

# Charles A. Lindbergh's arrival and reception in Washington, D.C., NBC radio broadcast coverage (June 11, 1927)

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*Charles Lindbergh*



*Graham McNamee*

## *The Day the Continental USA Shrank*

For as long as mankind has walked the earth, the species has been on a quest to conquer time and space, to get from place to place faster and to be able to communicate more quickly and more effectively over greater distances. At the dawn of the 20th century, that quest accelerated thanks to two nascent businesses: flight and radio. What is particularly fascinating is how those two businesses, both of which were to become seminal components of the entire 20th century, were inextricably linked. And, perhaps the greatest manifestation of their initial synergy was the broadcast that reported on the parade to welcome Charles Lindbergh back to the United States following his successful, solo, trans-Atlantic flight in the Spirit of St. Louis. That broadcast, heard over the NBC Radio Network, would solidify radio's importance, all the while raising the profile of flight and vastly increasing the celebrity of the young pilot.

Years earlier, at roughly the same time that the Wright Brothers were in the air, flying just a few hundred feet at Kitty Hawk on December 17, 1903, radio amateurs and experimenters were exploring the ways the invisible, magical radio waves might be used to carry messages over distances. Like the Wright Brothers' initial flights, the early years of radio transmission were stop and start, at best. However, during the next decade and a half, both flight and radio evolved into vibrant businesses that were on the precipice of exploding into vital aspects of the American landscape, and by the end of World War I, both were growing in import and were being regulated by the federal government.

Between 1920 and 1926, flight and radio literally took off to become important industries that helped fuel the economic boom that was the Roaring Twenties. When Charles Lindbergh flew

into the sky in the Spirit of St. Louis on May 20<sup>th</sup>, 1927--having no idea what kind of attention his successful flight would garner--in what was, in effect, his personal effort to bridge the distance between the USA and Europe, the NBC Radio Network was just eight months old. That network, the first of its kind, linked radio stations across the country together in a loose but evolving arrangement that was about creating a national audience for programming developed by and for the network. It was the wonderful confluence of Lindbergh's successful flight and the existence of the fledgling radio network that led to the broadcast of the parade honoring the dashing pilot.

By the time the *Memphis*, the ship carrying the triumphant Lindbergh back to the United States steamed into Chesapeake Bay, plans for the hero's welcome, including a huge parade in Washington topped off by a Presidential address, had been completed. Once those plans were set, NBC dispatched a team of announcers led by Graham McNamee who was, by all accounts, the man who created most of the roles that announcers to this day fill. Ironically, the radio coverage of the parade became almost as big a story as the parade and its hero; the "Washington Post" even ran a detailed biography of McNamee tracking his career from the moment he'd walked into the New York studios of WEAJ looking for a job.

The NBC plan was to have microphones installed at various locations along the parade's route. Never missing an opportunity to market the wonder of radio, NBC declared that June 11, 1927 would be called Lindbergh Radio Day, and to mark the aviator's return, the new network assembled a group of stations that would bring the reports of the festivities into homes across the country. The new network was so far-flung that it was estimated to be able to reach an audience of more than 50 million Americans, and that at a time when the total US population was less than 120 million. It all came together quite nicely, and while Lindbergh's feat certainly sold untold extra newspapers, what it did for radio was simply remarkable.

On Saturday, June 11, 1927, more than 100,000 people, standing beneath a crystal-clear sky, lined the parade route from the Navy Yard to the Washington Monument. But of greater import, at 11:30 AM Eastern Time, tens-of-millions of Americans from coast to coast flipped on the radio and were sonically and instantaneously transported to Washington, D.C. For two and a half hours, McNamee and his NBC colleagues moved around Washington, staying ahead of the parade so they could report every detail of what was happening to the radio audience. Just after one in the afternoon, Graham McNamee, who by then had made his way to the reviewing stand, turned his microphone over to President Coolidge--yes, Silent Cal--whose speech congratulating the American hero was interrupted by wild cheering every time he uttered Lindbergh's name.

Following the President's remarks, the moment the entire nation had been anxiously awaiting finally happened: Charles Lindbergh spoke. What he said was this:

On the morning of May 21, I arrived at Le Bourget, France. I was in Paris for one week, in Belgium for a day and was in London and England for several days. Everywhere I went, at every meeting I attended, I was requested to bring a message home to you. Always the message was the same. "You have seen," the message was, "the affection of the people of France for the people of America demonstrated to you. When you return to

America, take back that message to the people of the United States from the people of France and of Europe.” I thank you.

To say his talk was uninspired would be an understatement, and to call it short would be to state the obvious. In fact, most newspaper radio critics noted that Lindbergh’s speech was about 13 minutes short of what a good radio talk should be. Although, to be fair, those same critics noted that Lindbergh had a “fine radio voice and delivery.” But maybe Lindbergh’s brevity was part of a strategy, because it did set off speculation as to what a proper radio talk by the hero might cost a station, and those in the know suggested that the flyer’s fee for a real radio talk might be upwards of \$10,000!

It has been nearly a century since that day in June of 1927 when radio and aviation came together in a celebration of one man, but that celebration resonated far and wide for it showed that flight was here to stay, and it demonstrated the incredible power of radio as a national platform, an electronic town hall that could connect the distant corners of the nation. It was that singularly historic moment, a celebration of things that travel through the air, that showed why the 20<sup>th</sup> century would become the media century.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.