



## How a ‘wrong turn’ gave us an American hero

By Nancy McAllister

**D**ouglas Corrigan gained fame in 1938 when he took off from a Brooklyn airport ostensibly for Los Angeles and landed 28 hours later in Dublin, Ireland, instead. Since then the enthusiastic aviator has been known to Americans as “Wrong Way Corrigan” and has become part of popular culture—his nickname is still a household phrase used when someone makes a silly mistake. But it seems there was a little more to Corrigan’s story than the tale he hawked till the end of his life.

Corrigan was a skilled and experienced pilot—and he had applied many times to be allowed to fly to Ireland. But the American aviation authorities turned him down every time, deeming his plane unworthy of making such a flight. They had a point: The plane was old and rickety and jury-rigged together with parts from a lot of other planes. What’s more, Corrigan had installed five extra fuel tanks for the long flight, completely blocking his forward view when flying. Bailing wire secured the cabin door as well as other parts of the plane.

When he landed in Ireland, Corrigan said he had merely made a wrong turn. He acted surprised that he was in Dublin and told airport authorities that he had meant to fly to California, though it was reported that he could barely contain the twinkle in his eye as he gave a wink and a nod to bystanders.

The American public loved the brash recklessness of the young pilot. He became an instant folk hero, was given a ticker tape parade that more than 1 million people attended, and was asked to endorse products, such as a watch that ran backward.

Americans embraced the young man who thumbed his nose at authority and did what he wanted to do.

Corrigan usually answered questions about whether his flight was really a mistake with a “That’s my story and I’m sticking to it” statement. But it often seemed to interviewers that he was suppressing joy at getting away with something. His fans adored him and often sent him small gifts. During his lifetime, Wrong Way Corrigan received hundreds and hundreds of compasses.