BILL BRYSON

ONE SUMMER

AMERICA

1927

About the Book

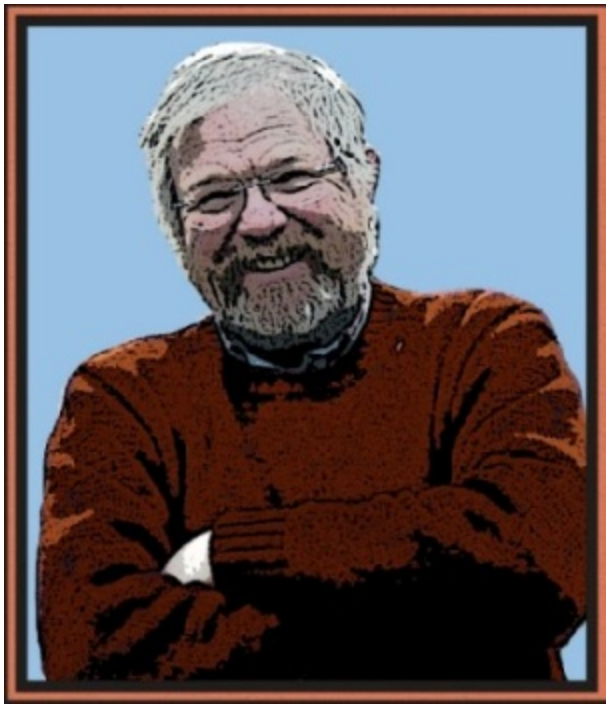
In the summer of 1927, America had a booming stock market, a president who worked just four hours a day (and slept much of the rest of the time), a semi-crazed sculptor with a mad plan to carve four giant heads into an inaccessible mountain called Rushmore, a devastating flood of the Mississippi, a sensational murder trial and a youthful aviator named Charles Lindbergh who started the summer wholly unknown and finished it as the most famous man on earth (so famous that Minnesota considered renaming itself after him).

It was the summer that saw the birth of talking pictures, the invention of television, the peak of Al Capone's reign of terror, the horrifying bombing of a school in Michigan by a madman, the ill-conceived decision that led to the Great Depression, the thrillingly improbable return to greatness of a wheezing, over-the-hill baseball player named Babe Ruth, and an almost impossible amount more.

In this hugely entertaining book, Bill Bryson spins a story of brawling adventure, reckless optimism and delirious energy. With the trademark brio, wit and authority that have made him Britain's favourite writer of narrative non-fiction, he rolls out an unforgettable cast of vivid and eccentric personalities to bring to life a forgotten summer when America came of age, took centre stage and changed the world for ever.

About the Author

Bill Bryson's bestselling travel books include *The Lost Continent, A Walk in the Woods* and *Notes from a Small Island*, which in a national poll was voted the book that best represents Britain. His acclaimed book on the history of science, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, won the Royal Society's Aventis Prize as well as the Descartes Prize, the European Union's highest literary award. He has written books on language, on Shakespeare, and on his own childhood in the hilarious memoir *The Life and Times of the Thunderbolt Kid*. His last critically lauded bestseller was *At Home: a Short History of Private Life*. He was born in the American Midwest, and lives in the UK.



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PROLOGUE

ON A WARM spring evening just before Easter 1927, people who lived in tall buildings in New York were given pause when wooden scaffolding around the tower of the brand-new Sherry-Netherland Apartment Hotel caught fire and it became evident that the city's firemen lacked any means to get water to such a height.

Crowds flocked to Fifth Avenue to watch the blaze, the biggest the city had seen in years. At thirty-eight storeys, the Sherry-Netherland was the tallest residential building ever erected, and the scaffolding – put there to facilitate the final stages of construction – covered the top fifteen storeys, providing enough wood to make a giant blaze around its summit. From a distance, the building looked rather like a just-struck match. The flames were visible twenty miles away. Up close, the scene was much more dramatic. Sections of burning scaffolding up to fifty feet long fell from a height of five hundred feet and crashed in clattering showers of sparks in the streets below, to the gleeful cries of the spectators and the peril of toiling firemen. Burning embers dropped on to the roofs of neighbouring buildings, setting four of them alight. Firemen trained their hoses on the Sherry-Netherland building, but it was a token gesture since their streams could not rise above the third or fourth storey. Fortunately, the building was unfinished and therefore unoccupied.

People in 1920s America were unusually drawn to spectacle and by 10 p.m. the crowd had grown to an estimated hundred thousand people – an enormous gathering for a spontaneous event. Seven hundred policemen had to be brought in to keep order. Some wealthy observers, deflected from their evening revels, took rooms in the Plaza Hotel across the street and held impromptu 'fire room parties', according to the *New York Times*. Mayor Jimmy Walker turned up to have a look and got soaked when he wandered into the path of a hose. A moment later a flaming ten-foot-long plank crashed on to the pavement near him and he accepted advice to withdraw. The fire did extensive damage to the upper reaches of the building, but luckily did not spread downwards and burned itself out about midnight.

The flames and smoke provided some welcome diversion to two men, Clarence Chamberlin and Bert Acosta, who had been flying in circles in a small plane above Roosevelt Field on Long Island since 9.30 that morning. They were doing so in an attempt to break the world endurance record set two years earlier by two French aviators. This was partly a matter of national honour – America, birthplace of aviation, was now hopelessly behind even the smallest European nations – and partly to confirm that planes could stay up long enough to make long-distance flights.

The trick of the exercise, Chamberlin explained afterwards, was to squeeze maximum mileage out of the plane by adjusting the throttle and fuel mixture to the point where the plane was just able to remain airborne – keeping it 'on starvation rations', as Chamberlin put it. When he and Acosta finally glided back to earth, shortly before one o'clock in the afternoon of their third day aloft, they were essentially flying on vapour. They had been continuously airborne for 51 hours, 11 minutes and 25 seconds, an advance of nearly six hours on the existing record.

They emerged grinning from their plane to the approving roar of a large crowd. (People really did gather in enormous numbers for almost any event in the 1920s.) The two triumphant pilots were tired and stiff – and very thirsty. It turned out that one of their ground crew, in a moment of excited distraction, had left their canteens filled with soapy water, so they had had nothing to drink for two days. Otherwise the flight was a great success – great enough to be the main story in the *New York Times* on Good Friday, 15 April. Across three columns the headline declared:

FLIERS SET RECORD OF 51 HOURS IN AIR;
DAY AND NIGHT WITHOUT FOOD OR WATER;
LAND WORN, BUT EAGER FOR PARIS FLIGHT

They had flown 4,100 miles – 500 miles more than the distance from New York to Paris. Just as significantly, they had managed to get airborne with 375 gallons of fuel, an enormous load for the time, and had used up just 1,200 feet of runway to do so. All this was extremely encouraging for those who wished to fly the Atlantic, and in the spring of 1927 there were many, like Chamberlin and Acosta, who most assuredly did.

By a curiously ironic twist, the event that left America far behind the rest of the world in aviation was the very one that assured its dominance in so many other spheres: the First World War.

Before 1914, aeroplanes barely featured in military thinking. The French air corps, with three dozen planes, was larger than all the other air forces in the world put together. Germany, Britain, Italy, Russia, Japan and Austria all had no more than four planes in their fleets; the United States had just two. But with the outbreak of fighting, military commanders quickly saw how useful planes could be – for monitoring enemy troop movements, for directing artillery

fire, and above all for providing a new direction and manner in which to kill people.

In the early days, bombs often were nothing more than wine bottles filled with petrol or kerosene, with a simple detonator attached, though a few pilots threw hand grenades and some for a time dropped specially made darts called flechettes which could pierce a helmet or otherwise bring pain and consternation to those in the trenches below. As always where killing is involved, technological progress was swift, and by 1918 aerial bombs of up to 2,200 pounds were being dropped. Germany alone rained down a million individual bombs, some 27,000 tons of explosives, in the course of the war. Bombing was not terribly accurate – a bomb dropped from ten thousand feet rarely hit its target and often missed by half a mile or more – but the psychological effect, wherever a large bomb fell, was considerable.

Heavy bomb loads required planes of ever greater size and power, which in turn spurred the development of swifter, nimbler fighter craft to defend or attack them, which in further turn produced the celebrated dogfights that fired the imaginations of schoolboys and set the tone for aviation for a generation to come. The air war produced an insatiable need for planes. In four years, the four main combatant nations spent $1 billion – a staggering sum, nearly all borrowed from America – on their air fleets. From almost nothing, France in four years built up an aircraft industry that employed nearly 200,000 people and produced some 70,000 planes. Britain built 55,000 planes, Germany 48,000, and Italy 20,000 – quite an advance bearing in mind that only a few years earlier the entire world aviation industry consisted of two brothers in a bicycle shop in Ohio.

Up to 1914, the total number of people in the world who had been killed in aeroplanes was about a hundred. Now men died in their thousands. By the spring of 1917, the life expectancy of a British pilot was put at eight days.

Altogether, in four years between 30,000 and 40,000 flyers were killed or injured to the point of incapacity. Training was not a great deal safer than combat. At least 15,000 men were killed or invalided in accidents in flight schools. American flyers were particularly disadvantaged. When the United States entered the war, in April 1917, not a single American military official had ever even seen a fighter aircraft, much less commanded one. When the explorer Hiram Bingham, discoverer of Machu Picchu but now a middle-aged professor at Yale, offered himself as an instructor, the army made him a lieutenant-colonel and put him in charge of the whole training programme, not because he had useful experience – he didn't – but simply because he knew how to fly a plane. Many new pilots were taught by instructors who had only just been taught themselves.

America now made a huge but ultimately futile effort to catch up in aviation; Congress appropriated $600 million to build an air force. As Bingham wrote in his memoirs, 'When we entered the war, the Air Service had two small flying fields, 48 officers, 1330 men, and 225 planes, not one of which was fit to fly over the lines. In the course of a year and a half, this Air Service grew to 50 flying fields, 20,500 officers, 175,000 men and 17,000 planes.' Unfortunately, almost none of those 17,000 planes reached Europe because nearly all available shipping was needed for troops. So American airmen, when they got to the front, mostly flew in borrowed, patched-up planes provided by the Allies, and thus they were sent into the most dangerous form of combat in modern times with next to no training in generally second-rate surplus planes against vastly more experienced enemies. Yet at no point was there a shortage of volunteer pilots on any side. The ability to climb to 13,000 feet, to fly at 130 miles an hour, to roll and dart and swoop through the air in deadly combat, was for many airmen thrilling to the point of addiction. The romance and glamour of it can

scarcely be imagined now. Pilots were the most heroic figures of the age.

Then the war ended, and planes and aviators both were suddenly largely worthless. America terminated $100 million of aircraft orders at a stroke, and essentially lost all official interest in flying. Other nations scaled back nearly as severely. For aviators who wished to remain airborne, the options were stark and few. Many, lacking anything better to do, engaged in stunts. In Paris, the Galeries Lafayette department store, in a moment of unconsidered folly, offered a prize of 25,000 francs to anyone who could land a plane on its roof. A more foolhardy challenge could hardly be imagined: the roof was just thirty yards long and bounded by a three-foot-high balustrade, which added several perilous degrees of steepness to any landing on it. A former war ace named Jules Védrines decided nonetheless to have a try. Védrines placed men on the roof to grab the wings of his plane as it came in. The men succeeded in keeping the plane from tumbling off the roof and on to the festive throngs in the Place de l'Opéra below, but only at the cost of directing it into a brick shed housing the store's lift mechanisms. The plane was smashed to splinters, but Védrines stepped from the wreckage unscathed, like a magician from an amazing trick. Such luck, however, couldn't hold. Three months later he died in a crash while trying to fly, more conventionally, from Paris to Rome.

Védrines's death in a French field illustrated two awkward facts about aeroplanes: for all their improvements in speed and manoeuvrability, they were still dangerous devices and not much good for distances. Just a month after his crash, the US Navy unwittingly underscored the point when it sent three Curtiss flying boats on a hair-raisingly ill-conceived trip from Newfoundland to Portugal via the Azores. In readiness, the navy positioned sixty-six ships along the route to steam to the aid of any plane that got into trouble, which suggests that its own confidence in the exercise was perhaps

less than total. It was as well that it took precautions. One of the planes ditched in the sea and had to be rescued before it even got to Newfoundland. The other two planes splashed down prematurely during the journey itself and had to be towed to the Azores; one of those sank en route. Of the three planes that set out, only one made it to Portugal, and that took eleven days. Had the purpose of the exercise been to show how unready for ocean flights aeroplanes were, it could not have been more successful.

Crossing the ocean in a single leap seemed a wholly unachievable ambition. So when two British airmen did just that, in the summer of 1919, it was quite a surprise to everyone, including, it seems, the airmen. Their names were Jack Alcock and Arthur Whitten (Teddy) Brown and they deserve to be a good deal more famous. Their flight was one of the most daring in history, but is sadly forgotten now. It wasn't particularly well noted at the time either.

Alcock, aged twenty-six, was the pilot and Brown, thirty-three, the navigator. Both men had grown up in Manchester, though Brown was the child of American parents. His father had been sent to Britain in the early 1900s to build a factory for Westinghouse, and the family had stayed on. Though Brown had never lived in America, he spoke with an American accent and only recently had given up his American citizenship. He and Alcock barely knew each other and had only flown together three times when they squeezed into the open cockpit of a frail and boxy Vickers Vimy aeroplane in June 1919 at St John's in Newfoundland and headed out over the forbidding grey void of the Atlantic.[fn1]

Perhaps never have flyers braved greater perils in a less substantial craft. The Vickers Vimy was little more than a box-kite with a motor. For hours Alcock and Brown flew through the wildest weather – through rain and hail and driving snow. Lightning lit the clouds around them and winds tossed them violently in all directions. An exhaust pipe

split and sent flames licking along the plane's fabric covering, to their understandable alarm. Six times Brown had to crawl out on to the wings to clear air intakes of ice with his bare hands. Much of the rest of the time he spent wiping Alcock's goggles since Alcock couldn't for a moment relax his grip on the controls. Flying through cloud and fog, they lost all orientation. Emerging into clear air at one point, they were astounded to find that they were just sixty feet above the water and flying *sideways*, at a 90-degree angle to the surface. In one of the few spells when Brown was able to navigate, he discovered that they had somehow turned round and were heading back to Canada. There really has never been a more hair-raising, seat-of-the-pants flight.

After sixteen hours of bouncing disorder, Ireland miraculously appeared beneath them, and Alcock crash-landed in a boggy field. They had flown 1,890 miles, only slightly more than half the distance from New York to Paris, but it was still an astounding achievement. They emerged unhurt from their mangled plane, but struggled to get anyone to grasp quite what they had just done. Word of their departure from Newfoundland had been delayed, so no one in Ireland was expecting their arrival, removing all sense of excitement and anticipation. The telegraph girl in Clifden, the nearest town, was not terribly good at her job, it seems, and could only manage to transmit short, mildly befuddled messages, adding to the confusion.

When Alcock and Brown managed to get back to England, they were given heroes' welcomes – medals were bestowed, the king gave them knighthoods – but they quickly returned to their quiet previous lives, and the world forgot all about them. Six months later, Alcock died in a flying accident in France when he crashed into a tree in fog. Brown never flew again. By 1927, when flying the Atlantic Ocean became an earnest dream, their names were hardly remembered.

Entirely coincidentally, at almost exactly the same time that Alcock and Brown were making their milestone flight, a

businessman in New York who had no connection to aviation at all – he just liked planes – made an offer that transformed the world of flying and created what became known as the Great Atlantic Air Derby. The man's name was Raymond Orteig. He was from France originally, but was now a successful hotelier in New York. Inspired by the exploits of First World War aviators, Orteig offered a prize of $25,000 to the first person or persons who could fly non-stop from New York to Paris, or vice versa, in the next five years. It was a generous offer but an entirely safe one since it was patently beyond the scope of any aeroplane to cover such a span in a single flight. As Alcock and Brown painfully proved, just flying half that distance was at the very bounds of technology and good fortune.

No one took up Orteig's offer, but in 1924 he renewed it, and now it was beginning to seem possible. The development of air-cooled engines – America's one outstanding contribution to aviation technology in the period – gave planes greater range and reliability. The world also had an abundance of talented, often brilliant, nearly always severely underemployed aeronautic engineers and designers who were eager to show what they could do. For many, winning the Orteig Prize wasn't merely the best challenge around, it was the only one.

The first to try was the great French aviator René Fonck, in partnership with the Russian émigré designer Igor Sikorsky. No one needed the success more than Sikorsky did. He had been a leading aeroplane designer in Europe, but in 1917 had lost everything in the Russian Revolution and fled to America. Now, in 1926, at the age of thirty-seven, he supported himself by teaching chemistry and physics to fellow immigrants and by building planes when he could.

Sikorsky loved a well-appointed aeroplane – one of his pre-war models included a washroom and 'promenade deck' (a somewhat generous description, it must be said) – and the plane he now built for the Atlantic flight was the plushest of

all. It had leather fittings, a sofa and chairs, cooking facilities, even a bed – everything that a crew of four could possibly want in the way of comfort and elegance. The idea was to show that the Atlantic could not simply be crossed, but crossed in style. Sikorsky was supported by a syndicate of investors who called themselves the Argonauts.

For a pilot they chose René Fonck, France's greatest war ace. Fonck had shot down seventy-five German planes – he claimed it was over 120 – an achievement all the more remarkable for the fact that he had flown only for the last two years of the war. He spent the first two digging ditches before persuading the French air service to give him a chance at flight school. Fonck was adroit at knocking down enemy planes, but even more incomparably skilled at eluding damage himself. In all his battles, Fonck's own plane was struck by an enemy bullet just once. Unfortunately, the skills and temperament needed for combat are not necessarily the ones required to fly an aeroplane successfully across a large and empty sea.

Fonck now showed no common sense in regard to preparations. First, he insisted on going before the plane was adequately tested, to Sikorsky's despair. Next, and even worse, he grossly overloaded it. He packed extra fuel, an abundance of emergency equipment, two kinds of radios, spare clothes, presents for friends and supporters, and lots to eat and drink, including wines and champagne. He even packed a dinner of terrapin, turkey and duck to be prepared and eaten in celebration after reaching Paris, as if France could not be counted on to feed them. Altogether the plane when loaded weighed 28,000 pounds, far more than it was designed, or probably able, to lift.

On 20 September came news that two Frenchmen, a Major Pierre Weiss and a Lieutenant Challé, had flown in a single leap from Paris to Bandar Abbas in Persia (now Iran), a distance of 3,230 miles, almost as far as from New York to Paris. Elated at this demonstration of the innate superiority

of French aviators, Fonck insisted on immediate preparation for departure.

The following morning, before a large crowd, the Sikorsky – which, such was the rush, hadn't even been given a name – was rolled into position and its three mighty silver engines started. Almost from the moment it began lumbering down the runway things didn't look right. Airfields in the 1920s were essentially just that – fields – and Roosevelt Field was no better than most. Because the plane needed an especially long run, it had to cross two dirt service roads, neither of which had been rolled smooth – a painful reminder of how imprudently overhasty the entire operation was. As the Sikorsky jounced at speed over the second of the tracks, a section of landing gear fell off, damaging the left rudder, and a detached wheel went bouncing off into oblivion. Fonck pressed on nonetheless, opening the throttle and continually gaining speed until he was going almost fast enough to get airborne. Almost, alas, was not good enough. Thousands of hands went to mouths as the plane reached the runway's end, never having left the ground even fractionally, and tumbled clumsily over a twenty-foot embankment, vanishing from view.

For some moments, the watching crowds stood in a stunned and eerie silence. Birdsong could be heard, giving an air of peacefulness obviously at odds with the catastrophe just witnessed. Then awful normality reasserted itself with an enormous gaseous explosion as 2,850 gallons of aviation fuel combusted, throwing a fireball fifty feet into the air. Fonck and his navigator, Lawrence Curtin, somehow managed to scramble free, but the other two crew members were incinerated in their seats. The incident horrified the flying fraternity. The rest of the world was horrified too, but at the same time morbidly eager for more.

For Sikorsky, the blow was economic as well as emotional. The plane had cost more than $100,000 to build, but his backers had so far paid only a fraction of that, and now, the

plane gone, they declined to pay the rest. Sikorsky would eventually find a new career building helicopters, but for now he and Fonck, their plane and their dreams were finished.

For the time being, it was too late for other ocean flyers as well. Weather patterns meant that flights over the North Atlantic were only safely possible for a few months each year. Everyone would have to wait now until the following spring.

Spring came. America had three teams in the running, all with excellent planes and experienced crews. The names of the planes alone – *Columbia*, *America*, *American Legion* – showed how much this had become a matter of national pride. The initial front-runner was the *Columbia*, the monoplane in which Chamberlin and Acosta had set their endurance record just before Easter. But two days after that milestone flight, an even more impressive, and vastly more expensive, plane was wheeled out of its factory at Hasbrouck Heights, New Jersey. This was the *America*, which carried three powerful, roaring engines and had space for a crew of four. The leader of the *America* team was 37-year-old naval Commander Richard Evelyn Byrd, a man seemingly born to be a hero. Suave and handsome, he came from one of America's oldest and most distinguished families. The Byrds had been dominant in Virginia since the time of George Washington. Byrd's brother Harry was governor of the state. Richard Byrd himself was already a celebrated adventurer in 1927. The previous spring, with the pilot Floyd Bennett, he had made the first flight in an aeroplane over the North Pole (though in fact, as we will see, there have long been doubts that he actually did so).

Byrd's present expedition was also by far the best funded and most self-proclaimedly patriotic, thanks to Rodman Wanamaker, owner of department stores in Philadelphia and New York, who had put up $500,000 of his own money and

gathered additional, unspecified funding from other leading businessmen. Through Wanamaker, Byrd now controlled the leasehold on Roosevelt Field, the only airfield in New York with a runway long enough to accommodate any plane built to fly the Atlantic. Without Byrd's permission, no one else could even consider going for the Orteig Prize.

Wanamaker insisted that the operation be all-American. This was a little ironic because the plane's designer, a strong-willed and difficult fellow named Anthony Fokker, was Dutch and the plane itself had been partly built in Holland. Even worse, though rarely mentioned, was that Fokker had spent the war years in Germany building planes for the Germans. He had even taken out German citizenship. As part of his commitment to German air superiority, he had invented the synchronized machine gun, which enabled bullets to pass between the spinning blades of a propeller. Before this, amazingly, all that aircraft manufacturers could do was wrap armour plating around the propellers and hope that any bullets that struck the blades weren't deflected backwards. The only alternative was to mount the guns away from the propeller, but that meant pilots couldn't reload them or clear jams, which were frequent. Fokker's gun gave German flyers a deadly advantage for some time, and made him probably responsible for more Allied deaths than any other individual. Now, however, he insisted that he had never actually been on Germany's side. 'My own country remained neutral throughout the entire course of the great conflict, and in a definite sense, so did I,' he wrote in his post-war autobiography, *Flying Dutchman*. He never explained in what sense he thought himself neutral, no doubt because there wasn't any sense in which he was.

Byrd never liked Fokker and now in April 1927 their enmity became complete. Just before six in the evening, Fokker and three members of the Byrd team – the co-pilot Floyd Bennett, the navigator George Noville and Byrd himself – eagerly crowded into the cockpit. Fokker took the

controls for this maiden flight. The plane took off smoothly and performed faultlessly in the air, but as the *America* came in to land it became evident that it was impelled by the inescapable burden of gravity to tip forward and come down nose first. The problem was that all the weight was up front and there was no way for any of the four men on board to move to the back to redistribute the load because a large fuel tank entirely filled the middle part of the fuselage.

Fokker circled around the airfield while he considered his options (or, rather, considered that he had no options) and came in to land as gingerly as he could. What exactly happened next became at once a matter of heated dispute. Byrd maintained that Fokker abandoned the controls and made every effort to save himself, leaving the others to their fates. Fokker vehemently denied this. Jumping out of a crashing plane was not possible, he said. 'Maybe Byrd was excited and imagined this,' Fokker wrote with pained sarcasm in his autobiography. Surviving film footage of the crash, which is both brief and grainy, shows the plane landing roughly, tipping on to its nose and flopping on to its back, all in a continuous motion, like a child doing a somersault. Fokker, like all the other occupants, could have done nothing but brace and hold on.

In the footage, the damage looks slight, but inside all was violent chaos. A piece of propeller ripped through the cockpit and pierced Bennett's chest. He was bleeding profusely and critically injured. Noville, painfully mindful of the fire that had killed two of Fonck's men, punched his way out through the plane's fabric covering. Byrd followed and was so furious with Fokker that he reportedly failed to notice that his left arm had snapped like a twig and was dangling in a queasily unnatural way. Fokker, uninjured, stood and shouted back at Byrd, blaming him for overloading the plane on its first flight.

The episode introduced serious rancour into the Byrd camp and set back the team's plans by weeks. Bennett was

rushed to a hospital at Hackensack, where he lay close to death for the next ten days. He was lost to the team for good. The plane had to be almost completely rebuilt – and indeed extensively redesigned to allow the weight to be distributed more sensibly. For the time being, the Byrd team was out of the running.

That left two other American planes, but fate, alas, was not on their sides either. On 24 April, eight days after the Byrd crash, Clarence Chamberlin was prevailed upon to take the nine-year-old daughter of *Columbia*'s owner, Charles A. Levine, and the daughter of an official from the Brooklyn Chamber of Commerce up for a short flight above Long Island. Chamberlin's young passengers got a more exciting flight than they expected because the landing gear fell apart during takeoff, leaving one wheel behind, which meant he had only one wheel to land on. Chamberlin made a nearly perfect landing without injury to himself or his passengers, but the wing hit the ground and the damage to the plane was sufficient to set back the *Columbia*'s plans considerably.

Hopes now turned to two popular naval officers at the Hampton Roads Naval Airbase in Virginia, Noel Davis and Stanton H. Wooster. Davis and Wooster were smart, able aviators, and their plane, a Keystone Pathfinder built in Bristol, Pennsylvania, was gleamingly new and powered by three Wright Whirlwind engines. What the outside world didn't know was that upon delivery the plane weighed 1,150 pounds more than it was supposed to. Davis and Wooster took it up in a series of test flights, each time cautiously increasing the fuel load, and so far had experienced no problems. On 26 April, two days after Chamberlin's emergency landing, they scheduled their final test flight. This time they would take off with a full load of 17,000 pounds, nearly a quarter more than the plane had attempted to lift before.

Among those who came to cheer them on were Davis's young wife, their infant son in her arms, and Wooster's

fiancée. This time the plane struggled to get airborne. At length it rose into the air, but not enough to clear a line of trees at the far side of a neighbouring field. Wooster banked sharply. The plane stalled and fell to earth with a sickening crash. Davis and Wooster died instantly. America, for the time being at least, was out of contenders.

To make matters worse, things were going rather well for foreigners. While the American flyers were investing all their energies in land planes, the Italians saw seaplanes as the way of the future. Seaplanes had much to commend them. They eliminated the need for landing fields since they could put down on any convenient body of water. Seaplanes could island-hop their way across oceans, follow rivers deep into jungly continents, stop at coastal communities with no clearings for airstrips, and otherwise go where conventional aeroplanes could not.

No one demonstrated the versatility and usefulness of seaplanes better than the Italian aviator Francesco de Pinedo. The son of a lawyer from Naples, Pinedo was well educated and headed for a career in the professions when he discovered flying. It became his life. In 1925, accompanied by a mechanic named Ernesto Campanelli, Pinedo flew from Italy to Australia and back via Japan. They did it in comparatively short hops, always sticking close to land, and the trip took seven months to complete, but it was still a voyage of 34,000 miles, epic by any standards. Pinedo became a national hero. Benito Mussolini, who had come to power in 1922, showered him with honours. Mussolini was enthralled by flight – by its speed and daring and promise of technological superiority. All of those qualities were magically personified, in his view, by the stout little Neapolitan, who became his emissary of the air.

Time magazine, four years old and enchanted with stereotype, described Pinedo in the spring of 1927 as a ‘swart Fascist ace’. (Almost anyone from south of the Alps

was ‘swart’ in *Time*.) Pinedo was in fact not especially swart and not at all an ace – he had spent the war flying reconnaissance missions – but he was indeed a loyal fascist. With his black shirt, brilliantined hair, thrusting jaw and habit of standing with his fists pinned to his hips Pinedo was, to an almost comical degree, the very model of a strutting, self-satisfied fascist. This was not a problem to anyone so long as he stayed in Europe, but in the spring of 1927 he came to America. Worse, he did it in the most heroic way possible.

While America’s Atlantic hopefuls were struggling to get their planes ready, Pinedo efficiently made his way to the United States via coastal Africa, the Cape Verde Islands, South America and the Caribbean. It was the first westward crossing by aeroplane of the Atlantic Ocean, a feat in itself, even if it was not done in a single bound. Pinedo reached the United States in late March at New Orleans and began a lavish, if not always wholly welcome, progress around the country.

It was hard to decide what to make of him. On the one hand, he was unquestionably a gifted flyer and entitled to a parade or two. On the other, he was a representative of an obnoxious form of government that was admired by many Italian immigrants, who were thus deemed to represent a threat to the American way of life. At a time when America’s air efforts were suffering one setback after another, Pinedo’s prolonged victory lap around the country began to seem just a little insensitive.

Francesco de Pinedo (*left*)with the Italian ambassador in Washington, DC, on 20 April 1927.