

The Paul Redfern Rescue Expedition of 1936

By Hans Kremer



Paul Redfern Rescue Expedition cover sent in 1936 from Suriname to the Canal Zone

Van Dietsen's Auction # 612 (May 2008) showed the above cover, dated April 29, 1936, canceled in Albina, Suriname. I've seen another addressed to the Canal Zone and one sent to the Netherlands (Wiggers de



Paul Redfern

Vries auction # 187. lot 553). Netherlands Philately, Vol. 15 # 1 also shows one of these covers.

The covers refer to the "Waid Post American Legion Paul Redfern Rescue Expedition - Dutch Guiana. Jan. 1936"

months later, A.C. Goebel won the \$25,000 Dole Race from Oakland to Honolulu. Not wanting to be left out of the fame and fortune that hit the aviation world, Paul persuaded the Brunswick (Ga.) Board of Trade that a \$25,000 record- setting flight from Brunswick to Rio would help them become a major port city.

Some legwork on the Internet, N.Y Times archives plus other resources brought me to the following story, which gives a fairly detailed report about Paul Redfern's ill fated flight.

From TIME Magazine of March 2, 1936

"Paul Redfern

On Aug. 25, 1927 a slim, wide-mouthed young man named Paul Redfern took off from Brunswick, Ga. to fly to Brazil. Some 27 hours later Pilot Redfern's single-motored monoplane swooped down over the Norwegian freighter Christian Krohg 200 miles out of La Guaira, Venezuela. Getting his bearings, Redfern dashed on toward South America, where he was later reported over the Orinoco Delta. Then he vanished.

Who was this Paul Redfern?
Charles Lindbergh, who was 21 days younger than Paul Redfern, made the first solo nonstop flight across the Atlantic in May 1927 winning the \$25,000 prize. Three

Because the region into which the young flyer had headed was so vast, unknown and impenetrable, search was from the beginning regarded as largely useless. Nonetheless, a few attempts were made, and all future

scientific expeditions through the Guianas or Venezuela were asked to keep an eye open. After five years of silence even Pilot Redfern's wife and father believed him dead, had given up hope that any trace of him or his plane would ever be found.

Late in 1932 a rumor burgeoned from the jungle. A U. S. engineer named Charles Hasler reported at Para, Brazil that he had heard of a captive white man believed to be Redfern. By mid-1933 the air was thick with rumors from a dozen sources. A German-U. S. engineer named Tom Roch appeared out of the wilderness to announce he had talked to Redfern. Regardless of source, the stories were all remarkably alike in detail.

By last October, when Explorer William LaVarre said he believed the Georgia flyer alive, the Redfern rumors had grown to such proportions that the U. S. State Department ordered an investigation. The Consular Agent at Paramaribo, Netherlands Guiana, unearthed a Creole Catholic missionary named Melcherts, stationed at Drie Tabbetjes on the Tapanahoni River in the interior, who told the following story:

"During December 1934 . . . I dispatched a Bush Negro named Paje with two boys to the upper river. He returned in February of 1935 and stated that while at an Indian Village (name unknown), he was told of a white man who had come out of the sky, had both legs broken and was living in an Indian Village only three hours from where he was. . . .

"On April 15 there entered the hospital at Drie Tabbetjes an Indian named Kapan from the village of Sapakunu on the Paloemeu River (not on the map) suffering with yaws. . . . He told me that there was a white man on the Paloemeu River in the village of Piaiman, that he, Kapan, had seen him and that he was crippled, so that he could not walk, that he had come out of the sky, and he had seen his machine which was wrecked on a savanna and not on a mountain."

Estimated the State Department: "To reach the place where Redfern is supposed to be . . . would probably take 75 days in all."

Such a semi-official story caused a rash of proposed rescue expeditions, the latest being announced last week

by Explorer LaVarre. Four have actually got under way. **One, financed by the American Legion, set out from the Canal Zone with lavish equipment, is now deep**



Redfern's 1927 departure from Sea Island, Ga. (Russell Maxey Collection)

in the jungle in canoes. Tom Roch popped up again, went off in search by foot with another U. S. adventurer. A Dutch expedition started along another route to the unknown interior. Most publicized expedition of all was that started by Pilot Art Williams, who taught Redfern to fly.

All four groups by last week had found nothing convincing to outsiders, were still plugging ahead, when there came an event which first blew the lid off the yarn, then clamped it back more confusingly than ever. In a Paramaribo newspaper appeared the tale of one Alfred Harred, newshawk and alleged member of an expedition to determine the boundary of British Guiana: "Art Williams, two Indians and I took off, landed on a tributary of the main Amazon . . . started to trek across the Tumuc-Humac Mountains. . . . After several days we came to a village where all Indians were completely nude. We saw an airplane caught in the branches of a big tree. A few hours later we met Redfern. He was dressed in a ragged singlet and underpants. He looked like a man over 40, hobbling on rude crutches made of tree branches and liana. He found difficulty at first speaking English, but evidently he had been expecting to be found. Williams gave him a biscuit and some tinned meat. . . .

"He told us he had been forced down by a leak in the gas tank. . . . His legs and arms were broken in the crash, but medicine men cured him. . . . He had married an Indian woman and has a son who looks very much like him. When the Indians suspected we intended to take Paul away they threatened us with poisonous spears and arrows and on Paul's advice we withdrew . . . with the intention of returning. It must be realized that any

rescue must mean the use of force with probable death of Redfern. . . ."

Said Art Williams in Georgetown, British Guiana: "I never saw Redfern or his plane. I do not recall meeting Harred."

So far the story in Time Magazine

The **bold** sentence was highlighted by me (HK).

I next decided to also consult the Dutch newspapers of that time and this is what I read in Het Vaderland of February 24, 1936:

People keep looking for Redfern. A new expedition has taken off.

The article states that 'a new expedition, made up by James Ryan and W. L. Farrell will try again to find out what happened to Paul Redfern. Ryan is staff correspondent of the Columbia Broadcasting Company and of Hearst. Mr. Farrell is "Post Commander" of the American Legion in the Canal Zone. The Legion as well as the press agents mentioned here are financing the expedition, while extra income is being thought through the sale to philatelists of covers relating to the expedition. These covers all have a special cachet and will be sent from Surinam to those who ordered these covers. The covers cost 50 US cent. If Redfern is found he will be asked to sign these covers (if he is able to do so). It will make for a nice addition to their collection. About 5,000 of these covers were sold, among them a couple to President Roosevelt.'

At least now I did find out what this cover was about, but of course the question remained: how did it all end up?

The U.S papers too extensively covered this expedition and on May 17, 1936 the N.Y Times reported some bad news:

"Christobal, C.Z, May 16- Arthur J. Farrell, a member of the Canal Zone American Legion expedition that sought Paul Redfern in the Guiana jungles, returned here today saying the party had found no trace of the missing American aviator. Farrel confirmed reports that James A. Ryan, one of his companions in the hunt for Redfern, was drowned in the hinterland.'

The NY Times of June 29, 1936 had a final note on the American Legion expedition: COLON, Panama, June 28-The Netherlands Consul has presented to the local post of the American Legion a bill for \$1,100, which the Government of Netherlands

Guiana claims is due its wards, bush Negroes and Indians who guided a fruitless search for Paul Redfern, missing American aviator. In the search JJames A. A. Ryan, American journalist. lost his lite. .

A. resolution passed at a recent meeting of the Legion post requests authority to pay the deficit from Legion funds and states the post sponsored the search on the understanding that it would share in any profits.

The total cost of the expedition was \$4,600, of which \$3,182 was raised by public subscription and from other sources.

The final notice in Het Vaderland newspaper appeared on May 19, 1938. It states that the Waldeck expedition has returned and had telegraphed Mrs. Redfern that the wreckage of her husband's plane had been found and they concluded that indeed he had died, bringing a closure to the Redfern story.

The 'Waid Post' of the American Legion was named after Elbert S. Waid. Post in this case refers to 'chapter'. The American Legion was chartered by Congress in 1919 as a patriotic, war-time veterans organization, devoted to mutual helpfulness. It is a not-for-profit community-service organization which now numbers nearly 3 million members, men and women, in nearly 15,000 American Legion posts worldwide.

Refs:

<http://www.capnbilly.com/redfern.htm>

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,847726-1,00.html>

<http://kranten.kb.nl/index.html>

HET EINDE VAN HET REDFERN-DRAMA
De Waldeck-expeditie uit Amerika welke het binnenland van Britsch-Guyana heeft doorzocht is te Georgetown teruggekeerd en heeft aan mevrouw Redfern geseind dat zij het vliegtuig gevonden hebben of lever het wrak ervan, zoodat de expeditie tot de overtuiging gekomen is, dat Redfern inderdaad is omgekomen.
* * *
De Amerikaanse vlieger Redfern houdt tien jaren lang vele vrienden bezig. Er zijn n.l. uit de rimboe geruchten gekomen, dat Redfern onder de Indianen leven zou. Verscheidene expedities zijn uitgerust, tot heden zonder resultaat. Waldeck heeft nu het einde gebracht.

Het Vaderland May 19, 1938

