

Air and Space this Week

Item of the Week

Calbraith Perry Rodgers and the Flight of the Vin Fiz

Originally appeared December 13, 2021

KEY WORDS: Calbraith Perry Rodgers Vin Fiz transcontinental Armour

A mere eight years after the First Flight at Kittyhawk, a daring aviator set out to cross the entire country, coast-to-coast, by airplane alone. He was in pursuit of a prize of \$50,000 offered by William Randolph Hearst. He failed, but became famous nonetheless, and focused the Nation's attention to the growing importance of the airplane.

Calbraith Perry Rodgers

Calbraith Perry Rodgers, Jr., was born on January 12, 1879, in Pittsburgh. Many in his family were Navy, all the way; Cal was related to John Rodgers and Oliver Hazard Perry, among others. His father, however, was an Army captain who died in the Wyoming Territory before Cal was born. Cal grew up with his mother and grandparents. The family had money; they lived in an affluent section of Pittsburgh and summered in Havre de Grace, Maryland.

Young Cal had a bout with scarlet fever, and lost much of his hearing as a consequence. It cost him a career in the military, but it didn't stop him from living a robust lifestyle. He was skilled in sailing, fast horses, and faster cars. But he didn't have a strong calling for a profession until...

Like so many younger men and women of the era, Cal developed an intense interest in flying when he was exposed to it. For him, it came later in life, when he was 33, when he visited a cousin undergoing flight training at the Wright Brothers' Flying School in Dayton. He immediately enrolled, too, but was frustrated by the pace of his progress toward solo flight. He was a man of considerable financial means, however, and short-circuited the process by buying his own training plane. He made his first solo flight on June 12, 1911, and passed the FAI exam on August 7 of that year, becoming the 49th licensed pilot on record.

He would make a flight that would make him famous, but like so many contemporary pilots, he perished in a flying accident. He was making a flight out of Long Beach, and flew into a flock of birds. Sea gulls are a lot tougher on a Wright EX than they were on Sully's Airbus A320, but the result was the same, both planes went down. Cal's controls were damaged severely by one of the gulls. The EX went straight down, crashing in the surf. Cal died from a broken neck.

Cal Rodgers was certainly a bold, bold pilot, but as the saying goes: "There are bold pilots, and there are old pilots, but there are no bold, old pilots."

The Flight of the *Vin Fiz*

Wealthy publisher, William Randolph Hearst, was interested in flight, too, and offered a \$50,000 prize for the first person to fly coast-to-coast in 30 days or less. Rodgers jumped at the chance.

Cal purchased a Wright model EX from Orville himself, who strongly discouraged Cal from attempting a transcontinental flight with it because he was concerned that the EX was not robust enough to make the trip. After all, the EX was a spruce-and-canvas short-range bi-plane with only a 35 hp engine. Cal ignored the advice. But he needed some financial support up front to prepare.

The Armour Meat-Packing Company had just come out with a new grape soda they dubbed “Vin Fiz.” Armour agreed to provide the necessary funds, and in return, Cal prominently decorated his aircraft with the “Vin Fiz” name and logo.

One week after he bought the aircraft, Cal was ready to go, at least he thought so. He took off from Long Island on September 17, 1911, and hoped to reach the Pacific in the requisite 30 days. The *Vin Fiz* funding provided for a support team traveling the same route by train. They had the mechanical skill and spare parts needed to keep the *Vin Fiz* flying. They would need all of it.

Air travel in 1911 was still in its infancy, and the infrastructure then in existence needed to support air travel was comically inadequate. There were very few airfields, almost no navigational aids (*Vin Fiz* didn’t even have a compass!), maps were poor, and weather forecasting more by guess than a network of observers. I stand corrected, the *Vin Fiz* did have one flight “instrument,” created when Cal tied a shoelace to a support above the pilot’s chair; the way it hang gave a small clue as to the plane’s attitude in the air. In one of the few concessions to bravado, Cal had the foresight to affix a set of crutches to the *Vin Fiz*’s wing...

Things did not go well for Cal. Between weather and *Vin Fiz*’s short range, he had to land often. It soon became apparent that making the 30-day deadline would take a miracle, but Cal, undaunted, pressed on. Along the way, the *Vin Fiz* would crash badly *sixteen times*! Cal got hurt a lot, and required several trips to the hospital, while his team struggled to rebuild the aircraft. Their supply of spare parts was taxed heavily, because *Vin Fiz* was essentially rebuilt completely twice-over during the flight. Almost nothing on the plane when the journey started made it to California. Part of his rudder, the two wing struts, and the engine oil pan were the only pieces to make it all the way.

Cal finally landed in Pasadena on November 5, missing the deadline by 19 days and being still twenty miles from the ocean. He didn’t win Hearst’s prize, but the newspapers had been following his trek the whole time, and Cal had become quite famous – the little guy against long odds. Almost nobody had seen him take off in Long Island, but over 20,000 people were on hand, cheering wildly, when he set down in Pasadena.

Cal wanted to get the *Vin Fiz* to the coast, so he could say he truly went from coast to coast. But those last few miles were just as tough, or tougher, than the 4000 or so that went before. The *Vin Fiz* needed repairs, delaying his departure from Pasadena until November 12. He

crashed twice more before actually landing on the beach on **December 10**, one hundred years ago last Friday. Both crashes necessitated extensive repairs to both plane and pilot; Cal had broken his ankle in one of the crashes. Good thing he brought his crutches! He finished his journey on the 10th by taxiing the *Vin Fiz* so that Pacific waves splashed up against his wheels.

The total elapsed time for Cal's trip was 84 days, during which he spent a grand total of about 82 hours aloft! His average ground speed was about 50 MPH.

Calbraith Perry Rodgers' fame endures, but he did not live long after his journey's end. He would be dead from the aforementioned crash on April 3, 1912.

REFERENCES

For more about transcontinental aviation after the flight of the *Vin Fiz*, see the A+StW Item of the Week for February 15, 2021, [here](#).

The *Vin Fiz* is presently in the collection of the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum, where it was displayed in the Pioneer of Flight gallery for years prior to the present renovation effort. Its journey to NASM was as arduous as the transcontinental flight! See:

https://airandspace.si.edu/collection-objects/wright-ex-vin-fiz/nasm_A19340060000

I was delighted to find a piece of the defunct-but-wonderful Centennial of Flight website's piece about Rodgers and the *Vin Fiz*:

https://web.archive.org/web/20031211151457/http://www.centennialofflight.gov/essay/Explorers_Record_Setters_and_Daredevils/Vin_fiz/EX6.htm

The Centennial of Flight website lists a link to Rodger's entry in the National Aviation Hall of Fame (<http://www.nationalaviation.org/enshrinee/rodgers.html>); however, that link is dead and the roster of enshrinees does not have Rodgers on it. Go figure.

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Last Edited on 12 December 2021