



### **An Earlier May**

By Jim Alexander

On the morning of May 20, 1927, a young man climbed into a small single-engine airplane and took off from Roosevelt Field, heading eastward. He was seeking a \$25,000 prize offered for the first solo flight between New York and Paris. The plane was stripped down to reduce weight and allow a maximum of gasoline. A cramped cockpit, no radio, the most rudimentary instruments, an extra gas tank in front requiring the pilot to use a periscope to see forward. His previous experience had been as an air mail pilot; on one earlier occasion, lost in the fog, he had to parachute to ground to save his life.

Charles Lindbergh landed at Paris Le Bourget field, 33 1/2 hours later. The exuberance of the crowds and the excitement that ensued began a spectacular response around the world, and a life for the young man that he could never have imagined. Papers covered the story with a zest only seen decades later when man landed on the moon.

Following celebrations in Paris and Europe, he returned to Washington, DC, where another massive celebration included President Calvin Coolidge presenting him with the Distinguished Flying Cross. Later, Congress awarded him the Congressional Medal of Honor.

At that time, with radios not in widespread home use, much of the news was carried by newspapers and shown in theater newsreels. Several news services took films of his triumphal welcome in Washington, and vied to be the first to show them on the screens of Broadway theaters. One company sent its film by train to New York, while another sent it by plane. The story of the race between the two made its own history.

A special locomotive was put into service by the Pennsylvania Railroad, and all other trains were ordered to stand clear on what is now the Northeast Corridor. In Delaware, the train encountered minor mechanical difficulty, and as it was being fixed, the plane, flown by "Casey" Jones (no relationship to the engineer of railroad lore), flew overhead and passed it. The train

resumed, setting speed records. While the pilot parachuted his films to a Long Island lab for processing, the train had carried a developing lab, and its edited films hit the screens on Broadway first. The locomotive of “train that beat the plane,” E6s No. 460, was preserved and is now on display at the Railroad Museum of Pennsylvania.

Seeking to take advantage of Lindbergh’s popularity and uncertain as to the future competitiveness of passenger air travel, the Pennsylvania Railroad worked with other transport companies to hire Lindbergh as an advisor in setting up the Transcontinental Air Transport system, in which a passenger could leave New York City, travel by train at night, planes by day, and arrive in Los Angeles in 48 hours.

Lindbergh embarked on a series of good-will flights in North America, including one to Mexico, where he met the daughter of the United States Ambassador, Ann Morrow. She wrote of her first impression of him: “He is taller than anyone else—you see his head in a moving crowd and you notice his glance, where it turns, as though it were keener, clearer, and brighter than anyone else’s, lit with a more intense fire.... I felt the whole world before this to be frivolous, superficial, ephemeral.” They were married in 1929. Late in life, she was to author *Gift from the Sea*, a highly regarded inspirational work presaging contemporary themes.

Their lives were not without grief, however. In 1932, their child was kidnapped, leading to the sensational Lindbergh Case, “The Crime of the Century,” in which a major trial was held in Hunterdon County. When they later traveled to Germany, he was impressed by German industry, and came to advocate America’s staying out of European entanglements, seeing Germany as a bulwark against Russia. Some felt he was pro-Hitler and anti-Semitic. Later, blocked by President Roosevelt from rejoining the Air Force, he volunteered as a civilian air advisor in the Pacific, participating in 50 combat missions. In 1954, President Eisenhower designated him as a Brigadier General in the Air Force Reserve.

In his later years, he developed a strong interest in the environment, writing that "all the achievements of mankind have value only to the extent that they preserve and improve the quality of life."

“Lucky Lindy” – “Slim” to his early friends – died on the Hawaiian island of Maui in 1974. The stone on his modest grave quotes Psalm 139:9: "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea ..."

*The Spirit of St. Louis*, which had been named to recognize the plane’s sponsors, remains on prominent display at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum.

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An article by Jim on the famous plane-train race carrying the Lindbergh reception films may be viewed at <https://jimquest.com/wp-content/uploads/Lindy5.pdf>