

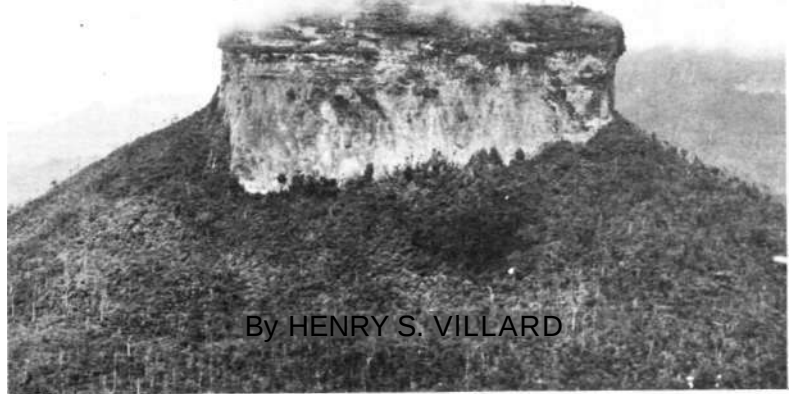
The year 1927 was a memorable one in the history of aviation. Lindbergh, Chamberlin, and Byrd spanned the Atlantic, the Pacific was bridged from California to Hawaii by Maitland and Hegenberger, Brock and Schlee flew more than half way around the world from Newfoundland to Japan, and long distance flights were the order of the day. Unhappily, not all of them were successful.

Among the airmen who failed to reach their destination was Paul Redfern, who disappeared over the trackless jungles of Venezuela on August 27th of that year while attempting to fly non-stop from Brunswick, Georgia, to Rio de Janeiro. Redfern set out alone on August 25th in the PORT OF BRUNSWICK, a Stinson SM-1 monoplane with the markings NX773, and apparently crossed the Caribbean without trouble. Two hundred miles off the coast of South America he dropped a note to the Norwegian tramp CHRISTIAN KROGH - his airplane carried no radio - asking directions to the nearest land. The ship turned its bow toward the shore and spelled out the distance on deck. Redfern dipped his wings in acknowledgement and sped off.

What happened then? No positive answer has ever been forthcoming. But ten years later, while serving as Secretary of the American Legation at Caracas, and long fascinated by the Redfern mystery - I had an opportunity to assemble a few clues pointing to the fate of the flyer and his machine. In the spring of 1937 a Fairchild passenger monoplane of the Linea Aeropostal Venezolana went down in the Guiana region of Eastern Venezuela, carrying to his death the Commercial Attache of the Legation, Frederic D. Grab. It was during a three weeks search by air for the crashed airliner, conducted from the Orinoco capital of Ciudad Bolivar and a small advance airfield at Tumeremo, that the chance to do some research developed.

Examination of the files of the newspaper of *El Luchador* at Ciudad Bolivar disclosed a despatch from its correspondent at Tucupita dated August 28, 1927, stating that an aeroplane had passed over the town of Macereo, near Barrancas (see map), at three o'clock the previous afternoon, emitting a trail of black smoke. Aeroplanes were sufficiently rare in the Venezuelan skies at that time to leave no doubt that the machine was Redfern's. It was then headed for the mouth of the Orinoco River, some 200 miles to the east, which caused the editor of the paper in his issue of August 29th to speculate that "the aviator must by this time be in the region of the Amazon ... or near Rio de Janeiro, provided his machine has suffered no damage and the weather has not been adverse." The reasoning behind this conjecture was that Redfern appeared to be "tracing a prolonged oblique across the Guianas to reach the latitude

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF PAUL REDFERN



By HENRY S. VILLARD

of Belem del Para, whence in another sharp-angled oblique he may complete his flight in Rio de Janeiro."

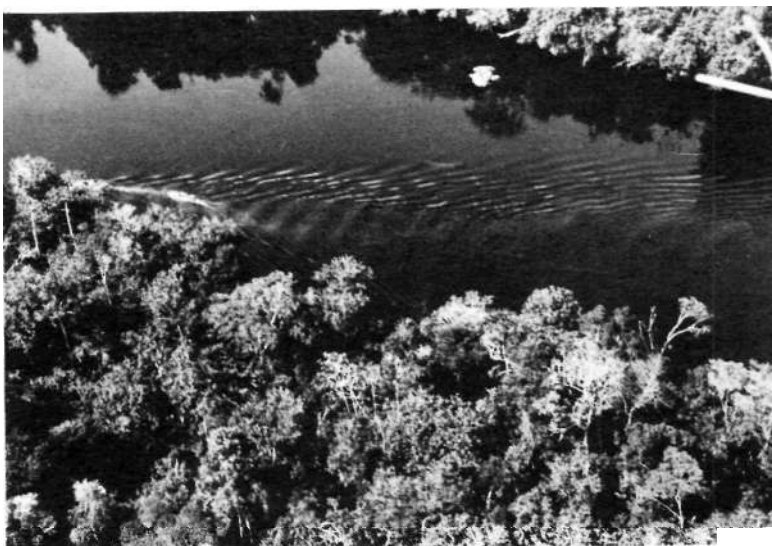
The same edition of the paper carried the text of a "Very Urgent" message from the Director of Telegraphs at Caracas advising the Ciudad Bolivar office that, according to a cable from New York, the Brunswick had failed to arrive in Rio. The local authorities were instructed to "obtain all possible news from travelers for forwarding to New York."

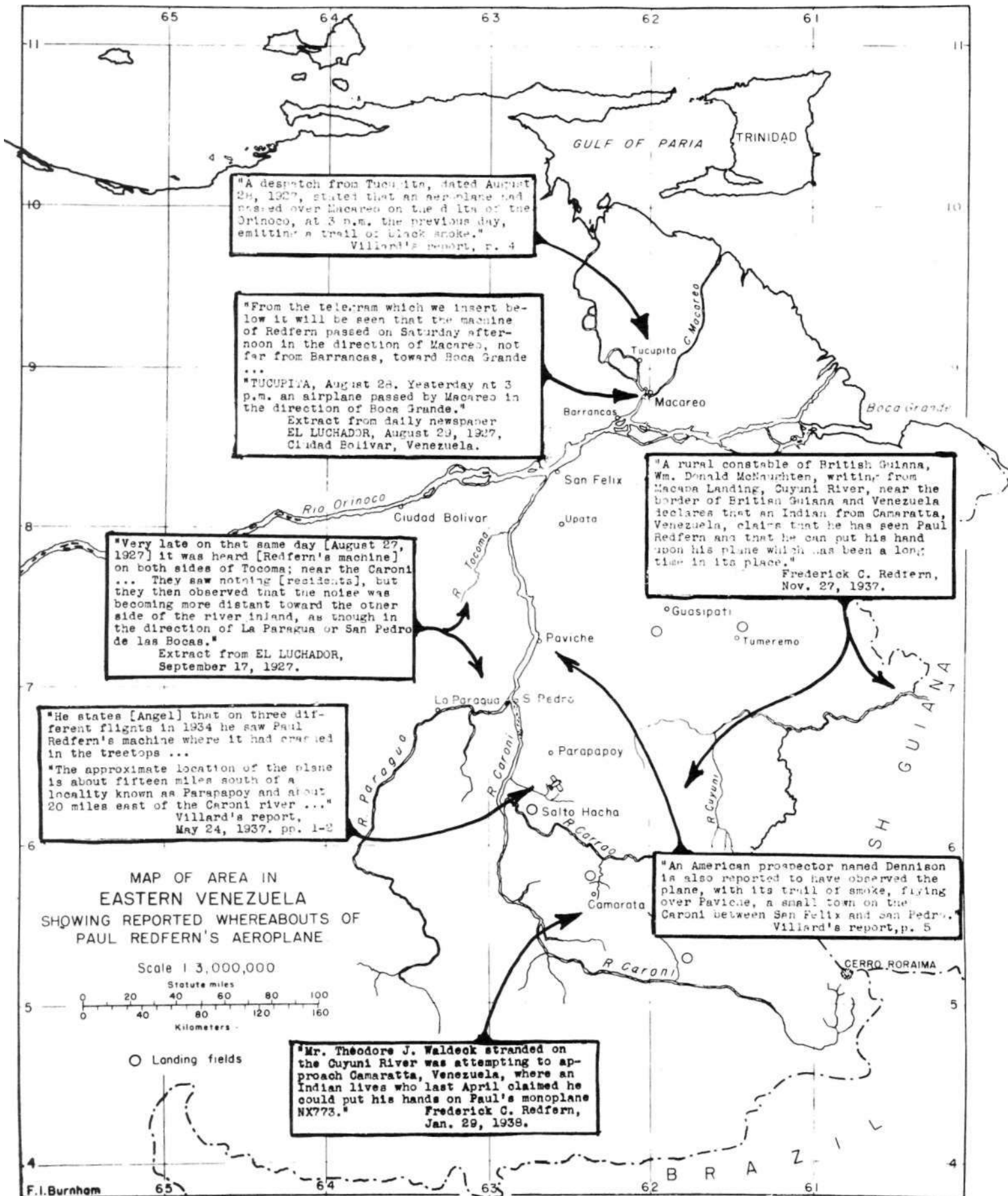
News, however, proved very scarce. An American prospector, Lee R. Dennison, was reported to have seen the Port of Brunswick on the afternoon of the 27th flying over Paviche, a small town on the Caroni River between San Felix and San Pedro. A Bulgarian map-maker named Trayanoff, working for the Ministry of Communications, was said to have sighted the machine over a small island in that river. The same evening, according to *El Luchador*, the noise of a motor was heard near a stream known as the Tocomá, a tributary of the Caroni; surprised residents of the area, thinking at first it was caused by a truck, noticed that the sound came first from the east side, then from the inland or west side in the direction of La Paragua (a town on the river of the same name). Passage of the BRUNSWICK over these localities would indicate that instead of proceeding obliquely across the Guianas to strike the Brazilian coast at Belem, Redfern had pursued a course almost due south from the Orinoco and was endeavoring to follow the Caroni overland to the Venezuelan-Brazilian border.

Nothing further was heard of the flyer. On September 17, 1927, *El Luchador* concluded that because of the multiplicity of rivers in the region, Redfern had probably confused a broad stretch of the Paragua with the Orinoco, that he had hesitated over which direction to take, and that he had crashed "in some solitary ... region, unexplored to this day because of the natural barriers which it offers and the scarcity of population and resources."

Over the next several years a number of attempts - some in good faith, others not - were made to find the missing airplane or its pilot. Reports appeared regularly in the press that wreckage had been found - in remote parts of Brazil, in British, French, or Netherlands Guiana, even in Colombia and distant Panama. Redfern was rumored to be alive, perhaps the prisoner of some Indian tribe; there were fantastic

At one point in the search for the ill-fated Linea Aeropostal Venezolana airplane it was thought that the figures in the river below were the survivors, however, the missing Commercial Attache Frederick Grab was never found. The dense jungle of Venezuela makes travel extremely difficult. (All photos by author)



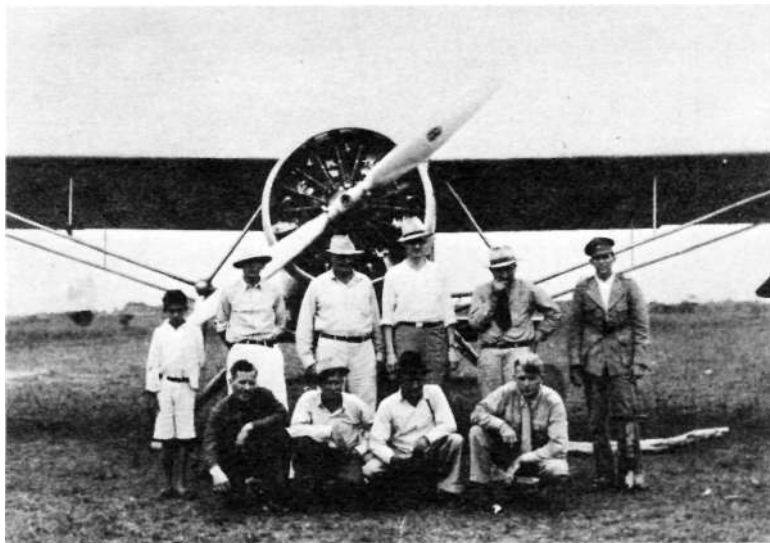


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MAP OF THE AREA OF THE SUPPOSED DISAPPEARANCE OF PAUL REDFERN

Courtesy of Henry S. Villard

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stories of his playing the role of a white god or king. Many of these yarns were spun by publicity-seekers, adventurers, or self-styled explorers, who tried to exploit the lingering hope that the aviator would one day emerge unscathed from the wilderness. None of the rumors ever received confirmation.

Here the tale would have ended had it not been for James Crawford (Jimmy) Angel of Los Angeles, who in the 1930s was associated with two other Americans, a geologist and a mining engineer, in survey flights for gold and diamond deposits in the same general area where Redfern disappeared. Jimmy was one of a half dozen pilots who had volunteered to search for the missing Aeropostal plane, and Frederick Grab and I accompanied him many times in pursuit of that objective. His Flamingo monoplane and Wasp engine had seen so much service that, as one of the other pilots remarked, the tail assembly seemed about to drop off, but it got Jimmy wherever he wanted to go and he had been nearly everywhere over that vast uncharted expanse of territory. As the days passed in what was to prove a fruitless quest (the Fairchild was never found from the air), Jimmy was naturally reminded of another vanished airplane in the vicinity. The PORT OF BRUNSWICK was an inevitable topic of discussion.

Resourceful, gregarious, mechanical-minded, a natural-born airman, Jimmy Angel also had a sense of drama. He asserted that on three different occasions in 1934 and 1935 he had glimpsed the wreckage of Redfern's Stinson where it had crashed in the treetops in a district known as Parapapoy, about 150 miles south by east of Ciudad Bolivar and some 20 miles east of the Caroni River. He said he had observed the glint of sunlight on metal; he noted that the plane had settled deep in the tropical growth, that the fabric had disintegrated and corrosion had set in to such an extent that little but the skeleton of a plane remained. Jimmy took it for granted, as had the editor of *El Luchador*, that Redfern was long dead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Henry W. Villard, a career Foreign Service Officer of the Department of State, has been a constant observer of the aviation scene for many years, and from a rich store of personal knowledge, wrote the account of man's first decade of flight from Kitty Hawk to World War I, his *CONTACT, The Story of the Early Birds*. Also from his observation point in South America he was privileged to know of the disappearance of Paul Redfern and participated in the subsequent search for him with the famous Jimmy Angel. Never satisfied with previous accounts of the terrain, and certain elements of the search, he submitted the accompanying account, hoping to shed some light on a mysterious disappearance.

From one other source came a report that seemed to tally with the theory that Redfern had fallen in the Venezuelan wilderness. A rural constable of British Guiana, William D. McNaughton, writing to Dr. Frederick C. Redfern, Paul's father, from Macapa Landing on the Cuyuni River, near the border of British Guiana and Venezuela, quoted a native of Camarata — an isolated Indian settlement in Southern Venezuela — as saying he could "put his hands upon" the ill-fated plane, which had "been a long time in its place." The region here is characterized by wide savannahs, steaming jungles, flat-topped mountains, tortuous rivers, and spectacular waterfalls.

In the course of our extensive aerial reconnaissance, Jimmy brought the Flamingo down to a landing on the grass at Camarata. Inquiries about a long-lost airplane — or one more recently missing — brought no response, possibly because of a local superstition that the great mechanical birds of the white man devoured the sun and the moon. An explorer named Theodore J. Waldeck, encountering many hardships, subsequently tried to lead an expedition in this area, approaching Camarata from the south through the headwaters of the Caronia, but without success.

Could Angel have been mistaken in what he saw in the jungle? He himself did not think so. He had sent a report to the Associated Press which, he claimed, had never been acknowledged or else had not been delivered. Had he lived, he would have been prepared to lend his assistance to any organized effort to find the spot where he believed Stinson lay. But no steps were taken to verify his story before Jimmy was killed in the crash of his Flamingo at Panama; since then no one has come forward with the plans and money for a careful search. Such an undertaking would no doubt be a costly one; it would require a well-equipped expedition, fully conversant with the perils and problems of the difficult terrain, to hack a way through the dense undergrowth and reach a locality pinpointed by aerial photography.

Meanwhile, a plaque was dedicated to Paul Redfern's memory at Sea Island, Georgia, on June 16, 1969. Unless and until a systematic attempt is made to comb the district where the evidence suggests he crashed, the virtually impenetrable fastness of Venezuela will continue to guard the secret of his last flight.

In the photo above, Jimmy Angel is second from right, standing by his Flamingo Monoplane. The author, Henry Villard, third from right, participated in the search for the missing Linea Aeropostal Venezolana Fairchild Monoplane which downed in terrain similar to that of the disappearance of Paul Redfern, characterized by flat top mountains rising from dense jungle as shown below.

