

The 1922 crossing of the Atlantic

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This year marks the centenary of the crossing of the South Atlantic by two Portuguese airmen.



Sacadura Cabral and Gago Coutinho

The years following the World War had seen efforts by many airmen to complete the first flights over the oceans of the world.

The first non-stop flight over the Atlantic Ocean was made by John Alcock and Arthur Brown in June 1919. They flew a Vickers Vimy aircraft from St John's in Newfoundland to Clifden in County Galway, on the west coast of Ireland.

They were responding to a challenge set by the Daily Mail in April 1913, offering a prize of £10,000 to "the aviator who shall first cross the Atlantic in an aeroplane in flight from any point in the USA, Canada or Newfoundland to any point in Great Britain or Ireland in 72 continuous hours". They achieved the crossing in 16 hours of flying time and covered 1,890 miles (3,040km).

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Map plan

Two weeks beforehand, a US Navy Curtiss flying boat piloted by Lieutenant Commander Albert Cushing Read had flown from New York to Plymouth in Devon over six days via Faial in the Azores, and with 23 stops on the way. On this journey, Read had called at Lisbon on May 27, to the wild enthusiasm of the Lisboetas, and he finished his journey at Plymouth four days later. The first leg of his trip (New York-Faial) measured over 3,800km, and the distance from the Azores to Plymouth via Lisbon was another 3,000km. Read was decorated by both the US and Portuguese governments for this record-breaking flight.

An airship made the double crossing of the North Atlantic a month afterwards and, later in 1919, a Vickers Vimy aircraft similar to that of Alcock and Brown made the first England-Australia flight. The interest in making the first flight to reach far-flung destinations persisted for some years.

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Sacadura Cabral

Photo: MUNICÍPIO CELORICO DA BEIRA

The year 1922 marked the centenary of the Independence of Brazil, and two Portuguese airmen decided to emulate the flight across the North Atlantic by making a similar crossing of the South Atlantic.

The first aerial crossing of the South Atlantic is only superficially comparable with the flight of Alcock and Brown. The distance between Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro, at 8,383km, is nearly three times greater than the distance covered by Alcock and Brown, and it was, therefore, not possible to make the journey in one continuous flight, since no contemporary aircraft could carry enough fuel for such a trip.

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Sacadura Cabral bust in Museu da Marinha

There was a further difference in that the Portuguese flight joined the two capitals (Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro) and not the two continents, a journey which would be much shorter. The aircraft they used was a seaplane, whereas the Vickers Vimy was a land-based aircraft.

There was nevertheless widespread enthusiasm for this enterprise. The two airmen were Sacadura Cabral (the pilot) and Gago Coutinho (the navigator). The flight had the support of the Portuguese government, who made available an aircraft for this crossing, as well as the services of a warship, the NRP República, whose task was to shadow the aircraft, and provide refuelling services (the abbreviation NRP stands for Navio da República Portuguesa and denotes a ship belonging to the Portuguese Navy).

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This ship had been built in Scotland by Connell at Scotstoun, and launched in 1915 as HMS Gladiolus, being classed as a sloop. Gladiolus and her sister ship Jonquil (renamed NRP Carvalho de Araújo) were sold to Portugal in 1920 and, reclassified as cruisers, they entered service in 1921.



Santa Cruz in São Brás

Cabral and Coutinho were pioneers of astronomical navigation for aircraft, and their two new instruments were an artificial horizon and a “contraption” to measure the effect of the wind on the direction of the aircraft. One of the reasons for government support for the flight was the opportunity to test these two developments in navigation during a long traverse of the sea. Cabral made visits to Britain and to France in order to select the aircraft which best suited this purpose. He chose a Rolls Royce-powered Fairey IIID Mark II seaplane which was specifically fitted out for the attempt. Their particular aircraft was christened Lusitânia.

The two set out from Belém on March 30, 1922. They made their first landfall at Las Palmas de Gran Canaria in the Canary Islands, and they set out again on April 5 on the 1,370km leg to São Vicente Island in Cabo Verde. They then flew to Praia on Santiago Island (also in Cabo Verde). At this point, they had to confirm their change of plans.

The original idea was to fly as far as the Brazilian islands of Fernando de Noronha, where the República would be waiting for them, but their experience on the journey at this juncture told them that the fuel consumption of the aircraft was greater than they had been led to believe, and they could not carry enough fuel.

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Tribute postcard

They planned now to reach the small rocky archipelago of St Peter and St Paul off Pernambuco, some 600km to the northeast of Fernando de Noronha. The most famous previous visitor to these remote rocks is Charles Darwin, who on his round-the-world trip on HMS Beagle came ashore here on February 16, 1832.

This next leg of the journey was the longest at 1,700km. The Portuguese airmen relied on Gago Coutinho's use of their new methods of navigation to reach the archipelago, and it was a navigational triumph, since these islets are tiny and uninhabited, remote in the wide ocean. In finding them, the new system of navigation had fortunately proved itself highly accurate, since as they put down in the ocean, their fuel reserves were down to the last three litres.

Now disaster struck. As the aircraft alighted in rough sea near the archipelago, one of the two floats became detached from the seaplane and, unsupported in the water, the aircraft sank. Fortunately, the República was at hand to take the two airmen on board, and they were transported to Fernando de Noronha.

Public enthusiasm in both Portugal and Brazil led the Portuguese government to send out a second aircraft, also a Fairey III seaplane. This replacement aircraft, christened Pátria, arrived at Fernando de Noronha on May 6. The two airmen flew back in Pátria to the point where they had lost Lusitânia in order to resume their interrupted journey.

An unfortunate engine problem forced them down again into the sea. The aeroplane was lost and the two men drifted for nine hours in the water before they were rescued. Having lost radio

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contact with the aircraft, the República had sent out a distress call, which was answered by a passing British freighter, the Paris City, which located the downed airmen, took them aboard and transported them back to Fernando de Noronha.

A third aircraft – another Fairey III, this time named Santa Cruz, christened by the wife of the President of Brazil – was loaded on to the cruiser NRP Carvalho de Araújo, transported to Fernando de Noronha and placed in the sea on June 5. Cabral and Coutinho set out again, this time southwards, and visited the Brazilian coastal cities of Recife, Salvador da Bahia and Vitória before arriving in Rio de Janeiro on June 17, where they alighted in Guanabara Bay. The two heroes were greeted by large cheering crowds.

Although they had originally expected that the whole enterprise would take them about a week, their journey had lasted 79 days, and the actual flight time was only 62 hours and 26 minutes. Both airmen were decorated by the Portuguese government with the Grand Cross of the Military Order of the Tower and Sword.

The third aircraft, the Santa Cruz, was the sole surviving machine connected with the crossing and it is now on display in the Maritime Museum in Lisbon, while two models in steel are on permanent display, one near the start point of the journey at the Torre de Belém, and the other on the outskirts of São Brás de Alportel.

The navigator for the epic flight was Carlos Viegas Gago Coutinho (1869-1959). His birth was registered in Belém, but there is a small chance that he was born in Mesquita near São Brás, in the home of his mother's parents, and that his birth was subsequently registered in Belém. He joined the Naval School when he was 17 and, after various tours of duty at sea while based in Mozambique and Timor, he was attached to the Cartographic Mission and involved in mapping Timor, Mozambique and Angola.

The two friends met for the first time in Mozambique, when Cabral joined the cartographical team under the command of Coutinho. Coutinho made his first flights with Cabral in 1917, as they began to research navigation methods, and they cooperated in testing them prior to the Brazil flight of 1922.

Coutinho's particular contributions were first, the addition of two spirit levels to a traditional marine sextant to provide an artificial horizon. This arrangement permitted accurate navigation without reference to the real horizon. His second contribution was an optical flight instrument mounted in the cockpit floor, allowing the measurement of leeway in flight while ever the ground, or surface, remained visible. Coutinho was promoted to the rank of Vice-Admiral immediately after the flight to Rio, and to full Admiral in 1958, the year before his death at the age of 90.

Artur de Sacadura Freire Cabral (1881-1924) joined the armed forces in 1897, with the intention of making his career in the navy. His father had just died and at least a part of his wage went towards the support of his widowed mother and his nine siblings. He had a natural aptitude for command and he reached the rank of capitão-de-fragata (equivalent to commander in the Royal Navy) in 1922. As a serving naval officer, he met and served under Gago Coutinho when they worked together in mapping Mozambique and Angola (1907-1915).

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In 1915, Cabral was one of the first Portuguese volunteers for air service and trained in France as a pilot. Soon after attaining his pilot's licence, he opted to train on seaplanes, also in France, and he became a pilot instructor on his return to Portugal in 1916. Although he was determined to become a pilot, it was surprising that he was selected for training because he suffered from short sightedness and he apparently, therefore, had his pilot's goggles fitted with prescription lenses.

Cabral went on to command the Naval Air School and was charged with improving aerial navigation. He and Coutinho worked together to conquer the problems caused by the wind to the accurate navigation of aircraft and they made a flight in 1919 from Lisbon to Madeira to test their navigation system before their journey to Brazil. Cabral also planned a commercial air service between Lisbon and Madrid, and a journey by air to replicate the voyage of Vasco da Gama.

After their momentous flight to Rio, Cabral visited Amsterdam in 1924 to fetch one of the five Fokker aircraft acquired through public subscription for the first flight to India, and ultimately for an attempt at a round-the-world flight. On his return journey to Portugal, the first leg would take him from Amsterdam to Brest in France, but he and his aircraft were lost in the North Sea, and neither his body nor the aircraft have ever been recovered. Later investigation showed that the probable area of ditching was somewhere off Beachy Head in the English Channel.

A poet wrote: "Encontrou a sepultura em pleno mar, Que a terra, donde andava foragido, Era pequena demais para o sepultar / He found his grave in the open sea, as he journeyed beyond the land, which proved too small to receive his remains."

As a result of the connection of the family of Gago Coutinho with the town, the Câmara Municipal of São Brás de Alportel has long promoted a movement to rename Faro Airport in his honour. In June 2022, the centenary of the crossing was marked by an announcement by the government that, in recognition of the family connection with the Algarve, Faro Airport would officially change its name to Gago Coutinho Airport.

Read more from [Peter Booker](#) about [Alves Reis and the Banknote Crisis of 1925](#) or [The River Airport in Lisbon](#)



Peter Booker

Peter Booker co-founded with his wife Lynne the Algarve History Association
www.algarvehistoryassociation.com