

Monday | March 25

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[Beliefs](#)
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Lindbergh Flies Again

'Lucky Lindy's grandson gets local training prior to own transatlantic flight

 By [Robert A. Hamilton](#) - [More Articles](#)

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Groton -- Most people know Charles A. Lindbergh made the first solo crossing of the Atlantic 75 years ago this spring, but how many remember Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli?

The two Frenchmen took off from Paris and headed for New York on May 8, 1927, in pursuit of the \$25,000 Orteig Prize that Lindbergh claimed days later. They never made it.

Now, as he prepares to recreate his grandfather's historic flight, Erik Lindbergh is hoping to avoid such ignominy. In the event he falls short of his goal, he's training this week at Survival Systems Inc., a business that helps pilots and passengers prepare for a ditching at sea.

"You've got to be pragmatic," Lindbergh said during a break Thursday. "As soon as you get afraid of a worst-case scenario, you lose your ability to deal with it. And that's what kills people."

Lindbergh, 37, a Seattle resident, said he is embarking on his trans-Atlantic adventure for three reasons, first and foremost of which is to celebrate his grandfather's accomplishment.

"I really want a deeper understanding of this event that changed my life, that really changed the world," Lindbergh said. "It's about drive. It's about determination. It's about inspi-ration. You don't grow and learn unless you push the edges of the envelope."

Lindbergh also is doing it to demonstrate his triumph over the rheumatoid arthritis that nearly crippled him, that required him to have two total knee replacements. Diagnosed with the disease 15 years ago, he'd been


Tim Martin/I

Erik Lindbergh of Seattle, Wash., deflating self-inflating raft during survival training at Survival Systems in Groton in preparation for his transatlantic flight.


Tim Martin/I

'What my grandfather did was to systematically take every risk scenario could think of and reduce or eliminate risk. I'm approaching this flight, I hope from the same perspective.'

rendered nearly immobile five years ago. Then a new drug, Enbrel, manufactured by Seattle-based Immunex, restored him to health.

Erik Lindbergh

“I can walk, I can work, I can fly, I can ski — things that I had given up and wasn't sure would ever be able to do again,” Lindbergh said. “I have a second chance. And I think I can do a lot of good with it. I think I can inspire people who are facing adversity to have hope.”

He also hopes to promote the X-Prize Foundation, which is offering a \$10 million prize to the first private team to fly to space in a privately built aircraft, return to Earth, and fly again in two weeks.

“Flying is freedom, particularly if you compare it to being in a wheelchair or having to walk with a cane and only be able to go short distances because of the pain,” Lindbergh said. “The next step, in my mind, would be the weight-lessness of space ... and I want to see what it is like to see our planet from orbit.”

Charles A. Lindbergh set a transcontinental record on his flight from San Diego to New York, arriving May 12, 1927. Eight days later he and his silver monoplane, the “Spirit of St. Louis,” departed New York for Paris. He flew through fog and ice and fought sleep deprivation on the 33 1/2-hour flight, arriving at Le Bourget Field in Paris at 10:22 p.m. on May 20, 1927, on a journey of more than 3,600 miles.

He later wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning book about his effort.

Grandson Erik, who was 9 when his grandfather died in Hawaii in 1974, said nobody talked much about the flight when he was a child; he said his classmates seemed to know more about it than he did. Despite his heritage, flying was not emphasized during his childhood. His grandfather did what he could later in his life to discourage media attention, spending years in seclusion as an inventor, working not only in aviation but in rocketry and cardiology.

“It was probably downplayed more than anything,” Lindbergh said of his grandfather's flight. “He wanted more than anything to have a normal life, to study and learn, and to try to solve some of the world's problems.”

Lindbergh's father earned a pilot's license in the 1950s but never flew much after that. Lindbergh went up in a friend's small plane when he was 24 and was so moved by the experience that he got his own private pilot's license soon after. Later, he received a commercial instructor's rating.

Lindbergh recalled that his grandfather loved to be with children, perhaps because adults always seemed to want something from him.

“I think he felt that kids were more authentic, they were more real than adults,” Lindbergh said. “Kids took him for who he was, and what he was. Kids don't care for that other stuff.”

The younger Lindy welcomes the opportunity to spread his message about his grandfather's battle with rheumatoid arthritis, and the X-Prize through the media. “Good Morning America” and National Public Radio were invited to his training this week, and the History Channel will have a special on his flight in May.

The original “Spirit of St. Louis” was powered by a 220-horsepower Wright engine. Charles

Lindbergh left his radio behind to cut down on weight. The Lancair Columbia 300 that the younger Lindbergh will fly from New York to Le Bourget Field, embarking May 1 depending on the weather, has a more powerful engine (310 horsepower), and can cruise at more than 150 knots, enough to make the trip in 18 to 20 hours, possibly less if conditions are optimal.

The Lancair will come equipped with a satellite communications system, weather instrumentation that will enable Lindbergh to calculate the best operating altitude to catch a stiff tail wind, and other modern conveniences. While the plane normally would be limited to about half the range of a trans-Atlantic flight, it has been modified to carry almost 300 gallons of fuel, which should give Lindbergh a comfortable margin.

“What my grandfather did was to systematically take every risk scenario he could think of and reduce or eliminate that risk,” Lindbergh said. “I’m approaching this flight, I hope, from the same perspective.”

He will, however, carry one piece of old technology: the Swiss Army Knife that belonged to his grandfather.

Modern advantages

Lindbergh's training at Survival Systems also will give him an advantage that his grandfather did not have. Tom Lazarro, the training manager at Survival Systems, said it's estimated that 36 to 38 percent of flight crash victims who survive initial impact into water get out of the plane safely.

“When you have the kind of training we offer, that statistic jumps up into the 90s,” Lazarro said. On the wall of one of the classrooms is a testimonial from a Canadian pilot who is convinced the training he received from Survival Systems saved his life after a ditching in the Gulf of Mexico.

Lindbergh spent Tuesday morning in a classroom reviewing the principles of surviving a crash, and getting out of a sinking plane. Lazarro said that for crash victims, the instinct is to get out of the seat belt immediately, which should actually be the last thing one does. He said that after a crash, even a small plane would be inundated with six to nine tons of water. Visibility will be poor and the plane will be whipped around.

“If you've taken off your belt, you're going to get pushed around, stuffed into a corner, and you're not going to be able to tell where you are,” Lazarro said. “At that point, you're lost. As soon as you release the seat belt, you're at the whim of the water, and the water is going to take you every time.”

Instead, he advised, hold your breath as the cabin fills with water, and when the pressure equalizes, push open the door, grasp the doorway with one hand, unbuckle with the other hand, and then pull yourself out.

Lazarro explained the “gasp reflex,” and showed a film of an Olympic gold medal swimmer plunged into 50-degree water. The swimmer could hold his breath no longer than 10 seconds before gasping for air.

“How long is it going to take you to get out of the aircraft?” Lazarro asked. “Hopefully, it's under 10 seconds, and it can be. But with only 10 seconds, how much time are you going to have to figure out what to do? You have to know what you're going to do before it happens.”

because you don't have time to think.”

Lazarro reviewed how to brace for a crash, the equipment a pilot on a solo transatlantic flight should have immediately at hand, and how to practice finding such things as a door latch with your eyes closed.

“A lot of this is common sense, but you have to hear it again and again and again to make you realize how important it is,” Lazarro said.

Later, Lindbergh got into a flight suit for a series of simulated disasters in Survival System escape trainer, a mockup of an aircraft cabin.

First the crew filled the module with smoke as fire spewed out of a ceiling vent. Lindbergh had to find an extinguisher in the dark, get it out of its holder and put it back - an unrestrained extinguisher would become a deadly projectile in a crash.

Then, the escape module was dumped upside down into 13 feet of water in a 30-by-40-foot pool, and Lindbergh had to find his way out and to the surface.

“There is a risk inherent to any flight,” Lindbergh said. “I’m not planning to get my feet wet on this flight, but if it should happen, I want to be as prepared as I can be.”

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