# READ

Vol. 45 • No. 5

November 3, 1995
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## HERO'S BABY KIDNAPPED!

### Suspect Pleads Innocent In The Other Trial of the Century



The infant Charles Lindbergh, shown on his first birthday, had blond hair and blue eyes and a dimple on his chin like his father had. His mother called him "Fat Lamb"; his father, "Buster." He had just learned to say a few words to his parents when the kidnapper(s) came for him.

TRUE-LIFE NARRATIVE

# The Kidnapping

**Suddenly the Lindbergh baby was gone. And suddenly the case was a national obsession.**

In May 1927, Charles Lindbergh became the first person ever to fly across the Atlantic Ocean alone and nonstop. After his landing in Paris, people in this country and much of the world went bonkers. The young American was tall, handsome, courageous—the perfect hero for the new age of aviation. Newspapers quickly dubbed him the "Lone Eagle"—and public interest clamped on him with an unbreakable grip.

The "Lone Eagle"

Both he and his wife, author Anne Morrow Lindbergh, hated that grip. Wanting to live their lives in peace, they bought an estate in rural New Jersey—400 acres surrounded by mountains, swamps, and fields. The move was not a complete success; newspapers printed aerial photos of the newly built mansion, complete with a detailed floor plan.

On Tuesday, March 31, 1932, Anne Lindbergh took an afternoon stroll in the chilly, damp weather. As she neared the mansion, she looked up at the second-floor nursery and saw her son in the arms of his nursemaid. She waved, and 22-month-old Charles Jr. smiled in recognition.

That evening, Anne and the nurse got young Charles ready for bed. After putting him in a one-piece Doctor Denton sleeping suit, they pulled up the covers and pinned them in place with two large safety pins. Then they secured the nursery windows by locking the shutters—except for the pair on the corner window, which wouldn't quite latch. The boy was asleep by 8:00 p.m.

Around 9:00 p.m., Charles was downstairs, telling Anne about his day in New York City, when he heard a strange noise "like the sound of slats from an orange crate falling off a chair." Anne said she'd heard nothing. The two resumed their conversation.

At 10:00 p.m., the nursemaid made her usual visit to the little boy's bedroom. Standing in the darkness, she was surprised not to hear him breathing. She reached into the crib.



It was empty.

Within minutes, the Lindberghs rushed into the room. "Anne," said Charles softly, "they've taken our baby." The corner window was open, and one of its shutters was swung back. On the windowsill lay a white envelope with a note inside scrawled in blue ink:

*Dear Sir!*

*Have 50,000 $ redy 2500 $ in 20 $ bills 5000 $ in 10 $ bills and 10000 $ in 5 $ bills. After 2–4 days we will inform you were to deliver the Mony.**

*We warn you for making anyding public or for notify the polise*

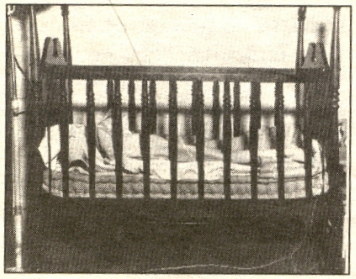
*the child is in gut care*

*Indication for all letters are singnature and 3 holes.*

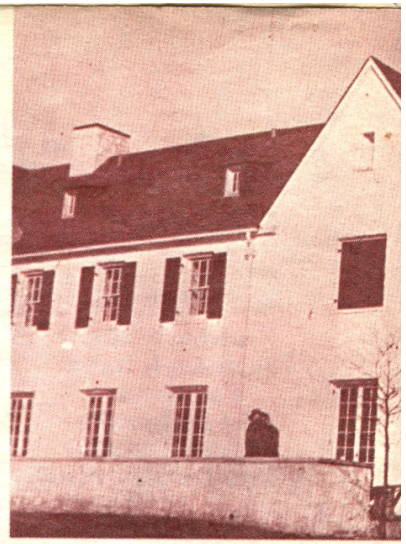
At the bottom of the note was a strange symbol made of two interlocking circles and an ink blot. This, apparently, was the "singnature."

Police arrived quickly at the mansion. No clear fingerprints were in the nursery or on the note. But about 75 feet from the house lay a crudely fashioned ladder with three sections. Two of the uprights were broken, and a rung was missing. Shoeprints showed clearly in the muddy earth, but the police neglected to measure them carefully or to make molds of the imprints.

*That $50,000 would be worth about $500,000 in today's money.



Young Charles's crib

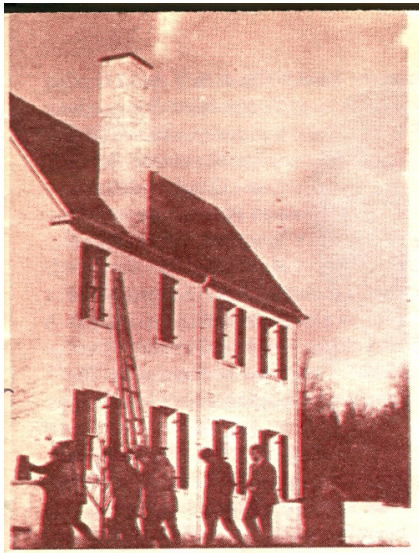


It appeared that the ladder had given way as the kidnapper or kidnappers had climbed down with young Charles. In any case, the infant was gone.

The news created a sensation. Kidnapping headlines appeared on every newspaper in the country. Before the case was even a week old, more than a million words had been written about the "Crime of the Century." "Go to it," editors urged their reporters. "There is absolutely no limit on space for this one." For the first time ever, radio stations began giving extended coverage of a news story.

In the meantime, the New Jersey state police swung into action.* They

*The head of the New Jersey state police was Norman Schwartzkopf, father of Gen. Norman Schwartzkopf, who won fame for leading Operation Desert Storm against Iraq in 1991.



After the kidnapping, police assembled the crude ladder and put it next to the kidnapping window. Meanwhile, officers and reporters had trampled the muddy ground and destroyed footprints leading to and from the ladder.

combed the woodlands, checked telephone records, and searched every house within 5 miles of the mansion.

Hysteria was not far behind. Citizens were urged to study the photos of Charles Jr., look out for disguises, and "bring the baby back to his mother's arms." A businessman in Connecticut was arrested because a woman heard him "talking about an infant." A vacationer driving across the country with New Jersey license plates was stopped and questioned dozens of times by the police.

People claiming to be clairvoyant had the child in 20 places at once. Fake ransom notes poured in. A man assured the press that he was in touch with Martians who had spirited the baby to the "red planet." A persuasive stranger fast-talked his way to Anne Lindbergh and launched into "To be or not to be" from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

At that point, the search for Charles Jr. took a weird twist. Dr. John Francis Condon, a retired school principal in the Bronx in New York City, saw the kidnapping as a national disgrace—and decided to do something about it. He wrote a letter to the *Bronx Home News*, putting up $1,000 to help pay the ransom and offering to meet the kidnapper anywhere at any time.

Incredibly, Condon received an answer the very next day—a handwritten note marked with the same mysterious symbol that was on the ransom note. The note accepted him as a go-between.

Was the note genuine? Apparently. Details about the ransom note and the symbol had been withheld from the press and the public. The Lindberghs agreed to let Condon act on their behalf.

Dr. Condon

Condon began putting messages in newspaper advertising columns. He signed them "Jafsie"—the phonetic sound of Condon's initials, J.F.C. The stranger responded with telephone calls and with notes mailed or delivered by taxi drivers.

Dr. Condon actually met twice with the mystery man, alone, near a cemetery in the Bronx. The stranger wore a hat and kept his coat collar up about his face. He was of medium



height and weight, had deep-set eyes, and spoke with what seemed to be a German accent, saying *boad* for *boat*. He said his name was John.

John spoke of the circles symbol on the note and knew that the baby's blanket had been held in the crib with safety pins. He said that four men and two women were in the kidnap gang. "Would I burn if the baby is dead?" he asked, then assured Condon that the child was safe on a "boad."

The two worked out a plan. Condon would place an ad saying "The money is ready." In turn, John would send him a token of good faith. Several days after the ad appeared, a postal package arrived at Condon's house. Inside was the baby's Doctor Denton sleeping suit.

The press knew nothing of all that. The ransom money was assembled, and the serial number of each bill was carefully recorded.

On the night of April 2, Dr. Condon and Lindbergh drove to another Bronx cemetery. Lindbergh remained in the car with the money, while Condon went to search for John. Seated 80 yards away, Lindbergh heard a voice call out, "Hey, Doctor, over here." Condon approached the ghostlike figure standing among the tombstones.

"Have you gotit the money?" asked John. Condon returned to the car for the marked bills and gave them to John, who inspected them carefully with a shaded flashlight.

"Where is the child?" demanded Condon. "You will find him on the boad *Nelly*," said John. "Take this note but do not open it for six hours." Then John disappeared into the darkness.

Ignoring John's instructions, Lindbergh opened the note. *The boy is on the boad* Nelly. *It is a small boad 28 feet long. Two persons are on the boad. They are innosent, you will find the Boad between Horseneck Beach and Gay Head near Elizabeth Island."*

Places named in the note pointed to Martha's Vineyard, an island off the coast of Massachusetts. For two days Lindbergh flew his own plane over waters around the island, searching in vain for the "boad *Nelly*." There was no trace of it. The Lindberghs' hearts sank.

On May 12, 1932, the terrible news came. Two men in a truck were hauling lumber along a back road in New Jersey, about 4 miles from the Lindbergh home. They stopped so one could answer a call of nature. As he walked into the woods, he came across the corpse of a human child.

Authorities quickly identified the body. An autopsy showed that little Charles had died of "a fractured skull due to external violence." Apparently, he had been killed within hours of the kidnapping.

The Lindberghs were devastated, and Anne Lindbergh made heartbroken entries in her diary. *My little boy—no control over tears, no control over hundreds of little memories that flood into my mind. . . . Impossible to talk without crying. . . . I hope he was killed immediately and did not struggle and cry for help—for me.*

People around the world reacted with sadness—and fury. The *New York Daily News* called the kidnappers "damnable fiends, inhuman monsters." New Jersey offered a $25,000 reward (worth $250,000 today) for information leading to their capture. Congress quickly

passed a law that made kidnapping a federal offense. Politicians demanded that the kidnappers be found.

Hounded by reporters and pushed by politicians, the police kept up the search.

Violet Sharpe

- Suspecting an inside job, they questioned the household staff time after time. They concentrated on a maid named Violet Sharpe, who was evasive concerning her whereabouts at the time of the kidnapping. The grilling was so intense that to escape it she killed herself by swallowing poison. (Later, police would find that she was simply trying to cover up a romance with another staff member.)
- A tree expert for the U.S. Forest Service carefully investigated the wood in the kidnap ladder. He checked out lumber mills from New York to Alabama and traced shipments to lumberyards in a quest for wood matching that used in the ladder. The trail led him to the Bronx.
- Copies of the ransom bills' serial numbers were sent to banks, and tellers were asked to watch out for them. The bills began turning up in the New York area, and police tracked their appearance on a huge map. In time, a line of pins formed along the subway routes in Manhattan, and some also appeared in the Bronx. Several store clerks were able to remember who had given them a marked bill—a man with muddy blond hair, sharp blue eyes, high cheekbones, a pointed chin, and a German accent.

Then—on Tuesday, September 18, 1934—came the big break that police had been hoping for. In a bank in the Bronx, a teller came across a $10 bill that was on the ransom money list. Someone had written *4U 13-41* on the margin.

Detectives traced the note to a gas station in upper Manhattan. The manager said the writing was his. Several days earlier, a stranger had handed him the bill after buying gasoline. To be on the safe side, he had jotted down the license plate number of the man's Dodge.

A quick check showed that the Dodge was owned by a man named Bruno Richard Hauptmann. He was 34, a German-born carpenter.

The next morning, as Hauptmann left for work, officers pulled him from his car and handcuffed him. "What is this?" he stammered." He had muddy blond hair, blue eyes, high cheekbones, a pointed chin—and spoke with a German accent. The serial number on a $20 note in his wallet showed it to be part of the ransom money.


A $10 bill and a license number led police to Bruno Richard Hauptmann.



The suspect had a wife, Anna, and a 10-month-old son, Manfried. He had fought as a German machine gunner during World War I. He had come to the United States ten years earlier without a legal passport.

In an old station house in Manhattan, police made Hauptmann copy phrases from the ransom notes until he was near collapse. Then they grilled him for hours more.

Where was he on the day of the kidnapping? He was, he answered, at his job on a building project and later at the bakery where his wife worked.

Where was he on the night that "Jafsie" first met "John"? He could not recall.

Where was he on the night the ransom money was paid? He was at home with his wife, as she would readily testify.

He insisted on his innocence. All he knew about the case, he said, was what he read in the papers.

Meanwhile, other officers were searching Hauptmann's garage in the Bronx. Bingo. Hidden in the walls was nearly $14,000 in tens and twenties—and every single bill was part of the ransom money.

Learning this, detectives at the station set a trap for the bleary-eyed Hauptmann.

"Where is the rest of the ransom?"

"I have no ransom money. There is no more money. I am innocent."

"You're a liar. You're a rotten, lying murderer because we found the Lindbergh money in your garage. What do you say to that?"

Hauptmann said that a friend and business partner, one Isidor Fisch, had returned to Germany the year before and had left behind some belongings, including a shoebox. When water seeped into the shoebox, Hauptmann said, he had opened it and discovered the money. He had not known it was connected to the Lindbergh case. He had used some of the bills, he added, because Fisch had owed him about $7,000.

When police asked how they could get in touch with Fisch to verify the story, Hauptmann replied that Fisch was dead. He had succumbed to tuberculosis in Germany.

The story was incredible, so incredible that it might actually be true. But the tough detectives stared at the suspect with scorn and disbelief. Well, a lineup might clear things up in a hurry. The Bronx carpenter—exhausted, rumpled, unshaven, and sweaty—was put against a wall along with clean-shaven policemen wearing fresh civilian suits. Then six people who had received ransom bills came in to study the lineup. Five picked out Hauptmann. But Dr. Condon—"Jafsie," the most important witness of all—said he couldn't identify John. The officers were furious.

Hauptmann was taken before a Bronx judge. He pleaded not guilty. He would not confess. The police took him back to the station, strapped him to a chair, and turned out the lights so he could not see who was hitting him. Then they beat him black-and-blue over a two-day period. Bruised and bloody, he still insisted on his innocence.

Except for his wife, no one believed him. A New Jersey grand jury looked at the evidence and found probable cause for a trial. On the night of October 19, 1934, a nine-car caravan took the prisoner to Flemington, N.J. The "Trial of the Century" was about to begin. ■