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FEATURED

Mainstreams: Charles Lindbergh, famous aviator led a life of triumph, tragedy and controversy

by Joni Astrup Associate Editor Sep 16, 2018



Charles Lindbergh with the Spirit of St. Louis, which he piloted to fame.

Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Minnesota's own Charles Lindbergh became an international sensation after flying from New York to Paris in 1927.

Historian David Jones, of Minneapolis, talked about Lindbergh's life during a presentation Sept. 6 at the Elk River Activity Center titled, "Charles Lindbergh: Triumph, Tragedy and Controversy."

A native of Little Falls, Lindbergh won international acclaim after becoming the first person to fly non-stop from New York to Paris in May 1927.

"That turned him into the biggest celebrity in the world, bar none," Jones said.

The historic flight came just five years after Lindbergh boarded an airplane for the first time. He took his first pilot lesson shortly after that. Lindbergh went on to serve in the United States Army Air Service and later honed his skills as an airmail pilot, Jones said.

Lindbergh set his sights on the New York to Paris flight after Raymond Orteig offered \$25,000 to the first pilot to make the flight non-stop — a prize worth about \$350,000 today.

"Nobody thought it could be done," Jones said.

Six people died trying, but that didn't deter Lindbergh. He got financial backing and arranged to have a plane, dubbed the Spirit of St. Louis, built for \$10,580. He went to California to supervise the plane's design and construction. Jones said he went to great lengths to keep the weight of the craft to a minimum, even trimming the extra paper off the edges of his maps.

Despite that, when he took off at 6:52 a.m. May 20, 1927, from an airfield in New York, the plane was overloaded. Lindbergh had to taxi the length of the muddy runway to lift off, and then only cleared the power lines at the end of the runway by about 20 feet.

Once in the air, Jones said Lindbergh's greatest challenge was to stay awake. The flight took 33.5 hours.

Both compasses failed during the flight, so Lindbergh navigated by the stars. He did it so well that by the time he sighted Ireland, he determined he was almost perfectly on course and ahead of schedule.



Charles Lindbergh became world famous after flying this plane non-stop from New York to Paris in 1927.

Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society



Aviator Charles Lindbergh

Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

point of landing at 2 p.m. each time, to prove that planes were reliable and flight schedules were possible.

The popular aviator also lent his support to people making advancements in rocketry and medicine.

On a personal note, he met Anne Morrow, the daughter of a U.S. ambassador. They married in 1929.

Then, tragedy struck.

The Lindbergh's first child, a son named Charles Jr., was born in 1930. Two years later, on March 1, 1932, he was kidnapped from his nursery at the family home in New Jersey.

When he reached Paris, an estimated 150,000 people were there to greet him when he landed, Jones said.

The feat catapulted him to international fame. Newspaper headlines included the likes of "Lindbergh's Paris Trip Makes Him World Hero."

President Calvin Coolidge sent a military ship to carry Lindbergh and his plane back to the United States. He was welcomed home with a huge ceremony in Washington, D.C., and a ticker tape parade in New York City. A few months later, Time magazine named Lindbergh its very first Man of the Year.

Jones said Lindbergh was caught off guard by all the attention.

In the aftermath of his historic flight, Lindbergh flew around the United States to promote aviation. He landed in every state — hitting a total of 82 cities — during the three-month tour. Jones said Lindbergh made a

Jones said the investigation was flawed from the beginning, with reporters trampling the crime scene and Lindbergh himself trying to direct the investigation.

Lindbergh paid \$50,000 in ransom, but Charles Jr. remained missing. Then on May 12, 1932, the body of the little boy was found.

Two years later, Bruno Richard Hauptmann was arrested after paying for gas with a bill that was traced to the ransom money. He went to trial, was convicted, and died in the electric chair on April 3, 1936.

"Hauptmann maintained his innocence to the very, very end," Jones said. "This is one of those cases that will not go away. To this day there are still people researching it, writing about it, offering alternate theories."

Meanwhile, the Lindberghs and their second son, Jon, moved to England in hopes of finding a quieter life. Four years later, they returned to the United States.

As the United States was on the brink of entering World War II, Lindbergh took a very public position against entering the war unless attacked. Some of his speeches from the time are hard to read, Jones said.

"There is no denying racist and anti-Semitic tone and words in them," he said.

After the war, when Hitler's atrocities became public, Jones said Lindbergh was never willing to take back what he had said before the war.

"Because of that position, he was never viewed the same. He's a controversial figure in history," Jones said.



Lindbergh with his plane.

Photo courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society

Adding to the controversy, Jones said, was the fact that several decades after his death, it came out that Lindbergh had fathered seven children by three women in Europe.

Meanwhile, America entered World War II after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. Lindbergh wanted to help the war effort and sought to serve in the military, but was blocked by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, after the two had feuded.

Lindbergh ended up designing bombers and then training military pilots in the South Pacific as a civilian.

"While he's there, as a civilian consultant, he actually flew a number of combat missions in World War II," Jones said.

In his later years, Lindbergh felt technology was encroaching on the environment and he turned his attention to conservationist causes.

He said, "If I had to choose between planes and birds, I'd choose birds."

Lindbergh died in 1974. His wife wrote about him, saying, "When he touched down in Paris, his life ahead was fame, opportunity and wealth, and also tragedy, loneliness and frustration."

Jones quoted an author, who said: "He was called many things. Pioneer. Hero. Adventurer. Traitor. Nazi. Patriot. Conservationist. But always true to himself, and spoke the truth as he saw it, no matter the consequences."

