

May 21, 1927:

Lindbergh lands in Paris

American pilot Charles A. Lindbergh lands at Le Bourget Field in Paris, successfully completing the first solo, nonstop transatlantic flight and the first ever nonstop flight between [New York](#) to Paris. His single-engine monoplane, *The Spirit of St. Louis*, had lifted off from Roosevelt Field in New York 33 1/2 hours before.

Charles Augustus Lindbergh, born in Detroit in 1902, took up flying at the age of 20. In 1923, he bought a surplus [World War I](#) Curtiss "Jenny" biplane and toured the country as a barnstorming stunt flyer. In 1924, he enrolled in the Army Air Service flying school in [Texas](#) and graduated at the top of his class as a first lieutenant. He became an airmail pilot in 1926 and pioneered the route between St. Louis and [Chicago](#). Among U.S. aviators, he was highly regarded.

In May 1919, the first transatlantic flight was made by a U.S. hydroplane that flew from New York to Plymouth, England, via Newfoundland, the Azores Islands, and Lisbon. Later that month, Frenchman Raymond Orteig, an owner of hotels in New York, put up a purse of \$25,000 to the first aviator or aviators to fly nonstop from Paris to New York or New York to Paris. In June 1919, the British fliers John W. Alcock and Arthur W. Brown made the first nonstop transatlantic flight, flying 1,960 miles from Newfoundland to Ireland. The flight from New York to Paris would be nearly twice that distance.

Orteig said his challenge would be good for five years. In 1926, with no one having attempted the flight, Orteig made the offer again. By this time, aircraft technology had advanced to a point where a few thought such a flight might be possible. Several of the world's top aviators—including American polar explorer Richard Byrd, French flying ace Rene Fonck--decided to accept the challenge, and so did Charles Lindbergh.

Lindbergh convinced the St. Louis Chamber of Commerce to sponsor the flight, and a budget of \$15,000 was set. The Ryan Airlines Corporation of San Diego volunteered to build a single-engine aircraft to his specifications. Extra fuel tanks were added, and the wing span was increased to 46 feet to accommodate the additional weight. The main fuel tank was placed in front of the cockpit because it would be safest there in the event of a crash. This meant Lindbergh would have no forward vision, so a periscope was added. To reduce weight, everything that was not utterly essential was left out. There would be no radio, gas gauge, night-flying lights, navigation equipment, or parachute. Lindbergh would sit in a light seat made of wicker. Unlike other aviators attempting the flight, Lindbergh would be alone, with no navigator or co-pilot.

The aircraft was christened *The Spirit of St. Louis*, and on May 12, 1927, Lindbergh flew it from San Diego to New York, setting a new record for the fastest transcontinental flight. Bad weather delayed Lindbergh's transatlantic attempt for a week. On the night of May 19, nerves and a newspaperman's noisy poker game kept him up all night. Early the next morning, though he hadn't slept, the skies were clear and he rushed to Roosevelt Field on Long Island. Six men had died attempting the long and dangerous flight he was about to take.

At 7:52 a.m. EST on May 20, *The Spirit of St. Louis* lifted off from Roosevelt Field, so loaded with fuel that it barely cleared the telephone wires at the end of the runway. Lindbergh traveled northeast up the coast. After only four hours, he felt tired and flew within 10 feet of the water to keep his mind clear. As night fell, the aircraft left the coast of Newfoundland and set off across the Atlantic. At about 2 a.m. on May 21, Lindbergh passed the halfway mark, and an hour later dawn came. Soon after, *The Spirit of St. Louis* entered a fog, and Lindbergh struggled to stay awake, holding his eyelids open with his fingers and hallucinating that ghosts were passing through the cockpit.

After 24 hours in the air, he felt a little more awake and spotted fishing boats in the water. At about 11 a.m. (3 p.m. local time), he saw the coast of Ireland. Despite using only rudimentary navigation, he was two hours ahead of schedule and only three miles off course. He flew past England and by 3 p.m. EST was flying over France. It was 8 p.m. in France, and night was falling.

At the Le Bourget Aerodrome in Paris, tens of thousands of Saturday night revelers had gathered to await Lindbergh's arrival. At 10:24 a.m. local time, his gray and white monoplane slipped out of the darkness and made a perfect landing in the air field. The crowd surged on *The Spirit of St. Louis*, and Lindbergh, weary from his 33 1/2-hour, 3,600-mile journey, was cheered and lifted above their heads. He hadn't slept for 55 hours. Two French aviators saved Lindbergh from the boisterous crowd, whisking him away in an automobile. He was an immediate international celebrity.

President [Calvin Coolidge](#) dispatched a warship to take the hero home, and "Lucky Lindy" was given a ticker-tape parade in New York and presented with the Congressional Medal

of Honor. His place in history, however, was not complete.

In 1932, he was the subject of international headlines again when his infant son, Charles Jr., was kidnapped, unsuccessfully ransomed, and then found murdered in the woods near the Lindbergh home. German-born Bruno Richard Hauptmann was convicted of the crime in a controversial trial and then executed. Then, in the late 1930s and early 1940s, Lindbergh became a spokesperson for the U.S. isolationism movement and was sharply criticized for his apparent Nazi sympathies and anti-Semitic views. After the outbreak of World War II, the fallen hero traveled to the Pacific as a military observer and eventually flew more than two dozen combat missions, including one in which he downed a Japanese aircraft. Lindbergh's war-time service largely restored public faith in him, and for many years later he worked with the U.S. government on aviation issues. In 1954, President Dwight D. Eisenhower appointed him brigadier general in the Air Force Reserve. He died in Hawaii in 1974.

Lindbergh's autobiographical works include *"We"* (1927), *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1953) and *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh* (1970).
