

THE DARING

YOUNG MAN

IN HIS
**FLYING
MACHINE**



BY BEN FENWICK

Watchers around the globe
followed the odyssey
of Robert Ragozzino's solo world flight.

*. . . I am become a name;
For always roaming with a hungry heart
Much have I seen and known—cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments . . .
. . . I am part of all that I have met.*

From "Ulysses"—Alfred, Lord Tennyson

On October 2, 2000, Robert Ragozzino, at age 41, had almost completed the first around-the-world solo flight ever made in an open-cockpit airplane. But he had a very difficult choice to make. Before him lay nearly 1,400 miles

of open ocean, the great and dangerous Bering Sea. His plane, a 1941 Stearman biplane, had a total range of 1,600. What if he encountered a storm or strong headwinds? A 200-mile fuel margin is not much, falling well below the old rule-of-thumb: never go below one-third in the tank, just in case.

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It's challenging, brutal, and beautiful...

"When you are a pilot, there's a difference between doing what you need to do and doing what's safe," Ragozzino says. "Sometimes the two meet."

In order to beat the record set by the first round-the-world flight —175 days— Ragozzino needed badly to leave Japan. He had waited 37 unscheduled days there for permission to pursue his best option—a stopover in Russia. The "forbidden" Russian peninsula of Petropavlovsk was only 1,000 miles away, just two-thirds his plane's range. But because of an aging strategic military base there, Russian authorities repeatedly denied landing privileges. In addition, every time he moved his plane in Japan, he was charged a \$3,700 landing fee. Time and money were running out.

So Ragozzino took a chance. He took off for Sheyma, Alaska. The flying weather was good, the sun was out, and the North Pacific was deep and blue. Then, halfway to his far Alaskan destination, the ocean became white-tipped as the headwinds picked up. His fuel economy dropped to the point of no return. Ragozzino was in trouble. He radioed the Russians and asked to make an emergency landing.

In the old days, they might have shot him down.

"I landed in Russia thinking I was going to jail," Ragozzino admits. "When I landed in the dark, there were two chase vehicles right behind me."

The armored chase vehicles, their lights on, followed the Stearman down the runway. As the pilot deplaned, he suddenly was set upon by grinning, happy-go-lucky Russians.

"I was surrounded by people saying, 'Welcome to Petropavlovsk!'" Ragozzino said. "In reality, they were as nice as could be. They just wanted to see the airplane."

No jail. No interrogation. No firing squad. Instead, it was vodka, salmon fishing, and barbecue. They loved him, calling him the "crazy astronaut." Their kindness was typical, he says, of everyone he met on this world journey.

As with any of the other 22 countries and 65 cities in 170 days of seeing the earth like no other human ever has, the main lesson Ragozzino learned was that people are great.

"You know what I saw in all those places?" Ragozzino asks. "I saw people in India telling me that the people in Pakistan were their brothers. Over here, we're being told they are on the verge of nuclear exchange. It was that way

Photos courtesy Robert Ragozzino



Robert Ragozzino's claim to have been born to fly is supported by this old photograph of the three-year-old at the airport with his flyer father, Gerald.

everywhere I went. I just saw people being kind, polite, and helpful. Living their lives."

And living is what it was all about, Ragozzino says. Not plodding through one's day hoping to make the dole, but flying through the storm to reach a jungle landing strip. Not answering to the boss for being five minutes late, but answering to the rush of wind, the drumming of aircraft fabric, and the throaty roar of a Pratt-and-Whitney radial wasp engine.

"When you start something like this, you do it because you are a child at heart. It's a childlike dream," Ragozzino says, "I am going to fly around the world.' Well, hell, who doesn't want to fly around the world?"

But the feat took more than a wish. And it helped that flight was in Ragozzino's blood.

"We came to Oklahoma in 1966," Ragozzino says. "My dad took a job with OU at Westheimer Field as a flight instructor. They'd just finished the new terminal out there."

Supporting the family of six, Gerald Ragozzino pursued his master's degree while working as an OU flight instructor. The family lived in a house that formerly had been the quarters for the commander of the naval air base that became Max Westheimer Field.

"Thirty-five years later, I'm still walking around that same airport," Ragozzino says. "It's funny to depart out of

the best of all worlds. Absolute torture, terror, and fear . . . yet absolute exhilaration



In the Westheimer Field hangar owned by a flight sponsor, his former employer, Harold Powell, Robert Ragozzino's Stearman biplane undergoes its initial disassembly and the fitting of a 150-gallon fuel tank mockup.



Ragozzino and the plane he calls Spartacus arrive in Narsaq, Greenland, a 6 $\frac{3}{4}$ -hour flight from Goose Bay, Labrador.

that airport, fly east, and come back from the west after flying around the world. The plane was essentially rebuilt at Max Westheimer."

The plane he originally found was an old, blue, early-World War II trainer with dirty yellow wings. He and his supporters brought it to the hangar in Norman, tore it

completely down, and then rebuilt it from the ground up. New engine, new fabric, a better paint job, and a much bigger gas tank later, the plane was ready.

It is not cheap to fly a supercharged "wild horse" of an airplane 23,000 miles. Nevertheless, Ragozzino says, the old Stearman was the right choice.

"I wasn't looking for fuel economy; I was looking for excitement," Ragozzino says. "This is the kind of plane that goes down and dirty. You are going through the mountain valleys, under the fog layers, and under the power lines you didn't see coming. It's the most genuine experience an aviator can have. It's challenging, brutal, and beautiful. It's the best of all worlds. Absolute torture, terror, and fear . . . yet absolute exhilaration."

First came the test flight in the United States. Ragozzino flew 23,000 miles around the country, a trial run that matched in miles the circumference of the earth. Along the way, he found funding from various sponsors,

including an internet company, rockcity.com.

"If you knew what it takes, you'd never do it," Ragozzino says. "Preparations were real challenging. I robbed banks on the weekdays and convenience stores on the weekends because the banks were closed. When we started this, I was going to leave in six months. Six and a half years later, I left."

On June 1, 2000, Ragozzino flew the Stearman from Wiley Post Airport in Oklahoma City and headed east into the sunrise.

"Post" was an aptly named point on the globe from which to embark. The auspicious beginning harkened to the other Oklahoman to fly alone around the world, Wiley Post himself, who was the first to do so in his plane, Winnie Mae. The Mae was a very different plane, Ragozzino smugly points out—a closed-cockpit plane.

"Lindbergh, Wiley Post, Earhart, they were great aviators from the golden years of aviation," Ragozzino says. "All those people did it in a closed cockpit in a sterile, high-altitude environment. It's not anywhere the same experience. To climb into an airplane and fly to 18,000 feet is not an experience on the face of the earth."

The legends are not here to argue. Lindbergh left behind such pursuits after crossing the Atlantic. Post and Earhart each died trying to accomplish what Ragozzino finally did.

"Old time aviation was truly dangerous," Ragozzino says. "The navigation aids were poor. The communications were poor. The airplane systems were not as reliable. What they did was dangerous and daring. Probably more than what I did. I could have got myself killed too, though."

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Ragozzino took off into the blue, flying east. In Canada he says he scared himself by almost choosing to fly over Goose Bay at night. In similar conditions, John F. Kennedy Jr.'s plane went down. ("I was terrified after I realized how ill-advised that was. I was ill-prepared.")

He flew from Canada, across the graveyard of the Atlantic, the North Sea, to Iceland, following Lindbergh's lonely trail.

"I'm sure going into space would be incredible," he says. "I'm sure it would give views of the earth that are unparalleled, but there's nothing like flying the ice cap of Iceland."

From there, he flew to Scotland, then to Paris. He tried to land where Lindbergh had landed, at Le Bourget Airport, but it was closed—union strike. Then, from Paris to Italy.

"You get in a boat and sail for six hours, and you cover 35 miles," Ragozzino says. "Get in a Stearman for six hours, and you cross France, down into Italy and encounter the Alps—villages, castles, and wild animals. It's intense, fast-paced."

Next came Egypt and the ancient Nile. He flew through Alexandria, Luxor (Noble on the Nile, he called it) and across the Sudan. His magic carpet ride took him through Riyadh and Oman and Bahrain. Across a sea of sand, he made his way up the old the silk route to India and Pakistan.

"In Pakistan I stayed two days," Ragozzino says. "It's a great place. Everyone has a machine gun, but it's a great place. They were kids, old guys, all with guns. I'd ask to look at their gun, and they'd hold it up with pride. They were nice about it. I saw a lot of great guns."

On through the mountains and jungles of the east. Ragozzino crossed into Laos, then Vietnam. He landed briefly at Da Nang airbase, where the old American-built jet hangars still stand, overgrown with weeds. He was off again.

In Japan he encountered the financial landing/taking off difficulties, while in Russia, he was a happy prisoner fed salmon and vodka. Among those boisterous people, Ragozzino faced his one experience with anti-American sentiment.

"This one man called me an ugly American ape-spy bastard," Ragozzino recalls. "We were standing outside a restaurant. The three Russian guys with me were talking to me, and he's on the other side of a fence waiting at a bus

stop. As he starts yelling this stuff, his bus comes and then drives off and leaves him. When he saw this, his look suddenly changed. The other Russians standing next to him just ripped him. The Russians don't really feel that way, just that one guy. The Russians are really nice."

It did take a call from the former astronaut, General Tom Stafford, and Oklahoma Senator Jim Inhofe to get the Russian high command to let him go. After some repairs to the Stearman, Ragozzino took off for Alaska.

"Flying through Alaska, I had a lot of really poor weather," Ragozzino says. "Rain and fog down in moun-

tain river valleys. The visibility was so poor, the fog went all the way down to the river. You had to trust your navigation readings that there was really a valley in front of you and a mountain wasn't there instead."

On this home stretch, Ragozzino says, he had plenty of time to reflect on the unique experience he had been through.

"You learn all about yourself, your society, and other peoples' views and societies—it's a real eye-opening experience," Ragozzino says. "And then you are filled with reflections like: how long does it take for your Snickers wrapper to fall



The low-flying Stearman afforded breathtaking vistas for pilot Ragozzino. As he flew from Rome to Kerkeria, Greece, he had a clear view of the cathedral and red-roofed buildings below.

to earth? Is it worth risking your life to get that candy bar in your mouth before you collide with an iceberg?"

On November 17, 2000, Ragozzino flew back into Wiley Post Airport—from the west. A throng of well wishers, media, and others crowded into the hangar to welcome him home.

Was the world really round?

"It all looked flat to me," he quips.

But it is not. Inside, Ragozzino knows the world is quite round, and so big that no one could ever know it all. Now he is haunted by the mistress of adventure and longs for the feel of the sky above, the earth below, and the wind ahead.

"I'm so close to this and have done it for so long, I don't have a feel for it. I am just a byproduct of the experience," he says. "Where do you go when you've just come back from the moon? Where do you go when you come back from the most intense adventure a guy could suit himself up for? I'm still reeling."

So, too, lamented Tennyson's Ulysses, who said: "All experience is an arch where through gleams that untraveled world whose margin fades forever and forever when I move."

Perhaps . . . south, this time.