

Field Guide to Coronado History:

Charles Lindbergh over Coronado

By Bruce Linder



In 1927, no single person commanded more stature than the youthful, charismatic, and engagingly modest Charles Lindbergh. Lindbergh's record-breaking solo flight across the Atlantic was the worldwide event of the year and he represented for many the dawn of the new aeronautical age.

Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis had been built right in San Diego at Dutch Flats (now the location of San Diego's Lindbergh Field) by the Ryan Airlines factory but Lindbergh's aeronautical connections with Coronado were equally strong.

If Lindbergh had a gap in his overall flying experience it was in aerial navigation and, while his plane was being built, he worked closely with naval aviators at North Island to learn long-distance navigation and dead reckoning, especially over water. Rather than land-based aerial maps, he also specifically approached the Navy for their charts, "the same as you carry on ships at sea," he explained.

Lindbergh flew from North Island for flight tests and engine calibrations and he ran the measured three-kilometer speed range, marked by buoys in the bay alongside the Silver Strand. Coronadans were quite used to seeing his distinctive silvery plane over town.

After thoroughly testing his new aircraft, Lindbergh was ready to depart on May 10, 1927 for his history-making attempt to fly the Atlantic. His plan featured three parts, first a non-stop flight from San Diego to St. Louis, then a shorter flight to New York for final preparations, and then the bold attempt for Paris. The flight from San Diego to St. Louis would span 1500 miles and with the heavy weight of his extra fuel, Lindbergh selected North Island for his departure point to avoid surrounding trees and telephone wires at Dutch Flats.

Lindbergh arrived early at North Island so that Ryan engineers could conduct final checks. With time to burn, Lindbergh accepted the invitation of the naval base commander to take a brand new Curtiss Hawk fighter up for a twenty-minute acrobatic flight and spent the rest of the afternoon that day with naval aviators.

Lindbergh set his take-off time as 4 p.m. so that most of the flight would be at night to get practice with night flying and navigation, despite the danger of navigating the high Rockies in the dark. At his appointed time, the no-nonsense Lindbergh taxied

onto the field, opened his throttles to full, and leaped nimbly into the air.

The Coronado afternoon was pleasant and sunny and the Spirit of St. Louis could be easily seen in its wide sweeping climb to the left. Two Army observation planes and a Ryan monoplane followed in trail while Lindbergh circled Coronado one last time to gain altitude.

The San Diego Union marked this grand Coronado event for posterity with the headline, "Lindbergh Winging his Way from San Diego to Paris."

Alas, in Coronado, no similar mention appeared in the *Coronado Journal* – whose lead story for the week applauded a new advance at Tent City, wood-built family cottages with bathrooms!

Four months after his historic flight, Lindbergh returned to San Diego for a full day-celebration crowned by a motorcade up Orange Avenue where hundreds of Coronadans lined the street for a glimpse of the famous aviator. *The Coronado Journal*, perhaps making up for their earlier lapse in reporting, described every minute of an elaborate banquet at the Hotel del Coronado.

Although Charles Lindbergh was certainly the center of attention, most also remembered a mechanical model of the Spirit of St. Louis that conspicuously circled high in the banquet room – certainly a first in the long history of the Del.

One final secret remained that was not well known to the celebrants that evening.

Before Lindbergh had headed east from San Diego, he was aloft over San Diego Bay in late April 1927, conducting routine mechanical tests. Without warning, a North Island Navy fighter suddenly swerved into Lindbergh's path.

For just a moment near Coronado, history might have been changed, with no celebrated Charles Lindbergh, no dramatic flight to Paris and no famous American aircraft hanging in the Smithsonian.

A fiery collision appeared unavoidable with only quick and instinctive reactions by both pilots standing in the way of disaster. But Lindbergh never saw the Navy fighter as the Spirit of St. Louis was designed without a front window to allow space for a large fuel tank.

A crash, maybe into Coronado, was averted only at the last second through emergency maneuvering by the fighter. For alarmed observers, it was a sudden moment of providence, and a little known story involving Those Times in Coronado.



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