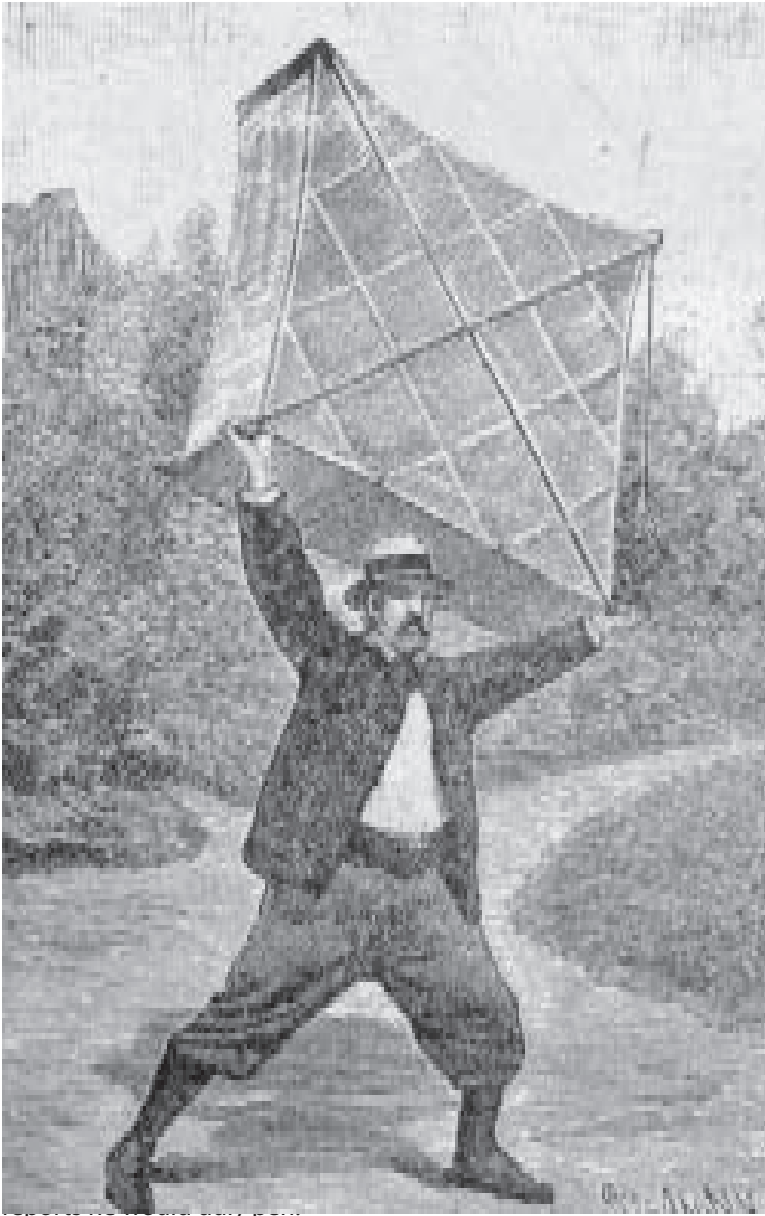


Joseph Lecornu and wife flying some in years ago.

A good student if a bit unruly, LeCornu was disciplined once for causing a disturbance in the dining hall, a second time "for having taken part in a noisy demonstration against freshmen."

During a seaside holiday at St. Aubin sur Mer, he helped organize torchlight tatoes and, aided by a brother, rescued a drowning swimmer. The brothers were awarded a medal by the French navy.

Le Cornu did a great deal of writing as a student, good preparation for the long, excellent aeronautical research



*Le Cornu lofts his famous "waffle" kite.*

Graduating from university in 1888 at age 24 with a degree in civil engineering, LeCornu did mandatory military service in Paris and then joined the National Electricity Company, of which he eventually became a significant official.

He married Marie Therese Hattersley in 1891 after she converted from Protestantism to his Catholicism. They were never to have children.

After a training period, LeCornu was assigned by the

electrical monopoly to his home town, Caen, where he organized a regional electric firm, the soon to be powerful Electricity Company of Caen. Creating the firm and then building its first factory overlooking the city's fort, LeCornu became known as city's "father of electricity." Because of endemic French conservatism, the work was initially difficult. Citizens were unhappy with the new and revolutionary source of power. They objected to overhead wiring and to unsightly electric poles, clinging to tried and true gas for their power needs

Little by little, though, electricity made headway in Caen and by 1895 there were 5,000 lights in the city; four years later there were 13,000.

After a good period of development, the electric firm eventually ran into trouble when construction debts and operating costs combined to preclude payment of dividends to bond holders. A revolt followed, with complicated political overtones, and LeCornu was fired in 1904 from the firm he had organized and overseen with such apparent success. His investment in a brother's hotel was wiped out at the same time and LeCornu for the moment faced a bleak financial future.

Having become deeply involved in city politics during his battles on behalf of the power firm, Le Cornu took the job of secretary-general of the Caen town council

and applied his organizing skills and intelligence to this administrative post. Le Cornu held the job for four years until ousted by rival politicians. He lost not only the post but also his lovely government lodging within the town hall, having then to settle in a single room in Caen. His work did not go unheralded, however, since he was awarded a medal for his services to the city.

That same year LeCornu assumed the mayorship of the nearby town of Cambes, a largely ceremonial post, and

held it until his death. Le Cornu maintained a country home near Cambes. Using political connections, he soon obtained an excellent job in the coal industry.

The extensive travel required by the work did not faze LeCornu because, starting around 1900, he had begun driving his own car. His first was a Bollee, which broke down often. LeCornu found his engineering skills invaluable in keeping him mobile. LeCornu's autos over the years ran to a Dion, Zebra, Amilcar, Peugeot and

last minute, LeCornu replaced him and sailed away on Captain Mangin's Siege de Paris, beaming with joy and shouting to one of his brothers: "Tell Mum I'm leaving." He subsequently published a magazine account on this joyful trip.

That same year, LeCornu joined the French Aerial Navigation Society and attended meetings of the group for many years, eventually becoming president of the organization that grew out of this society, the French League of Kites, a federal association that supported experimental studies.

In 1907, LeCornu had another opportunity to fly in a balloon in Caen. His wife permitted him to make the trip only if she were taken along. She was.

Having been intrigued by aeronautics, and particularly kites, since childhood, LeCornu by 1897 had invented a "shelf" or "ladder" kite, composed of three rectangular cells placed one above the other. His materials were basic: light wood for the frames, light cotton or silk cloth for the sails, glue, ties made of waxed string. But his construction technique was ingenious.

In 1900, LeCornu won a first prize at the World's Fair in Paris with an multicellulaire oblique kite, the famous Gauffre de LeCornu (The Le Cornu Waffle). He used the kite to tow himself in a boat and marketed it widely. Public recognition of the device's efficiency provoked led LeCornu to advertise the kite in specialized journals and it was subsequently used for weather soundings in many countries—England, Belgium, Russia, the U.S. Always abreast of the times, LeCornu marketed a suspension rig

for cameras so his kite could be used to make aerial photographs, a new craze begun by the Frenchman Batut.

Using his writing skills to advantage, LeCornu published the important, widely used reference book *Les Cerfs*



*Jean Le Cornu, wife and friends pose with his replica of a classic LeCornu.*

finally a Rosengaert. He and his wife were also pioneers with the new two-wheeled bicycles, going out for long rides together.

LeCornu had a pioneering spirit from the beginning. In 1887 while still at school, he attended a balloon launch in Caen. When a prospective passenger fainted at the

Volants (Kites) in 1902. Although it contained inaccuracies, this book was the first comprehensive effort anywhere in the world to document the contemporary state of the art of kites. A volume on aerial navigation soon followed. From 1904 on, he contributed to the journal *Les Cerfs Volants* and served as one of its editors. Among the other writers were men whose names were to become hallowed in the field of flight—Saconney, Hargrave, Houard, Puyo, Roch-Donzella. In 1912 he issued *Manual du Cerf-voliste* (Handbook for Kitefliers). During World War I he published brochures on sea surveillance and on the use of manned kites from the decks of submarines to increase range of vision. (Disregarded by the French military, this idea of using kites from the decks of subs was taken up much later by the rival Germans who flew spotter Focke-Achgelis gyroplane kites from submarines during World War II.)

The fertile LeCornu not only wrote about kites, but also about many other subjects that interested him—electricity, aviation, mathematics. He wrote short novels with a scientific turn to them and most of these were published. He also wrote satirical songs and monologues, as well as articles on freemasonry.

Joseph LeCornu was not the only theoretician in his family. His eldest brother, Leon (Jean Le Cornu's great-grandfather) did much scientific research and wrote many books. He became a member of the prestigious French Academy of Science and in 1910 was elected its chairman.

Although a reserve officer, Joseph LeCornu was declared too old at age 50 for active duty when World War I broke out in 1914. With his usual energy, however, he took to writing letters to soldiers to dispense news and to express his unshakeable optimism in the French cause. He wrote many hundreds, perhaps thousands, of these missives.

Having used his political connections to get a good job in the coal industry after losing his Caen council post in 1908, Le Cornu by World War I found himself idle as the war brought his business to a standstill. LeCornu then involved himself in something quite new to him—cider-making and the distillation of cider into the high proof brandy marc.

By 1923 he retired with his wife to their country home at Le Bijude, near Caen and Cambes, where he busied himself with a big garden and raising bees. A gracious host to his many friends, he became something of a legend to his visiting nieces and nephews for the ingenious toys he built for them.

The still energetic LeCornu continued as mayor to run the nearby village of Cambes with wisdom and rectitude. He maintained roads, had water service installed, saw to road mending, supported the church, advised former school friends, served on a variety of local and national boards. Not surprisingly, he saw to the electrification of the town of Cambes and surrounding countryside. It was one of his major achievements.

In the summer of 1931, LeCornu drove to the town hall in Cambes for a meeting, where he appeared in obvious ill health to friends. He asked his secretary for papers which he ordinarily signed at the end of the meeting. He explained this request: "No,

immediately, while I can do it." Returning home, LeCornu died in his bed on the morning of August 9, apparently from a heart ailment. The death was mourned in the church at Cambes, which proved to be too small for the number of people attending. LeCornu was buried in the churchyard in the city of his birth, Caen. He was 67.

### *A Personal Summing Up*

*As his biographer and admiring great-grandnephew, I am prepared to sum up Joseph LeCornu this way: A good and faithful man. Active, passionate, kind-hearted and very sensitive. He stayed young and joyful, was open-minded, honest, deeply religious. He had wonderful gifts for music, drawing, photography, poetry, writing. He was an expert craftsman—blacksmith, mason, house painter, modeler, electrician, cook, tailor, gardener. He was noted for his ability to tame birds. His dogs Taupette and Zezette remain legendary in my family's collective memory. Altogether, a renaissance man.*

—Jean Le Cornu