

1992: A TBM 700 is selected as the shuttle for the International Olympics Committee at the Courchevel Mountain airport during the Winter Olympic Games



Philippe de Segovia fell into aviation at the age of 14, when he started flying gliders. He was able to combine his passion for aviation with his professional life, first as a journalist for aviation magazines such as Aviation & Pilote, of which he was editor-in-chief, then for 25 years as communications manager for SOCATA and then Daher aircraft, including of course the TBM. He is also secretary of the Heritage Avions Morane-Saulnier association.

At the very beginning of the TBM program, the Winter Olympics in Albertville, France, provided an opportunity to demonstrate the single-engine turboprop's performance in the VIP transport role.

Flashback to 1990. The first deliveries of the TBM 700, the first certified civil pressurized single-engine turboprop, had barely begun following its certification in Europe and the United States, but the aircraft was already making headlines despite the Gulf War. The following year, around thirty aircraft were delivered to the United States, as well as to Asia, Germany, Austria, and of course, France. Among the French customers, Jacques Lemaigre du Breuil, a banker, had just taken delivery of serial number 11 and was quickly impressed by the aircraft's performance. He shared this enthusiasm with other pilots and acquaintances in the business world. This is how he formed a partnership with the owner of another TBM 700, the S/N 13, based in the Paris region, to benefit several companies with rapid transport needs. The idea was to take advantage of the TBM's exceptional cost-effectiveness.

In the early 1990s, once the Gulf War had passed, the major event was the organization of the Albertville Winter Olympics, the first held in France since 1968. Among the major works undertaken to prepare the Olympic venues, the Courchevel altiport had its runway lengthened to accommodate larger aircraft, increasing from 375 to 537 meters, and its width from 30 meters to 80 meters.



Very quickly, several TBM 700 pilots, already holding site qualifications, wanted to enjoy the ski slopes flying their new aircraft on the steep 18.66% gradient of runway 04/22, the steepest in the world for an international airport.

The capabilities of the new aircraft, offering an alternative to helicopter transport, attracted the attention of the office of the French Minister of Sports, Frédérique Bredin. Courchevel, which hosts the ski jumping events, also serves as a mountain base for the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Commercial flights operated by the local airline using unpressurized DHC-6 Twin Otters were often diverted to Chambéry (LFLB) requiring a transfer by car in case of fog in the valleys. The TBM 700, on the other hand, can provide direct flights from Paris, flying at level ground almost to the destination. The only reason for a "no-go" is a southerly wind, a relatively rare occurrence. And the fact that it was a single-engine turboprop didn't deter anyone, as Air Alpes had previously operated with Pilatus PC-6s for commercial VFR flights. Even the French Civil Aviation Authority saw nothing wrong with it... a different era.



TBM 700 on the Courchevel altiport ramp next to its famous terminal-chalet.

The project took shape under the leadership of Nicolas Gorodiche, a regular pilot of the TBM 700 S/N11. This former flight test engineer, who had become an executive in the transportation sector, was one of Air Alpes' early pilots alongside Michel Ziegler. He contacted Philippe Deleume, then chief pilot of SOCAT, to work on the technical aspects and define a training program for the pilots who would be transporting VIPs. Along with two other pilots, former Air Alpes pilots Jacques Beriel and Dominique Prevost, they departed for Courchevel in the TBM 700 S/N 11 in early January 1992. This was one month before the start of the Olympic Games, which were to take place from February 8th to 23rd. In his logbook, Nicolas Gorodiche recorded 15 touch & goes to qualify the TBM 700 captains for Courchevel. "Mountain flying is never easy, however, the extraordinary performance of the TBM 700 allowed us to carry out this type of mission safely. Provided, of course, that we were rigorous with the parameters." On take-off, the instruction was to lift off with the yoke nose-up to relieve the pressure on the nose gear. On landing, the approach was made with full flaps at 85 knots, maintaining power during the flare to climb back up the slope. Among the specific instructions, one was not to retract the landing gear in case of slush to avoid any risk of the mechanism freezing. The first operational flights began on February 2nd between Paris-Le Bourget and Courchevel. Until February 20th, about ten flights transported around thirty passengers to the heart of the action. And despite days with winds sometimes gusting to 15-20 knots, no scheduled flights were cancelled.



TBM-700N taking off; the photographer is not holding the camera at an angle, the runway at Altiport-Courchevel really does have such a steep gradient!



In any case, the TBM 700 made a remarkable entrance into VIP transport. The idea that a pressurized single-engine turboprop could be reliable enough to commercially transport passengers under instrument flight rules was beginning to gain traction. A few months later, the French Air Force took delivery of its first TBM 700 liaison aircraft. And the following year, Nicolas Gorodiche accompanied Jacques Lemaigre du Breuil on S/N 11 for a new adventure: a non-stop round-the-world flight. The TBM 700 had become legendary.



The first official TBM 700 passengers :

Welcomed by local authority, Nelson Paillou, president of the National Olympic committee of France, Frederique Bredin, France's Minister for Youth and Sports, and their pilot Nicolas Gorodiche.

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