

My visit to Lindbergh's grave

by Rand Peck

As we break out on top, our 757's cockpit brightens and the ride improves. Moisture streams back over our windshield into a soft blue and orange evening sky. After our Seattle departure and climbout to altitude, the passengers, crew and I are winging our way along at .80 Mach over nearly 2,300 nautical miles of open Pacific. It's a few hours until we land in Maui tonight and my real adventure begins. I've flown airplanes for more than 30 years, and tomorrow, I'll pay my respects to the Lone Eagle.

The adventures of Charles Lindbergh and others, including my father, Northeast Airlines Capt. Red Peck, had a profound influence on my life. Their colorful exploits lured me into a career in airline cockpits.

The next morning, I leave Kahului and follow Pulehu Road eastward past the Puunene Sugar Cane Mill. As the sun climbs over the horizon, morning commuters stream into town; rush hour exists even on Maui. The smooth two-lane road allows me to drive at a comfortable 50mph, and I should reach my destination in no time—only 35 miles away. A short while later, I turn onto Route 37, and my speed is down to 25mph.

This is the southerly route to Hana, where Lindbergh is buried. The drive is spectacularly beautiful, and today's mist, fog and low-hanging clouds lend an air of mystery to my adventure. Driving through green open fields, tall, fog-shrouded mountains to my left and the Pacific Ocean 500 feet below a cliff, reminds me of coastal explorations I've done in Ireland and Scotland. The next bend in the road reveals black volcanic sand beaches with pounding surf and waterfalls that drop from 1,000 feet into a churning ocean.

The now unpaved road gets narrower. It twists and turns, climbs and dives, passes underwater at points and presents vistas of unparalleled beauty. I've yet to see another vehicle as the terrain becomes more rugged and beautiful. I am truly alone and love it. My top speed now slows to 15mph. It's difficult to drive more than a few yards without pulling over to photograph another remarkable view. Each new scene is more breathtaking than the last, and it becomes clear to me why Lindbergh loved this island. He was an intensely private man and an environmentalist, and my passage to his gravesite reveals more about the man than any book I've studied. Perhaps that's the problem: I had always studied him; today, I'm getting to know him. When doctors told him his time was running out, he informed his family



that he would immediately leave for Hana, and plans were made quickly. Doctors advised against this journey; they felt the stress would only shorten what little time he had. He thanked them for their efforts, but expressed that he'd rather "...spend two days alive on Maui than two months in this hospital in New York City." I was beginning to understand.

After passing beneath the lush-green rain forest's canopy, a series of turns bring me to a small, secluded church near the sea. Palapala Hoomau Congregational Church is a long way from the soggy runway at Roosevelt Field, where, on May 20, 1927, "Slim" changed the course of human events. Surprisingly, he survived his heavily laden takeoff to go down in history and ended his days at this spot 47 years later.

It is still early, and I enjoy my visit and the grounds, uninterrupted by other tourists and curiosity seekers. The grounds surrounding the church, his plot and the Vermont granite stone reflect the values he had honed as a young pilot—simplicity. Lindbergh handled his death much the same as he did an airplane. Nothing was left to chance, and he had a hand in even the smallest of details—his burial clothing, the casket, the music and the hymns—that surround it and his interment.

I come bearing gifts. My friend Capt. Steve Richardson had visited Lindbergh's gravesite a few months earlier. When he learned I was planning the same journey, he sent me his airline wings (a sacred item to any pilot who has earned them) and asked that I leave them with "the colonel" as a way to pay his respects to the great aviator. I do as instructed and then depart just as a few tourists arrive.

Later that evening, once more over the Pacific, I contemplate my day. A darkened cockpit, out to sea and beyond VHF radio range, is a wonderful place to sit and think. The years are screaming past, and my own retirement is now only a few years away. The adventure I began as a young Beech-18 night airmail pilot 32 years ago—the same year as Col. Lindbergh died—is rapidly drawing to a close. But I now know Slim, not necessarily as a hero but as a fellow airmail pilot. It had been a rewarding day, and Seattle lay nearly 34 degrees east in the darkness beyond. ✦

—Rand K. Peck

