



[The Flight](#) | [Flight Timeline](#) | [Spirit of St. Louis](#) | [Spirit Designer](#) | [Spirit Reproduction](#) | [Spirit Log](#) | [Guggenheim Tour](#)
[Charles Bio](#) | [Anne Bio](#) | [Timeline](#) | [Maps](#) | [Airmail Pioneer](#) | [Emergency Jumps](#) | [Gliders](#) | [Orient](#) | [My Lindbergh Story](#)
[Contribution to Rocketry](#) | [Contribution to Cardiology](#) | [Contribution to Conservation](#) | [America First](#) | [WWII Pilot](#) | [FBI Files](#)
[NY Times Articles](#) | [Kidnapping](#) | [Movie Clips](#) | [Audio Clips](#) | [Music Clips](#) | [Lindy Documents](#) | [Lindy Pictures](#) | [Lindy Paintings](#)
[Lesson Plans](#) | [Awards](#) | [Lindy Links](#) | [Boyhood Home](#) | [Press Releases & Info](#) | [Memorabilia](#) | [Search This Site](#)
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[Lindbergh Discussion Center](#) | [Home](#)

You are here: [Home](#) | [My Lindbergh Story](#) | Major General Earl L. Johnson

Major General Earl L. Johnson—How I First Met Charles Lindbergh



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I was assigned to Headquarters 20th Air Force on the island of Guam in the last half of 1948. Since I was single, the "overseas tour" was only one year. But due to my previous assignment during World War II on the island of Tinian, 125-miles north of Guam, and my war experience as a B-29 instructor pilot, when I reported to 20th Air Force, the then Commanding General, A. C. Kincaid, kept me at the Headquarters as Flying Safety Officer and later Inspector General. With the initials of A.C.K., General Kincaid soon became known as "Ack-Ack" Kincaid. But with both of us being from Indiana, we got along very well.

As a single officer, I was assigned a room in a Quonset Hut building directly across the street from Gen. Kincaid's cliffside house. Gen. Kincaid's quarters were the same ones used by Gen. LeMay during World War II when he commanded the entire B-29 operation against Japan, including the two atomic bomb missions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Late one afternoon the phone rang on the porch near my BOQ room and it was General Kincaid. He asked me what I was doing for dinner that night and I told him I had no plans. He then said that General Lindbergh was there to spend the night and would I come over for Christmas Eve dinner. He also said that a few Colonels who commanded our bases would be there and to dress in just khaki everyday uniforms and be there about 6:30.



Major General Earl L. Johnson.
[Click on image to enlarge.](#)

Editor's Note: Review a few brief quotations and photos relating to Lindbergh's tour and findings. Brief quotations from Charles A. Lindbergh's book "Autobiography of Values". ctsy. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publications

In 1948 and 1949 Charles A. Lindbergh, at the request of USAF Headquarters, Washington D.C. toured a variety of Air Force bases, throughout the world on an inspection trip. His purpose was to evaluate the current status of personnel, equipment, base facilities, and the overall capabilities of the USAF in view of the evolving Cold War threat from the Soviet Union.



Charles A. Lindbergh on round-the-world inspection trip for the Air Force, 1948-49. Specific location in photograph is not identified. Click on image to enlarge.

In his book *Autobiography of Values*, published in 1977 by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc. and Anne Morrow Lindbergh, he speaks about his impressions and findings in Chapter 8, 'Inheritance of Power'. General Johnson's experience with Lindbergh was a part of that story. I will include three quotations and two photographs from that chapter that reflect some of his thoughts and conclusions on this subject.

—CAL speaking—

From page 220: "Work with the Strategic Air Command seemed to me one of the most important of my postwar military assignments. I believed the security of the United States depended on SAC's retaliatory ability. And I was certain that the security of Western civilization was closely bound to the security of the United States. Surely, 'brush-fire' wars would continue, requiring the use of relatively conventional

weapons and tactics, but they would be fought under an 'atomic umbrella' that the major powers held over the world."

From pages 222 and 223: "I visited Strategic Air Force bases from Labrador to Okinawa, lived with the officers, flew with B-29 and B-50 squadrons, listened to Air Force men and women discuss problems of the lives they led. "The recommendations in my reports to Washington headquarters were general and simple. I recommended that SAC be given top priority in the selection of its officers and crews, that its personnel receive improved terms of tenure, that the construction of air-refueling tankers be accelerated to increase practical bombing ranges, that monthly periods of flight training in emergency procedures be inaugurated to cut down accident rates, and that every SAC pilot fly a basic trainer on occasion in order to maintain proficiency in the ABCs of flying technique.

"All of these recommendations were adopted effectively except the one related to basic training. SAC pilots did not approve of the idea of flying basic trainers, and in fact demonstrated an extraordinary inability to fly them. Walker Air Force Base, in New Mexico, had been selected as the place to try out my recommendation in this respect. Several AT-6s were sent there for the purpose. They were cracked up so fast that AT-6 instructors were included with their replacements. Even then, the accident rate with basic trainers continued so high that the project was abandoned."

One can imagine my surprise and eagerness to meet Lindbergh for he had been a boyhood idol of mine since I was a kid back in Indiana. So after taking a shower and putting on a clean uniform I walked across the street at the appointed time and was ushered into the spacious living room to meet General Lindbergh.

He was dressed very casually in gray flannel slacks and a blue shirt open at the collar. The climate on Guam is quite humid so no one ever wore a necktie. The other invitees were either already there or showed up promptly. As I recall, there may have been five or six of us invited to Meet Gen. Lindbergh.

Filipino houseboys took drink orders and I think most of the Air Force officers took either a coke or a whiskey drink. Lindbergh drank either a Coke or ice water.

As the conversation got underway, Lindbergh was interested in where we were all from, how and where we had learned to fly and a little about our World War II experiences in the Air Force. Most of the invited guests were senior in rank to me and it turned out all of them had first learned to fly after they joined the flying cadet program. Some had gone to West Point and then moved on to the Army Air Corps.

When Lindbergh got to me I told him I had grown up building model airplanes and had learned to fly before I got into the Air Corps. That I had soloed in a small, Piper Cub and had about 50-hours before I went into the Air Corps flying program. He



Charles A. Lindbergh on round-the-world inspection trip for the Air Force, 1948-49. Specific location in photograph is not identified. Click on image to enlarge.

wanted to know if I had ever flown an airplane with an OX-5 engine and I told him I had ridden in some but had not actually piloted any.

That was about the extent of his questioning except he wanted to know what state we were from and if we had been to a college he might recognize. I told him I had graduated from Wabash College, a small, all-male liberal arts college in my small, hometown of Crawfordsville, Indiana, two years before I joined the Air Corps.

We had a delightful dinner that Christmas Eve and we all went back to wherever we lived about 9:30.

Christmas Day, 1948

The next morning, around 8:00, the phone at my BOQ rang again and it was General Kincaid. He said General Lindbergh wanted to know if I would show him the island of Guam that Christmas day since I had been there a few times during World War II, and seemed to know my way around the island. He said he had further picked me because I had learned to fly in light airplanes and knew something about barnstorming. Of course, the answer was immediately forthcoming and I was across the street to the General's quarters in a few minutes.

I normally drove a Jeep around the island, but since this was a special occasion General Kincaid instructed me to take his staff car. General Lindbergh was all ready to go, only this time he was dressed in khaki pants and shirt like everyone else, but he had no insignia on his clothes and he did not wear a hat like we did in uniform.

We started out with me driving and Lindbergh was in the front seat. The car was a Chevrolet with the gear shift on the steering column and I had a little difficulty shifting due to a cast on my left hand from a broken little finger caused by a beach accident. It was nothing serious but it bothered me in shifting and Lindbergh immediately noticed the problem. So he said, "why don't you let me drive and you just tell me where to go". That was fine with me, so I stopped and we changed seats. Lindbergh did all the driving that day which turned out to be rather interesting, but that can wait.

The Magellan Harbor

One of the interesting places on Guam is a very small harbor near the southern end of the island. It is named Magellan Harbor and is where Ferdinand Magellan put in on his historical trip around the world in the Year 1521. This harbor is very tiny and it is surrounded by some hills and the entrance to the little harbor is very narrow. I would guess the entire harbor area is not much bigger than a football field. It is quite a historic place with a small monument commemorating this connection. So, I directed Lindbergh to the right roads to take us down there. I would guess it is perhaps ten or twelve miles to get there from where we started which was near the middle of Guam

Once there, Lindbergh became enthralled with that little harbor. We were up on a hill above the harbor so he could get a good view of it and I noticed he was surveying the entire area and even holding his finger up into the breeze to determine wind direction. Finally he said, "You know that Magellan was quite a sailor — how he found this little harbor in a sailing vessel over 400-years ago — is quite miraculous".



Magellan Harbor showing a little Church on its shore. One can notice the hills surrounding the small harbor. Lindbergh was enthralled by the size of the harbor and the fact that Magellan was able to find it in 1521. Click on image to enlarge.



Entrance to Magellan Harbor and the southwestern shore of Guam looking northward with the Pacific Ocean on the left. Click on image to enlarge.

I had been down to this location before but had never studied it like Lindbergh did and this was his first trip to Guam. I learned right there that it was no accident that he could make that trip from New York to Paris in 1927, in a single-engine airplane. He was a student of the earth, including its winds, weather and oceans.

A Camera Reared Its Ugly Head

I knew that Lindbergh hated cameras so in spite of the fact that I had a 35mm camera on Guam, I left it in my BOQ room. But unfortunately, an Air Corps Chaplain, in uniform, recognized Lindbergh around the monument at the Magellan Harbor and asked him if he would consent to having his picture taken. Lindbergh didn't say much so the Chaplain handed me his little camera to snap the picture while Lindbergh stood with him. I could tell by the expression on Lindbergh's face that he was not enthralled

about having his picture taken, but I snapped it and handed the camera back to the Chaplain. He thanked Lindbergh and went about his sight-seeing. Lindbergh pulled me aside and said, "I don't like cameras and wouldn't have done that if he had not been a Chaplain in uniform".

It was obvious the Chaplain was legitimate for he had on Captain bars and the little Chaplain cross on his uniform. Several days later he brought me a copy of that picture, but for the life of me, I cannot find it among the hundreds of pictures I have collected over the years.

Lindbergh The Staff Car Driver

Around Guam, one occasionally runs into a little concrete bridge which is actually under the water a few inches. Instead of building a small bridge above little streams, they somehow place a little concrete roadbed under the water so one can drive across it without getting stuck. It is usually the width of only one-lane so only one car can go across it at a time. Such a little "underwater" concrete roadbed was across a little stream not far from the Magellan Harbor. One should remember that Lindbergh was driving, so I am excused from what is about to happen, but it was hilarious, to say the least.

As we were about in the middle of this narrow concrete roadbed, in about six inches of water, Lindbergh looked up the stream a hundred yards or so and saw several naked native children enjoying a swim. (It must have reminded him of earlier days, growing up on the Mississippi River near Little Falls, Minnesota.) Without saying a word to me, he turned the Chevrolet Staff car off the concrete and onto the gravel-bottom stream saying, "Let's go up there and see those native kids". Well, that was fine with me but not with the staff car. We did manage to get all four-wheels off the concrete and onto the stream bottom, but that is as far as we got. We were stuck for good in about eight or ten inches of water with not a chance of moving forward or backward. And here I was with Charles Lindbergh at the wheel.



Above the harbor is this little shrine. I couldn't tell its age, but it might have been shelled in World War II or in earlier times. Click on image to enlarge.



Bronze plaque erected on an old stone telling visitors that Magellan landed here March 6, 1521. It was erected in 1926 by the Guam Teacher's Association. Lindbergh spent a lot of time looking at this bronze plaque. Click on image to enlarge.

The only thing to do was seek help, so we took off our shoes and socks, set off and yelled for the kids to come down and help us. Also, other cars seeing our predicament stopped just short of the little sunken bridge, took their shoes off and came in to help. We must have had fifteen or twenty "lifters and shovers" with barefooted Lindbergh back in the driver's seat, trying to get some help out of the staff car. We finally got the back wheels up on the concrete and he was able to get it away from the water as we thanked all the helpers and tried to wring the water out of our socks and pants. Lindbergh sure got plenty of opportunity to see all the naked Guam kids he was so interested in.

Lunch and More Airplanes

After we had dried out a little we came to a small open-air sandwich place on the eastern shore of Guam and it seemed to be time for lunch. We pulled in and sat outdoors at a wooden-table and ordered something. By this time Lindbergh was doing most of the talking. I had always heard he was known as "Silent Lindy" or words to that effect, but not this day. He couldn't keep from talking.

A lot of our conversation was about flying and not in B-29's or the modern airplanes of 1948, but about old Jenney's, gliders, Waco's, Eaglerock's, Travelair's, and the airplanes of his youth when I was merely a kid in knickers. At one point he asked me if I had "ever landed an airplane while looking at the tail". I told him I hadn't, but I guessed it could be done with a little practice. He said, "I used to do it a lot in an old OX-5 Eaglerock. It took some practice but I finally got pretty good at it. What you need to do is start looking at the tail the last fifty feet or so before touchdown and keep looking as long as you can, then finally you will feel confident to look backwards clear through the touchdown and until you stop." I could tell he was getting a real thrill out of telling me how he had finally mastered this feat. About all I could say was, "I'm sure you took several quick glances up ahead to see there were no cows or horses out in front of you." He laughed and said, "you bet I did, but you'd be surprised how you could make a good, three-point landing looking backwards."

Lindbergh Had Deep Thoughts

I don't know what got him started but at one point in our Christmas Day together some 54 years ago, he made a statement

to me which I will never forget. As this is written in the year 2002, it is almost eerie what he said in 1948, given the terrible "War of Terror" which has been turned loose on the civilized world. As best as I can remember, this is what he said: "I think my flight to Paris came too soon for the civilizations of the world. They were suddenly thrown together by air travel and they weren't quite ready for it."

To hear such a statement from my "boyhood hero" was shocking to say the least, although it would take me another 54-years to understand what he meant. But what he said required some comment so I think I mumbled about as follows: "Well sir, there were several other flyers about to attempt that same flight and you just happened to do it first." He had to agree with that statement so we dropped the subject. But I could tell that he was bothered by what he had done which one has to admit has changed the so-called "civilized" world in which we live.

I have thought about this memorable Christmas Day many times over the years and decided that it was about time that I write it down for posterity. Not many are as privileged as I was to get to spend a whole day with their boyhood hero as I was with Charles Lindbergh.

Earl L. Johnson
Maj. Gen. USAF (Ret)

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"Sea Breeze Restaurant" where Lindbergh and I had lunch. It is located on the eastern shore of Guam and near the southern end of the island. Click on image to enlarge.

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