

A Columbia (SC) Aviator and His Stinson Detroiter Remembered

By Thomas Savage (1933-2018) and Ron Shelton

Paul Rinaldo Redfern -----The First Aviator to Solo the Caribbean Sea

- At age 16 he built and flew in a biplane type glider on the outskirts of Columbia, S. C.
- In a sophomore industrial arts class at Columbia High School he built a full size biplane without an engine. It created a local sensation when displayed at the University of South Carolina, and resulted in his not graduating the following year with his senior class.
- Because of his demonstrated skills and talent and with his parents' permission he left the area upon the completion of his second year in high school to work as an inspector at the Standard Aircraft Factory in Elizabeth, New Jersey. When the factory ceased production in February, 1919 he reentered high school in Columbia.
- At Benedict College, where his father was on the faculty, he designed and assembled a small biplane from spare parts and a used WW I aircraft engine during his senior year in high school.
- During this time he established the first commercial airfield in Columbia at the present site of Dreher High School. He soloed from this field in his small biplane.
- After graduating from high school Paul Redfern earned his living as an aviator. In addition to his small biplane he acquired and flew a Curtiss Jenny JN-4 and a DeHavilland DH-4. He operated out of his airport in Columbia and later out of one he established in Toledo, Ohio.



A very large group of observers and supporters gathered to watch the departure of the Stinson SM-1 from a runway on the beach at Sea Island, Ga. (Russell Maxey Collection)

Paul married Gertrude Hildebrand in Toledo, Ohio, in 1925. They lived in Toledo while Paul worked as an aviator for her father and operated an airfield he established in the area. They eventually moved to Savannah, Georgia when Paul accepted employment as an aviator with the United States Customs Department. Her last contact with Paul took place on August 25, 1927, just before he departed for his historic flight. Gertrude and Paul did not have any children, and she never remarried. She died in 1981 and is buried in Detroit, Michigan.

Paul Redfern attempted to fly from Brunswick, Georgia to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in August 1927, a distance of 4600 miles. If he had been successful he would have flown 1000 miles farther than Charles Lindbergh did in his flight to Paris three months earlier. Redfern did not arrive in Brazil and neither he nor his airplane has ever been located. He was twenty-five years old when he attempted this ill-fated flight for fame and fortune.

Redfern used a Stinson Detroiter SM-1, a high-wing monoplane with a Wright J-5 "Whirlwind" engine, the same type of motor used on "Lucky Lindy's" Spirit of St. Louis. According to the publication Aircraft Circulars, National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, prepared by the Stinson Aircraft Corporation, and published in Washington in 1927, "The Stinson Model SM-1 was the first monoplane of the illustrious 'Detroiter' series and successor to the popular SB-1 cabin biplanes (Ed. Note: It was also the first aircraft to be fitted with a Diesel engine. See here and here). The first SM-1 ever built won the 1927 Ford Air Tour, flown by Eddie Stinson himself. Thirty-six planes were reported built in 1927, and many were used in attempts to set world records. Although comparatively large, the SM-1 performed and handled well and could be landed in the traditional cow pasture. The factory price was \$12,000 to \$12,500 and included such standard equipment as inertia-type engine starter, metal propeller, wheel brakes and wings wired for navigational lights. Pontoons were also available."

Redfern went to the Stinson Aircraft Factory in Detroit to supervise the installation of additional fuel tanks and other modifications in the Stinson Detroiter. "With Eddie Stinson in the second seat, Paul took off in the modified Stinson at 9:40 a.m. on August 5 and reached Brunswick, Georgia, at 7:40 p.m. He averaged 86 miles an hour on this non-stop flight," according to Redfern's father. John Underwood states in his book, *The Stinsons -- A Pictorial History*, that Eddie Stinson tried to persuade Redfern that two days of flying "was more than a man could stand." He was unable, however, to convince Redfern to take another pilot with him.



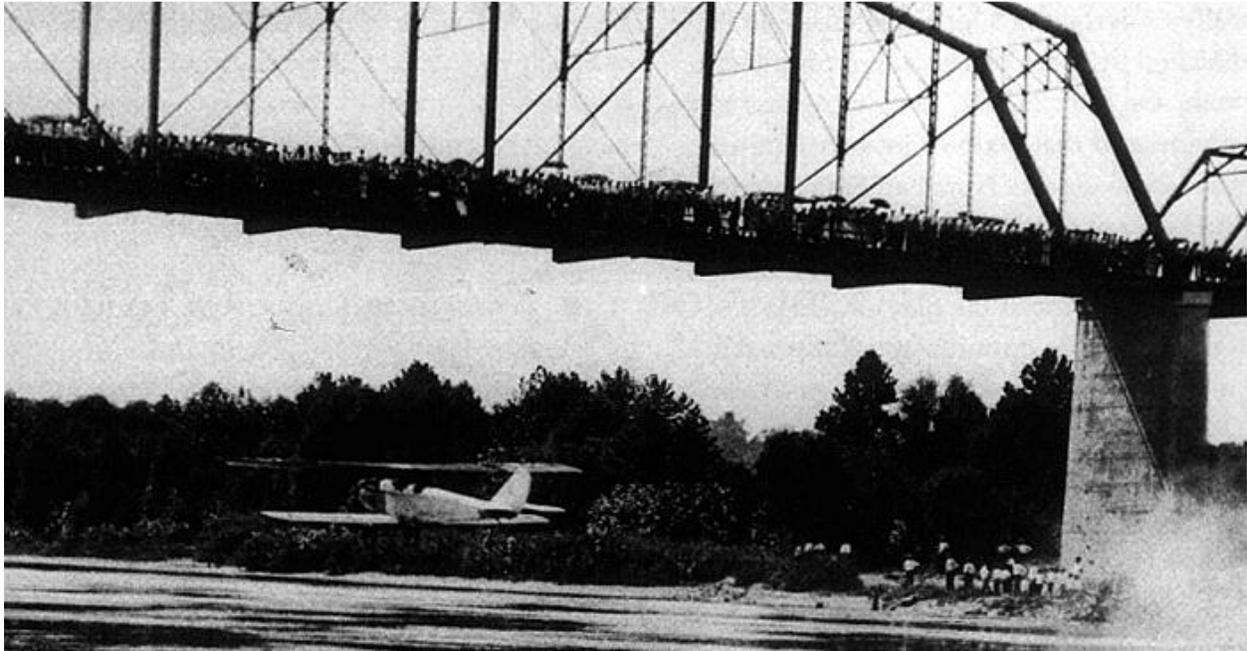
Redfern (right) and a colleague beside the Stinson SM-1 (Russell Maxey Collection)

Redfern had the Detrouter painted green and yellow with white lettering. The authors note that green and yellow are the colors of the Brazilian flag. On both sides of the fuselage just behind the engine were the words: "Port of Brunswick." In bold letters behind the wing's trailing edge was "Brunswick to Brazil." In large letters on the upper and lower wing was the registration number issued by the U. S. Department of Commerce, NX773.

Among those monitoring the flight nothing was heard from anyone by the time Redfern's fuel would have been exhausted by 4:30 p.m. on August 27. By that time the festive atmosphere in Rio de Janeiro, where the president of Brazil and the movie star Clara Bow planned to greet him, had ended with the knowledge that he and his plane were down, but where and when nobody knew. There was no news until September 8. It is not hard to imagine the agony experienced by his wife, parents, three sisters, his flight committee and many friends. His wife, Gertrude, spent most of this time in seclusion. His father, Dr. Frederick C. Redfern, spent most of August 27-28 at The State Newspaper in Columbia awaiting word, which never came. Then on September 8, as reported in the Atlanta Journal, the last written communication by Paul Redfern surfaced, as the captain and crew of a ship, then docked in New Orleans, reported about their unexpected encounter with Paul Redfern and his brightly colored airplane.

This unexpected encounter took place on August 26 at approximately 3:00 p.m., and lasted about forty-five minutes. The ship was the Christian Krohg, a Norwegian steamship. It was near the island of Trinidad and some 165 miles off the coast from Venezuela. Approaching the ship from the north Paul Redfern began to circle the ship from a low altitude. He wrote a note on a piece of paper asking the captain to point the ship toward land, and to wave a flag or handkerchief once for each 100 miles. He signed the note. His father later verified his handwriting and signature. He put the note in a carton and dropped it toward the ship. Unfortunately it landed in the ocean. A crewman dived into the water and retrieved the carton. After the captain read the note he had the ship turned to point toward Venezuela and blew the ship's whistle two times. Redfern lined his plane up with the direction of the ship, wagged the wings of the airplane in appreciation and began flying away toward Venezuela.

When Redfern did not arrive at the airfield in Rio de Janeiro as planned, a massive sea, land and air search took place and lasted for several days. Then after his encounter with the Norwegian ship became known there were successive expeditions to French and British Guyana and Venezuela. Reports filtered in that Paul Redfern had been seen crossing the Orinico Delta and going in a southern direction toward Boca Grande. A small group of natives reported that they had seen him flying near St. Cathert, British Guyana. No trace of Redfern or his Stinson Detroiter was found.



Redfern doing one of his many aviation stunts and adventures in S. C., here flying the Curtiss "Jenny"
Courtesy of the South Caroliniana Library

After a lull of several years there was another series of expeditions in the mid 1930s prompted by multiple reports that a white man on crutches was being held captive by an Indian tribe after he had fallen from the sky. These reports became so frequent and persistent as reported in various and sundry newspapers and the radio that the United States Government became concerned and got involved in the renewed search for Redfern. The Smithsonian Institution sponsored one expedition. The last expedition took place in 1938 when Paul's parents contracted with Theodore Waldeck to go in search of their son and his airplane. On April 28, 1938, a report was made from Georgetown, British Guyana, with the headline "U. S. Searching Party Reports Redfern Dead." The report went on to say that the Waldeck group, led by Theodore Waldeck, an ex-World War One pilot and his author wife, Jo, who had spent considerable time in the Guyana Wilderness, reported that they had found the spot where the aviator fell in Venezuela. Their report was based on a statement by a native who said that he had seen Redfern's plane crash into some trees. The Waldecks were not able to get to the spot because of a wetter than usual season. The area in question was full of sinkholes, poisonous snakes and black widow spiders. The Waldecks returned to Columbia to discuss their findings with Dr. and Mrs. Redfern. Whereas the Redferns initially accepted the Waldeck's conclusion that their son was dead, they later changed their minds believing that their only son had landed elsewhere and that he was still alive.

They had heard from Jimmy Angel who reported a different site for their son's airplane. They also had communicated with an American engineer named Lee Dennison. Altogether some twelve expeditions were made to South America between 1927 and 1938.

Gertrude Redfern came to the conclusion before the Waldeck expedition was completed that her husband was dead. A clipping from a January issue of a Detroit newspaper states that on "January 4, 1938, a circuit judge granted a petition, in which Redfern's wife sought to have him officially declared dead." Mrs. Redfern was quoted as saying, "I believe my husband perished as did many other ocean fliers." Also, "she said she believed that the scientific expeditions by trustworthy agencies have proven conclusively that her husband was not alive but had perished at sea."

In an article published in Art of flight, artist/author Robert Carlin states that in 1982 a Gene Lowe and David Bell got together for the purpose of locating the Stinson Detrioter. Gene Lowe is identified as a former World War Two pilot who has located a number of lost and wrecked planes, including a Stinson Detrioter SM-1 from the Greenland icecap where it had been for forty years. David Bell is described as a successful author of a number of aviation books, including one containing a chapter about Paul Redfern.



After a careful study of the available materials, Lowe and Bell decided to give credence to a report made by a well-known jungle bush pilot named Jimmy Angel. Angel had reported that he had flown over Redfern's plane many times. He also stated that as time passed the airplane settled deeper in the jungle. Although Angel had given a latitude-longitude fix on the wreck, Robert Carlin states that these reports were not believed at the time they were made "because Angel was known for his bombast, especially when he was trying to raise money, and because it seemed incredible that Redfern actually had managed to reach Venezuela." Jimmy Angel is best remembered today for discovering the highest waterfall in the world in Venezuela which is named for him, Angel Falls.

Lowe and Bell then found in their research a map and crash location for Redfern's airplane which had

been developed at that time by Henri Villard, a consular official, in Caracas. Quoting again from Robert Carlin, "Villard compared Angel's data with that of Christian Krogh's crew and found an immense amount of commonality in all of it." Lowe and Bell then located Marie Angel. They were unable to talk with Jimmy because he died in an airplane crash in 1956. Marie talked about her experiences as a copilot on many of her husband's jungle flights. She described Paul Redfern's airplane, and how it seemed to sink deeper and deeper into the jungle canopy over time.

Redfern and his friend Bill Haynes created this hand-drawn map of his proposed flight and autographed it. Later, during a commemoration in 1969, the map was autographed by an astronaut who participated in the occasion.

Clara M. McCall writing for The Masonic News stated: Redfern "apparently planned to steer southeast, at just about 135 degrees on the compass, pass Puerto Rico and Trinidad, and pick up the coast line of Brazil at its northeast corner. He was to drop a flare over the town of Macapa in Brazil, north of the Amazon, as he passed it the second night, and follow the coast line to Rio if all went well."

Courtesy of the South Carolina State Museum

She told how the plane's covering had deteriorated until all that remained to mark the site was "the sun's light on the cabin glass." This interview with Marie Angel was recorded for further reference as needed.

Lowe and Bell found one more credible piece of evidence. This was a report by an American engineer, Lee Dennison, who reported seeing a plane fly over Venezuela's Ciudad Bolivar plaza. He took note of the airplane's green and yellow colors and copied down the number NX773. He also recalled seeing a thin line of black smoke trailing back from the nose of the plane as it turned and flew off toward the southeast. Lowe and Bell referenced a book published in 1942 by Dennison entitled *Devil Mountain* that includes a chapter about his encounter with Redfern's airplane. Robert Carlin painted what he views as Redfern's last moments in the air based on the information in Dennison's book. The authors have read Lee Dennison's documentation about Paul Redfern in the book *Devil Mountain*. This is one of several documents that indicate that Paul Redfern flew over the Caribbean Sea from Georgia to Venezuela. Also important is the information provided by Jimmy Angel, and later verified independently by Marie Angel to Robert Lowe and David Bell.



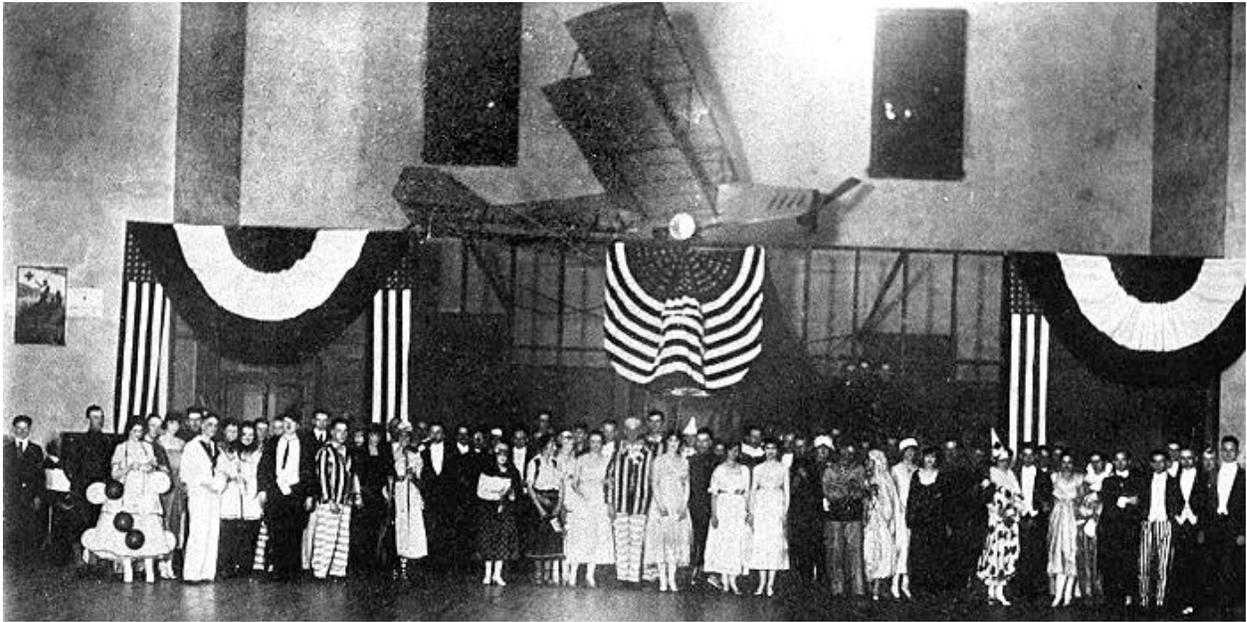
*Redfern in his home built biplane at the field of the Redfern Aviation Company
Courtesy of the Russell Maxey Collection*

Carlin writes that Lowe and Bell have flown over the most likely crash site numerous times. He describes the jungle as very “formidable” with no trails cutting through it. He states with conviction that Redfern’s airplane will be found because “Lowe and Bell will see to that. They know it’s there.” An interesting postscript is that the authors recently learned that Lowe and Bell are fictitious characters or pseudonyms. Robert Lowe is actually Robert Carlin, who is now deceased. David Bell is actually Dale Titler, who has extensive files about Paul Redfern. He is the author of *Wings of Mystery* first published in 1966 and revised in 1981, both of which contain a very informative chapter about Paul Redfern.

As a result of his brief but illustrious career and his daring final flight, Paul Rinaldo Redfern has been remembered in the following manner to date:

- A street in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil is named for him
- An airfield was named for him on Sea Island, Georgia, that later became the location for Redfern Village.
- In 1938 Metro Golden Mayer produced a movie about him, *Too Hot To Handle*, starring Clark Gable.
- In 1969 a plaque was dedicated at Sea Island, Georgia, and placed adjacent to the beach from which he took off in August 1927. Gertrude Redfern was present and participated in the dedication. A Stinson Detroiter SM-2 flew overhead during the ceremony.
- In 1982 a plaque was dedicated at Dreher High School in Columbia, SC stating that he established the first commercial airfield at that location, and was lost attempting a flight to Brazil.
- The *Experimental Aircraft Association* Chapter 905 at St. Simons, Georgia, was named for him when it was formed in 1988. The service provided to flyers stopping at the Club's airfield while on their way to the EAA's annual Sun 'n Fun in Florida is provided in Paul Redfern's memory.
- The South Carolina Educational Television Corporation, commonly known as SCETV, produced a video about him in 1988 which has been shown yearly during the month of August.

- Russell Maxey, who attended high school with Paul Redfern and considered him a personal friend, authored a book entitled *Airports of Columbia* in 1988 that he dedicated to Paul Redfern and several pages and many pictures are devoted to the Redfern story.



*Redfern's biplane, which had no engine, hangs in a University of South Carolina gymnasium in 1917
Courtesy of the South Caroliniana Library*

August 25, 2002 was the 75th anniversary of Paul R. Redfern's historic flight. On Saturday, August 24, 2002 **EAA 242** hosted a one-day aviation event at Owens Airport in Columbia, SC (CUB). Activities of the day included a 10:30 AM ceremony to remember and honor Paul R. Redfern. A Stinson Detroit SM-2 was not available, but a Beech Travelair, one of Delta's first aircraft, stood in. Among the honored guests was one of Paul Redfern's nephews, Paul Redfern Jennings of Sumter, SC. Bob Coble, Mayor of Columbia, and Dr. Miles Richards of The University of South Carolina History Department, an authority on Paul Redfern, each delivered remarks. The owner and pilot of the Beech Travelair reenacted Redfern's 1927 take off. The ceremony concluded with the dedication of a plaque stating that Paul Rinaldo Redfern was the first aviator to solo the Caribbean Sea and included a missing man flyover of vintage aircraft and the dropping of a wreath by a local aviator. During the day pilots of **EAA 242** provided free airplane rides to children as part of the Club's Young Eagles program. Numerous vintage and homebuilt airplanes were on display during the day. The Nickelodeon Theatre in Columbia showed *Too Hot To Handle* starring Clark Gable on Wednesday & Thursday August 21 & 22 at 7:00 PM.

Ron Shelton, Curator of Science and Technology for the **SC State Museum** since 1982, holds an MS in Science Education from Olivet Nazarene University and Ohio State University. He taught science and math in public schools and adjunct science education at various colleges in Ohio, Illinois and South Carolina for 20 years before joining the museum. He is a pilot and aircraft owner with a special interest in historic aviation, and is also interested in antique vehicles and machinery, astronomy, hiking and canoeing.

Tom Savage (1933-2018) was born in Newport News, VA. He intended to become a pilot, but his height of 6'10" prevented this, and he received an MS in social work, subsequently working in that field for 33 years. Besides his writing skills in evidence here, he plays clarinet and saxophone in community bands and a local dance band, and is a ballroom dancer. His interest in Paul Redfern began when he worked at the SC State Museum on a part-time basis. He is currently a member of The Experimental Aircraft Association **Chapter 242**.

Paul Rinaldo Redfern Aviation Society

Events, publications and research efforts have been promulgated for many years since 1927 to both uncover the mystery of Paul Redfern's disappearance and to keep his historic legacy active. He was a founder of commercial and recreational aviation in South Carolina and has world-wide notoriety.

Following a 2007 (August 25, 2007) symposium commemorating the 75th anniversary of Redfern's final flight a group of interested persons affiliated as the Paul Rinaldo Redfern Aviation Society (PRRAS). PRRAS has met annually on or nearby August 25 each year since.

In 2012 for the 85th anniversary another significant symposium was produced by PRRAS.

Here are some pictures and info comments regarding the 2012 PRRAS Symposium and a link to news stories.

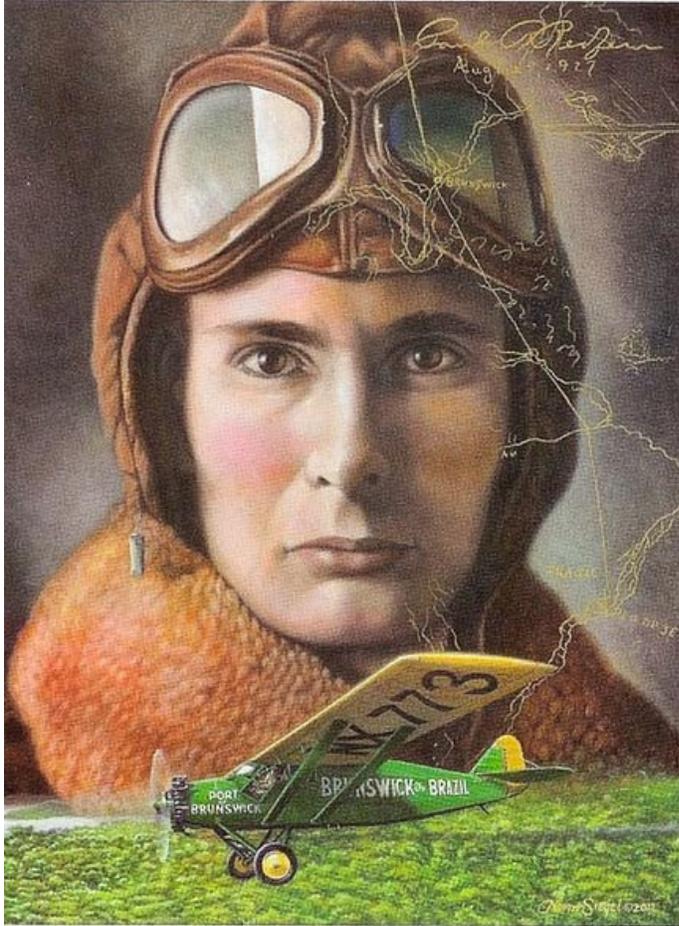


PRRAS 2012 Symposium Committee members and speakers Following the dedication of a new Historical Marker at Dreher High School.

<http://www.scaaonline.com/south-carolina-aviation-hall-of-fame/>

http://www.eaa242.org/PaulRedfern/redfern_001.htm

**http://www.thecolumbiastar.com/news/2012-08-31/Society/Columbias_famous_aviator_honored.html
more contact info at www.schistoricaviation.org**



FIRST PLACE GENERAL

Norm Siegel

"The Last Pilot"

24 x 18"

Oil

In 1927, Paul Rinaldo Redfern set out to fly to Rio de Janeiro from Port of Brunswick, Ga. He was last seen over Venezuela, trailing smoke from his Stinson "Detroit." Neither he nor his aircraft has been found.