

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES



In 1928, the first plane to land on the air strip on Section 14 in Palm Springs was the sister ship of the Spirit of St. Louis. PROVIDED BY PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Charles Lindbergh's 'firsts' included one in Palm Springs

Tracy Conrad special to The Desert Sun | USA TODAY NETWORK

The massive gas tank made any forward vision from the pilot's seat in the new plane completely impossible. Dubbed the Spirit of St. Louis, the plane was unusual and its pilot, Charles Lindbergh, according to Richard Crawford writing in the San Diego Union-Tribune, "did not want to be sandwiched between the tank and the engine — a recipe for disaster if the plane crashed." • Lindbergh was well-acquainted with disaster. • Barnstorming in southern Minnesota, Lindbergh heard that army cadets flew the most modern and powerful airplanes. He immediately enrolled and, according to the Lindbergh Museum and House, learned "the essentials of aerodynamics, navigation, meteorology and military law. Already a skilled pilot, military training taught (him) precision flying techniques." Once, while practicing formations he was forced to parachute to safety when his plane collided with another. He graduated first in his class.

After training, he found a job with the newly established U.S. Air Mail service from St. Louis to Chicago. When the controls of his commercial plane malfunctioned in a blinding snow and rainstorm, he was forced once again to jump to safety. "As a result, he became the first man saved twice by a parachute."

Delivering the mail by air was new and extremely dangerous. At the time, one of every six airmail pilots was killed on the job. "Twice more Lindbergh was forced to jump from his plane, each time being saved by his parachute." He earned the nickname "Lucky Lindy" for surviving those travails.

Flying was the national fascination, and Lindbergh was obsessed.

At 25-years-old, he commissioned the Spirit of St. Louis from Ryan Airlines in San Diego in hopes of achieving the first ever trans-Atlantic crossing by air. The accomplishment would garner the monumental cash prize of \$25,000 offered by New York hotel owner Raymond Orteig as "a stimulus to the courageous aviators."

Many teams of young men prepared to attempt the feat. George Vecsey, writing in 1977 for The New York Times on the 50th anniversary of Lindbergh's successful flight, recounted the earlier failures: "Richard E. Byrd assembled a skilled team, but an accident on a muddy field held him back. Charles A. Levine, an eccentric junk dealer, hired Clarence Chamberlin to make an effort. Rene Fonck, the French war ace, crashed in his heavily laden plane, killing two crewmen. In early May, Charles Nungesser, another French war hero, and Francois Coli challenged the prevailing winds and were never seen again after leaving the French coast."

Lindbergh's plane was named for St. Louis, the hometown of the boosters who provided him with partial financial backing and built by the little-known aviation firm in San Diego that had pledged it could adhere to his custom specifications and produce the plane in just 60 days. Lindbergh recounted: "This company is a fit partner, they're as anxious to build a plane that will fly to Paris as I am to fly it there."

Lindbergh put up all his savings, along with the money from his supporters, and asked for a single-engine monoplane with a massive 450-gallon gas tank to enable the uninterrupted hop across the pond. "For the flight Lindbergh would use side windows for sight, along with a periscope mounted on the instrument panel."

Crawford recounted that the decision perplexed Donald Hall, Ryan's chief engineer, "who wondered about a navigator and relief pilot. But Lindbergh had decided he would rather have extra gasoline than an extra man."

When Lindbergh landed in Paris on May 21, 1927, just 33 and a half hours later. He had 85 gallons left.

Vecsey summarized: "Younger Americans, who casually use the airplane to commute to work and play, may have trouble appreciating the impact of Lindbergh's solitary, trans-Atlantic flight. Much of the emotion for this anniversary will be supplied by older people, who still remember a world fragmented by oceans, mountain ranges and deserts."

But before knitting the fragmented world together by air, Lindbergh

had flown from San Diego to St. Louis in the darkness of night. That trip and the route were soon celebrated too. San Diego named its airport Lindbergh Field.

Transcontinental Air Transport inaugurated a Lindbergh Line which offered the first coast-to-coast passenger service in 1929, capturing the imagination of those trying to understand Lindbergh's amazing feat by flying some of the distance themselves.

Nascent airline companies engaged Lindbergh to chart the air route to cities in South America, Canada and around the world, rushing to capitalize on the sensation created by his trans-Atlantic crossing.

Speeding "men, mail and merchandise" across the country and the world, Pan American Airlines produced a travelogue played in Palm Springs in 1935. The newspaper reported: "An interesting motion picture film, 'Flying the Lindbergh Trail,' was presented by Pan American Airways, Inc. in the lounge of the Desert Inn. Edited from 80,000 feet of motion picture film, the pictures showed interesting subjects which have never before been shown on the screen." Documenting luxurious clipper ship air travel to exotic locations, travelogues further opened horizons of general consciousness.

Two decades later in April 1944, Lindbergh himself was in Palm Springs en route to Mojave, flying a F4U Corsair. (An example of that plane is on view at the Palm Springs Air Museum.) At the time Lindbergh was a consultant for the Vought Aircraft Division of United Aircraft Corporation. His travels had taken him around the globe and during World War II to Hawaii for the first of what would be many visits to the islands.

After years of globetrotting, Lindbergh wanted to find a peaceful and private place to live. He and his wife Anne Morrow Lindbergh bought a beautiful piece of land in Kipahulu, Maui, completing their house in 1970. It had two stories, no television, no air conditioning and only gas-powered generators for electricity, but it had a spectacular view of the ocean.

When Lindbergh was diagnosed with terminal cancer, he told his doctors that he preferred to live two days in Maui rather than two months in a New York Hospital. He spent the remainder of his days gazing at the sea and was buried on the grounds of the Palapala Ho'omau Church in Kipahulu, overlooking the Pacific Ocean.

His unusual, even eccentric, design of the Spirit of St. Louis had been successful beyond imagination. With it, he had conquered the Atlantic Ocean. Lindbergh gave the plane to the Smithsonian in 1928 and it has been on permanent display since.

Its success in making the trans-Atlantic flight caused replicas, so-called "sister ships," to be constructed in the fervor that followed his remarkable flight. In 1928, the first plane to land on a dirt strip purporting to be an airport in Palm Springs, far from any ocean, was the sister ship of the Spirit of St. Louis piloted by Bert Jacobson. The auspicious landing was captured in a photograph.

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