

There was something familiar to me about the airplane. I was sure that I had seen it before. My father pointed to the very same airplane in a museum! But in the museum, the plane was hanging by cables from a very high ceiling, in a big room filled with other planes, jets, and even spaceships. Now, the plane was right in front of me, parked on a wet airstrip on a cold gray morning.

What is it about this airplane? What am I supposed to remember? NYP . . . NYP . . .

I stared at the markings on the airplane's tail for a few minutes. Somehow, I knew the clue was there, on the tail. And then, I remembered. "NYP" stood for "New York to Paris." The silver airplane was the *Spirit of St. Louis!* The man in the pilot's cap was Charles Lindbergh! The Picture Frame had brought me to Roosevelt Airfield, just outside of New York City, on May 20, 1927. It was early in the morning, just after dawn, and Charles Lindbergh was getting ready to fly nonstop to Paris!

I walked over to the crowd of people that had gathered around the airplane and its tall, thin pilot that would soon be famous.

"It's a fool's journey," a man in the crowd said, as he shook his head and waved his hands in dismissive disbelief. "New York to Paris? It can't be done!"

"Did I tell you? I was here last year when those French pilots tried to do it," another man in the crowd said. "Their plane didn't even make it to the end of the runway. Right over there, do you see that spot? Their airplane exploded and burned right there. I saw it happen!"¹

A short man in a black overcoat stood in the middle of the crowd, holding open a newspaper. Several people were reading the newspaper over his shoulders. A sad headline had caught their attention. The headline said that hope of finding two missing pilots who had taken off from Paris two weeks earlier, bound for New York, was running out. The paper said that even though searches for the two men were still being conducted, most likely their plane had crashed in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. The two men had lost their lives in yet another failed attempt to cross the Atlantic Ocean by airplane and claim the Orteig Prize.²

*Yes, the Orteig Prize! I remember now: \$25,000 to the first person to fly from New York to Paris, or from Paris to New York! It's like the ANSARI X-Prize in my time.*³

"It can't be done!" the man holding the newspaper said as if he had no doubt. The heads behind him nodded in agreement.

Then, Charles Lindbergh stepped forward and took on the naysayers in the crowd: "Any coward can sit in his home and criticize a pilot

for flying into a mountain in fog. But I would rather, by far, die on a mountainside than in bed. Why should we look for his errors when a brave man dies? Unless we can learn from his experience, there is no need to look for weakness. Rather, we should admire the courage and spirit in his life. What kind of man would live where there is no daring? And is life so dear that we should blame men for dying in adventure? Is there a better way to die?"⁴

Brave . . .

Lindbergh was standing right next to me. He put his hand on my shoulder. Then he looked down at me and said: "I was attracted to aviation by its adventure, not its safety, by the love of wind and height and wings."⁵

That's when I realized what was really happening. That's when I understood what the Picture Frame had planned for me that day. I was going to fly across the Atlantic Ocean with Charles Lindbergh!

Panic took over. My heart pounded in my ears and I felt shivers run up and down my spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

We're going to fly from New York to Paris—in that tiny, single propeller airplane? It looks like a crop duster! Maybe these people are right—maybe it really is a crazy idea! Maybe it really is impossible!

A few police officers came over and pushed the crowd back. It was almost time to go, and they wanted to make sure everyone stood a safe distance away from Lindbergh's plane.

After the crowd was behind a rope, one police officer came over to Lindbergh and pressed something into his hand. It was a gift from a woman in the crowd. I only caught a glimpse of her, out of the corner of my eye, before she disappeared into the throng of people corralled behind the rope. I don't think Lindbergh ever saw the woman at all. He was looking up at the watery sky, lost in thought, probably calculating our chances for survival. He placed the woman's gift into his jacket pocket without even looking at it. I noticed that it was a Saint Christopher medal.⁶

Saint Christopher, patron saint of travelers, please watch over us . . .

After a few more minutes of silent contemplation, Lindbergh spoke. He had made his decision. We would go, he said.

"Of course there's danger; but a certain amount of danger is essential to the quality of life. I don't believe in taking foolish chances; but nothing can be accomplished without taking any chance at all."⁷

Together, Lindbergh and I turned and walked toward the little airplane standing on the muddy runway. Its engine was already rumbling. Lindbergh opened the door and we climbed into the cockpit of the *Spirit of St. Louis*.

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CHARLES LINDBERGH STANDS NEXT TO HIS AIRPLANE, THE SPIRIT OF ST. LOUIS.
Location: Roosevelt Airfield, New York. Date: 5/20/1927.
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