

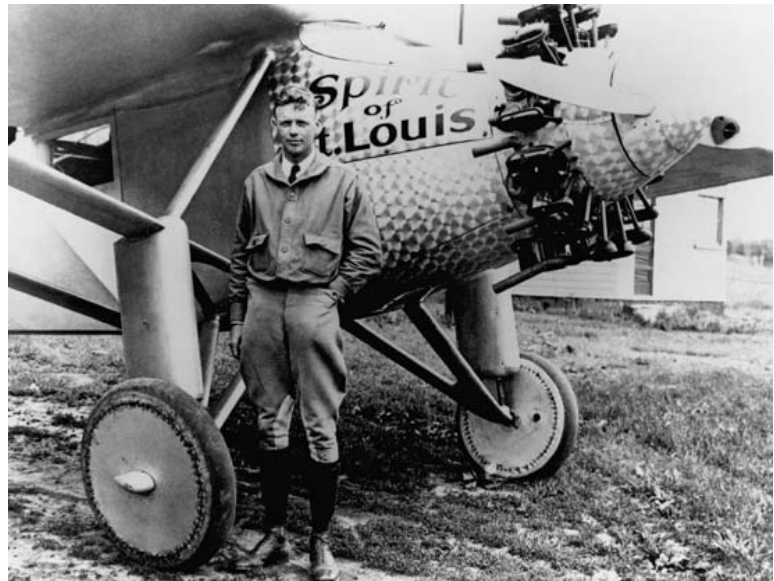
“Charles Lindbergh and San Diego”

The thrilling and fascinating spectacle of a San Diego-built plane, piloted by a famous army and air mail aviator, racing across the Atlantic Ocean . . . will be witnessed this summer. A contract for the construction of a monoplane for his proposed New York to Paris non-stop flight was awarded to the Ryan Aircraft Company of this city yesterday by Capt. Charles A. Lindbergh.

--San Diego Union, March 1, 1927.

In the spring of 1927, several teams of flyers competed for the most celebrated achievement in aviation: the first non-stop, trans-Atlantic crossing. The prestige of such an accomplishment would be accompanied by a cash purse of \$25,000, offered by New York hotel owner Raymond Orteig for a flight between New York and Paris. With one exception, all challengers for the “Orteig Prize” featured well-financed teams of two or more airmen in large, multi-engine planes.

The exception was a quietly ambitious mail pilot from the Midwest, Charles Lindbergh. With limited financial backing from bankers in St. Louis and his own meager savings, Lindbergh shopped for an airplane capable of trans-ocean flight. He decided to investigate a little-known company from San Diego—Ryan Airlines, who pledged they could build a custom plane for him in sixty days.



Lindbergh came to San Diego in February 1927. He found the Ryan factory in “an old, dilapidated building” on the waterfront at the foot of Juniper Street. It was a no-frills operation but Lindbergh was immediately impressed by the enthusiasm of Ryan’s owner, B. Franklin Mahoney, and the evident ability of the chief engineer, Donald Hall. “This company is a fit partner,” Lindbergh decided, “they’re as anxious to build a plane that will fly to Paris as I am to fly it there.”

With a contract signed for a \$10,580 custom-built plane, Lindbergh sat down with Donald Hall to design the single-engine monoplane. His decision to fly solo surprised Hall who wondered about a navigator and relief pilot. But Lindbergh had decided he would “rather have extra gasoline than an extra man.”

Hall was also taken aback by Lindbergh’s insistence that the cockpit be placed behind the fuselage gas tank, which meant the pilot had no forward vision. But Lindbergh did not want to be sandwiched between the tank and the engine—a recipe for disaster if the plane crashed. For the flight Lindbergh would use side windows for sight, along with a periscope mounted on the instrument panel.

To determine the amount of fuel the plane would need, Lindbergh and Hall drove to the San Diego Public Library at 820 E Street. Using a globe and a piece a string, Lindbergh estimated the distance from New York to Paris. It came out to 3600 statute miles, which Hall calculated would require 400 gallons of gas.

With plans in hand, the Ryan team of thirty-five employees went work--seven days a week and often into the night. Lindbergh himself worked long hours at the factory, carefully watching the progress and making suggestions based upon his flying experience.

As the construction progressed, he spent time at the Public Library, working out the calculations he would need to conserve fuel and navigate across the Atlantic. The head of the reference section, Grace Arlington Owen, remembered the “tall, young man whose fair hair rose up in unruly fashion.” Lindbergh would come in each evening “and remain until near closing time lost in some problem of mathematics.”

Lindbergh’s San Diego residence in this period is a mystery. His latest biographer, A. Scott Berg (*Lindbergh*, 1998), discovered Lindbergh lived for a time at the U.S. Grant Hotel, but then moved to less expensive quarters at the YMCA. Some biographers have claimed he shared an apartment with the Ryan sales manager, A. J. Edwards. Still another candidate for “Charles Lindbergh slept here” is the Palomar Apartments on 6th Avenue, where Ryan owner, B. F. Mahoney lived.

Lindbergh’s contract with the Ryan had promised a plane in sixty days. The builders finished the work exactly on schedule. The “Spirit of St. Louis,” named in honor of the Lindbergh’s St. Louis partners, was towed to the Ryan airfield at Dutch Flats, near Barnett Avenue. On April 28, Lindbergh tested the plane for the first time. He later wrote, “I never felt a plane accelerate so fast.

Flying solo across the Atlantic with a single engine was an enormous risk. The plane’s builders had their doubts. “We were skeptical ourselves,” recalled machinist Ed Morrow, “that even our plane would be able to make it.”

Along with possible engine failure, Lindbergh greatest fear was falling asleep. New York to Paris would require over thirty hours of flying. The pilot had to stay alert the entire time--not just flying the plane but monitoring gas consumption and navigating with minimal instruments. In preparing for the flight, many witnesses in San Diego would later say Lindbergh trained to stay awake by walking for hours at night—a claim dismissed by biographer Berg as myth.

Lindbergh would make 23 training flights in the “Spirit of St. Louis” in ten days. The plane performed flawlessly. On May 10, Lindbergh prepared to leave Dutch Flats for short hop to North Island before departing for the east coast. He thanked the employees of Ryan for their “grand” work and, saying good-bye to Ed Morrow, remarked, “Well, Ed, I guess this is goodbye--I might get wet.” Morrow assured him that wouldn’t happen, their plane “was built to fly the Atlantic.”

Late that afternoon Lindbergh took off from North Island for a night flight to St. Louis. Lindbergh had never flown all night before but he needed to test his plane and navigation skills in darkness. He reached St. Louis in record time, and then departed for New York the following day.

At Roosevelt Field on Long Island, Lindbergh waited for rainy weather to clear. He finally lifted the “Spirit of St. Louis” off a muddy runway on Friday morning, May 20. Thirty-three and half hours later, Lindbergh landed at Le Bourget Field, Paris—the first person to fly non-stop across the Atlantic Ocean.



Preparing for departure from San Diego. *Courtesy San Diego Air & Space Museum*

From Richard W. Crawford, *The Way We Were in San Diego* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011, pgs. 102-106.