An American Hero: The True Story of Charles a. Lindbergh Study Guide

An American Hero: The True Story of Charles a. Lindbergh by Barry Denenberg

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Plot Summary

An American Hero is a biography of aviation pioneer Charles Lindbergh. Written for younger readers, the book covers the major events in Lindbergh's life, including his famous transatlantic flight and his controversial views about World War II.

Charles Lindbergh was born in 1902 to a politician father. His mother and father lived in separate residences and only refrained from divorcing to salvage the father's political career, so Lindbergh lived in a variety of places growing up. He enrolled in engineering school, but he never cared for school, and was instead interested in motorcycles, cars, airplanes, and other mechanical things.

Lindbergh quit college to take flying lessons in Nebraska. There, he became a barnstormer, flying around different communities and taking people for rides. He also performed tricks like wingwalking and acquired a reputation as a daredevil. He later joined the army, and impressed everyone with his flying skills.

In 1927, Lindbergh got financial backing from a businessman in order to build a plane, The Spirit of St. Louis, in a race to become the first man to fly across the Atlantic Ocean. Personally overseeing the plane, Lindbergh introduced several innovations into the design, and he was successful in a solo flight from New York to Paris. He became a worldwide celebrity and was mobbed wherever he went. He quickly developed a dislike for the media and constant attention. Around this time, he met and married Anne Morrow, daughter of a U.S. ambassador.

In 1932, tragedy struck when Lindbergh's infant son was stolen from his nursery. It was dubbed the "Crime of the Century", and it attracted nationwide attention. After a convoluted and botched investigation, the child's body was found two months later. The police traced gold certificates from the ransom money to a German immigrant named Bruno Hauptmann. Hauptmann was tried and found guilty of murder, and in 1936 he was electrocuted to death. Some modern historians have cast doubts as to whether Hauptmann was tried in a just fashion.

Throughout the 1930s, Lindbergh worked as a consultant for several new airline companies, and he helped to make aviation mainstream. In 1936, he was asked to make a visit to Nazi Germany to report on that country's military strength. Lindbergh was very impressed with Nazi Germany, and he felt the Germans were invincible. Lindbergh's adoration of Nazi Germany began to turn public perception against him, especially as World War II began. Lindbergh was a fierce supporter of an isolationist policy, and he argued that the United States should not enter World War II. Lindbergh was revealed to be an anti-Semite in a speech, and he became somewhat of a villain to most Americans, despite serving in several dozen combat missions over the Pacific.

After World War II, Lindbergh continued to fly around the world as a consultant for airlines. He wrote a best-selling autobiography and became involved with conservation

causes. He died in 1974 of lymphatic cancer, and he never expressed regret over his controversial views on Nazi Germany or his white supremacist views.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Charles August Lindbergh, or C.A., was born in Sweden with the last name Mansson. He came to America, and changed his last to Lindbergh because Mansson was too common. He settled in Little Falls, Minnesota, and was a successful lawyer. His first wife died and he remarried Evangeline Lodge Land, nearly two decades his junior.

Charles Lindbergh was born to the couple in 1902. He spent many of his childhood days alone on the farm. When he was three and a half, a fire burned the family home to the ground, an experience which lingered with him long afterward. The family had to live in a hotel until a new, smaller home, was built.

In 1906, C.A. was elected to the House of Representatives. His marriage to Evangeline was falling apart, but they decided to keep up appearances and remain married but live separately, as divorce would have harmed C.A.'s political career. Charles spent several years between Washington D.C., Little Falls, and his mother's home in Detroit. Charles inherited his love of machinery and inventions from his grandfather, Charles Land, who was an innovative dentist. Charles did not enjoy school, and he did poorly in most subjects, instead preferring to fool around with machines on his own. One of his first successful machines was a pulley system which deposited ice slabs into an icebox.

A few years later, Charles helped his father on a political campaign by driving him around in a Ford Model T automobile. Charles loved the relatively new invention. C.A. lost, and Evangeline saw no reasons to keep up appearances, so she moved to California, and Charles drove her the entire way there, which took months because of bad road conditions. Charles spent several winters on the West Coast.

As a teenager, Charles worked on a farm, and at his mother's insistence, he enrolled in engineering college at the University of Wisconsin. He had no interest and did not fare well. He preferred to hang around with a few college friends to race motorcycles. Charles also developed an early interest in flying, and was fascinated by the World War I aces and local airplane exhibitions. Though both his parents disapproved, Charles dropped out of college to enroll in a flying school for $500 in Nebraska.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Human aviation began with Orville and Wilbur Wright, two bicycle mechanics who had a knack for engineering. On December 17, 1903 in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the Wright Brothers made humankind's first flight, traveling ten feet above the ground in a homemade airplane over a distance of 120 feet.

Lindbergh's own first flight took place on April 9, 1922, at Ray Page's Flying School. It was as thrilling as he had dreamed. But lessons were few and far between at the school - the instructor saw a friend die in a plane crash and was reluctant to go back up - so in May of 1922, Lindbergh took on an apprenticeship of sorts with a man named Erold Bahl. Bahl was a barnstormer, a pilot who would fly to various communities to offer plane rides to the citizens for five or ten dollars a trip. Lindbergh who help attract publicity for Bahl's planes by riding on the airplane wing as they soared over various towns.

Ever a daredevil, Lindbergh next attempted a double parachute jump, meaning that he would jump from a plane, release one parachute, cut it off, and release a second. Lindbergh nearly died in the jump, as the second parachute opened late, but he survived. Lindbergh later described it as a life-changing experience, insofar that he earned the respect of the aviators around him and went from apprentice to an aviator himself.

Lindbergh continued his barnstorming with Harold J. "Shorty" Lynch, doing his parachuting, wingwalking, and dangling from the wings from a strap, and acquiring a reputation as a daredevil. But Lindbergh was tired of doing the tricks and wanted to do the flying. In April 1923, he acquired a World War I-era plane, popularly known as a Jenny. Though the Jenny was slow and underpowered, Lindbergh toured the country doing his own barnstorming, and learned a great deal on his own about flying. Unfortunately, barnstorming was a tough business, and Lindbergh did not make much money.

In March 1924, Lindbergh enrolled in the Army Air Service Cadet Program in Texas, figuring the Army had the best planes and training around. He had to enroll in classes, something he hated, but he disciplined himself and ended up graduating first in his class as a Second Lieutenant. Lindbergh acquired a reputation as one of the most skilled aviators in the country.

Lindbergh moved to St. Louis after the program and worked at Lambert Field, instructing and fixing planes. Soon he got involved as an airmail pilot, and because of his reputation, he was named Chief Pilot of the St. Louis-Chicago airmail route. He developed several innovations that turned airmail from a sketchy and dangerous profession into a safer and more reliable way to get mail around.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

By the fall of 1926, aviation was quite the craze, and a $25,000 prize called the Orteig prize was being offered to any pilot who could make a transatlantic flight, from New York to Paris. Convinced that he had enough experience and that flight technology was at a point that made such a flight possible, Lindbergh convinced a businessman named Harry Knight to fund his transatlantic flight. Lindbergh was given freedom to pick out his own plane and make all other decisions. Lindbergh called his plane The Spirit of St. Louis, and both Lindbergh and Knight hoped to establish St. Louis as a new mecca for aviation.

Lindbergh believed the best way to cross the Atlantic Ocean was in a single-engine plane solo. This flied in the face of conventional wisdom, as many said a multi-engine plane with both a pilot and navigator was required. After much searching, Lindbergh contracted the Ryan Airlines Corporation of San Diego to build his single-engine plane for $6,000, and the company hurried to build the plane in the face of increasing competition for the Orteig Prize from American and French aviators.

Overseeing every decision of the plane's manufacturer, Lindbergh insisted the fuel tank be placed in front of the cockpit rather than behind the cockpit, as putting the pilot between the fuel and the engine had cost many lives in early aviation. This design would block forward vision, but Lindbergh insisted all he needed in normal flight was to look out windows on either side. Lindbergh also guided the manufacturers to make the plane as light as possible. Lindbergh carried no parachute, and there was not even as much as a fuel gauge on board, as it would add weight. Lindbergh kept track of fuel consumption with his wristwatch.

At the end of the plane's construction, it appeared Lindbergh would never get his chance at the Orteig prize, as there were reports of other more famous aviators already making the transatlantic flight. But several of these aviators "cracked up" (had a crash) or even were never heard from again once they got out over the ocean. On May 8, 1927, Lindbergh flew The Spirit of St. Louis from St. Louis to New York, in preparation for the transatlantic flight.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

Going from St. Louis to New York, Lindbergh set a new transcontinental record. Lindbergh had become well-known by this time, and in New York he was mobbed by reporters, a hint of things to come. The public became enamored of Lindbergh because of his underdog status, as a lone pilot in a single-engine plane going against more famous aviators backed by huge corporations and piloting much more elaborate planes. Lindbergh was shy in front of cameras and photogenic, further endearing him to the American public. Thousands came to see him take off across the Atlantic, and police had to hold mobs of people away from the airplane hangar. One of the nicknames the media gave Lindbergh was "Lucky Lindy", a nickname Lindbergh hated because he believed there was no luck involved in what he did, only proper training and diligence.

Even at this early stage, Lindbergh developed a dislike for swarming camera people who blocked his flying lanes and who never seemed to get enough pictures. Reporters also visited Lindbergh's mother in Detroit and worried her about Lindbergh's flight, something Lindbergh also intensely disliked.

Lindbergh and his team anxiously waited for the right weather to begin the flight. In a few days, the time came, and the plane was moved to Roosevelt Field because it had a sufficiently long runway. On the morning of May 20, 1927, Lindbergh took off from a muddy runway with very little sleep.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

This chapter is comprised of a few dozen journal entries, labeled according to specific hours Lindbergh was in the air. The journal entries are attributed to Lindbergh himself, but whether Lindbergh had the opportunity to literally write the entries during the flight or whether he reconstructed them later is uncertain.

Lindbergh expresses annoyance at reporters and a newspaper airplane. He remarks that The Spirit of St. Louis feels like an extension of his body, and he is pleased. He tells himself he must not be too disappointed if this flight fails, and he resolves himself to try again should he fail.

By the third hour, Lindbergh loses sight of the coast of the United States. The third through eighth hours are dedicated to Lindbergh fighting fatigue. In the eighth hour, flying over the coast of Nova Scotia, Lindbergh is dismayed to discover fog, the enemy of all aviators, but he manages to avoid it. In the ninth hour, Lindbergh has another crisis of extreme sleepiness he must battle.

In the fourteenth hour, Lindbergh flies too high and his engine starts to ice up, and he must quickly lose altitude. By the seventeenth hour, the cockpit is warming and the ice has largely melted. In the eighteenth hour, halfway to Paris, Lindbergh does all he can to fight sleepiness, reminding himself over and over that sleep means failure and probably death. By the twenty-second hour, Lindbergh reports that he sees vaporous apparitions in the cockpit. Whether these are genuine hallucinations from fatigue or literary license on Lindbergh's part is a matter of debate.

In the twenty-seventh hour, Lindbergh spots small specks, fishing boats, on the water, and he is heartened to know he must be close to the European coast. By the twenty-eighth hour, Lindbergh spots land. He crosses England and heads inland to Paris. He sees France by the thirty-second hour. In the thirty-third hour, he spots the Eiffel Tower. Lindbergh doesn't know exactly where the airport, Le Bourget, is, and he simply looks for the lights of its runway. He has a successful landing, and he is amazed to see the entire field is flooded with people waiting for him.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Lindbergh touched down at 10:22 PM Paris time. He was worried about customs and brought letters of introduction, and he only expected a handful of reporters. Instead, it is estimated that between 20,000 and 100,000 people flooded Le Bourget to watch Lindbergh land. It was a mob scene; people took Lindbergh and held him aloft, and The Spirit of St. Louis was being vandalized so that people could take home souvenirs. The French police eventually restored order.

After a ten-hour sleep, Lindbergh formally greeted a crowd at the American Embassy, alongside the U.S. ambassador. Lindbergh then reluctantly agreed to accept President Coolidge's invitation to return to the U.S. aboard the cruiser USS Memphis; he had intended to fly through Russia and back around the entire world. Lindbergh was given a hero's welcome back in Washington D.C., and an amazing thirty million people tuned in to the ceremony on the radio. Lindbergh was given the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Congressional Medal of Honor by the President. In New York, Lindbergh was treated to a huge tickertape parade.

Lindbergh became the most famous man in the world, and was idolized. He received marriage proposals in the mail, and a new dance craze, the Lindy, was named after him. He was also offered countless product endorsements, everything from cigarettes to shaving cream, but he turned them all down; Lindbergh figured lucrative endorsement deals would be a distraction from his true passion, advancing aviation. However, he did endorse aviation-related products, such as Mobil oil and Goodrich tires. It is estimated he earned a half a million dollars total as a result of his flight.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

In July of 1927, Lindbergh worked feverishly to write a first-hand account of his flight, which he called WE. He then embarked on a nationwide tour to promote aviation in The Spirit of St. Louis. His tour was financially backed by Harry Guggenheim, an aviation advocate. The ambitious tour would have Lindbergh landing in each of the (then) forty-eight states according to a rigid timetable. By adhering to a rigid timetable, Lindbergh and Guggenheim wanted to show that aviation could be reliable. Lindbergh traveled 22,340 miles on the tour, and was only late for one stop due to fog. Lindbergh had a dramatic impact on public perception of air travel. New airports were being constructed, and airmail services were being funded at unprecedented rates.

Two months later, Lindbergh accepted an invitation by the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow, to fly to Mexico City in order to improve U.S.-Mexican relations. Through Morrow, Lindbergh met Morrow's twenty-one-year-old daughter, Anne Morrow, who would become his wife. Their courtship was brief, and in the span of a few months they were engaged to be married. In May of 1929, the two were wed in a very casual and somewhat secretive ceremony at the Morrow Estate. Always battling the press, Lindbergh set up a decoy plane at Roosevelt Field so that the press would go to Roosevelt Field to try to catch newlywed Lindbergh. Instead, Lindbergh and Anne spent a honeymoon on a boat. After ten days, the press caught up to them, and the honeymoon was over.

The new couple could not go anywhere without being hounded by the media, and they wore disguises to go to restaurants. Their first son, Charles Jr., was born on June 22, 1930. The Lindberghs did not acknowledge the birth, and only weeks later did they give pictures of the infant out to select members of the press. Meanwhile, Lindbergh acted as a consultant for some of the first transcontinental airline companies, determining routes and advising on plane purchases.

After Anne and Charles co-piloted an ambitious trip to China in order to find a U.S.-China airplane route, they came quickly back to the United States after they received word that Anne's father Dwight had died. Charles continued to consult with aviation companies, and he was a financial supporter of technology in general, working with a man named Dr. Carrel to fund an early version of a heart pump that would make heart surgery possible. The couple decided to have a permanent estate built in the rural town of Hopewell in New Jersey. The media dubbed the estate the Eagle's Nest.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

On the evening of March 1, 1932, Charles Jr. was kidnapped from his second-story nursery at the Hopewell estate. The nurse, Betty Gow, discovered the child was missing, and Lindbergh, at home in the study, immediately called the police. A crude, homemade ladder was found outside the home, and a chisel was also found that the kidnapper used to pry open the window shutter.

The investigation was handled by the head of the New Jersey State Police, Colonel Normal Schwarzkopf. More a military man than a policeman, Schwarzkopf had little training in proper police procedure, and he often deferred to Lindbergh's advice because of hero worship. The author characterizes the investigation of the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby as a bungled mess. Important forensic clues at the scene were ruined by inept policemen as well as media people tramping around the grounds. Schwarzkopf refused federal assistance by the FBI at the request of Lindbergh, who believed that a discreet investigation was more likely to result in the safe return of his son. Schwarzkopf and Lindbergh believed that the mafia was responsible for the kidnapping, and for a time they considered asking gangster Al Capone, in prison for tax evasion, to help, though federal authorities refused such an option. Instead, Lindbergh hired Morris "Mickey" Rosner, a known gangster, to act as an intermediary between the family and the kidnappers.

A ransom note had been left in the nursery, demanding $50,000. It was signed with a distinctive circular design, and Lindbergh intentionally did not release this detail to the press in hopes he could use the unique signature to distinguish the real kidnapper from fakes. While Rosner was doing his own investigation, the kidnappers allegedly contacted a Bronx man named John Condon, using the circle signature. Condon and Lindbergh met the kidnapper at a cemetery, and thereafter the kidnapper would be known as Graveyard John. After a series of cat-and-mouse chases with this figure, Lindbergh and Condon gave $70,000 over to Graveyard John, who instructed them to find the baby, safe, on a boat in a specific location. However, there was no boat, and no baby.

On May 12, 1932, over two months after the kidnapping, a trucker found the body of Charles Jr. near the road. An examiner concluded the baby had died on the night of the kidnapping from a skull fracture, meaning the entire ordeal with Graveyard John was a fraud. The investigation now shifted to finding the baby's killer.

The police believed it had to have been an inside job; the timing of the kidnapping was too perfect. Suspicion fell on the maid, Violet Sharpe. Police interrogated her mercilessly, to the point she drank cyanide and killed herself rather than be subjected to further harsh interrogation. Police were never able to link her to the crime. The largest lead in the case arose from the IRS' insistence that some of the ransom money include

gold certificates. When the kidnapper used these distinctive bills, he could possibly be tracked. After months of tracking, a certificate was traced to a gas station where the attendant wrote down the license plate number of the man who gave him the certificate. The car belonged to a German immigrant named Bruno Hauptmann.

Hauptmann was apprehended, and after intense questioning, he told the police that the money was given to him by a man named Fisch who had recently left back to Germany and then died of tuberculosis. However, Hauptmann had a history of armed robbery, and when given a handwriting test, his handwriting matched the ransom note, and he misspelled the same words the ransom note did. He was arrested.

Hauptmann's murder trial took place in Flemington, and the small town soon became packed with media to report on the outcome of the "Crime of the Century". Eyewitnesses delivered testimony, including Lindbergh himself, Condon, and others. The handwriting expert, Albert Osborn, testified that Hauptmann's handwriting matched the ransom note, and a wood expert, Arthur Koehler, testified that a rung from the ladder found at the crime scene matched a missing piece of section in Hauptmann's attic. Hauptmann was a carpenter, and the prosecution alleged that he made the ladder. The defense, led by blustery and inept publicity hound "Big Ed" Reilly, offered a poor defense, and the jury delivered a guilty verdict. In April 1936, Hauptmann was put to death by electric chair.

The author finally mentions that historians have raised doubts about the guilt of Hauptmann. Key eyewitnesses may have been motivated by money, or were revealed to have very bad eyesight. Condon changed his story about identifying Hauptmann. And there is the matter of how Hauptmann would have known where exactly the baby was in the home, and that the Lindberghs would be at their new home in Hopewell in the first place, as they were mostly living at the Morrow estate elsewhere. There was also the fact that Graveyard John indicated there were multiple kidnappers. Some historians now consider Hauptmann as an innocent scapegoat, while others think perhaps he was guilty but that the police manufactured evidence or otherwise broke the law to ensure a conviction.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Between the kidnapping and Hauptmann's execution, Anne and Charles attempted to live normal lives. Charles continued to consult for Pan Am Airways and Transcontinental Air Transport. In 1934, Lindbergh became embroiled in a controversy involving charges that the postmaster general was catering to special interests and big business by awarding airmail contracts to large companies. President Roosevelt issued an executive order to hand over the airmail to a federal service, but Lindbergh wrote a public telegram to Roosevelt criticizing his action. With public sentiment against him, Roosevelt relented and restored the airmail service to private companies. It would not be the last time the two men clashed.

In 1932, their second son Jon was born. In the summer of 1933, Anne and Charles left on a long, circuitous trip across the Atlantic and around Europe. The media criticized the couple for abandoning their young son.

The media continued to be relentless with respect to the Lindberghs and their new son. They felt they had no privacy, and often they would receive letters threatening a kidnap of Jon. Lindbergh decided their only chance at a normal existence was to leave the country, so on a secret boat ride, they left America for England. The family enjoyed two years of relative solitude in England before moving to a remote island off the coast of France. They moved nearby to Dr. Carrel, the surgeon Lindbergh had worked with to develop a heart pump. Carrel was a white supremacist, who felt steps needed to be taken to protect the purity of the white race. Lindbergh agreed, and was thinking about entering American politics. Anne, meanwhile, was a budding novelist, and wrote a well-received book called North to the Orient about the couple's 1931 flight to China.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

In 1936, Lindbergh was asked to visit Germany and report on that country's military strength, particularly its planes. Germany had been demilitarized following World War I, but under Adolf Hitler it was quickly rising to become a military force once again, and many were worried. Lindbergh agreed, and was personally shown various facilities by Hermann Goering, the head of the Luftwaffe, the German air force. Goering exaggerated the strength of the Luftwaffe, and Lindbergh's tour was guided and censored by Nazi officials. As a result, Lindbergh reported back to the United States with the opinion that Germany's air force was superior to all of Europe's air forces combined, and that it would be foolish to try to battle Germany.

In 1937 and 1938, the Lindberghs returned for visits to Nazi Germany, hobnobbing with high society folks and high-ranking Nazis. They were very impressed with the work ethic and enthusiasm of the German people, and the amazing energy of Nazism. In October 1938, Lindbergh was given a medal, the Service Cross of the German Eagle, by Goering in a ceremony. Less than a month later, Kristallnacht occurred, in which German citizens terrorized Jewish homeowners and businessmen. American public perception of Lindbergh changed drastically as it became clear Nazi Germany was a danger to the world. In that same year, England's prime minister, Neville Chamberlain, conceded land to Hitler in an attempt to appease him. The author indicates that Chamberlain may have relied on Lindbergh's assessment of Germany's air power, and that he was fearful that England and the rest of Europe could not take on Germany. Of course, Hitler was not content with Chamberlain's concession.

For his part, Lindbergh remained impressed with Nazi Germany, and thought Hitler's amazing accomplishments overshadowed whatever faults he had. And he at least partially agreed with Hitler's desire to preserve the purity of the white race. In 1940, Anne published a book called The Wave of the Future in which she defended Nazi Germany and urged the world not to fight it. Naturally, the Lindberghs were quickly becoming villains in America.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Lindbergh returned to the United States in April 1939, and immediately resigned his commission in the military so that he could speak freely about political issues, as a civilian. He advocated an isolationist foreign policy, and he urged the United States not to enter World War II. Lindbergh felt that Nazi Germany was invincible, and besides, Nazi Germany wasn't that bad anyway. Lindbergh issued a nationwide radio address that attracted a large audience, and many in America agreed with him at that time. Roosevelt offered him a cabinet post if he would tow the administration's line, but Lindbergh refused.

By late 1940, American public opinion was changing as Nazism became a more obvious threat, and Lindbergh started to become a minority voice. Then, at the Battle of Dunkirk, England's Royal Air Force scored decisive wins against the German Luftwaffe, casting into doubt Lindbergh's long-held assertion that the Luftwaffe was invincible. People also began to be swayed by the eloquence of Winston Churchill.

Lindbergh was asked to become a spokesman for the America First Committee (AFC), which was a large organization which advocated isolationism. Lindbergh agreed and delivered several speeches for America First.

A turning point came in a September 1941 speech in Des Moines, Iowa. He shocked America and even most of his America First members by blaming the Jews for forcing America into war, and he issued a veiled threat to any Jews continuing to lobby for American involvement in World War II. The public largely turned against him at that point, and people questioned his patriotism. Roosevelt himself was convinced Lindbergh was a Nazi, and others thought so, too. Wife Anne stuck by her husband without question.

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and the next day the Congress voted to go to war. Resigned to American involvement, Lindbergh acted as a consultant for Henry Ford, helping to solve production problems in a war factory. He also flew several dozen combat missions in the Pacific, though he was officially given the title of "civilian observer" because Roosevelt refused to reinstate his army officer status. Despite his skill in fighting for his country, by the end of World War II Lindbergh went from American hero to American villain.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

After World War II, Lindbergh continued to act as a consultant for airline companies, and he flew all over the world, being away for months at a time. In 1953, he wrote the autobiographical book, The Spirit of St. Louis, which sold well and which won the Pulitzer Prize. Anne also enjoyed success as a writer. She wrote Gift from the Sea in 1956, and it was a best-seller. In 1957, a movie about Lindbergh's famous transatlantic flight was made starring Jimmy Stewart.

Never returning to their Hopewell home, the Lindberghs settled in Darien, Connecticut, raising their five children. For the first time in a long time, the Lindberghs were largely left alone by the media, and the children had a relatively peaceful childhood. Eventually, the Lindberghs had residences in Switzerland as well as Maui.

In the 1960s, Lindbergh enjoyed a resurgence in popularity due in large part to President Kennedy. Kennedy invited the Lindberghs to several state dinners, as did Lyndon Johnson after him.

Late in life, Lindbergh took up nature conservation causes, and became an advocate for environmentalism. He never expressed regret for his controversial views on Nazi Germany, and likely he was a Holocaust denier.

In 1974, after a couple years of illness, Lindbergh died from lymphatic cancer.

Characters

Charles Lindbergh

Charles Lindbergh is the chief subject of the book. He was an aviation pioneer, author, conservationist, and businessman. He is perhaps best known for being the first man to make a solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean, from New York to Paris, in May 1927. Lindbergh, then twenty-five, designed his own plane for the trip, The Spirit of St. Louis.

Lindbergh was rebellious and independent. From an early age, he was much more interested in toying with machines in the garage than in schoolwork. He had a knack for machinery, and he was gifted with terrific eyesight, courage, and other attributes that made him an ideal pilot.

Lindbergh came to resent his worldwide celebrity and the intense scrutiny the press treated him with. He and his wife, Anne, had to travel in disguises to try not to be noticed and photographed. Press attention would crescendo with the kidnapping of his child in the "Crime of the Century." After the death of Charles Junior, Lindbergh and his wife took extensive trips around the world to try to escape the attention.

An anti-Semite and white supremacist, Lindbergh agreed with the philosophy (if not the methods) of Adolf Hitler, and he was an early proponent of Nazi Germany. As such, he argued against the United States entering into World War II, which included aiding England financially. Lindbergh believed a takeover of Europe by Germany would not be a terrible thing.

In later years, Lindbergh spent time consulting with airlines and traveling across the world. He wrote a successful autobiography, and also became involved with nature conservation.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh

Anne was the daughter of Dwight Morrow, a U.S. ambassador to Mexico. When Morrow invited Lindbergh to fly to Mexico City as part of an effort to improve U.S.-Mexican relations, Lindbergh had the opportunity to meet and court Anne. Always an analyst, Lindbergh went about his courtship scientifically, and felt Anne possessed a satisfactory blend of personality traits and physical qualities.

Anne suffered through years of intense media attention as the new wife of Lindbergh; the couple had to hatch an elaborate plan to throw the press off their trail for their honeymoon, and even then the press caught up to their honeymoon boat after ten days. Anne would often have to wear face-covering scarves and other disguises while out with Charles to avoid being recognized. Anne took part in her husband's profession, copiloting an ambitious trip around East Asia.

The kidnapping of the couple's first child, Charles Jr., naturally devastated Anne. To escape, Anne and Charles moved to Europe, where Anne raised subsequent children in England and then off the coast of France. Like Charles, Anne was convinced of the good of Nazi Germany, and in 1940 she published a book, The Wave of the Future, in which she called for the world to embrace Nazism. Even after Charles came under fire for his apparent anti-Semitism and pro-Nazi views, Anne stood by her husband and remained loyal.

C.A. Lindbergh

C.A. Lindbergh was Charles' father. He was a Swedish immigrant who became a successful lawyer and later politician.

Harry Guggenheim

Guggenheim was a New York philanthropist and aviation advocate who financially backed Lindbergh on an extensive flying tour of the United States after Lindbergh's transatlantic flight.

Dwight Morrow

Morrow was the U.S. ambassador to Mexico who persuaded Lindbergh to fly to Mexico City as part of an effort to improve U.S.-Mexican relations. Morrow's daughter, Anne, became Lindbergh's wife.

Colonel H. Norman Schwarzkopf

Schwarzkopf was the head of the New Jersey State Police who led the investigation into the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby. The author criticizes Schwarzkopf for making several missteps in the investigation.

Bruno Hauptmann

Hauptmann was a German carpenter who was arrested and tried for the murder of the Lindbergh baby. He proclaimed his innocence until he was electrocuted to death by the state of New Jersey.

Dr. Alexis Carrel

Carrel was a surgeon who was convinced that heart surgery was possible. He and Lindbergh worked to develop a heart pump that would make such surgery possible. Carrel also influenced Lindbergh with his white supremacist views.

President Franklin Roosevelt

Roosevelt became annoyed and frustrated with Lindbergh's isolationist stance in a time when Roosevelt was urging the United States to enter World War II. Roosevelt became convinced that Lindbergh was a Nazi, or at least a Nazi sympathizer.

Herman Goering

Goering gave Lindbergh a guided tour of Luftwaffe production facilities in 1936, and in 1938 presented Lindbergh with a German medal of honor. Lindbergh became friends with Goering and visited him several times.

Objects/Places

Spirit of St. Louis

This is the name of the plane that Lindbergh designed and piloted across the Atlantic Ocean for the first transatlantic flight in history.

Crime of the Century

The kidnapping of the Lindberghs' first child, Charles Jr., became known as the Crime of the Century, and it caused a media frenzy. The child died, and carpenter Bruno Hauptmann was found guilty of the murder and was put to death in 1936 for the crime.

Little Falls, Minnesota

Little Falls was Charles Lindbergh's childhood home. When his father became a U.S. representative, Lindbergh spent time in Washington D.C., but he often found the opportunity to come back to Little Falls.

Ray Page's Flying School

Lindbergh quit engineering college to move to Nebraska and enroll in the Ray Page Flying School. He soon quit the school and became a barnstormer.

Barnstorming

Early aviators "barnstormed" by flying over middle American communities, doing daredevil tricks and offering paid plane rides to citizens. Lindbergh was a barnstormer and airmail delivery person prior to his transatlantic flight.

Le Bourget

This was the airport in Paris, France that Lindbergh landed in after his successful transatlantic flight.

America First Committee

This organization advocated an isolationist foreign policy, and urged the United States to keep out of the Second World War. Lindbergh was a spokesman for the organization and made several speeches for them.

Luftwaffe

The Luftwaffe was Germany's air force before and during World War II. It was headed by Herman Goering. In 1936, Lindbergh toured Luftwaffe production facilities and felt that Germany's air power was invincible.

The Wave of the Future

This 1940 book by Anne Lindbergh urged the world to embrace Nazism, calling it the wave of the future.

Service Cross of the German Eagle

This German medal of honor was bestowed upon Lindbergh in 1938 in a ceremony conducted by Herman Goering. Lindbergh's refusal to reject the medal caused his popularity to dip in the United States.

Themes

Stubborn Lindbergh

One important character trait that emerges from the biography is Lindbergh's stubbornness and determination. This stubborn streak served Lindbergh both well and poorly. On the positive side, stubbornness allowed Lindbergh to follow his dream of being an aviator despite his parents' disapproval and other obstacles. No one thought that the twenty-five-year-old Lindbergh could possibly cross the Atlantic in a single-engine plane, but he proved all the critics wrong by possessing a singular and tenacious focus. This focus then aided him in his consultant work for several airline companies, and he largely accomplished his goal of mainstreaming aviation in the eyes of the American public.

Lindbergh's stubbornness also was a detriment, however. Lindbergh insisted on guiding many aspects of the investigation into his son's kidnapping, refusing to accept wiser counsel to let the police do their job. Partially due to Lindbergh's stubborn meddling and fixation on the idea that the kidnapping was mob-related, the investigation suffered. Additionally, Lindbergh's stubborn streak reached its nadir with respect to his adoration of Nazi Germany and his anti-Semitic views. In the face of increasing German aggression, Lindbergh still believed Hitler had the right idea and that Nazism was an inevitability that the world should embrace. He foolishly did not give back a medal given to him in a German ceremony, despite public outcry. And even decades after, Lindbergh refused to apologize for or reassess his dubious actions and beliefs during the period of World War II.

The Twin Tragedy of The Crime of the Century

Denenberg demonstrates that the Crime of the Century, the Lindbergh baby kidnapping, was not just a tragedy for the family and the unfortunate infant, but a tragedy in the way it was handled from beginning to end. The press was merciless, turning the Lindbergh's town into a circus, and ruining the crime scene and chances of apprehending the criminal with their invasion. The lead investigator, Colonel Schwarzkopf, was an army man with little to no police training, and thus his team made several missteps with the investigation. Schwarzkopf also deferred much too often to Lindbergh himself, who guided (and harmed) several elements of the investigation. The investigation was extremely convoluted and unfocused, with John Condon and Mickey Rosner starring as battling intermediaries to the kidnappers, attempting to communicate messages in newspapers.

Once the police got a solid lead on the kidnapper - the traceable gold certificates on the ransom money - they fared little better. They caused one woman, Violet Sharpe, to commit suicide because of harsh interrogation tactics, and they subjected the lead suspect, Bruno Hauptmann, to similar tactics. Many historians suggest that the police

manufactured evidence or cut other corners in order to ensure a conviction. And the trial of Hauptmann had every bit the circus atmosphere as the initial investigation along with a buffoonish lead defense attorney and dubious testimony from eyewitnesses and experts.

Lindbergh as Innovator

From very early on, Lindbergh was clearly an important pioneer and innovator of aviation. In the airmail service, he learned how to improve the efficiency and logistics of airmail routes, and because of his efforts airmail delivery became a lot safer and more reliable. With respect to his transatlantic flight, he realized that a single-engine plane flied solo had the best chance of crossing the ocean, given the technology that was available. This flied in the face of the common belief that multi-engine planes had to be used.

Additionally, Lindbergh insisted that the fuel tank for the plane be built between pilot and engine. Existing plane designs placed the pilot between the fuel tank and engine, and any rupture in the fuel tank meant the pilot was in danger of being caught in a fireball. Lindbergh also designed the plane to be as light as possible, to the point that he discarded a fuel gauge and relied upon a wristwatch and pencil marks to measure fuel consumption.

After his famous flight, Lindbergh continued to innovate as the unofficial ambassador of aviation. Working with fledgling airline companies, he designed plane routes and helped to determine terminal locations. Even as late as World War II, Lindbergh shared flying tricks he had learned about conserving fuel to other pilots, and he out-gunned and out-flew top pilots.

Style

Perspective

Written in the third person as a biographical account of Charles Lindbergh, An American Hero is a balanced examination of Lindbergh's entire life. The author, Barry Denenberg, has written many nonfiction books for middle-grade and young adult readers. As such, concepts are expressed clearly and simply, and vocabulary is appropriate for younger readers.

Denenberg attempts to write an unbiased view of Lindbergh. Despite the title of An American Hero, Denenberg's biography is not a hagiography, and Denenberg is not particularly reverential to his subject. There are two parts to the book, "Ascent" and "Descent", and indeed, Lindbergh's life story can be rather neatly divided between his triumph of the transatlantic flight and the tragedy of the Lindbergh kidnapping, along with Lindbergh's plummet in popularity during World War II. Denenberg does not gloss over either section and gives each section its due.

At several controversial points in Lindbergh's biography, Denenberg is careful to present multiple points of view. For example, regarding Lindbergh's refusal to give back his German medal, Denenberg provides both Lindbergh's reasoning for not giving it back, as well the opinion held by many Americans about the controversy. Similarly, Denenberg is careful to point out that Lindbergh's isolationist viewpoint was one that was held by many Americans, but also was one that became a minority viewpoint just prior to Pearl Harbor.

Tone

Denenberg's tone is objective, patient, and careful. Writing for younger readers, the author simplifies difficult concepts and provides sufficient background on events and historical context that may be unfamiliar to the reader. Writing neither to convince the reader that Lindbergh was a "hero" or a "villain" — despite the title - Denenberg provides multiple points of view, and rarely does he betray a bias about certain controversies in the life of Lindbergh. For example, with the trial of Bruno Hauptmann, Denenberg lays out of the evidence the prosecution used against the man, but then lays out the objections that later historians raised about that evidence.

With the trial, and the issue of whether justice was truly served, Denenberg leaves it up to the reader to make up his or her own mind. However, as far as the investigation into the kidnapping, Denenberg clearly characterizes that process as botched and bungled. He portrays the lead investigator, Schwarzkopf, as a military man with no police experience who deferred too often to Lindbergh himself, hurting the investigation. Denenberg also criticizes the police for not establishing a crime scene, allowing media people and other onlookers to trample all over the scene, ruining forensic evidence.

Throughout, however, Denenberg primarily is a presenter of information, as evidenced by his reliance on a variety of quoted historical documents, be they Lindbergh's letters, passages from his biography, or articles from contemporary historians.

Structure

An American Hero is divided into twelve chapters. These chapters usually begin and end at crucial turning points in Lindbergh's life. For example, chapter two begins when Lindbergh drops out of college in order to attend flying school, and Chapter Eight begins in 1932 with the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby.

Furthermore, the book is divided into two parts, "Ascent" and "Descent", with "Ascent" covering Lindbergh's life up until the kidnapping. Besides being a play on Lindbergh's profession, with the "ascent" and "descent" referring to a plane taking off and landing, this division points to the fact that Lindbergh did indeed experience a great high with the celebrity of his transatlantic flight, and then terrible lows with the kidnapping and his unpopularity during World War II.

Chapters are often full of quotations pulled from historical documents, such as Lindbergh's biography or letters, Anne's correspondence, or other historians. These quotations serve to deepen the reader's understanding of the material, or provide a controlling idea with which to understand the proceeding material in the chapter. Numerous photographs serve a similar purpose.

Chapter five, titled "Alone" is unique among chapters in that it is exclusively a series of direct quotations from journal-style entries Lindbergh made while on his transatlantic flight.

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Quotes

"Charles showed exceptional mechanical ability by the time he was nine. He took things apart - his bicycle, for instance - and reassembled them with ease. He once conceived and built a clever and elaborate mechanical system for transporting large blocks of ice that had been cut from the Mississippi and were stored in the icehouse."
Chap. 1, p. 10

"Forced to fly the underpowered Jenny, Lindbergh developed piloting skills good enough to compensate. Barnstorming on his own gave him the opportunity to add to his already extensive knowledge of engines, airplane design, and cockpit controls."
Chap. 2, p. 29

"Range and fuel efficiency were of paramount importance [to the design of The Spirit of St. Louis]. Therefore weight - what to take and what not to take - became an ongoing, critical decision. Lindbergh was adamant about not taking anything he considered unnecessary."
Chap. 3, pp. 50-51

"[Lindbergh] appeared on the scene the all-American hero; the underdog, going up against famous aviators supported by powerful financial groups, piloting huge, elaborately equipped multiengined planes."
Chap. 4, p. 57

"My mind is losing resolution and control ... If sleep weighs so heavily on me now, how can I get through the night, to say nothing of the dawn, and another day and its night, and possibly even the day after? Something must be done - immediately ... I will force my body to remain alert. I will force my mind to concentrate."
Chap. 5, p. 71

"[Lindbergh] received millions of letters (including marriage proposals - four times as many women as men wrote to Lindbergh) and hundreds of thousands of telegrams. Babies, parks, streets, schools, and, in at least one case, a mountain peak (in Colorado) and a sandwich (in New York) were named after him. The Lindy became the name of the latest dance craze."
Chap. 6, pp. 94-95

"Lindbergh was tireless and unselfish in his efforts to promote the future of civilian aviation. He gave 147 speeches, was honored at 69 dinners, and traveled 1,285 miles in parades, greeting the enormous crowds that turned out wherever he went."
Chap. 7, p. 102

"There were few Americans in 1936, the year Hauptmann was executed, who even considered the possibility that he was innocent. In five years America would be at war with Germany, and anti-German feelings were already beginning to swell. [...] But in the

years since, questions have been raised about the investigation, the trial, and the verdict."
Chap. 8, p. 170

"Carrel believed in the superiority of the white race, which he felt was being threatened by a rising tide of Asian and other 'colored' races. He advocated exterminating criminals, the insane, and anyone else who, in Carrel's estimation, would weaken white civilization. [...] He urged his fellow white men to do what was necessary to maintain white supremacy. Lindbergh agreed with much of what Carrel was saying."
Chap. 9, p. 188

"Lindbergh was impressed by the Nazis. They had once again turned Germany, only recently the weakest country in Europe, into a modern military power. Hitler had accomplished a great deal in a short period of time. Some of his politics, Lindbergh grudgingly admitted, were, perhaps, a bit excessive but he felt Hitler's extraordinary accomplishments would overshadow his shortcomings."
Chap. 10, p. 200

"To many Americans - politicians, journalists, religious leaders, and citizens - Charles Lindbergh no longer sounded like someone who sincerely believed it was wrong for America to become involved in the war. He sounded more like someone who simply disliked Jews."
Chap. 11, p. 215

"[Lindbergh] decided that once again he had to take a public stand on an issue that was vitally important. He joined the World Wildlife Foundation as well as other conservation organizations. He began to put all his energy and time into the conservation and ecology movement."
Chap. 12, p. 229

Topics for Discussion

What reason did Lindbergh give for not returning the German medal awarded to him in 1938?

Why do some modern historians doubt the verdict in the "Crime of the Century" trial?

What innovations did Lindbergh introduce into The Spirit of St. Louis airplane?

What opinion did Lindbergh hold of Nazi Germany in the late 1930s? Did his views differ over the years?

Why was Lindbergh's Des Moines speech as a spokesman for America First an important turning point in public perception of the man?

Describe Lindbergh's aviation-related activities prior to his 1927 transatlantic flight.

What was Lindbergh's relationship with the media?