

“Let Her Go”: The Transcontinental Flight of Cal Rodgers  
by Dr. Arnold T. Schwab  
Professor Emeritus CSULB English Department

Prologue

In 1911 the Vin Fiz soft drink company, a subsidiary of the Armour Meat Packing Company, agreed to sponsor the first attempt at a transcontinental flight by Calbraith Perry Rodgers, a thirty-two year old former motorcycle racer, a relatively inexperienced aviator. He wanted not only to be the first to fly across the country but also to win a \$50,000 prize offered by William Randolph Hearst to anyone who could accomplish this feat in no more than thirty days. Hearst believed this offer was safe because such a flight was impossible, considering the primitive state of aviation at the time, and exceedingly dangerous (at least fifty-six aviator fatalities occurred in 1911) and that it would help sell his newspapers. The Vin Fiz Company hoped to publicize a new grape drink of the same name, a bottle of which was to be strapped to the plane, from which leaflets about the drink were to be dropped throughout the country. The company would pay for leasing a three-car train carrying Rodgers's wife, mother, food, fuel, spare parts, assistants to help with the plane and even rebuild it if it crashed, and a bevy of reporters. The train would follow his flight and rendezvous with him daily.

Rodgers took off in a Wright biplane from Sheepshead Bay, New York, on September 17, 1911. Two other aviators entered the race, one to head west and one to head east.

Poem

I sing of planes and one heroic man  
Who did not fight a war or found a city  
Like Homer's Odysseus or Virgil's hero,  
Nor did he spend ten years sailing from Troy  
To Greece. But yet his journey was far longer  
And filled with deadlier perils than the Greek's  
He was a hero, too: he helped to show  
The world that space could greatly be reduced  
By planes that traveled faster than a train  
Saving not only time but human lives.  
No lotus gardens lured him for his goal;  
No Dido caught his eye, diverting him;  
His only solace was a long cigar  
And blowing smoke rings into following winds  
He has no mates for company, no wine,  
Only a bland concoction called Vin Fiz;  
Of which he drank as little as he could  
To advertise it. His Penelope  
Saw him nightly, thankful he was alive.  
What took Odysseus ten years by sea

Took Calvin Rodgers less than fifty days  
Of death-defying choices and decisions  
Until he crashed just miles from the Pacific.  
The tall, well-built, and handsome Calvin looked  
A hero, though he wore no armor plate  
Or sword or helmet, just a business suit.  
He was no plaything of the gods  
Or guided by one God. He must have prayed  
He'd find a flatter place to land than Rome.  
This poem does not contain an epic's books  
But celebrates an epical event  
That helped to modernize and thrill the world

Dream, Cal, dream  
Of the California sea  
And the sun-silvered waves.  
Lead the thrill-seeking band  
Of pioneers who dare  
To populate the sky,  
No slave to land.

“Man created this monster,  
It's unnatural, illegal,”  
Cried religionists  
“God created the eagle,  
Intended it to fly,  
Not men, meant for the ground  
To gaze at the stars, earthbound.  
If He wanted men to race  
Toward heaven, He'd given them wings”  
Earthquakes, floods, and fires  
Were caused by man's desire  
To rise about his place-  
All signs of God's displeasure  
With airborne human beings,  
Said evangelists

Fly, boy, fly,  
“Get a horse!” Some viewers chant  
As you prepare to take off.  
“Let her go,”  
You shout, as twin propellers whirr  
And helper run you out

Into the wind and sky,  
You can't hear the jibes or cheers  
As you pull the stick,  
But looking back you can see  
The hats that hundreds doffed  
Bravoing your brave endeavor,  
And now you are aloft,  
Scaring the birds.

Fly, boy, fly  
In a canvas aeroplane  
Built with struts and spars  
Sitting cold and alone  
In a seat like a swing's.  
With a corset lace that shows  
The relative wind- it blows  
So hard at times,  
It puts out your cigar –  
And tells you if you are  
Skidding in your turns.  
No instruments to view,  
No radio to warn  
Of an approaching storm.  
You can't shut your tired eyes,,  
A problem may make you act  
Within a second's flick  
Like dodging a sudden flock  
Of birds. Almost all you know  
Is what you can barely see,  
Through goggles blurred by rain,  
Of rivers, railroad tracks,  
A sketchy, undrawn map,  
Or where the compass darts,  
Double-checked by the arc  
Of the sun.

Fly, boy, fly,  
Look out for a cloud-hidden peak,  
You can't hear an ominous crack  
Or the motor's faulty hum.  
Don't let the searing crash  
Make you turn back.  
Before the sun goes down

You must begin to search  
For a pasture or a field  
Near a depot town,  
Avoiding oak and birch  
And docile cows that flee  
Or a defiant bull,  
Jealous of his domain,  
Who chases you into full  
Retreat, when your valor yields;  
Soothe farmers demanding pay  
For smashing their fence or crops;  
Allow fans to inscribe  
Their name on the dusty plane,  
But guard it: in their zeal  
For souvenirs they would ruin  
The parts they cannot steal.  
You shake your head.

Before the train arrives,  
Mayors, pleased with renown  
Your visiting will bring,  
(The press follows your stops),  
Offer a boozy drink  
And a flattering toast  
But declining to imbibe,  
You down Vin Fiz instead  
To publicize the stuff  
You don't really like.  
They make a speech you're glad  
You can't hear, while you smoke  
Your ever-present cigar,  
And when you've stayed long enough,  
You thank your beaming host  
And ride to the railroad car,  
Kiss your mother and wife  
And go to bed...

Fly, boy, fly  
Over canyons, hills, and passes,  
In cold that locks your jaws  
And blocks the blood in feet  
You kick to make it flow,  
At cities and towns you pause –  
Lobo, Chicago, Nebo, El Paso,

You realize the prize is lost,  
Too many crashes caused delays  
To reach the Pacific in thirty days  
But money was not your major aim;  
You knew your naval family's cry  
In battle, "Don't give up the ship!"  
And even if you had to die,  
You weren't about to end the race.  
To prove you were a fighter, too,  
Was why you undertook the trip,  
But, more to prove that aeroplanes  
Could conquer distance, time, and space  
And challenge death.

Thousands in Pasadena hold their breath  
As your sputtering plane appears;  
The town resounds with cheers.  
You stun the crowd with stunts  
They did not know  
A plane could do.  
And when you land to applause  
The Rose Queen hands you a bouquet  
Of roses, though good cigars  
Would please you more.  
Lunches and dinners honor you all week;  
(You'd rather fly and aeroplane than speak.)  
You have to go some twenty-seven miles before  
You reach your goal:  
The western shore.  
The plane repaired,  
You head one Sunday  
Toward the Long Beach pier,  
Though ministers bewail your jaunt:  
That day, they claim, was meant to fill the soul.  
(They did not mention the collection plate.)  
As if they put a hex on you, you crash  
In Compton, suffer injuries that place  
You in a hospital, a hotel bed,  
And wheel-chair, anxious to fly  
The last twelve miles and set the mark  
Before another pilot heading east  
Beats your time

Three weeks go by  
Then, ankles wrapped in casts,  
And crutches strapped securely to the frame,  
You climb into the reconstructed plane.  
“Let her go,”  
You yell, and helpers  
Run you toward the wind.  
Minutes later, you land on the beach  
Where thousands clapped and cheered,  
And many, seeking souvenirs, rush  
Toward you, as you unstrap your crutches,  
And might have mauled  
You had they breached  
The ropes that pressed policemen held  
To keep you and the “Vin Fiz” whole  
Until a car hauled  
You off, smoking a cigar.  
Officials at a gala dinner affair  
Call you “Balboa of the Air.”  
Your speech  
Was brief.  
“I thought that I could do it,  
And I did”

The sire of Lindbergh, Earhart, Corrigan,  
And all their followers,  
Who set the many records you inspired  
And magnified the industry you began,  
You were no boy, Cal Rodgers.  
You were a man.

### Epilogue

Showering ten thousand carnations from his plane flying over Pasadena’s twenty-third Tournament of the Roses on January 2, 1912, Cal replaced the queen as the King of the event and viewed the floats from the judge’s stand. After a few weeks of honors and dinners, his celebrity began to diminish. In the spring of 1912, he returned to Long Beach, where he gave plane rides for two dollars each. On April 3, 1912, while testing the engine of his plane, Rodgers, attempting to avoid a flock of sea gulls, dove at a steep angle and could not pull out. The plane plunged into three feet of water near the Pine Avenue pier. The engine broke loose from its mount and struck Cal, breaking his neck. He died instantly.