

# Investigation: On a wing and an heir

In 1932 the baby boy of the aviation hero Charles Lindbergh was kidnapped and murdered. Or so it was thought. Now one man may have the vital evidence to prove he is the missing son □ and his sinister revelations could devastate America

By Pope Brock

Sunday January 09 2005, 12.00am GMT, The Sunday Times

Remember plots? Back in the old days, men like Brutus, Guy Fawkes and John Wilkes Booth would get a group together, make a plan, succeed or fail. End of story. It's not that way anymore. Maybe it happened when JFK fell sideways in that car, the moment when conspiracies lost their innocence and became conspiracy theories, but our minds are full of them now, possible dark forces possibly doing dark deeds. We've become conspiracy winos, half-drunk, half-sober and never quite sure what's going on. So you may want some black coffee before taking on this one. Monumental if true, it centers around America's so-called "Crime of the Century": the kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh Jr. on March 1, 1932.

First child of the man world-famous for his solo flight across the Atlantic, the boy was 20 months old when he disappeared from his crib in Hopewell, New Jersey, and the event turned the nation upside down. Ten weeks later his corpse — badly decomposed, with parts missing — was found in the woods near his house. The aviator himself identified the body, which was cremated amid the greatest outpouring of public grief since the Lincoln assassination. From a plane over the Atlantic, Lindbergh scattered his son's ashes.

That's choice A. Choice B: Charles Lindbergh Jr is alive and well and living near San Jose, California. "I went to a cardiologist the other day," says this seemingly preposterous person. "He said, 'How long have you been angry?'" He's not the only one to have claimed the throne. Over the years, the indisputedly alive children of Charles and Anne Morrow Lindbergh — three sons, Jon, Scott and Land, and a daughter, Reeve — have endured a steady trickle of loonies, each claiming they are the kidnapped baby. These have included a man from India and a black woman, who said she had undergone a pigmentation and sex change. Reeve calls them "the pretenders", and plainly they have been.

But this man's story is different. He may be wrong, he may be deluded — honestly, what are the chances that baby survived? — but he has a case, a crazy quilt of fact and inference that's just pesky enough to be possible. Now 74, he has spent decades trying to prove it (an obsession that makes him the distance champion if nothing else), and about 15 years ago he changed his name to Charles Lindbergh Jr.

The modest apartment he shares with his second wife, Adua, is like millions of homes, with family photos dotted all around. The difference is that the people in the pictures think his

relationship to them is a figment of his own imagination. Charles (to use a term of convenience) is mild-mannered, garrulous and easy to like. He also bears a dramatic resemblance to members of the Lindbergh family. "See here?" he says, his finger tapping a picture of Reeve. His face isn't identical, but it's in there.

With the pictures comes a tale that conflicts with the accepted version of events from the moment the baby was seized. According to Charles, he wasn't taken out of the window but through the front door. After that he remembers being "kept in a place with Italian people".

A chapel, a man with a meerschaum pipe, being passed to other Italians. Then he was stashed in rural Kansas with the family of a bootlegger and minor mob henchman, Charles Sigman.

Kept in girls' clothes and long hair to disguise him, the child was given no name until he was nearly five, during which time a German immigrant named Bruno Richard Hauptmann was convicted of the murder and kidnapping of the child, and, still protesting his innocence, executed in 1936. (His widow, Anna, would spend almost 60 years, till her own death, trying to clear his name). Charles was next passed for reasons unknown to a family in Wichita named Husted; they cut his hair, put him in overalls and told him he was now one of them, Loren Paul Husted. To correct a twist he had had since birth in one foot, they put him in orthopaedic shoes, which caused him to "weep with pain". He remembers a life of whispers: Lindbergh, Lindbergh... It was at this point that the FBI first appeared in his life. "I was taken to the FBI office in Wichita," Charles says. "I'm sitting in an agent's lap, another man is taking my shoes and socks off, checking my feet." He believes this may have been to check for overlapping toes, a characteristic of the Lindbergh family (his do).

Along with being abused by Don Husted, the head of the house — "I was beaten so bad as a kid I almost committed suicide" — Charles says he was shadowed and photographed for years by more men in dark suits. Shifted from town to town, he wound up in California and went into the insurance business. Or tried to: starting in the late 1950s, Charles says, the FBI spent at least 30 years trying to destroy him. In 1968, for example, he was lured to a restaurant at the San Jose airport, supposedly on business, but found himself sitting with FBI men. They drugged his coffee.

"My body just fled like an angel with wings out to my car," he says. "I pulled out of the airport. I could have killed someone." By the time he got home, the euphoria was gone. "My face had black holes in it and sparks were coming out of my eyes. My wife kept dosing me with cold water."

This experience, which he says took years to pull out of; the alleged systematic poisoning of his credit rating and business contacts by government agents; and the brutality and disorientation of his childhood all combined to cripple his will. In the mid-1980s he made abortive attempts to get the American media interested in his claim of being the lost Lindbergh child, but he was ignored. It wasn't until the late 1990s, when a San Francisco attorney named Robert Damir took his case, that he began to find focus. Damir, 79, has had a successful career in business and real-estate law, and is devoted to the cause, but he has scant experience in the realm of celebrity hardball,

and they're still fighting to be heard. No wonder: Charles's saga sounds at first like a parody of an opera plot.

Why should we listen to this man? Because of several odd shards of evidence — not enough to make a whole picture perhaps, but enough to prove there's a puzzle. Consider this: I Vladimir Kovalik, a retired physicist, has been a good friend of the colonel's second son, Jon Lindbergh, since the early 1950s. They were both at Stanford University. About 10 years ago Kovalik was brought together with Charles by a common acquaintance. "I thought, 'My God, this man looks like a Lindbergh,'" Kovalik says. Voice, gestures, everything fit, and he now believes that Charles is the genuine article. "Deep inside I feel he is a Lindbergh because of his knowledge, his dedication and conviction." He has urged Jon to entertain the possibility, without success, and, publicly at least, no other sibling is willing to either. (A spokesman for the family said they would have no comment for this article.) In recent years, Paul Anderson, an insurance man in Nebraska, has become friends with Charles and another brother, Scott Lindbergh — apparently by coincidence — and has met the sister, Reeve.

"I'm one of the few who knows Charles and the family," he says. "I assure you, when you meet Scott or Reeve, you know that's the brother." At least twice, Anderson has visited Scott in Brazil (where he now lives), brought photos of Charles and pled his case. By now "there's not much doubt in Scott's mind either," Anderson claims.

Stan Otremba, a former homicide detective in Santa Barbara County, California, started his polygraph business in 1985 and has conducted more than 10,000 lie-detector tests. When Charles appeared in November 1997, asking to be polygraphed, "I made sure I did a really good job," Otremba says, "we used the whole day." Based on his tests, Otremba is "100% positive" that Charles Lindbergh Jr is who he claims to be.

In 1976 Charles underwent 112 sessions of hypnosis with a California therapist, Mylen Fitzwater. Though Charles's conviction that he was a Lindbergh had been dawning since childhood, the hypnosis seemed to provide vivid confirmation. According to Fitzwater, 83 and now retired, the patient was "consistent in what he said under hypnosis, and had a lot of interesting details". That does not mean that what Charles recovered under hypnosis was necessarily true. As Dr Melvin Gravitz of George Washington University, an expert in the uses of hypnosis in criminal cases, says, "One of the characteristics of hypnotic recollection is that it's 'believed in', whether it's accurate or not. But there's no way to distinguish fact from fiction without independent verification." In Charles's case, this verification is in short supply. It's largely his word against history's.

But not altogether. The leitmotif of his tale is the malevolence of the FBI, and in one instance — his most outlandish charge, in fact — he has someone to back him up. Kay Husted, his ex-wife, remembers him coming home that day in 1968, after being drugged at the coffee shop. "He was hallucinating," she says. "I was frightened. 'You've got to help me,' he said." A few minutes later two FBI agents appeared at the door. "They showed me their badges," she says, "and said they just wanted to be sure he got home safely. Then they left. He was in bad shape that evening and into the next day."

Charles claims he knows the name of the FBI agent he believes led the vendetta against him. (Both the agent, now retired, and the FBI declined to comment for this article.) In recent times, Charles says, the agency was finally leaving him alone — until he began his latest drive to get his story out. Lorene Carnevale, a 10-year friend of Charles's from Stockton, California, says that in 2003 she received several phone calls from two "arrogant and abrasive" FBI agents. She says the agents told her they were trying to stop "this person who's claiming that he's Charles Lindbergh". "They said I could get in trouble if I didn't answer their questions. It was disgusting. They've been tapping our phone since then."

Within days of the calls to Carnevale, one of those agents turned up at the office of Charles's attorney, Robert Damir. The FBI man, Damir says, was "really cocky, like a storm trooper trying to set a tone of fear. He said, 'Aren't you afraid to represent a dangerous man like that?' I told him I didn't think Charles was dangerous at all."

A few confirmed sightings don't prove that the FBI has spent most of Charles's lifetime trying to ruin him. Nor does the agency's file on him, which Damir obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, because there's almost nothing left in it: just a handful of mostly innocuous pages. (An unspecified amount of other material has been withheld on national security or privacy grounds.) What all this to-do does suggest, however, is that Charles's crusade has been unusually agitating to the family — perhaps to Reeve most of all. "Reeve has been upset about it," Kovalik says. "She's made an effort to keep the lid on." The question is, on what?

Philip Roth's latest novel, *The Plot Against America*, made a big splash this past autumn. It's an alternative-history yarn in which Charles Lindbergh, Nazi sympathiser and crypto-fascist, is elected president in 1940, then launches a campaign against American Jews. His becoming president is the only fictional part of this premise. Lindbergh was notorious for his fascination with the Third Reich: he visited Germany repeatedly during the 1930s, and accepted a medal from Hermann Goering — and Roth salts his tale with some of Lindbergh's real-life anti-Semitic mouthings. The man who claims to be Charles Lindbergh Jr has a special take on the aviator's dark side. Charles says that because he was slow to talk and had a twisted foot, his father the Aryan perfectionist deliberately got rid of him.

He doesn't know how the kidnap plot was hatched. He says Al Capone's gang was involved, but whether or not the boss himself was behind it is unclear. (Capone, who was in a Chicago jail when the baby was taken, said he was "pretty sure" he could recover the baby if he was temporarily released. The Lindberghs refused his offer.) Either way, Charles says, his father was in cahoots with them, probably from the beginning.

He has no proof of this remarkable charge. To believe it, you have to believe that Lindbergh deliberately lied when he identified another child's corpse as his son; that he lied when he fingered Bruno Richard Hauptmann as the kidnapper. But Charles says he knows it's all true, because while he was growing up, it wasn't the FBI alone who kept tabs on him. The colonel did too, appearing in person on at least three occasions — most notably in San Luis Obispo, California, when the boy was 12. One day a man he worked for took him to Cochrane's Coffee Shop — "He sat me down at the soda fountain and ordered a pineapple milkshake for me." Three other men were at the counter; the one on the far end Charles recognised (from pictures and a

previous sighting) as Colonel Lindbergh. "Occasionally he leant forward or backward to get a better look at me. I was trying to see him better too, till I jumped off the stool and started for him, but a man in between caught me around the waist and pulled me away." Later that day, Charles says: "I was washing windows at the coffee shop, and unbeknown to me my father was inside watching me through the glass. Then he came outside and watched me work.

Finally, he walked away. I wanted to reach for him but I couldn't. My confidence wasn't healed." As for why the colonel indulged in these ghostly visitations, Charles has a theory: "He was guilty enough to track me but not big enough to bring me home." Instead he colluded with the FBI to keep his son impoverished and discredited. "The harassment," as attorney Robert Damir says, "was to drive him to the edge, to wreak so much havoc he'd never surface to recover his real identity."

Speculation like this requires hip boots, and it's quite possible that conventional wisdom is right: maybe Charles and that black woman are siblings under the skin. But there's a way to settle the question. Since 1998 Charles has been pushing the Lindbergh family for a DNA comparison. So far they have not responded.

"We Lindberghs still know ourselves best as a tribe," wrote Reeve in her memoir, *Under a Wing*, "close-knit and self-enclosed, always prepared to be besieged by invisible forces upwelling from the past." Still, it would seem he deserves a test, given that in late 2003 three middle-aged Germans proved that Colonel Lindbergh was their father. A trove of more than 100 love letters he wrote to their mother, a Munich hat-maker, backed by a DNA test, established that the flyer had lived a double life in Europe under the name Careau Kent. The American Lindberghs have accepted the kinship.

This could open a new line of attack for Charles: perhaps he might turn to the Germans to prove whether he's a Lindbergh or not. Three DNA experts interviewed for this article agreed that a paternity test with the half-siblings would be virtually as accurate as one with those in the US. Indeed, according to Anton Schwenk, a media consultant for the Germans, they and the Lindberghs were a 99.7% match. Would they do a test with Charles? "I'm open to it if he [Charles] contacts us directly," says Schwenk.

Damir is considering this new plan B, but with reluctance. He and Charles both have been locked on the goal of a head-to-head match-up with the Americans for years now; to them that's the real arena of justice. And Schwenk says Charles would have to come to Germany and use their lab in Munich; Damir doesn't like that. He wants to keep the "capture and transport" process as localised as possible. He says: "You may consider this paranoia, but we're very concerned about the FBI tampering with the process."

One thing is sure: Charles poses a greater risk to the privacy of the Lindbergh family than any threat from Germany. A surprise solution to one of the most famous crimes of the 20th century — acknowledging Charles as their brother — would cause huge upheaval for all involved. It would topple Colonel Lindbergh as an American hero, and unlike Lindbergh's German children, who want nothing but recognition of their heritage, Charles has his eye on a big payday: a share of the Lindbergh family fortune. Reparations, in his view. "When Charlie wins his case, we'll

move to Carmel where Clint Eastwood lives," says his wife, Adua. He wants to go on national talk shows, write the book, make the movie.

Meanwhile he marshals his evidence and his morale in a den at home, a nest of document boxes, memory-improvement tapes and self-help books with titles like *Awakening Intuition* and *The Brain Workout Book*. And he'll be having an operation soon on his right leg. He's still trying to do something about that limp.