

Tim Grove – YALSA nonfiction finalist 2016

I am fortunate to work at one of our nation's beloved museums. It's one of the most-visited museums in the world, the National Air and Space Museum, part of the Smithsonian Institution. Every day I see people of all ages look up with awe at the soaring machines that have given humans wings. All of these iconic artifacts have wonderful stories to tell. Sometimes the stories get lost in history. One airplane named *Chicago*, a biplane with two open cockpits, sits next to Amelia Earhart's bright red Vega and near the Spirit of St. Louis. It made headlines all over the world in its day, but its story is unknown to most people. The *Chicago* was one of two planes that were first to fly around the world. I wasn't familiar with its story until I began work on an exhibition about aviation pioneers. The more I learned of this grand adventure, the more I became determined to write a book to bring the story to younger generations.

I'm a public historian who understands the value of primary sources. The fact that the museum's archives held the handwritten journal of one of the two men who flew in the *Chicago*, and over 400 photographs from the flight, meant I was sitting on a treasure trove. It helped that the journal's author, First Lieutenant Leslie Arnold, included wonderful observations of local color throughout and had a good sense of humor (plus he had legible handwriting). The flight visited over 20 nations and colonial mandates. I wanted to find a way to incorporate the culture and geography as well, so managed to work sumo wrestlers and geisha girls into the story, along with the crocodiles, camels and tigers. To up the drama, it was a race. Other countries were not going to just hand over the glory to the United States. Teams from five other nations took flight and the race was on. The state of aviation in 1924 meant there was no guarantee that any of the flights would achieve success. The obstacles were many:

rough weather, limited air fields, small fuel tanks, unfamiliar cultures. Ultimately it was about perseverance, determination and teamwork. Of the four American planes that left Seattle, only two returned. One crashed into a mountain in Alaska and one sank in the North Sea, but there were no fatalities.

There's a great Boston connection to the story. Each of the four American planes was named for a U.S. city: Seattle, New Orleans, Chicago and Boston. Unfortunately *Boston*, the airplane, was the plane that sank in the North Sea during the flight, but Boston the city joyfully welcomed the remaining two planes of the world flight on their arrival in the United States on September 6, 1924. Arnold described it: "every boat and whistle for miles around was saluting us and guns were fired." The governor and mayor greeted them with a motorcade and police escort to the Massachusetts capitol where they were given the key to the city. Military bands led them through cheering throngs. The fliers had become celebrities during their travels and this was their first taste of America's appreciation for their sacrifice.

I faced several challenges with telling the story:

Structure and pacing - How much of the race to include? The fact that it's a race drives the action, but the focus is the American flight. How to weave in the other flights? Arnold's journal included a great deal of mundane information. More fog... The weather stopped them quite often. I had to select the most interesting parts. I didn't want to list each day, so had to decide which days to focus on.

The story offered a nice opportunity to mix in geography and world cultures. To ensure the action would keep moving forward, we used a series of sidebars to incorporate Arnold's

observations about the cultures he encountered. The journal contained a certain degree of cultural insensitivity which I had to be careful with. And, of course, place names have changed a lot since 1924. We had to determine how we would indicate name changes. One mistake I caught late in the process: Labrador was not part of Canada in 1924.

Finally I always had to consider the audience. I wanted to include the geisha girl description, but decided not to mention that they were 15 year olds. The Soviet soldiers they encountered gave the fliers vodka, a nice gesture, but probably not appropriate for the audience.

And we certainly never expected multiple perspectives on history to stop the presses. I had selected a colorful 1922 map from the Library of Congress to illustrate the world at the time of the flight. The printing process had begun when the Chinese printer refused to print the book without a few changes to the map. The censors didn't like that China and Taiwan were different colors, that Taiwan was noted as part of the Japanese colonial empire, and that the letters saying Tibet were the same size as those saying China. We were not about to alter a historic source, and so the printing went to Singapore.

In the end I hope these rich primary source materials draw the reader into distant lands and convey the values of teamwork and perseverance. We need to continue to bring primary sources directly to students and to teach them how to question the past and to make connections between past and present. Younger generations need to understand that stories from the past hold great relevance with decisions made today.

I've learned so much from my own journey writing this book and want to thank my editor Howard Reeves and the staff at Abrams Books for Young Readers for their help and encouragement, for taking a risk with an unknown story, and for incorporating so much of my vision for the project. Sara Corbett's design added vibrant color to the book. Thank you to the YALSA nonfiction committee for your leadership in promoting excellence in publishing for children. I'm deeply honored that *First Flight Around World* was selected as a finalist. I congratulate my fellow finalists for their spectacular achievement in bringing true stories to life so vividly for young readers. I'm honored to be in your distinguished company. Thank you.