

## **Macon's most remarkable air crash struck heart of town**

# **Disaster on Cherry Street**

*By Rick Maier*

Beneath the oak trees along the 500 block of Cherry Street, below a neon sign advertising Molson Ice beer, lies a small memorial to one of the most bizarre incidents in the modern history of Macon.

The mangled people and crumpled aircraft have long since been removed. The bloodstained sidewalks have been rebuilt. Most of the witnesses are no longer living. The only sign of the tragedy is a small plaque embedded in the sidewalk with a miniature bronze propeller and the date: February 18, 1928.

It should have been the most exciting day in Macon aviation history. Famous pilots were arriving from all over the country to participate in the first Southeastern Air Derby at the old Miller airfield, once where Bowden Golf Course is today. Daredevil airmen were scheduled to race one another and perform stunts such as loops, wing walking, parachute jumping and "dead-stick" landings.

The air show was expected to attract the biggest crowd ever to witness an event in the city, even bigger than the Bathing Beauty Revue sponsored by the Macon Telegraph the previous summer.

### **Promotional stunt goes wrong**

A local flight instructor named Buck Steele was one of the organizers of the show. A few minutes before the show was to begin, Buck grabbed a young student pilot by the name of Lucky Ashcraft, and they jumped in his plane to do a little last minute promoting for the show.

Airplanes were still a rare curiosity to people in 1928. General aviation was just getting started, and there were no Air Force bases or airports in Middle Georgia. In fact, blimps - not airplanes - were all the rage for transporting people in those days.

### **It happened one busy day**

There was no mall, and few if any suburban stores, so lots of people were shopping and working in downtown Macon that Saturday afternoon.

It was a clear, cool winter's day – a good day to fly.

Buck and Lucky climbed into Buck's bi-plane with a supply of small aerial bombs ordered from a fireworks store. The plan was for Buck to buzz the city at a low altitude while Lucky lit the bombs and threw them out over the downtown area to get people's attention and advertise the air show.

### **Fireworks ‘bomb’ downed plane**

Two “bombs” exploded over the city, so everyone was looking up when a third bomb went off too close to the plane, blowing off one of the wings. The aircraft made a few spirals, then headed straight down like a meteor, so fast that the nose of the plane buried into the concrete pavement, killing Buck and Lucky instantly.

Thirty-four year old Clyde Murphey ran out into the street to see what all the noise was about, and was struck by the plane as it crashed to the ground. His left arm was severed at the shoulder and his right foot was cut off, but he didn’t die until later in the Macon Hospital.

Hundreds of people rushed to the scene of the crash. It must have been a horrible, gory mess. Women fainted and children were trampled in the chaos.

### **Then street collapsed**

Back in those days, sidewalks were built over cellars where coal was delivered and stored. The sidewalk structure near the scene of the crash collapsed under the weight of all the people. Those who didn’t fall into the cellar of Person’s Drug Store panicked and ran. Just ten minutes after the three men died from the airplane crash, over a dozen more people were seriously injured from falling into the cellar or being trampled in the pandemonium.

The air derby was postponed that Saturday, but Mayor Luther Williams declared that the show must go on. The next day, all the pilots flew their planes in formation over Macon, and dropped flowers over the site of the crash in honor of their friends.

Today the cellar has been filled and the newly poured concrete sidewalk shows no sign of the tragedy - except for that little plaque with the propeller.

This month marks the 73<sup>rd</sup> anniversary of the big crash on Cherry Street.

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