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Waverly Root

Waverly Root (1903–1982), whose book *The Food of France* remains a classic, offers in his 1987 memoir *The Paris Edition* a lively retrospective account of Lindbergh's moment. Root lived in France for a long time, and is the type of the American Francophile newspaperman (a type that continues in our own day with R. W. Apple) who is a different sort than the American Paris journalist. The journalist writes about food; the newspaperman is there for the news, and eats on the side.

The Flying Fool

During my first days on the Paris Edition, I was still isolated from the matter-of-fact world by the euphoria of finding myself in Paris, above which I seemed to be floating without touching the ground. Oblivious to mundane matters I entered the office one morning in the first or second week of my employment by the *Chicago Tribune* to be met by unusual behavior on the part of Kospoth.

“The crazy fool,” he said. “He’ll never make it!”

“Who’ll never make it?” I asked.

“Lindbergh,” Kospoth answered.

“Who’s Lindbergh?” I inquired.

By not knowing who Lindbergh was at 11:00 A.M. on May 21, 1927, I betrayed the fact that as a newspaperman I was being grossly overpaid at \$15 a week. Nobody in the city room winced at my question, and Kospoth answered as if my ignorance were the most normal thing in the world: “Crazy young feller thinks he can fly the Atlantic. He’ll never make it.”

This exchange disposed of Lindbergh for the day, and we went about our routine with no consciousness that drama was occurring somewhere over the North Atlantic. I don’t remember what I did that evening. It seems incredible that I would have stayed home during this period of exploring Paris, but quite as incredible that I could have roamed the streets without noticing that they had been more or less emptied. Subse-

quent reports put the number of Parisians who flocked out to Le Bourget to wait for Lindbergh as high as a million, which was a third of the total population of Paris at that time. Half a million would probably have been closer to the truth, but even that should have created a noticeable void in the streets and cafés. All Montparnasse seems to have moved to Le Bourget, but I had not yet found Montparnasse. It was therefore in complete ignorance that I strolled into the office at eleven the next morning.

“Where the hell you been?” Kospoth snarled. “Get over to the embassy as quick as you can for the press conference.”

“What press conference?” I asked.

“Lindbergh’s,” said Kospoth. “He made it.”

An absentee witness, I have to depend on what other journalists told me to reconstruct what happened on that historic night at the airfield of Le Bourget. They were not all in agreement with one another nor with the accounts that have been printed since, even including Lindbergh’s. His book *The Spirit of St. Louis* is perhaps not to be accepted as gospel since it appeared twenty-six years after the event, time enough to play tricks with the memory. And, though Lindbergh signed it, I am inclined to wonder in what proportion he wrote it. Having done a good deal of ghostwriting myself, I think I can sense the telltale perfume of the ghostwriter, particularly during a passage in which Lindbergh described his sensations as he was being tossed perilously about by the crowd that was carrying him in triumph from his plane. As far as I can find out, this never happened.

The wild night at Le Bourget was a comedy of errors whose unifying characteristic was that nobody, including Lindbergh, had understood in advance the full amplitude of the event—except the public. The professionals—the diplomats, the airport authorities, the police, the journalists—were taken by surprise. Only the amateurs were sensitive enough to be kindled by the romance of Lindbergh’s one-man exploit. It was the *people* who began flooding toward Le Bourget in a first wave when radio broadcasts announced that Lindbergh had been sighted over Ireland at 4:00 P.M., and when he was reported over England at 6:00 P.M., a second surge swelled the crowd and was still going strong even after Lindbergh had landed and left.

The great rush toward Le Bourget produced what was perhaps the first great traffic jam in history. We are accustomed to this sort of thing nowadays, but fifty years ago there were barely enough automobiles anywhere in the world to create such a phenomenon. Certainly no one would

have believed that there were enough cars in Paris to fill the whole four miles of road from the city limits to Le Bourget. The French police—who apparently never even tried to do anything about the traffic jam, a hopeless task in any case—were not prepared to control the crowd at the airfield. They seem to have sent only one busload of officers to Le Bourget. I have forgotten the size of the police buses of those times, but this may have been somewhere between twenty and forty men to deal with half a million. When reinforcements turned up—a handful of policemen on bicycles—those who saw them arrive laughed. But bicycle police were not a bad idea; only bicycles could thread their way through the stalled cars on the road.

The American Embassy had been no more imaginative about what might happen if Lindbergh landed. Two weeks earlier a pair of French fliers, Charles Nungesser and François Coli, had taken off from Paris for, they hoped, New York, crossing the North Atlantic the hard way (its prevailing winds blow west to east), and were never heard from again. Ambassador Myron T. Herrick had cabled to Washington that under the circumstances the American aviators who were preparing to fly from New York to Paris should postpone their projects, for fear that an American triumph in the midst of French mourning would cause resentment in France. Perhaps he thought that this had put an end, for the moment, to transatlantic flying.

But it was too late for an ambassadorial admonition to check the momentum of the race that was getting under way for the \$25,000 Raymond Orteig prize for the first direct nonstop flight between New York and Paris. Four planes that had been preparing for months to make the attempt were reaching the takeoff point at New York. Of the four, Lindbergh, the only one who planned to risk the crossing solo, seemed about the unlikeliest to get away first.

The news of his takeoff left the embassy as unperturbed as it had left the day staff of the Paris Edition. No plans were made for any reception. No doubt the diplomats, like Kospoth, believed he would never make it. If anyone gave a thought to the unlikely possibility that he might, he perhaps considered that the occasion might be marked sufficiently with a hastily organized cocktail party for a few French officials and prominent members of the American colony of Paris—visiting senator's treatment. While Lindbergh was pushing his way across the Atlantic, Ambassador Herrick was attending what he considered the most important event of

the day: the doubles finals of the French international tennis championships at St. Cloud, between Tilden and Hunter for the United States and Borotra and Brugnon for France. He did not see its end (the French won, but it is probable that few Frenchmen noticed it, for the following day's papers had room for nothing but Lindbergh). It was in the middle of the match that a messenger brought to the ambassador the news that Lindbergh had been sighted over Ireland. The ambassadorial party left the stadium in considerable disarray. But if Herrick had been slow to anticipate the event, from the moment that it occurred he reacted with all the skill of a practiced diplomat to turn Lindbergh's personal exploit into a national triumph for the greater glory of the United States.

At Le Bourget, the airfield administration had been caught off balance like everybody else. I have purposely used the term airfield rather than airport for to have called the Le Bourget of 1927 an airport would have been a considerable exaggeration. This was before the days of regularly scheduled passenger services. Le Bourget was used mainly by military planes, whose hangars occupied one end of the field, while the civilian facilities, mostly for mail planes, were at the other. There were no runways—planes took off and landed on grass. The airfield had never been called on to deal with any such situation as it met with now, and reports vary on its unreadiness when the test came. Many witnesses insist that though the beacon on Mont Valérien, on the outskirts of Paris, had been lighted to guide Lindbergh to Paris, the landing lights at Le Bourget itself were not turned on until Lindbergh's motor was heard overhead. There could have been considerable confusion on this point, for military planes landing at the far end of the field had caused several false alarms.

All versions agree on one point: As Lindbergh touched down, an uncontrollable mob rushed toward his plane and he was barely able to cut his engine in time to avoid mowing a swathe through his well-wishers.

At this moment the only people who had correctly estimated what was likely to happen at Lindbergh's arrival played their largely unnoticed role. They were members of a small group of French pilots—three to my knowledge, but there may have been more—who had organized an unofficial reception committee. Fliers themselves, they had a practical appreciation of what a man who had spent thirty-three-and-a-half sleepless hours at the controls of a plane would need most—and it wasn't official ceremonies. They felt his most immediate need would be rest, and they had prepared a cot for him in the office of Major Pierre Weiss, commander of

the bombers of the forty-third aviation regiment, based at Le Bourget. Two of the French fliers, Michel Détroyat, a military pilot, and “Toto” Delage (I do not know his real name), a civilian one, had placed themselves near the point where the plane came to a halt. When it did they were aided by a misunderstanding that everybody since has reported—Lindbergh’s helmet, torn from his head or thrown into the crowd, was snatched by a young American who bore a slight resemblance to the flier and was accordingly borne off triumphantly by the crowd to Ambassador Herrick, waiting in the airfield’s administrative building. One version of this story has either Delage or Détroyat clapping the helmet on the false Lindbergh’s head, but this sounds almost too quick-witted to be true.

However it happened, the error gave the two French fliers time to hustle Lindbergh off to the haven they had prepared for him; the stories that say he was carried off on the shoulders of the crowd, including the account in his own book, seem not to have been true. Lindbergh was delivered to the cot in Major Weiss’ office, too excited to sleep. He asked anxiously if he would have any difficulties because he had entered France without a visa, an idea that for a few moments rendered the French fliers speechless with laughter. Delage asked where he wanted to go and Lindbergh answered with a single word, “Ambassadeurs,” the name of the hotel where the *New York Times* had reserved a room for him, underestimating the impact of the event to the extent of believing it could have an exclusive story by signing Lindbergh up to write his account of the flight. Delage understood him to mean the American Embassy and drove him there, getting through the traffic I don’t know how. At the embassy an attempt was made to put him to bed for a second time, and the journalists who came pouring into the embassy were told that he was sleeping, exhausted, and could see no one until the next day. But Lindbergh was still too excited to sleep. About two in the morning he sent down word that he would see the press, and it was then that he gave his first brief interview, sitting on the edge of his bed, dressed in a pair of pajamas lent him by Herrick. It was no secret that the ambassador was portly, but the press was for once too respectful to expatiate on the elephantine effect his pajamas produced on a young man with the nickname of Slim.

When a big news story breaks, competition among correspondents of individual papers is frequently fierce and among correspondents of news agencies it is ferocious. I was thus able to believe a story about that night at Le Bourget, told me at the time, which I was unable to confirm later. I

pass it on without guaranteeing its authenticity but it is not at all improbable. According to this account, the chief correspondents of the Associated Press and the International News Service arrived at Le Bourget to discover that their opposite number of the United Press had preceded them, distributing legal tender in the right places to such good effect that all the airfield's phone booths (there were only six, which until then had proved sufficient) were occupied by burly citizens instructed to keep the lines busy and to yield their places to no one not employed by the United Press. The representatives of the Associated Press and the International News Service decided on concerted action. Addressing themselves to taxi drivers who had brought customers to the field and were waiting to take them back again, they hired twelve bruisers who outweighed the United Press's men and assigned them to battle stations, with instructions not to act until the signal was given. There was no point in giving the enemy warning in time to permit a counteroffensive.

When the United Press bureau chief came pelting into the room and seized the telephone from one of his hirelings, the charge was sounded and the infantry gave assault. For a few hectic moments, a royal battle waged around the telephone booths. The one that contained the United Press correspondent was thrown to the floor, wires ripped from the wall, doorside down, with two men sitting on it. Inside its prisoner raged, shouted, swore, kicked, and threatened dire retribution but nobody paid any attention. In the struggle, all the telephone wires were torn out, and nobody was able to use the public phones that night.

In the offices of the *Chicago Tribune*, the Foreign News Service and the Paris Edition did not see eye to eye about the importance of the Lindbergh flight. Hank Wales knew he was faced with a big story, Bernhard Ragner did not. Like Ambassador Herrick, the editor of the Paris Edition felt that the important event of the day was the tennis match; unlike Herrick, he proved unable to shift gears when it became apparent that it was not. He assigned only one man to Le Bourget, Jules Frantz. William Shirer asked if he could go along to help. "If you want," Ragner said, "after you finish the tennis story. Whichever of you gets back first can write the story." This turned out to be Shirer. He beat the traffic jam by running three of the four miles from Le Bourget, until he was lucky enough to come upon a taxi driver who had been trying to get to the airfield and, discouraged, had decided to turn back. "OK," said Ragner. "You write the story. Keep it short."

Frantz arrived, breathing hard, forty minutes later. He had run the whole four miles to the first subway station at the city limits. He tore down to the composing room, where Ragner was just finishing the makeup of the first page. Shirer's story, or as much of it as Ragner had considered necessary to use, gleamed from the page in freshly composed metal, not yet touched by ink. There was a three-column headline on it.

"Three columns?" said Frantz. "Every paper in the world will put a banner on this story!"

"What for?" Ragner replied testily. "He landed. We've got the story. That's all there is to it."

Frantz offered to write a color story on the spectacle of the crowd at Le Bourget to supplement Shirer's story of the landing.

"It's too late to pull the paper apart and remake it now," Ragner said. "I have to catch my bus."

In desperation, Frantz proposed that he run over to Commercial Cables, where he knew Wales was writing his story, to bring back a carbon. For once even the dreaded name of the Foreign News Service boss failed to impress Ragner. "Go if you want," he said, "but we won't be able to use it."

Frantz went all the same. When he returned, Ragner had left and the table on which pages are made up in composing rooms was empty, with the last pages already trundled off to the stereotyping room. For a wild moment Frantz was tempted to mutiny: There was time to call the front page and an inside page back and remake the paper with, on the Lindbergh story, the eight-column headline it deserved. But Ragner, foresighted for once and obstinate as always, had left orders with the printers that under no circumstances was the paper to be remade.

Wales, meanwhile, had cabled his story to Chicago. He had cast it in the form of an exclusive interview with Lindbergh, undaunted by the handicap of never having set eyes on him nor heard his voice. Jay Allen, his assistant, had telephoned from the embassy a report of the brief 2:00 A.M. bedroom press conference, but everybody had that—only Wales dared promote it into a private interview. I heard envious correspondents say later that Wales had written most of it during the afternoon before Lindbergh arrived, which would not have been impossible. It was not difficult to imagine in advance some of the phrases that were bound to be uttered on such an occasion, including the sentiments the embassy would prompt Lindbergh to utter in the interests of French-American amity.

Wales was on excellent terms with Herrick and it wouldn't have been beyond him to acquaint Herrick with what he intended to write and make sure there would be no denial of it. Indeed he might even, as a friend of the ambassador, have served as a sort of unofficial adviser on what angles it would be politic to persuade Lindbergh to stress, in which case he could interview Lindbergh in absentia with a minimum of risk, for he would in essence be interviewing himself.

Whatever the mechanics of the affair, there arrived for Wales the next day a cable from Chicago: CONGRATULATIONS YOUR LINDBERGH EXCLUSIVE STOP MAILING FIVE HUNDRED BONUS. MCCORMICK.

Five hundred dollars was a lot of money in those days.

I had missed the historic arrival but for the rest of the time Lindbergh stayed in Paris, a week or two, I felt as though I were living in his pocket. I hardly let him out of my sight, unless he were in bed or the bathroom, about the only places where he could enjoy a little privacy. The adulation must have been more of an ordeal than the flight.

When I arrived at the embassy for Lindbergh's first formal press conference, I found the street outside the building besieged by hero-worshipers hoping to catch a glimpse of their idol as he passed in or out. The crowd would thin out as the days passed, but a hard core remained there as long as Lindbergh stayed in Paris.

As I entered the embassy, Lindbergh was descending the stairs between Herrick, who had imprisoned the flier's right arm under his own, and the representative of the Ryan airplane company, which had built the *Spirit of St. Louis*, in similar possession of his left arm. Lindbergh looked as if he were being led to the electric chair between two husky guards. He was, indeed, about to be thrown to the hounds—the pack of reporters who jammed the entrance hall. The first question came, idiotic but inevitable:

“What do you think of Parisian women?”

“I haven't seen any yet,” Lindbergh said, which was his last contribution to the conversation except for the syllable “Uh.” This I took to be in the nature of a clearing of the throat, preparatory to developing the theme further, but he was never given a chance to do so. If a question opened an opportunity to make political capital, Herrick answered for Lindbergh before he could get his mouth open. If it were technical, the Ryan man pounced on it. Between these answers, Lindbergh was helpless. Only once did a question stymie both of Lindbergh's custodians. It was his one chance to speak but he let it pass. The question had been put

in the rasping voice of Hank Wales: "Say, Lindy, did you have a crapper on that plane?"

It was on that first day, I think, that I attended a lunch in Lindbergh's honor at the Clos Normand, a now-vanished restaurant on the edge of the Bois de Boulogne. Lindbergh was led to the place of honor, where he regarded with puzzled disbelief the forest of glasses rising behind his plate. I seem to remember that there were seven, for an aperitif, four wines, cognac, and even, the largest one, for mineral water. As Lindbergh sat down, the sommelier, all attention, sprang to his elbow, bottle cocked and ready to fire. Lindbergh pushed all the glasses back except the big one and requested water. It would have been polite for the rest of us to follow his example, but I do not recall that anyone did.

The days that followed were carbon copies of the first. There were two press conferences a day at the embassy because the reading public was mercilessly hungry for information and had to be fed. We followed Lindbergh through a succession of presentations of awards, official receptions, banquets, and laudatory speeches, reporting word after banal word. Never in human history had the name of Lafayette been so frequently brandished. Lindbergh was moved through this labyrinth of ceremony like a puppet, wearing a perpetual expression of bewilderment. He seemed to be wondering why everybody was making such a fuss about him; all he had done was what he had been accustomed to doing daily as a mail pilot—taking off from his point of departure and landing as planned at his point of destination. The press, which had started out by calling him the Flying Fool, had now shifted to Lucky Lindy. It was wrong both times, but as we watched him receive the accolades like a wide-eyed adolescent, we found it difficult to believe that he had achieved his exploit on purpose.

That was the impression, and it was completely wrong. He may have seemed helpless as he was guided through the unfamiliar political and social world, manipulated, apparently, by men more sophisticated, and more self-seeking, than himself, but in his own milieu he was complete master of his profession. His exploit was not the result of luck, it was the result of shrewd analysis of the factors making for failure or success, of unerring judgments in finding the best answers to the problems presented him, of courage in accepting the risk of applying those solutions, and of minute preparation for his flight.

Eight or ten of us found that out when we sat down with him at a

lunch of the Anglo-American Press Association of Paris. It was a different Lindbergh who had come to eat with us, no longer the bewildered boy who had been promenaded helplessly through meaningless ceremonies, but a technician who knew precisely what he had done and why he had done it. Herrick was not with him. The Ryan representative was, but he hardly opened his mouth. This time Lindbergh did the talking. Why hadn't he taken a radio? Because, given the limited range and the cumbersome dimensions of the apparatus of those times, he had judged the added element of security insufficient to justify the expenditure of fuel required to transport its weight. Why did he alone dare fly solo? In a way, for the same reason: a copilot wasn't worth the gasoline it would take to carry him. What, after all, were the functions of a second man? First, to spell the first pilot when he became tired; second, by his presence to bolster the other's morale. Lindbergh judged he could keep awake long enough and maintain his morale without help from anyone else. Why, most important of all, had he taken off over the Atlantic on only one motor when all his rivals planned to use two? "Because," he said, "two engines meant twice as much chance of engine failure."

In case of trouble, a second engine might have saved his life, but it could not have carried him to Paris. His preoccupation was not with safety, but with success. And so he succeeded. During the next three years other pilots (with more men and more motors) would try to duplicate his feat but all of them failed. The first flight had been the perfect flight, and it has not been bettered since.