

Aerospace, 1902-1974

Charles Augustus Lindbergh was born in Detroit, Michigan. His father of the same name was known as C.A. and served as a liberal Republican congressman from Minnesota (1909-17), notable primarily for his pacifism on the eve of World War I. Young Lindbergh attended the University of Wisconsin for two years before leaving to attend flight school.

Human flight was essentially a novelty in the early 1920s, the domain of dashing barnstormers who performed stunts to delight the crowds at county fairs. In the military realm, the record of the air force in World War I had not won universal admiration. Many influential officers stoutly resisted the pleas from Billy Mitchell and a handful of others who believed that the future of warfare would be closely linked to the airplane. The U.S. Post Office had contracted with a number of firms to transport the mails by air, but still regarded the program as experimental.

An important force in changing attitudes toward flight was found in Raymond Orteig, a New York restaurateur of French descent. Orteig was a great airplane enthusiast and offered a prize of \$25,000 for the first flight to be completed nonstop between New York and France. A number of famed aviators and adventurers accepted the challenge, including Admiral Richard A. Byrd, the famed polar explorer*; several were injured and killed in their attempts to claim the prize.

Lindbergh had been commissioned in the Air Corps Reserve in 1925 and worked for four years as an air mail pilot operating out of St. Louis, Missouri. He decided to enter the competition and attracted financial support from a group of local businessmen. The other aspirants concentrated on developing large two- or three-engine airplanes that could carry multi-person crews. Lindbergh took a minimal view and constructed the Spirit of St. Louis as a single-engine, one-man aircraft; every effort was made to avoid amenities in order to maximize the amount of space available for fuel storage.



Charles Lindbergh with Spirit of St. Louis

During the development and testing phases of Lindbergh's venture, he became a well-known public figure, flying the Spirit from California to New York, and setting new speed and distance records in the process.

Several aviators were on the verge of attempting the transatlantic crossing in the spring of 1927, but Lindbergh seized the opportunity when unexpectedly favorable weather appeared on May 20. He departed from Roosevelt Field on Long Island at 7:52 a.m., successfully getting his plane into the air — no mean feat given the weight of the fuel.

Once under way, his prime concerns were avoiding ice build-up on the wings, keeping his bearings and staying awake. He completed the 3,600-mile journey in 33 hours and 32 minutes and landed at Le Bourget Field outside Paris at 10 p.m. on May 21. A crowd of more than

100,000 cheering Frenchmen welcomed the new hero, who was variously dubbed by the world press as “Luck Lindy” or the “Lone Eagle.”

In truth, luck had little to do with Lindbergh’s achievement. An immense amount of time and thought went into the construction of the Spirit, which in final form was little more than a propeller-driven fuel tank. Lindbergh emerged as a hero even greater than the beloved Babe Ruth and Jack Dempsey, and his fame was not confined to the United States.

Later in 1927, Lindbergh made a goodwill tour of several Latin America nations. While in Mexico, he met the U.S. ambassador’s daughter, Anne Morrow; the two were married in 1929. The Lindberghs made a number of widely reported flights together, including a memorable one to the Far East on the great circle route above the Arctic.

In March 1932, the Lindbergh’s infant son was kidnapped from the family home in New Jersey. A few weeks after paying a \$50,000 ransom, the body of Charles Jr. was discovered. Bruno Richard Hauptman, a German immigrant, was arrested two years later and charged with murder. He was convicted of the crime in a highly publicized trial and was executed in April 1936. The tragedy deepened Lindbergh’s reclusive nature. The couple moved to England in 1935, in an effort to avoid the public eye.

Lindbergh had earlier worked as an advisor to Transcontinental Air Transport (later TWA), but in 1936, he displayed other talents in his collaboration with Alexis Carrel, a French physician, in the joint development of an early version of a mechanical heart.

In 1938, Lindbergh made a European tour to test aircraft and assess the capabilities of various air forces. He stated publicly and unequivocally that the Germans were head and shoulders above the others and was honored by the Nazis for his service.

Lindbergh returned to the United States in 1939, where he devoted his energies to promoting isolationism on behalf of the America First Committee. Public opinion regarding Lindbergh deteriorated rapidly as the world descended into another major conflict.

He continued his efforts to keep the U.S. neutral until the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Then, without fanfare, Lindbergh served as an advisor to wartime aircraft builders and flew 50 secret combat missions in Asia.

Lindbergh’s reputation was slowly reestablished after the war and was given a major boost in 1954 when President Dwight Eisenhower honored the former hero and appointed him a reserve brigadier general. Lindbergh aided in the selection of U.S. military bases overseas during the Cold War.

Late in his life, Lindbergh was active on behalf of various environmental causes, rendering vital assistance to those who opposed the development of the supersonic transport (SST). He died at his beloved home on Maui in August 1974.

Lindbergh described his transatlantic flight in print in *We* (1927) and later won a Pulitzer Prize for his autobiography, *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1953). Anne Morrow Lindbergh was a widely published author, producing a variety of travel literature, poetry, essays and fiction. She passed away in 2001.

*His airplane was forced to touch down off the coast of France.

<http://www.u-s-history.com>