

LINDBERGH'S MOVIE CONTRACT

*\$1,000,000 for one picture was
the offer made to America's great-
est hero, who accepted, and then—*

BY MAJOR THOMAS G. LANPHIER



"Lindy" had just made his epochal flight in "The Spirit of St. Louis" (above). The movies wanted him. He turned down numerous offers until . . . Right, with Louis B. Mayer, whose studio planned a film on the history of aviation



SUPPOSE you were in your twenties—and in Hollywood.

You had never acted before—not even in a high-school drama. You had not had so much as a screen test. You didn't know whether you'd photograph. You didn't know whether you'd be able to act at all. You already had a career in which you were interested and in which you seemed on your way to success.

OldMagazineArticles.com

Lindbergh's Movie Contract

And then they pushed it into your hands. A contract. A very fat contract. To do one picture for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Corporation.

To make it even more enticing, the picture was to be a history of the industry you had turned to for your career.

For this one picture, you were to receive one cool million dollars in cash and ten per cent of the gross receipts of the film.

Would you sign the contract?

Easy, now. This is no fantasy invented to amuse you. It's the story of an incident that really happened. It's the story of a lank, blond-haired young man and a moving-picture contract. If the young man signed the contract, he became worth more than one million dollars.

That young man was Colonel Charles Augustus Lindbergh, freshly returned from his epochal New York-to-Paris flight and in Hollywood, at the moment, on his good-will trip around the United States.

Young Lindbergh did what, I think, you also would have done.

He signed the contract. It was a contract with William Randolph Hearst to make a picture of aviation from its beginning down to his historic transatlantic hop.

While in Los Angeles, Lindbergh was the guest of the movie colony at Hollywood. Because of his tremendous popularity, numerous offers to enter the movies were made to him. He rejected all of them, until Mr. Hearst offered him this million-dollar contract to do an aviation spectacle for M-G-M.

Lindbergh signed that contract. But, though he had committed himself in writing to make the picture, it was never made. Had it been, America's hero might, conceivably, have become, overnight, the greatest box-office attraction in the history of the film industry. And Charles Lindbergh's whole future might have been drastically changed.

Instead . . . but here is what happened.

On Lindbergh's return to New York, his friends learned what he had done. They felt he was making a mistake by branching away from his chosen career—aviation. Though Lindbergh had signed the picture contract without consulting his advisors, he was stubborn about it. He refused to give up his plans; to attempt to break his contract.

He was determined to make the picture and his advisors could do nothing with him.

That is where I was brought into the situation. I had met "Slim" shortly after his return from Paris while I was acting as Commanding Officer of the First Pursuit Group stationed at Selfridge Field, Mt. Clemens, Michigan.

I had led a squadron of twenty-four army pursuit planes to Bolling Field to escort Lindbergh and his *Spirit of St. Louis* to New York City for the huge "welcome back" demonstration there.

Since that meeting we had become rather close friends. We flew together, he stayed overnight at my army quarters and, later, we were to plan, with the help of a map spread on the floor of my living room, the first transcontinental air passenger line across the United States.

"Slim's" advisors knew of our friendship; knew, too, that at that time he had more confidence in the judgment of a fellow flier than in that of anyone else.

Accordingly, they summoned me to New York from Montgomery, Alabama, where I was on maneuvers with the First Pursuit Group.

They wanted me to try to talk him out of "this movie idea."

I flew to New York and talked with "Slim." But his advisors had overestimated my influence; underestimated Lindbergh's tenacity. He was not to be dissuaded.

He did permit me to accompany him on his visits to Mr. Hearst's apartments

on Riverside Drive, where he was holding conferences with Mr. Hearst and members of M-G-M who were submitting the plans of the forthcoming picture for flyer Lindbergh's approval.

Before this, he had allowed no one to go with him to these conferences. I was asked by Colonel Breckinridge and Harry Guggenheim, Lindbergh's two closest friends, to note what occurred at these meetings and to dictate a report to a stenographer in Colonel Breckinridge's office as soon as they were over.

This went on for a fortnight. During all that time, we were trying to persuade Lindbergh to give up the contract.

He refused.

MANY prominent men in New York brought their influence to bear. Among them were Daniel Guggenheim, father of Harry Guggenheim, and Herbert Bayard Swope, then managing editor of the *New York World*.

I think "Slim" was most swayed by the arguments of Daniel Guggenheim. In any event, at one of the conferences, Mr. Hearst seemed to sense a change of heart on Lindbergh's part. He was not unaware of the objections of "Slim's" friends. He asked Lindbergh, plainly, if he still wished to go through with the contract.

Lindbergh's hesitation revealed that he was no longer sure he wanted to make a picture.

Mr. Hearst asked no more questions. He did something, then, for which I have always admired him. He brought out the contract and tore it up in Lindbergh's presence.

"You are as much of a hero to me," he told "Slim," "as to anyone else in the world. If you and your friends feel that making a picture will interfere with your career in aviation, then I want you to know that I will be the last man to stand in your way."

Had that picture been made. . . .

Well, speculation is intriguing. Many things that lay ahead of Lindbergh might have happened differently.

And, undoubtedly, Hollywood would have produced one of the greatest pictures of all times.

About those things, I don't know. This is, after all, the story of how one of the most ambitious movies of all times, starring America's hero, Charles Lindbergh, was *not* made.

PHOTOPLAY

JANUARY, 1939