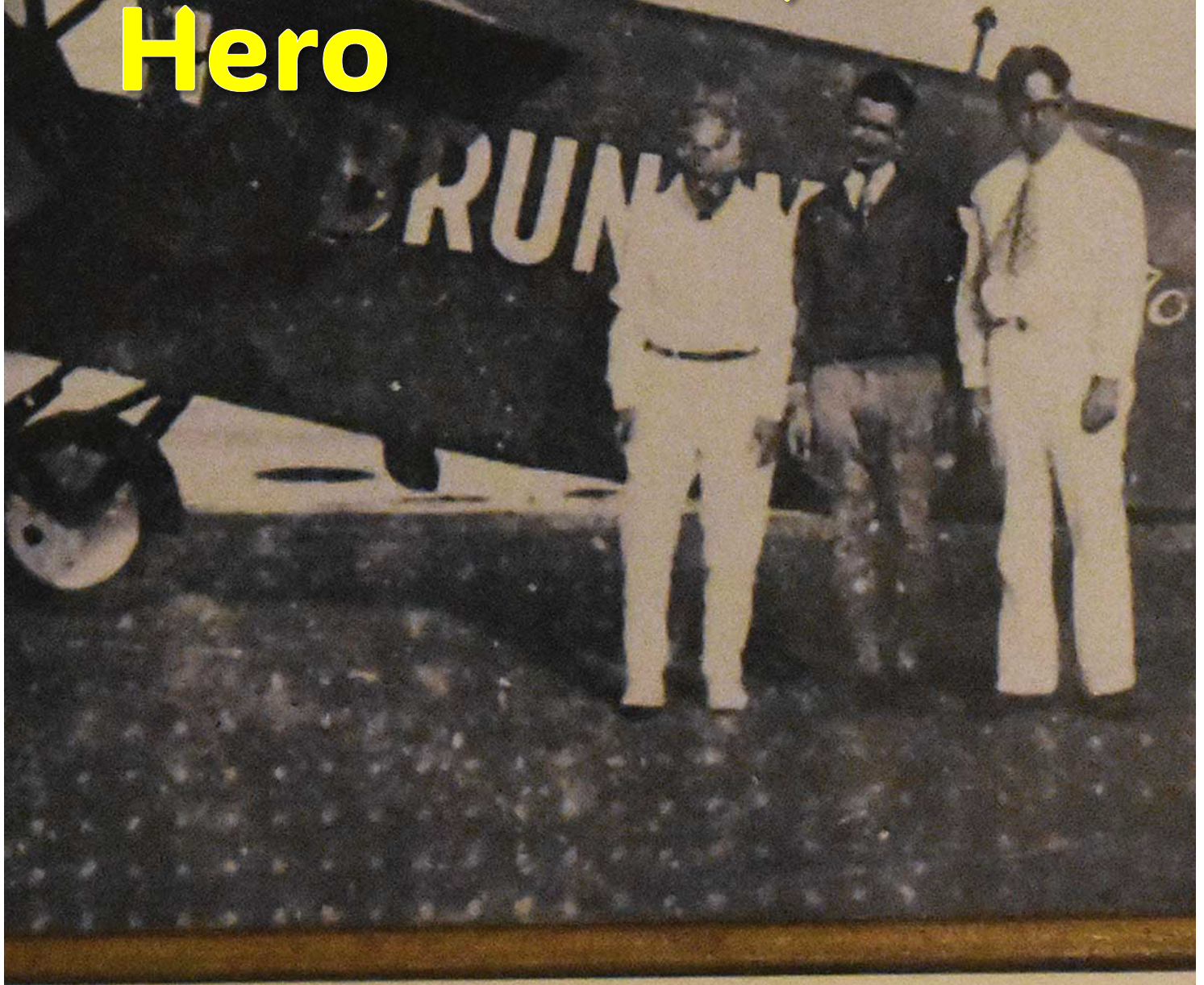


Paul Redfern, Aviation Super- Hero



*Aviator Paul Redfern (center) before his
unsuccessful attempt to fly non-stop from*

Paul Redfern — The Aviation Superhero of Whom You Have Never Heard

By Mike Jones

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Wandering around the Cloisters, I found a gallery of antique photos featuring long gone celebrities enjoying weird activities at The Cloisters. Did you know that “sand sailing” was a thing? In the 1920s, the hotel offered rides on wind-powered buggies along the wide hard beaches of Sea Island. Picture a gaggle of vacationers standing on a freight pallet rolling along the beach on four rubber tires, under a huge sail. For ten minutes I tried to figure out how they steered the thing. No railings, no chairs, no seatbelts. Where’s OSHA when you need them?

Another photo caught my eye because it featured an airplane. The caption related that on August 25, 1927 a 25-year old chap named Paul Redfern departed from Sea Island airport in his single-engine Stinson “Detroit.” Nothing too odd about that, except that Redfern’s plan was to fly from Sea Island to Rio de Janeiro. Non-stop. Solo.

Excuse me?

Pretend for an instant you’re the TV detective Lt. Columbo, wonderfully played by Peter Falk.

“Just one more thing...” you would ask Captain Redfern, using Falks’ scratchy, quizzical voice. “So you’re going to fly 3,900 nautical miles, at maybe 85 knots, over long stretches of ocean and even longer bits of unexplored jungle? In hurricane season? For two nights? Without any navigational gear but a compass? No weather forecasts, no modern altimeter, no autopilot, no bathroom? That’s the plan?”

But Redfern was determined. Lindbergh reported he had terrible difficulty staying awake for his 34-hour journey; how

would anyone remain alert for 55 hours? Even Eddie Stinson, who had produced Redfern’s SM-1, warned the plan was lunacy.



Coffin’s Publicity Stunt

The flight was a publicity stunt funded by the City of Brunswick, Georgia, which had pledged a \$25,000 prize (roughly \$1 million in today’s inflated dollars) to the first pilot to link their burg with Rio. The event was generally financed by Howard Coffin, automaker and owner of the Cloisters Hotel on near-by Sea Island. Coffin and the city were hoping the publicity would establish Brunswick as a place of sophistication and commerce, like Savannah. Lots of luck with that.

Redfern was mechanically talented and at an early age had become infatuated with airplanes. When he was sixteen, he reportedly built a plane out

of cardboard and spare parts that he flew around the cow pasture next to his school. He later flew passengers for thrill rides, stunt flying, barnstorming, and even working for the government spotting illegal moonshiners in the forests of Georgia. He had stick-and-rudder skills, to be sure. His decision-making skills might have needed a bit of polish.



It will be no surprise to the savvy readers of this journal that the flight did not go well. Redfern departed as planned on a sultry August morning and steered southeasterly. He was spotted by shrimp fisherman off the shore of Georgia. He made it through the night and flew over Trinidad and was spotted by a tramp steamer. There is a surviving report from an American engineer, Mr. Lee Dennison, who was able to read the N-number of the aircraft as it flew over Venezuela. He also reported the plane was “trailing a thin wisp of black smoke.” After that: nothing.

This failure is not surprising. Redfern carried no radio, and of course there was no air traffic control, radar coverage or emergency locator beacons. Even if Redfern had stayed on course, he would have flown over 2,000 miles of jungle, all of which was dangerous and some of which was inhabited by headhunters. But for the next decade occasional rumors would surface of a Caucasian man in the jungle, “who had come out of the sky” with broken legs and was living in an Indian village. Despite a dozen searches over the next ten years, including one even funded by the State Department, Redfern was never seen again.

Ten years after his flight, his wife had a Michigan judge declare her husband legally dead, and Redfern and his Stinson faded into history. But the story is not quite over. The Paul Rinaldo Redfern Aviation Society of Columbia, SC was formed in September 2007. It meets every year on August 25th, at precisely 12:46 pm, the group raises a toast to Redfern’s historic attempt. You gotta admit, the guy had pluck.

Sources

Sources for this note include Wikipedia, the Columbia (SC) Star, excellent reporting in the Toledo Gazette, the website of the South Carolina Aviation Association, and a marvelous article by Winston Groom in Garden & Gun Magazine, June/July 2011. My thanks to all of them.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

