

## “Wrong Way” Corrigan

Contributed by Brian P. Hegarty Jr.



Douglas Corrigan, the last of the glory seeking fliers, took off from Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Field on July 17, 1938, on a flight that would finally win him a place in aviation history. He carried two chocolate bars, two boxes of fig bars, a quart of water and a U.S. map with the route from New York to California marked out. It was a foggy morning and Corrigan flew into the haze and

disappeared. Twenty-eight hours later, in a plane that was structurally unsound, leaking fuel, lacking a reliable compass and equipped with reserve fuel tanks mounted in such a way that they blocked his straight-ahead view, he landed in Dublin, Ireland and instantly became a national hero. Although the transatlantic flight was far from unprecedented, Corrigan received national attention simply because the press was amazed that his rattletrap aircraft had survived the journey.

Eleven years earlier, American Charles Lindbergh had become an international celebrity with his solo nonstop flight across the Atlantic to Paris. Corrigan was among the mechanics who had worked on Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis* aircraft and this inspired Corrigan to make a transatlantic flight. Since Corrigan was an Irish-American, for him Dublin became the obvious choice.

In 1933, Corrigan bought a 1929 Curtiss Robin aircraft off a trash heap, rebuilt it, and modified it for long-distance flight. "I always considered my plane as a little ray of sunshine," Corrigan said, "so now I put the name *Sunshine* on the plane's engine." He built and installed extra gas tanks as he was hoping to receive permission for a transatlantic flight. Corrigan practiced flying around the country, but bad weather often forced him grounded. In 1936, he installed two more gas tanks for good measure. When he practiced flying nonstop from Floyd Bennett Field back to California, he had reason to be thankful he had not tried an Atlantic crossing. Over the Mississippi, it was so cold that ice began forming on his carburetor. That caused the engine to slow down, and he had to keep moving the throttle back and forth to break the ice loose and keep it from forming again. The winds were against him too, which meant he did not have enough gas to make it nonstop to Los Angeles. When inspectors caught up with him, they deemed *Sunshine* unworthy for flying. To get *Sunshine* to fly again, he overhauled the engine and had the plane re-inspected. The inspector said the plane was good enough for an experimental license which put Corrigan in the same position as before – flying only in the continental United States. He ran some tests on gasoline consumption at various speeds, eventually deciding that 85 mph was the best speed for his Curtiss Robin. He had spent three years trying to get permission to fly from New York to Dublin, had been told that he could only fly nonstop from New York to California, that an ocean crossing was out of the question.

He registered and filed his flight plan – New York to California, just as his license said. On July 17, 1938, at Brooklyn's Floyd Bennett Field, he climbed into *Sunshine* and took

off. The plane was so weighed down with fuel that it traveled 3,200 feet down the runway before leaving the ground. When it passed the eastern edge of the airfield, it was only 50 feet above the ground. Not long after that, it disappeared into the thick fog heading east.

Corrigan had been flying for 10 hours when his feet suddenly felt cold. The leak in the gas tank was running over his shoes and onto the floor of the cockpit. He was losing fuel by the minute. As time went on, the leak only got worse, and if it reached the exhaust pipe, he would have no chance of surviving. So, he used the only tool that he had, a screwdriver, and punched a hole in the floor of the cockpit.

He planned to conserve fuel by running the engine slowly, but now realized that would only give the fuel more time to leak out. So, he decided to run his engine fast by increasing his rpms.

Approximately twenty-six hours into his flight, Corrigan dropped down out of the clouds and noticed that he was over a large body of water. Knowing that it was too early to have reached the Pacific Ocean, Corrigan looked down at his compass and suddenly noticed that he had been following the wrong end of the magnetic needle.

When a small fishing boat was seen from his aircraft, he realized he must be close to land, so he opened a package of fig bars to celebrate and when he reached land, he opened the chocolate bars. When Corrigan reached Dublin, Ireland, he introduced himself by saying "I left New York yesterday morning headed for California. I got mixed up in the clouds and must have flown the wrong way." Public interest in such a colossal mistake earned him the nickname "Wrong Way" Corrigan.

Corrigan met Éamon de Valera, Ireland's Taoiseach (Prime Minister), the next morning and told his story. When he got to the part about misreading the compass, everyone started laughing. "From then on everything was in my favor," Corrigan later wrote. "He came into this country without any papers of any kind, why, we'll just let him go back without any papers," said de Valera. De Valera also thanked Corrigan for putting Ireland on the map again.

Corrigan headed home, a New York Evening Post writer H.R. Knickerbocker wrote:



*You may say that Corrigan's flight could not be compared to Lindbergh's in its sensational appeal as the first solo flight across the ocean. Yes, but in another way the obscure little Irishman's flight was the more audacious of the two. Lindbergh had a plane specially constructed, the finest money could buy. He had lavish financial backing, friends to help him at every turn. Corrigan had nothing but his own ambition, courage, and ability. His plane, a nine-year-old Curtiss Robin, was the most wretched-looking jalopy.*

The New York Post printed a front-page headline "Hail to Wrong Way Corrigan!" – backwards.

After all, no matter how many rules he had broken, "Wrong-Way" Corrigan was a hero – and in America he was granted a hero's welcome. In August 1938, New Yorkers so admired his moxie that he was given a ticker-tape parade down Broadway with more than a million-people lining the street,

more people than had turned out to honor Charles Lindbergh after his transatlantic flight. The following year Douglas Corrigan starred the lead role in a film about his journey as *The Flying Irishman*.