

Lone Legacy

Eighty-five years ago this month, Charles Lindbergh conquered more than the Atlantic.

by James Perloff

When Charles Lindbergh arrived at Paris' Le Bourget Airfield on the night of May 21, 1927, completing the first solo nonstop transatlantic flight in history, French police and two companies of soldiers with fixed bayonets could not restrain the 150,000 Frenchmen who had gathered to greet him. The 25-year-old pilot hoped to taxi the plane into a hangar, but stopped his propeller for fear it might harm those in the onrushing crowd, who hoisted him onto their ocean of shoulders.

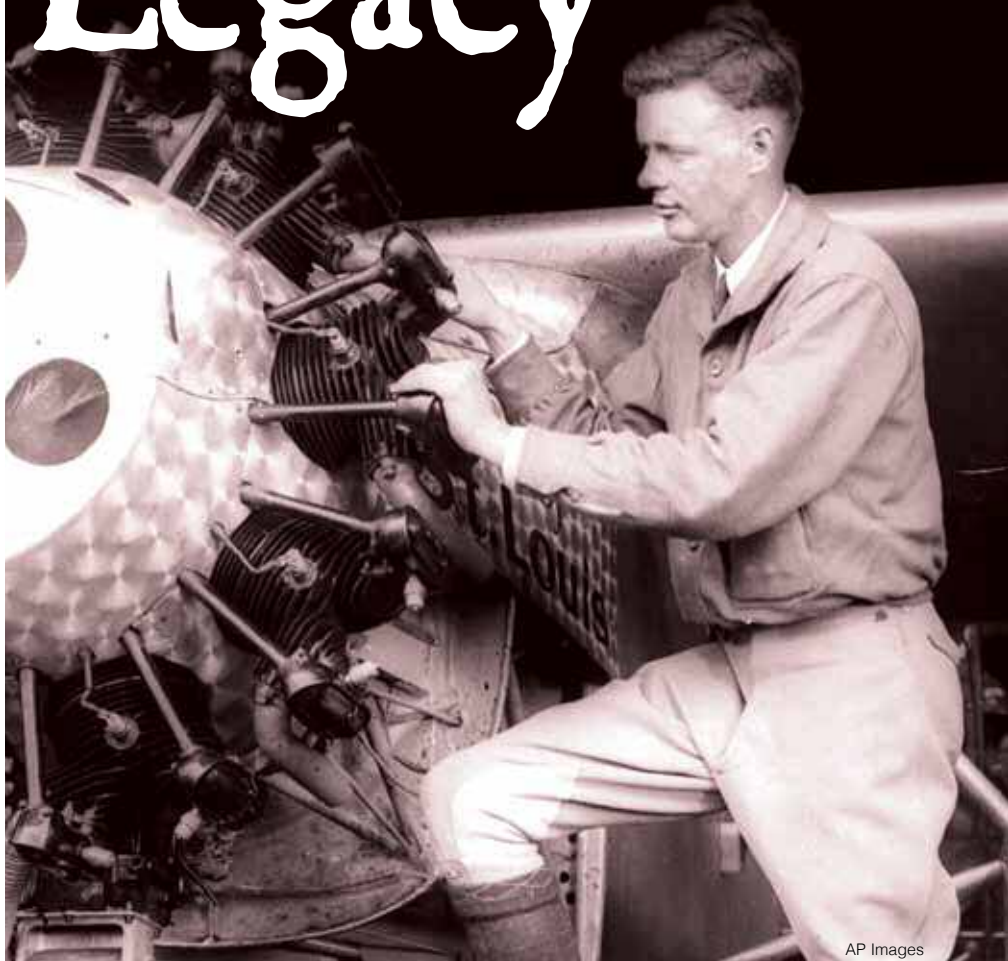
The world would not be the same.

An American Boyhood

Lindbergh's father, Charles, Sr., was an attorney, and a U.S. Congressman from 1907 to 1917. He was generally regarded as the fiercest congressional opponent of both the Federal Reserve Act and U.S. entry into World War I. Well ahead of his time, he foresaw the destruction that Fed-inflated dollars and foreign interventionism meant for our Republic.

Although young Charles (born 1902) occasionally stayed with his father in Washington, most of his boyhood was spent on the family farm in Little Falls, Minnesota. The house was literally on the Mississippi's banks; Charles would awake each morning to the river's roar. He was given his first rifle at age six and became a crack shot, eventually able to shoot a duck in the head in full flight. Much of his boyhood was spent hunting, rafting, and exploring the outdoors. He loved sleeping outside, even in subfreezing temperatures.

Charles also had a penchant for things



AP Images

Lindbergh services the *Spirit of St. Louis* in preparation for his flight. As the only competitor for the Orteig Prize to fly alone, he was nicknamed "the Lone Eagle."

mechanical. By age 11 he had mastered driving the family's Model T, "Maria"; at 12 drove his father on his campaign trail; and at 14 drove his mother to California.

In 1920, Lindbergh enrolled as a University of Wisconsin engineering major. He joined the university rifle team, which ranked number one nationally in his freshman year, with Lindbergh recognized as its top marksman. However, Charles found academics boring, earned mostly poor grades, and dropped out in 1922.

Emerging Pilot

By now Lindbergh dreamt of becoming an airplane pilot. He spent much of his savings on flying lessons at the Nebraska Aircraft Company, where he also learned to

care for engines, but the firm soon folded. However, while there he met a barnstorming pilot, Erol Bahl. Barnstorming was then a popular new form of crowd entertainment. Bahl told Lindbergh he needed no help, but Charles made an offer he couldn't refuse — he'd help for nothing. Lindbergh proved so valuable that Bahl began paying him, then allowed him to perform stunts — "walking the wings" while waving to crowds below.

Joining other barnstormers, Lindbergh advanced to parachute stunts. On his first jump ever, he did a "double jump": Wearing two chutes, he cut the first; the crowd gasped as he plummeted toward "doom" — until he opened the second chute.

In 1923, with \$500 he bought his first

Charles also had a penchant for things mechanical. By age 11 he had mastered driving the family's Model T, "Maria"; at 12 drove his father on his campaign trail; and at 14 drove his mother to California.

plane, a rickety old model called a "Jenny." He kept it running with a combination of engine and elbow grease, and toured several states, earning a living off \$5 rides he offered the public.

At a St. Louis air show, Lindbergh was advised to join the Army Air Service (forerunner of the Air Force), where he could learn much more about flying. Charles took the advice. He entered the Air Service as a cadet in 1924. Taking studies far more seriously than in college, he graduated first in his class. He was commissioned as a second lieutenant, but with America in the midst of a lengthy peacetime, he exercised the option of becoming an officer in the reserves.

Airmail was in its infancy, and at 23, Lindbergh was selected as chief pilot for the first Chicago-to-St. Louis mail route. Meteorology was not advanced then either, and unanticipated storms, particularly during winter, often made airmail delivery dangerous. Pilots called airmail planes "flying coffins."

One night, not knowing that a mechanic had replaced his fuel tank with a smaller one, Lindbergh encountered a huge zone of dense fog. Unable to see a landing place, and with his engine sputtering as its fuel gave out, Lindbergh parachuted into the fog's emptiness. He heard the sound of his plane crashing as he landed in a cornfield. With the help of local farmers, Lindbergh found the plane two miles away. Since the craft had run out of fuel, it hadn't burned, leaving the mail intact. With the farmers' assistance, Lindbergh got the mailbags onto a train so they could continue to their destination. He stayed overnight with the farmers, whom he paid for their gracious help.

Lindbergh set an unusual record by becoming the only pilot to save his life four times by parachute. August Thiemann, Lindbergh's former staff sergeant, wrote him that "it appears to me

as though you are favored by the angels." Nevertheless, Charles sought an even higher challenge.

Reaching for the Sky

In 1919, Raymond Orteig, a French-born New York hotelier, had offered a \$25,000 prize to anyone who could

complete a nonstop flight from New York to France. Today, transatlantic flight seems routine. At that time, however, bridging the stark intercontinental waters by air seemed fantasy. It was less than 16 years earlier that the Wright Brothers made the first airplane flights at Kitty Hawk, traveling but a few hundred feet.

In 1927, Orteig's challenge was still unmet, although two British fliers, Alcock and Whitten, had successfully crossed from Newfoundland to Ireland — an impressive feat, yet 1,400 miles short of the intercontinental New York-Paris connection. With advances in airplane design, more fliers hoped to meet Orteig's challenge. Lindbergh was the

"dark horse" among a field of candidates far more famous and financed.

Frenchman René Fonck, World War I's greatest Allied fighter ace, embraced the challenge in September 1926. Fonck taxied down New York's Roosevelt Field, loaded with a crew of four, three engines, two radios, and 2,380 gallons of fuel. Even leather upholstery and a bed were added. The plane crashed on takeoff — Fonck escaped alive, but two crew members did not.

Admiral Richard Byrd, the famed polar explorer, joined the list of aspirants, but his plane crashed on its first test flight. Though no one aboard suffered major injuries, restoring the plane took time. In April 1927, Noel Davis and Stanton Wooster, top U.S. Navy pilots, crashed and died in a trial flight for a run at the Orteig. One plane, the *Columbia*, never left the ground in time due to legal wrangling amongst the owner and crew.

Few financiers and airplane manufacturers wanted to invest in little-known Charles Lindbergh. But, while putting up \$2,000 of his savings, Lindbergh was able to find backers among businessmen

In 1925, Lindbergh tested a new commercial plane that failed to come out of a spin. Before it crashed, he parachuted from just 350 feet, dislocating his shoulder. He was back flying later that day.



in St. Louis, where his skill and courage as a mail pilot had made him something of a local legend. Only one airplane manufacturer would commit to his transatlantic endeavor — San Diego's Ryan Aircraft Company. Like Lindbergh, they were generally unknown, but talented and dedicated.

The plane was built from scratch according to Lindbergh's own specifications; he oversaw every step of production. When Ryan's chief engineer, Donald Hall, learned Lindbergh wanted a single cockpit, he was initially stunned. Lindbergh explained he would "rather have extra gasoline than an extra man." Hall understood — Lindbergh had learned from competitors the hazards of both excess weight and disagreements. To ensure lightness, Lindbergh took no radio, sat in a wicker chair, and even designed lightweight boots for the flight.

Ryan Aircraft built the single-engine plane in just two months, for well under the budgeted \$15,000. To honor his supporters, Lindbergh named it the *Spirit of St. Louis*. After test flights, he flew it from San Diego to New York, setting a transcontinental speed record in the process.

In the meantime, in their own pursuit of the Orteig Prize, two French ace pilots, Charles Nungesser and François Coli, left Paris in their plane *The White Bird*. After heading out over the Atlantic, they were never seen again.

After waiting for Atlantic storms to clear, Lindbergh took off on May 20, 1927, from the muddy dirt runway of Roosevelt Field — where Fonck had crashed. Loaded with 450 gallons of gasoline, the *Spirit of St. Louis* cleared telephone lines at the runway's end by just 20 feet.

Lindbergh's flight caught America's attention — he was the Orteig underdog, flying alone on one engine. Lloyd's of London had already quoted 10-1 odds against anyone making a transatlantic flight in 1927; in Lindbergh's case, they declined even giving odds, saying "the risk is too great."

Lindy faced many obstacles. After 14 hours airborne, sleet began pelting him in the cockpit. Shining a flashlight on his wings, he saw ice — potentially deadly — building. He carefully maneuvered the plane downward through the clouds to warmer air, seeking a clearing where he



AP Images

The *Spirit of St. Louis* is surrounded after touching down at Le Bourget Airfield on May 21, 1927. When police and soldiers could not hold back the crowd, they joined them.

could sight the stars, for he had only these and his compass to guide him; the *Spirit of St. Louis* carried no navigation equipment.

Perhaps the greatest obstacle: lack of sleep. Lindbergh had none for 22 hours before takeoff. A few moments of dozing now, if it didn't end his life, could set him perniciously off-course. Sometimes he deliberately flew within 10 feet of the waves to let the ocean water splatter his face into alertness.

After 27 hours, Lindbergh spotted the first sign of humanity — a fishing trawler. He circled it, yelling "Which way is Ireland?" but only got a blank stare in response. Sensing the comic futility, Lindbergh carried on, and an hour later was traversing Ireland as villagers waved.

As the sun set, Lindbergh overflew cheering throngs at France's port of Cherbourg. After circling the Eiffel Tower, he searched in the dark for his destination — Le Bourget Airfield, northeast of Paris. Adding to the confusion was a long string of lights — but flying closer, he realized it was bumper-to-bumper car lights of motorists en route to the field.

After a flight lasting 33 hours and 30 minutes, Lindbergh touched down at 10:22 p.m. on May 21. He had not slept for 55 hours — nor would he for another eight. For Lindbergh, it was as much a beginning as an end.

More Than a Pilot

Now began weeks of honors and celebrations. From France's President, Lindbergh received the Cross of the Legion of Honor; from England's King George V, the Air Force Cross; and from the President of United States, the first Distinguished Flying Cross and (later) the Congressional Medal of Honor.

Because Lindbergh brought no clothing but his flying suit on the *Spirit*, French tailors were quickly orchestrated to outfit him with formal attire. The day after arriving, he was honored at Paris' Aéro-Club, which awarded him 150,000 francs. But Lindbergh asked that the money instead go to families of the French fliers who had died for aviation. One of the first visits he personally requested to make was to the mother of lost flier Charles Nungesser. She embraced him with loving tears.

Lindbergh would prove a far better "ambassador" than any globalist-minded diplomat ever sent by Washington. On the day he departed France in the *Spirit of St. Louis*, Lindbergh thrilled crowds with stunts from his barnstorming days, and dropped a weighted French flag bearing a message of his gratitude to the Parisians.

Although many European nations wished to honor Lindbergh, the President was eager to have him home. Lindbergh was thus allowed to only fly to Belgium



The *Spirit of St. Louis* now hangs in the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. It had a wing span of 46 feet, and weighed a little over 2,100 pounds when empty.

and then England — where the cruiser *Memphis* would pick up him and the *Spirit* (the American government would not risk losing their new hero in a return transatlantic flight).

After ceremonies in Belgium, he dropped from the *Spirit* a wreath of flowers on Waregem cemetery, where lay hundreds of American soldiers who had died in World War I.

The English are known for their reserve, but their crowds showed no less enthusiasm than the French for Lindbergh. And when he spoke privately with King George V, he learned that royalty had the same questions as the general public. The King leaned forward and asked: “There is one thing I long to know. How did you pee?” (Lindbergh used a corked aluminum can.) After meeting the Prince of Wales, reporters asked what they had talked about. “Oh,” said Lindbergh, “about ten minutes.”

When the *Memphis* pulled into dock in America, with naval guns blazing and

fighters soaring overhead, the first person permitted to greet him was his mother. They were escorted to President Calvin Coolidge’s limousine. The day after Washington’s opening festivities, Lindbergh visited wounded veterans at Walter Reed Hospital.

New York City gave him the largest ticker tape parade in its history — two thousand street cleaners were required to sweep the confetti. Lindbergh accepted an invitation to tour the United States by air, and in a span of three months, visited 92 cities in all 48 states. He soon became the most photographed man in the world, and — according to polls — the most admired. “Lindy mania” swept America. A new sense of national pride glistened at every level of society. Even gangsters toasted Lindbergh, and a hip new dance, “the Lindy Hop,” dominated ballrooms.

Yet he remained humble throughout. Reporters were surprised to learn Lindbergh neither drank nor smoked — not from “prudishness,” but because such things could affect the self-control piloting required. Young Lindbergh kept a list of 65 qualities he strove for — honesty, diligence, tact, unselfishness, etc. Each night he would review the list, placing a black cross beside any quality he felt he’d violated that day.

Paul Garber, the Smithsonian Institution’s aviation historian, stated: “Even more impressive than Lindbergh’s flight across the Atlantic was the way in which he comported himself afterwards.” Lindbergh biographer A. Scott Berg notes: “Speeches dwelled as much upon his character as upon his achievement.”

Lindbergh turned down millions of dollars in endorsement deals and six-figure offers from Hollywood. William Randolph Hearst, the titan of newspaper “yellow journalism,” handed him a contract for \$500,000 — plus 10 percent of the gross — if Lindy would star in a movie opposite Hearst’s mistress, Marion Davies. Lindbergh politely declined, but Hearst kept shoving the contract at him, saying the only way Lindbergh could not accept would be to rip it up. Unfazed by the older man’s ploy, Lindy finally tore the contract in half. Later he elaborated that Hearst’s newspapers “represented values far apart from mine.”

Indeed, Lindbergh’s flight taught him lessons about media ethics. One newspaper printed a fake picture of his mother kissing him before takeoff, superimposing their heads on other people’s figures. Another paper published a “firsthand account” of the transatlantic flight, falsely alleging Lindbergh wrote it himself.

Lindbergh’s modern critics — for whatever motives — love to scrutinize his life, looking for faults. Certainly Lindbergh

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AP Images

Lindbergh was at the center of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first major public-relations defeat. FDR told his Press Secretary: "Don't worry about Lindbergh. We will get that fair-haired boy."

was, like all men, flawed. Nevertheless, some aspects of his flight transcend human explanation.

On the night he flew, 40,000 fans were in Yankee Stadium to watch Jack Sharkey battle Tom Maloney in a heavyweight boxing match. Before the contest began, the referee implored the crowd: "Ladies and gentlemen.... I want you to rise to your feet and think about a boy up there tonight who is carrying the hopes of all true-blooded Americans. Say a little prayer for Charles Lindbergh." Biographer Leonard Mosley wrote that "a hush fell over the stadium that even overawed and silenced the candy barkers. Never before or since can 40,000 boxing fans have worn such reverent expressions on their faces. Even the pugs looked soulful." And all across America, others were praying.

Not until many years later did Lindbergh reveal that, 24 hours into his flight, weightless angelic beings appeared in and around his plane, advising him about the flight and "reassuring me, giving me messages of importance unattainable in ordinary life."

Something else was remarkable about Lindbergh's accomplishment. Charles Lindbergh, Sr. — who had died in 1924 — had arguably been the single greatest enemy of the globalist-Fed-Wall Street

elite. By what stretch of "coincidence" did this man's only son, an unknown Midwestern mail pilot, rise from oblivion to become the world's most celebrated hero? When Lindbergh took off on his unlikely flight, perhaps a few cigars were lit amongst snickers on Wall Street. If so, those cigars may have been swallowed when he touched down at LeBourget Airfield. Lindbergh's mother, Evangeline, had had a very strained relationship with his father. Nonetheless, she told young Charles: "Your father lives in you." What if Lindbergh returned, and used the microphones to denounce the forces his father had fought? But if the bankers harbored any such fears, they proved unfounded. At 25, Charles' thoughts were on aviation, not politics. And using his achievement to advocate political views — no matter how well-grounded — would not have gone over well, especially with the nation still prospering in 1927.

Soon, however, the Great Depression commenced, and Charles was at the center of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's first public-relations defeat. In 1934, FDR attempted to nationalize airmail service. He stripped private airline companies of their contracts without due process, announcing that the Army Air Corps would henceforth deliver airmail. Lindbergh, who had previously been both an Army

Air and mail pilot himself, protested the decision publicly, noting that the Army Air Corps had neither proper planes, nor its pilots the proper training, to take over airmail delivery.

Roosevelt told his Press Secretary, Stephen Early: "Don't worry about Lindbergh. We will get that fair-haired boy." But after 78 days of operation, 12 Army Air crew members had died in 66 airmail accidents. The outcry from the public, and even within his own party, was so great that Roosevelt had to rescind his socialist edict, and restore airmail delivery to private contractors. The President's prestige had suffered an enormous blow; however, he blamed not himself, but Lindbergh, whose views the tragedy had vindicated. Thus began the era of conflict that historian James Duffy summarizes in his 2010 book, *Lindbergh vs. Roosevelt: The Rivalry That Divided America*.

In May 1927, however, Charles Lindbergh stood for something far more universal than politics. He symbolized the hope that all people have: that they can achieve their dreams, even against overwhelming odds. ■

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