

Hall of Fame nomination

Living inductee : Mr Vincent LEÏS

Nationality : France

Date of birth : Born in Lille, France, on 2nd october 1958

Vincent started gas ballooning in 1973 at the age of 15 with his brother Thierry. In 1975, at the age of 17, he got his gas balloon licence and **was and still is the youngest pilot in France**. At that time, there were very few hot air balloons (just arrived in France around 1973) and the tradition of Northern France was historically gas ballooning up till the 80's.

His instructor was a famous french balloon builder Robert D ev eque.

Vincent was a member of the AANF (Association A rostatique du Nord de la France).

He passed his hot air balloon licence in 1979.

In 1980, the balloon club « CBLN » (Club des Ballons Libres du Nord) is created by Vincent and Thierry Le ys, Claude Jutteau and Dominique Spriet. They built together their first netted balloon (700m³) named « Le point d'Exclamation ». A short while later, they built their 2nd netted balloon named « Le point de Suspension » (700m³).

In 1982, they built the « Robert D ev eque » (250m³) in memory to his instructor.

The CBLN had a lot of contracts with cities on public squares (1 or 2 balloons inflated) almost every week-ends ! This was a very popular tradition in France in Northern France as long as coal mines were in activity, supplying cheap coal gas !

After 10 years of gas ballooning, in 1985, the CBLN bought their first Hot air balloon, then the 2nd in 1989, and a 3rd one in 1993, so gas ballooning and hot air ballooning were both being operated in the same club !

During the 90's, Vincent and his team, built 4 new gas netted balloons : the « Santos Dumont » (700m³), the « Carboxyque » (250m³), the « Robert D ev eque » (340m³) and « Le Petit Prince » (1000m³).

Achievements, honors and awards :

Vincent and his brother Jean-Fran ois decided to participate to their first Gordon Bennett with « Le Petit Prince » in 1997 from Warstein (Germany). They won the race after a 45h30min flight and 1732,5km, landing on the beach of the Black Sea in Romania, 220m further than the American team « Sullivan/Levin ».

In 2000, they built a new netted gas balloon, the « Globe Trotter » (510m³).

They participated again in the Gordon Bennett Race in 2001 from Warstein (Germany) and they won the race.

In 2002, the race started from Ch atellerault in France, they flew southwest across the Gulf of Gascony then over the north coast of the Iberic peninsula, when all the other competitors landed before the Atlantic Ocean, but Vincent and his Brother Jean Fran ois flew on going west over the ocean for 400km before heading South East back to land at the Saint Vincent Cape   at the tip of the South of Portugal ! The ballooning world was admiring that performance ! Victory again !

The following year, launching on a very windy night from Arc et Senans in France, they won the Gordon Bennett for the 3rd time in a row, and therefore they kept the trophy for good !

What an achievement for the 2 brothers : 4 participations and 4 gold medals on board their own home built balloon!

In 2006, Vincent Leys had a new copilot (Sebastien Rolland) and performed 7th place by landing in Norway (take off in Waastmunster).

And in 2009 for their 2nd participation, they won the GB after 85h11min flight (french national record for duration).

In 2010, they finished 4th place.

2011 saw Vincent's 6th victory with « Le Petit Prince » launching from Gap Tallard and landing in Austria the next day ...Short Race as much as distance and time were concerned !

Then, Vincent built a new competition netted balloon, « Le Grain de Folie », extremely performing, with brand new light material, full of innovation (carbon valve on the top, white color inside the envelope, super light net, super light basket, etc...). « Le petit Prince » was already a very competitive balloon, but this one was about 30 kgs lighter !

Taking part at the GB 2012 starting from Ebnat Kappel, they won the race again, landing in South Portugal very close to Saint Vincent Cape !

With these 2 victories, matching the record of Joseph Starkbaum in the GB (7 wins !), Vincent enters the legend of gas ballooning !

In 2013, Vincent flew with a new co-pilot (Christophe Houver) who used to be the headman at the French command center for years. The race started from Nancy (France) early in the morning after a big thunderstorm had washed out the night before the launch site, and they went to land in Portugal and fetch another victory.

Making the second « 3 in a row » wins in the GB for him and France (2001,2002,2003 and 2011,2012,2013), and with a total of 8 victories, Vincent now holds the absolute record !

In 2014, after 8 Gold medals in the Gordon Bennett, it was the first time that Vincent had a different medal color, a « silver medal », with his second place behind Willy Eimers (4th Victory for him in the GB), who had a nice word to Vincent on the Podium : « Vincent, it's usually your place here ! » That was another fabulous race, starting from Vichy (France) and finishing on the shore in Sicily flying about 30 hours over the Mediterranean Sea !

And last but not least, in 2017, launching from Gruyères (Switzerland) and landing in Estonia, Vincent won the Gordon Bennett for the 9th time, after being the only balloon doing a fantastic flight through the « Kaliningrad window » towards Baltic countries!

And in 2019, starting from Montbéliard, he won his first Bronze medal in the GB and set a new duration French National record with 89h16min !

As a summary, with 19 participations in the GB, he performed 9 gold medals (about 50% wins !), 1 silver medal and 1 bronze medal, becoming the most decorated pilot in the history of distance gas balloon competition.

The same year, for his first participation in the America's Challenge, he won a silver medal with a new copilot (Eric Decellieres) and also broke the distance French National record with 2136km ! 2 French records in one month !

List of records of Vincent Leys in gas balloons :

- Distance French record for AA-02 (250m³) with 343,82km.

- Duration French record for AA-02 with 13h55min in 1994. (was also World Record in 1994 !)
- Distance French record (837,078km) for AA-04.
- Duration French record (22h15min) for AA-04.
- Altitude French record (6176m) for AA-05 during the GB 2006.
- Duration French record (89h16min) for AA-05 during the GB 2019.
- Distance French record (2135,97km) for AA-05 during the Americas'Challenge 2019.

2002 : Recipient of the Montgolfier Diploma

2003 : recipient of the Sports French Academy : « Andre de Saint Sauveur Prize ».

Vincent has flown about 3000 hours in gas balloon and more than 1500 hours in hot air balloon since 1973.

He is a very active flight instructor, has qualified 15 gas balloon pilots and 12 hot air balloon pilots.

He has always been motivated in sharing and transmitting his « savoir-faire » to others.

He has built 9 gas balloons mostly from his front room ! Because of his eagerness in improving his competitive balloons, he has made other competitors turn to more competitive balloons !

One can say that because of his many successes in the Gordon Bennett races, Vincent had made gas ballooning, from a dying sport, a great motivation to new pilots to come to gas ballooning in France. France has proudly being entering 3 balloons at the GB races for a few years now.

He is the Chairman of the Gas Balloon Commission of the French Ballooning Federation.

He has been a board member of the same French Ballooning Federation for many years.

And since 1973, he has been busy promoting so convincingly the netted gas balloon French tradition ! Hasn't he ?