



The AMA History Project Presents: Biography of CALBRAITH (CAL) PERRY RODGERS



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Career:

- Broke the established full-sized plane flying record in 1911 by flying for 33 hours at a meet in Chicago
 - Made the first flight across the United States in 1911 flying the Wright brothers Wright EX, which he named Vin Fiz after the soft drink manufacturer who sponsored flight
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The following article on Cal Rodgers ran in the October 1969 issue of Historic Aviation magazine.

Cal Rodgers and the Vin Fiz

By Ben H. Morrow and K.W. Charles

Born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1879, Calbraith Perry Rodgers was the grandnephew of Oliver Hazard Perry, hero of the Battle of Lake Erie in the War of 1812, and the great-grandson of Matthew Calbraith Perry, the American Navy commodore who opened Japan to the west in 1854. His father, an Army captain, had died fighting the Indians in the Southwest. Cal himself would have followed a service career, but a childhood attack of scarlet fever had left him with impaired hearing. He was a big man, six feet, four inches tall, and around 200 pounds.

He had played football at Virginia and Columbia. He had a fondness for sailboats, racehorses, fast cars, and cigars. When the Wright brothers introduced their new EX bi-planes, Cal added airplanes to his sporting passions.

In August 1911, a new world distance record for airplanes was set by Harry N. Atwood in a cross-country flight from Saint Louis, Missouri, to New York City. The big question in many minds was still to be answered: was it possible for an airplane to make it all the way across the United States? To help answer that question, newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst offered a prize of \$50,000 to the first aviator who could complete a flight from coast to coast in only 30 days.

One of the aviators to attempt this feat was Cal Rodgers. A newcomer to flying, Cal obtained his pilot certificate August 7, 1911, after soloing in only 90 minutes. During the year, Cal broke the established world record at the Chicago International Air Meet with a flight of 33 hours in a Wright B. The feat brought him to the attention of the public and gained him a substantial amount of prize money.

At this time in history, there were no airports. Short hops from pasture to pasture were the rule, and the few “aviation fields” were small balloon grounds, generally unsuited for aircraft use.

Weather forecasting was undeveloped, and there were no aids for cross-country flying. Such was the state of aviation in 1911 when Cal Rodgers decided to cross the U.S. in an airplane.

Everything had to be carefully planned in advance. A special train would carry gas, oil, spare parts, a full machine shop for the repairs, an automobile to meet him at each landing, first aid supplies, his mother, his wife, his manager, and a team of mechanics. The train would also serve as an important navigation aid.

Cal purchased a four-cylinder, 35-horsepower bi-plane from the Wright brothers for \$5,000. Called the Wright EX, it could easily be dismounted and reassembled for movement suitable to take-off areas. It had a range of 200 miles. Cal persuaded the manufacturer of a popular soft drink, Vin Fiz, to finance part of the trip. In return, Cal named his plane for the bubbly product.

On September 17, 41 days after he had obtained his pilot's certificate, Cal Rodgers had the Vin Fiz assembled on the Sheepshead Bay racetrack near Long Island, New York. A large crowd had gathered. Most of them doubted the trip could be made.

Cal lit a fresh cigar and mounted the pilot's seat. The props were spun and the Vin Fiz lifted steadily into the air, leaving Sheepshead Bay and the crowd behind. Ahead were New York City and the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Soon office workers were amazed to see an airplane flying over the downtown area where cars had been introduced some 15 years before.

Cal spotted his train and the railroad tracks as he crossed into New Jersey, and he followed without incidence the first day. The first landing was at Middletown, New York, and when Cal landed, he had covered 105 miles in only an hour and 44 minutes. At this pace, he would have no trouble reaching the Pacific Coast in 30 days.

The takeoff the second day had to be made in a strong wind. As the Vin Fiz lifted off, a wing struck a tree, and Cal crashed into a chicken yard. The only parts undamaged were the radiator and one of the gas tanks. Cal suffered a scalp cut. The mechanics went to work at once, and after two days, the Vin Fiz was again ready to fly.

Cal was forced down again at Hancock, New York, by engine trouble and the Vin Fiz was badly battered by strong winds. Constant work by Cal and his mechanics, however, kept the aircraft flying. On the September 21, Cal landed at Binghamton, New York, and after almost hitting a fence to avoid the crows; the Vin Fiz was practically dismantled by souvenir seekers. After leaving Binghamton, the engine failed over Elmira, New York, and a forced landing had to be made.

On his way to Akron, Ohio, Cal was blown off course by strong winds, and he lost sight of the railroad. Dark was rapidly approaching, and Cal had never flown in the dark. The plane had no lights, and the countryside had no city lights. Cal managed to keep flying in the dark, then the moon appeared and he attempted a landing. He touched down safely in a pasture crowded with cows. Afraid that the cows would do as much damage as the sightseers, Cal spent the night chasing them away from the Vin Fiz.

At daybreak, Cal found that he was near Kent, Ohio. After leaving Kent, he ran into lightning storms and barely succeeded in keeping the Vin Fiz flying. On landing at Huntington, Indiana, he hit a fence and broke both props, one wing and the landing gear. The mechanics were able to repair the plane again, but by this time, it was becoming obvious that Cal would never make it to the Pacific by the deadline. Cal did not admit defeat, but continued on, arriving in Chicago on October 8. By this time, Cal had flown 1,199 miles in 21 hours and 53 minutes. To celebrate, Cal put on an aerobatic show for the prisoners in Joliet Prison. By the time he reached Marshall, Missouri, he had covered 1,398 miles, breaking the existing world record for cross-country airplane flying. Again, he staged an exhibit of aerobatics to celebrate.

By the time Cal arrived in Kansas City, Missouri, the 30-day time limit on the prize money had expired. But Cal was not disappointed, for he knew that he could still fulfill his dream of being the first aviator to cross the United States by air. After performing, an aerobatic show for Kansas City, Cal headed southwest for Texas and the last half of his big adventure. Since Cal had to follow his train, he could not go straight across Texas, but instead had to follow the tracks of the Southern Pacific Railroad. The Vin Fiz was wearing out, in spite of the mechanical care, it was given, and it took two weeks for Cal to make it across Texas.

After crossing the Texas-California border and only 178 miles from his destination, the Vin Fiz blew a cylinder. Hot steel splinters were driven into Cal's right arm, and hot oil was splashed in his face. He managed to maintain control and landed in the California desert. Doctors removed the steel splinters and the mechanics repaired the engine. The next day, both pilot and airplane were ready to fly. To reach a suitable take-off site, Cal and the mechanics had to push and carry the Vin Fiz four miles over the desert.

After taking off from the Salton Sea, Cal headed for the 6,000-foot San Geronio Pass. While flying through the pass, the radiator sprung a leak, and then the magneto wires began to come loose. Cal managed to make a landing in a plowed field without extensive damage. By this time, even Cal would admit that the little Vin Fiz was worn out. But determination won out, and the Vin Fiz was repaired. On November 5, more than 20,000 persons jammed into Tournament Park in Pasadena, California, waiting for Cal to arrive. The observatory at Mount Wilson even trained its big telescopes on the sky to be the first to catch sight of the aircraft. At 4 p.m., the Vin Fiz was in sight of the field and the crowd exploded in welcome as Cal spiraled down and landed within 25 feet of the target area. The crowd wrapped Cal in an American flag and drove him through the city as thousands cheered. It was a well-deserved hero's welcome. Even more important, America had been crossed by airplane.

Quoting from a newspaper interview with Cal Rodgers in Pasadena: "I don't feel much tired. The trip was not a hard one, all things considered. Indeed, I believe that in a short time we will see it done in 30 days and perhaps less. I was never worried at any stage of the game, not even when it looked as if it was all off. I knew I'd get through even if only to show up the fellows who laughed at me."

Cal's actual flying time was 82 hours and two minutes. Bad weather, accidents, and nightfall made it impossible to fly longer. The best leg of the trip in a single flight was 133 miles from Stovall, Texas, to Imperial Junction, California, and his average flying speed was 51 mph. Cal

had fallen out 15 times during his crash landings and all that remained of the original Vin Fiz was the vertical rudder and engine drip pan.

Another entrant in the contest, Robert Grant Fowler, flew from Los Angeles to Jacksonville, Florida, in four months, arriving in Jacksonville in February 1912. Four other entrants who had originally started dropped out.

The special train was disbanded, and the Vin Fiz looked as if it would never fly again. But, as far as Cal was concerned, his dream was not finished. Shortly after his arrival in Pasadena, Cal again started the Vin Fiz and took off on a flight to the Pacific Ocean. The Vin Fiz responded and climbed once more into the sky. Then the engine failed and the worn-out machine plunged 100 feet to the ground. In the crash, Cal broke both legs and his collarbone, along with several ribs.

But still he would not give up. A month after the crash, Cal again tried and this time his dream was fulfilled. On December 10, 1911, the Vin Fiz landed on the beach off Long Beach, California. Cal taxied down and let the salty waves of the Pacific wash over the wheels of the little plane that had first crossed the United States. The crowd gathered on the beach and applauded the man who walked on crutches with his legs in casts. He had realized his dream.

[Note: The magazine writers used and suggested the following resources for further research: Cal Rodgers and the Wonderful Flight of Vin Fiz, by Vera M. Cantor and Muriel F. Lesser, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.; and First Transcontinental Flight by Charles S. Wiggin (Cal Rodger's chief mechanic), The Bookmailer, Inc., New York.]

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