

## This Day in History... May 20, 1927

# First Solo Non-Stop Flight Across the Atlantic

On May 20, 1927, Charles Lindbergh began his famous flight across the Atlantic aboard the *Spirit of St. Louis*.

Born in 1902, Charles Augustus Lindbergh was taught to be completely self-reliant. It was this mindset, along with the spirit of an explorer, that led to the flight that would make him an aviation pioneer.

"Lucky Lindy" began his career at the age of 20, when he left the University of Wisconsin to enroll in flight school. Soon he was a barnstormer, offering plane rides for \$5 a person and performing as a stunt pilot at fairs. He also trained with the Army Air Service and went on to fly airmail between St. Louis and Chicago.

Lindbergh was an airmail pilot for the United States Postal Service (USPS). He was very familiar with the risks of flying. Between the years 1919 and 1926, 19 USPS pilots had died in accidents. In fact, Lindbergh himself had crashed on his St. Louis to Chicago route. It didn't dampen his enthusiasm for flying, though. He dreamed of trans-Atlantic flights – carrying mail and passengers – becoming an everyday occurrence.



*Issued as part of the Celebrate the Century Series.*

Since 1919, a New York City hotel owner, Raymond Orteig, had offered a \$25,000 reward to the first pilot to fly non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean. Several pilots attempted to earn this prize, but all failed – some were injured or even killed. In 1927, this unclaimed prize came to Lindbergh's attention. He believed the trip was possible with the right plane.

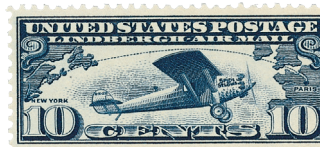
Lindbergh convinced a group of St. Louis businessmen to give him the financial support he needed to build a special airplane of his own design. He named the plane the *Spirit of St. Louis*.

On May 20, 1927, at 7:52 a.m., Lindbergh took off in the *Spirit of St. Louis* from Roosevelt Field, located near New York City. Lindbergh's plane was so heavy with fuel it barely cleared the telephone lines to begin the daring flight. When fully loaded with fuel for the flight, the 27-foot Ryan M-2 aircraft weighed slightly more than the average US automobile. Lindbergh insisted that the plane be purposely constructed to be uncomfortable to help keep him awake during the long journey.

Lindbergh's only tools were a compass, an airspeed indicator, and his own navigational skills. His greatest challenge on that long, lonely flight was to stay awake, as he began to feel tired just four hours in. The storms he encountered took him off course and became navigational challenges. While over the Atlantic Ocean, he saw two fishing boats, circled down, and tried to ask them to point to land. Unsuccessful, he continued on and soon spotted the coast of Ireland. He knew at that point that his flight was a success, and he flew on to Paris in higher spirits.

Cruising at an average airspeed over 100 miles an hour, Lindbergh crossed Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, Ireland, England, and the English Channel. Thirty-three-and-a-half hours and 3,600 miles later, he landed near Paris at Bourget Field where a wildly excited crowd of well over 100,000 rushed onto the runway to meet him. The next day, another crowd formed outside the American Embassy where he was staying, cheering and waving hats and handkerchiefs. Lindbergh received the Legion of Honor Medal from the president of France, the Distinguished Flying Cross, and was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor by US President Coolidge.

Lindbergh's historic flight made him an instant celebrity. A US Navy cruiser transported Lindbergh and the *Spirit of St. Louis* home. Following a hero's welcome, the pilot and plane began a lengthy goodwill tour across the US and Latin America. On the final leg of the tour, Lindbergh flew the *Spirit of St. Louis* to Washington, DC, and presented the plane to the Smithsonian Institution.



*The first US stamp issued to honor a living a person, spurred on by thousands of requests.*



*Stamp commemorating the 50th anniversary of Lindbergh's historic solo transatlantic flight.*

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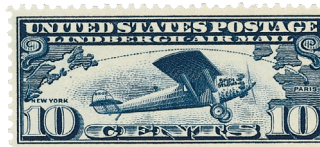
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