

## Douglas "Wrong Way" Corrigan



"Wrong-way"  
Corrigan.

Douglas Corrigan became a legendary aviator, not because of his accomplishments as a pilot but rather because of a supposed navigational error. In 1938, Corrigan "mistakenly" flew from New York to Ireland—when he was supposed to be flying from New York to California—because he seemingly misread his compass. For Americans, who were caught in the midst of the Great Depression, Corrigan's antic provided a great deal of humor and uplift and he became a national folk hero. To this day, Corrigan's nickname, "Wrong Way Corrigan," remains a stock colloquial phrase in popular culture. People use it to describe anyone who blunders and goes the wrong way, particularly in sporting events. Nevertheless, as much fun as Corrigan's incident provides, many people do not understand all the complexities of his story, nor do they appreciate the fact that he was a sound and accomplished pilot.

Corrigan was born in Galveston, Texas, on January 22, 1907. His father was a construction engineer and his mother a teacher. When Douglas was 15 months old, he was already making a name for himself; he won first prize in a local baby contest. Corrigan's father moved his family around fairly often during Douglas's childhood. Eventually, Corrigan's parents divorced and Douglas bounced from one parent to another before he settled in Los Angeles with his mother. There, he began working in the construction industry. At the time, aviation did not seem to be in his future.



Douglas "Wrong-Way" Corrigan's  
Curtiss Robin J-1  
Special airplane,  
1943.

Then, on a Sunday afternoon in October 1925, Douglas decided to visit a local airfield. Corrigan watched a pilot take passengers for rides in a Curtiss " " biplane. Excited at the prospect of taking his own ride, he returned the next Sunday with \$2.50 in hand and persuaded the pilot to take him aloft. Flying over Los Angeles that afternoon, Corrigan was hooked; he was determined to learn to fly. The following Sunday, he returned for his first flying lesson and continued for weeks thereafter. Corrigan also spent time learning everything he could from the field's aircraft mechanics. On March 25, 1926, Corrigan made his first solo flight.

Notably, Corrigan took flight lessons at the airfield where B.P. Mahoney and , a team of well-known aircraft manufacturers, were operating a small airline. It was not long before Corrigan got a job with the two men and started working in their San Diego factory.

Shortly after Corrigan began working for Mahoney and Ryan, a new customer approached them about making a special aircraft. wanted them to design and build the Spirit of St. Louis. Corrigan assembled the aircraft's wing and installed its gas tanks and instrument panel.

When Lindbergh made his famous in May 1927, Corrigan and his coworkers were thrilled, but Corrigan's excitement did not stop there. Inspired by Lindbergh's trip, he decided that he would make his own transatlantic flight someday. Being of Irish decent, he selected Ireland as his destination.

Starting in the late 1920s, Corrigan changed jobs several times. In October 1929, he became a full-fledged pilot when he earned his transport pilot's license. The following year, he moved to the East Coast and began a small passenger-carrying service with a friend named Steve Reich. The two men would land in small towns and convince people to buy airplane rides. Although the operation did fairly well financially, Corrigan eventually grew restless and decided to return to the West Coast. In 1933, he bought a used OX5 Robin to make the trip home. Back in California, Corrigan returned to work as an aircraft mechanic. During that period, he also began to modify his Robin for a transatlantic