

# 60 YEARS AGO, THE FIRST PARIS – TAHITI LANDED IN FAA'A

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*TAI's DC-7 on the Faa'a trail.*

**On October 16, 1960, for the first time, a long-haul commercial flight landed in Tahiti. Even if the Faa'a track will not be completed and inaugurated until the following year, this DC-7 from the TAI company brings fenua into a new era. Jean-Claude Soulier, present on the track that day to welcome the aircraft, remembers.**

It is a date difficult to forget for Jean-Claude Soulier. On October 16, 1960, just 60 years ago, an Intercontinental Air Transport (TAI) Douglas DC-7 touched down in Faa'a. The octogenarian, then a young technician - electrician for the company, was on the tarmac that day. He even, from the top of a stepladder, rolled up a long wreath of flowers around the nose of the four-engine, landed "three minutes" after a Navy Lancaster. *"The state didn't want a private person to land first,"* he smiles. But the TAI was determined to be the first company to land in Tahiti, after two days of flight and stopovers from Paris, along the "route to India".

### **A "real track" after that of Bora Bora**

Orly, Athens, Cairo, Karachi, Saigon, Sydney, Nouméa... The road is long to reach Faa'a. The track, built on the lagoon, between the coast and Motu Tahiri - a technical feat for the time - was not yet finished. But whatever, for several years now the TAI wanted to push its service a little further east, already extended to Australia in 1956, for the Melbourne Olympic Games, then to New Caledonia. The dream of its co-founder, Paul Bernard: to extend its lines across the Pacific, to reach the United States, already served by Air France... *"He wanted to allow passengers to go around the world on French wings"*, continues Jean-Claude Soulier. Polynesia is a must, but its only airstrip was the one that was built during the war in Bora Bora. The company had started to land its DC-6s and then DC-7s, propeller planes, from 1958. Passengers then boarded Bermuda or Catalina seaplanes for Tahiti. But Paul Bernard knows it: the future lies with the jets, which require a longer runway, and the economic center of Polynesia must open up. Very early on, he was one of those who pleaded the cause of a modern airport in Tahiti. The idea was raised - and debated - in 1953 in Papeete, supported by a handful of entrepreneurs and high-ranking officials in Paris. It is the "context" which will decide the State, explains Jean-Claude Soulier. Project funding,

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*The cars of the curious gathered on the motu, which already hosts a small base for launching seaplanes. In the background, the DC-7 and the Lancaster landed on October 16.*

On October 16, 1960, the event moved “a good part of Tahiti” to the coast of Faa'a, still not very urbanized, or directly to the edges of the slopes, where we also meet Madeleine Moua's group Heiva. It will not be the last time that the crowds meet at the airfield. The TAI flight, which continues on to Honolulu, and later, Los Angeles, is starting this October, weekly. Very quickly, the new Tahitian runway also welcomed the Constellation of the SPAL (a company specially created by the Pan American to establish itself on the Hawaii - Tahiti line) or the Electra of the TEAL, future Air New Zealand. At the point of Hotuaera, known as “du Flamboyant”, the landings become popular and regular gathering places.

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*The construction of the Faa'a runway in 1960. It measured less than 2km on October 16, but reached 3400 meters a few months later, which allows it to accommodate jets.*

In Faa'a, the ballet of trucks, which went to seek in the valley of Punaruu the enormous quantities of stones necessary for the embankment, will not stop before the end of 1961. The first terminal, on the motu side, is not then finished. But from March 61, the runway was long enough to accommodate the first jet aircraft, a DC-8. In May, it was officially inaugurated, at the same time as the famous "round the world" line, the result of the partnership between Air France and TAI. This gigantic project for the fenua of the time, attracted many companies and workers from metropolitan France, who joined the teams of the companies in Tahiti and the first streams of tourists whose journey was made easier. The country is all the more agitated as at the end of the year 1960 unloads Marlon

Brando and the MGM teams to film *The Bounty rebels* . As recalled by Jean-Claude Soulier, who, after the TAI, had a long career as a journalist, this short period preceding the CEP initiated the economic boom in Polynesia.

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From year to year, the former TAI, UTA, the company which absorbed it in 1963, or civil aviation meet on October 16, around the stele of Paul Bernard, today installed in front of the "New" terminal. A gathering that could not be held this week, the health situation not being favorable. But there is no question of letting these 60 candles pass. The OPT is expected to put a commemorative stamp on the letters in some of its offices today. As for the ceremony, that Jean-Claude Soulier wanted " *a little more important than usual* " , anniversary requires, it will simply be "postponed". The Country itself has expressed the will to "mark the occasion".

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*Jean-Claude Soulier nevertheless visited the stele in memory of Paul Bernard this week. "A man who has done a lot to open up and develop Tahiti," he explains. This great resistance fighter, who became a figure in French aviation in the 1950s, died in September 1960, a few weeks before the TAI landed in Tahiti. © DR*

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