



JEFF SKILES

COMMENTARY / CONTRAILS

Coast Out

Land's end, close of day, long flight till morning

BY JEFF SKILES

THE LIGHTS OF ST. JOHN'S shine brightly in the twilight below, a comforting sight in contrast to the enveloping darkness ahead. St. John's is the last outpost, the final sentinel guarding the shores of North America. Beyond? Only the black maw of the Atlantic and rolling waves marching unbroken to European shores.

Dusk is heavy upon the land, and I can only make out the faintest delineation between black rock and even darker water. So fast has the veil fallen that it is certainly night for those on the ground, but aloft as we are the last few moments of the sun's illumination still linger.

Very soon I will pass a point known simply as "coast out" in the parlance of international aviators. The final point of land, the last solid foothold of a continent before the land ends and the black sea begins. Ahead, only an ocean of air, an ocean of night, a long, dark passage before glimpsing the lush green fields of Ireland at dawn.

MYSTERY BELOW

On this early spring evening the lights of St. John's appear to twinkle in the darkness. I ponder this unusual sight largely because I have nothing else to do at the moment. No doubt some mysterious meteorological phenomenon is at work causing this. Perhaps a very thin cloud deck unseen in the inky blackness below is causing a partial obscuration alternately concealing and then in turn dramatically revealing the lights of this small town. I consider this scientific sounding explanation that I have completely made up in my head. It almost sounds plausible, but when I think about it, I have never been to Newfoundland, at least not with feet on the ground. Maybe the good people of St. John's simply prefer their lights to twinkle.

Newfoundland is far away from hearth and home after all, and the fact that I have never been there doesn't seem like a huge gap in my background. You see, we have already traversed 1,200 miles since the hustle and bustle of our Philadelphia departure, and the night is settling into a routine. With 2,000 miles ahead before we "coast in" over Ireland and another 1,000 or so on into Rome, we will hang suspended thus, like a star in the blackness of the night sky and carry on into morning.

It was not so very long ago that Lindbergh was in these very same skies aloft with the stars. Less than a century ago the bold aviator was sitting as I am now considering the charms of Newfoundland while pondering the dangers of a long night across the North Atlantic. The world was a much bigger place back then, a place that had room for explorers, adventurers, and pioneers. Danger was accepted in the name of

discovery, and the whole world could follow the exploits of a lone aviator set on a momentous achievement.

CHARLES LINDBERGH

Charles Lindbergh took off from Roosevelt Field on Long Island, May 20, 1927. At 7:52 a.m. he left the crowd of well-wishers behind and was instantly alone. Alone to face his destiny and single-handedly unite the world. A day, a night, and another day would pass before his wheels would roll on the grass of Le Bourget. I am fortunate to have two companions to share this night with me, although, in truth, one is currently asleep in the bunkroom in back. We spell each other, taking our breaks in turn, to ensure two rested pilots are at the controls. Lindbergh had no such assistance. He could depend only on his own thoughts to keep him awake on his voyage of discovery.

To maintain a record and to keep busy on his long flight, Lindbergh kept a log with notations from liftoff to touchdown a world away. In the early evening he shared this same night sky as I. At 6:52 p.m., 11 hours into the flight, Lindbergh carefully recorded: "altitude 700 feet, airspeed 98 mph, winds from the west at 30 mph." I glance up at the multicolored navigation display before me: 39,000 feet, 486 knots, wind from 277 degrees at a modest 22 knots; the intervening years have brought much advancement. Yet, as we shortly begin flying our assigned route, North Atlantic Track Tango, I will be keeping a log of my own recording the time and fuel, and I will carefully plot our location on a handsome chart as mariners do.

Where Lindbergh was grateful to hear the roar of a lone Wright J-5, I hear only the rush of the slipstream, like the sound of a

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waterfall close but unseen in the forest. I feel a kinship with Charles. He flew in these same skies, breathed the same air.

In *The Spirit of St. Louis* Lindbergh writes, "I came upon it suddenly—the little city of St. John's, after skimming over the top of a creviced granite summit—flat-roofed houses and stores, nestled at the edge of a deep harbor."

St. John's doesn't look so small from my perch, but perhaps it is only "little" to Lindbergh in contrast to the vast nothingness he faced. The seriousness of his undertaking would have darkened even the brashness of spirit. Certainly Lindbergh gave thought to the fate of Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli who disappeared only 11 days before in a similar pursuit of the Orteig Prize. The pair of World War I aviators left Paris for New York only to vanish. At Harbour Grace only 10 miles from St. John's some reported hearing an aircraft late in the night, but then nothing. No trace surfaced then or since.

EXPLORERS AND ADVENTURERS

I am not an explorer tonight, and the world will not herald this flight, even the people onboard will not dwell on it long. Perhaps this is for the best. The 250 or so passengers in back would certainly be better served that way. So far have we progressed in aviation that few even give thought to where land meets sea, or those who have passed this way before. Their musings are more appropriately centered on which quaint little café on the Via Veneto they might choose for lunch tomorrow, or possibly on how to roll their R's properly to say buongiorno.

Charles Lindbergh didn't have such frivolous thoughts on his mind as he approached the eastern shores of Newfoundland. His options in failure were limited to one, an open ditching in the rolling Atlantic swells with absolutely no hope of rescue. His fate was either to succeed or die.

I feel the comforting vibration of the massive Rolls-Royce Trent engines on each wing and think of Lindbergh's lone Wright J-5 and the 2,000 miles ahead. Perhaps "coast out" should always be daunting. Man was not meant to swim like a fish and would be singularly unprepared for a chance meeting with the waves. The Atlantic is a hostile environment either on the water or in the air. But Charles didn't let the cold sea, lack of sleep, or darkness stop him from seeing the shores of Ireland in his tomorrow, and neither shall we.

Below our widely stretched wings St. John's now passes firmly in our wake. The last outpost of civilization before the black void of night swallows us whole. We "coast out" just as Charles did 88 years before, and his words describe the experience with solemn resolution, "For me, this northern city is the last point on the last island of America—the end of land; the end of day." *EAA*

Jeff Skiles, EAA Lifetime 336120, is an ATP and CFII-ME who has been an airline and light airplane pilot for almost 40 years. He owned a Cessna 140 and a Waco Y0C and currently flies a Cessna 185. Jeff can be reached at JeffreyBSkiles@gmail.com.