

Conquering the airways between New York and Paris

It took three months for Christopher Columbus to cross the Atlantic by ship in October 1492 and only a little more than three hours for the supersonic airplane Concorde to cover the distance between Paris and New York 500 hundred years later. Nowadays to board one of the 15 planes that takes passengers daily between the “big apple” and the “city of light” is no longer an adventure. But in 1927 it was. A truly unbelievable great adventure.

On May 20-21, 1927, a young American man of 26 years, Captain Charles A. Lindbergh, was the first to fly non-stop the 5.776 kilometers between New York and Paris in 33 and a half hours, alone and aboard a little single-engine plane named “Spirit of St. Louis”.

He was not the first to defy the emptiness of the skies over the Atlantic Ocean. Others from Spain, Portugal, France and Italy had done it before him, some of them paying with their lives the prize of their unsuccessful adventure. But the fact that he did it alone and without stopping caught the imagination of the people. Lindbergh became an instant hero.

As the Paris newspaper Excelsior of 22May 1927 wrote in his front page:

“Un jeune homme, presque un enfant, vingt-six ans à peine, vient de conquérir, d’un coup d’aile et d’héroïque audace, l’immortalité”.

The flight, which the aviator started planning one year before, began early in the morning of Friday May 20, 1927 at the Roosevelt airfield in Long Island (New York). Lindbergh took aboard with him around 1.800 liters of fuel, as much as he could take to be able to take off and reach destination. He also took with him five sandwiches, which he kept under his seat, “If I get to Paris, I won’t need any more”, he said. “And if I don’t get to Paris, well, I won’t need any more, either”. But to travel lighter he did not carry any radio, or parachute or other instruments that might have been considered essential for the journey.

Lindbergh was not new to the then risky adventures of aviation. His job was to deliver mail by plane in the United States, between Chicago and St. Louis. He confessed that the routine of being a flying postman was becoming tedious and also there was a reward of \$25.000 offered by a hotel businessman for the first pilot to fly New York-Paris in one go.

Only less than two weeks earlier, two French pilots, Charles Nungeeser and François Coli, had left Paris aboard their plane, “L’Oiseau blanc” trying to be the first airmen to cross the Atlantic non-stop. They never did it. It seems that they were about to get to New York when they apparently had problems with their engine, they crashed probably in the state of Maine and their bodies were never found. They became “martyrs to the cause of aviation”, as one newspaper put it.

Undeterred, Lindbergh, one of whose nicknames was “flying fool”, wanted to “demonstrate that the impossible is possible”, as another newspaper put it, and took to the skies flying first over the northern east coast of the United States, then over Newfoundland, in Canada, and on into the fog, the snow, the sleet and the occasional turbulence until he flew over the southern tip of Ireland and England and into France and Le Bourget, in Paris.

When the American pilot reached the coast of France, at Cherbourg, people who waited at the offices of Le Matin, in Paris, learn about the news through the bulletin board of the newspaper and started cheering and then driving to Le Bourget to greet him.

The New York Times, who managed to secure the exclusive rights of Lindbergh own story, wrote: “Not since the armistice of 1918 has Paris witnessed a downright demonstration of popular enthusiasm and excitement equal to that displayed by the throngs flocking to the boulevards for news of the American flier, whose personality has captured the hearts of the Parisian multitude”.

Tens of thousands of people were there to witness the historical moment of his arrival, which happened at 10:22 p.m. of Saturday the 21st of May. Lindbergh had not slept for 55 hours and his first words were: “Well, I did it”. One of the first things he did was to visit the mother of

Charles Nungeeser, who was anxiously waiting for news of his lost son, to encourage and comfort her.

The Paris evening newspapers were quickly in the streets to report the event with simple news bulletins. All those experts who had said the trip was impossible to accomplish because of lack navigating instruments were silent. Nevertheless, a Canadian newspaper, The Globe, noted in one editorial the existence of “differences of opinion as to the immediate practical value of a venture of this nature”. The newspaper, perhaps ironically, said that soon there would be crowded skies over the Atlantic.

It took some time before that happened but three years later, two French flyers followed the steps of Nungeeser and Coli but, this time successfully, they made the first trip Paris to New York non-stop in 37 hours and 17 minutes. The flight took longer because they were flying against the jet stream. This also made their journey more difficult and dangerous.

After his epoch making adventure, Lindbergh became a world hero, especially in his country where he was the object of numerous homage and recognition. It was not the last time he would make headlines. A few years later his baby son was kidnapped and killed and later he was accused of being a nazi sympathizer and many people questioned his loyalty to the country when he was campaigning for neutrality during the II World War. He died in Hawaii in 1974. His flying machine, the Spirit of St Louis is now on display at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington DC.

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