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**Rear Admiral**  
**RICHARD EVELYN BYRD**

*a Biography*

by

**GEORGE J. DUFEK**

Rear Admiral USN Retired

**COMMEMORATING THE DEDICATION OF**

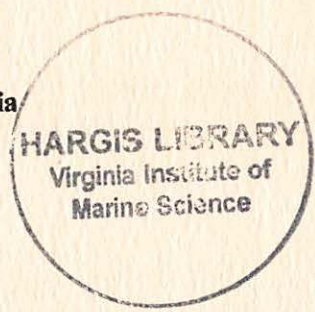
**RICHARD EVELYN BYRD HALL**

of the

**VIRGINIA INSTITUTE of MARINE SCIENCE**

**Gloucester Point, Virginia**

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## The Author

*Admiral George J. Dufek, a personal friend and compatriot of Rear Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd on several polar expeditions, became a top "cold weather" expert of the Navy. Besides two expeditions to the Arctic, Dufek made six trips to the Antarctic. In 1939 he was navigator aboard Admiral Byrd's flagship USS BEAR, and in 1954-59 he was Commander, U. S. Naval Support Forces, Antarctica. During these operations he became the first American to set foot on the South Pole, though Byrd had flown over it several times. Dufek has related his Antarctic experiences in two books, OPERATION DEEP-FREEZE and THROUGH THE FROZEN FRONTIER, the latter a children's book.*

*A rugged, gregarious and much-decorated veteran of polar exploration and two wars, Dufek became director of the Mariners Museum in Newport News, Virginia on December 1, 1960. He has received numerous campaign and achievement medals, and honorary degrees in Law, Science and Humane Letters.*

*The Administration and Staff of the Virginia Institute of Marine Science gratefully acknowledge Admiral Dufek's contribution to this biography marking the date on which the Commonwealth of Virginia through its oceanographic agency pays tribute to Admiral Byrd and inscribes his name on Virginia's new marine research building, to be known henceforward as RICHARD EVELYN BYRD HALL.*





Courtesy of J. G. Cowell

U. S. Navy Photograph

ADMIRAL BYRD

## Rear Admiral

### RICHARD EVELYN BYRD

Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd was born in Winchester, Virginia on October 25, 1888. He was a direct descendant of William Byrd (1674-1744), a Virginia planter; lawyer, statesman and man of letters who founded Richmond, Virginia in 1733.

Scion of this illustrious Virginia family, the Admiral had two brothers who, together, were known as Tom, Dick and Harry. Tom was the business man of the house. Harry (1887-1966) became the famous Senator of Virginia, and Dick, America's foremost adventurer and polar explorer.

When Admiral Byrd was twelve years of age in the year 1900 he received at his family's home in Winchester, Virginia an invitation to visit a friend in the Philippine Islands. After much insistence and pleading by the youngster, his parents reluctantly allowed him to travel alone to Manila, halfway around the world. This was during the time Aguinaldo and his Filipino Tagalog rebels were carrying on guerrilla warfare in the jungles against our American troops. Traveling with the constabulary in the interior young Byrd heard his first gunfire in combat. After that brush the lad was kept closer to the home of the family friend in Manila.

The following year he continued westward through the Indian, Mediterranean and Atlantic Oceans to his home in Boston, a youngster who had been around the world. Dick Byrd had tasted excitement and adventure and he liked the taste.

Richard Byrd attended the Shenandoah Military Academy, Virginia Military Institute, and the University of Virginia prior to entering the United States Naval Academy in the class of 1912.

He entered into the life of a midshipman at the Naval Academy with the same enthusiasm that he displayed in later years in conquering the unknown portions of the earth and sky. He was a member of the Athletic Association, and a member of the Hop Committee for three years, Chairman his First Class year. He was a member of the football, baseball and gymnasium squads and was welterweight wrestling champion one year.



While practicing a difficult gymnastic feat on the rings he fell thirteen feet to the hardwood floor and shattered his right leg.

He graduated from the United States Naval Academy in June 1912, was commissioned an Ensign, and assigned duty in the battleship U.S.S. SOUTH CAROLINA. During the next four years he served in various ships as a junior officer. Misfortune crossed his path again when he fell down a hatch of his ship and injured his weak leg to such extent that he was retired from the active list of the Navy. But he was recalled to active duty when his country needed him during two world wars and on many special assignments. On two occasions during his first four years of service as a naval officer, he rescued a man from drowning. For his heroic action he was awarded two letters of commendation by the Navy Department and the Silver Life Saving Medal by the Treasury Department. These were the first awards to Richard Byrd, whose brilliant career was to earn him the honor of being the most decorated officer in the history of the Navy. They are so numerous that they are listed in the appendix to this narrative.

Although officially on the retired list, Byrd, during World War I, was recalled to active duty and ordered to the Naval Air Station, Pensacola, Florida for flight training. His game leg could not hold up as a watch officer on the steel decks of a battleship, but it would not handicap him in flying an airplane. In 1916 most of the flying was guided by the seat of one's pants. Here, Byrd learned the fundamentals of flying, the construction and maintenance of aircraft, and aerodynamics. He studied every book he could find on navigation and meteorology. Lieutenant Byrd received his wings on April 7, 1917, one of the early pioneers of naval aviation, one of the Golden Eagles.

Lieutenant Byrd served the remainder of World War I in aviation as Commanding Officer United States Naval Air Stations in Canada. In planning and executing anti-submarine patrols Byrd pioneered in night and all-weather flying, and designed improved navigation instruments. He had time to dream of the things he would like to do when the war was over. His thoughts reverted to his boyhood days in Winchester when he had recorded in his diary that he would be the first to reach the North Pole. This hope had been destroyed during Byrd's plebe year at the Academy, in 1919, when Admiral Peary reached the Pole. Familiarization with the area around Newfoundland gave birth to the idea of a transatlantic flight. He would be the first

to fly the Atlantic. The leg across the Atlantic would be reduced by flying from the United States to Halifax; to Trepassy, Newfoundland; to the Azores; and then on to Paris. Byrd submitted this plan to the Navy Department and hoped he would lead it. His proposal resulted in the first crossing of the Atlantic by air, but Byrd had been replaced by pilots of more senior rank. This was one of the number of disappointments young Byrd was to experience before he reached the zenith of his fame and contributions to the world. Three NC flying boats started the trip and one completed the flight to Lisbon. Though Byrd was keenly disappointed in not being one of the pilots he contributed materially to its success by being placed in charge of the navigational preparations for the flight. The press and the Navy Department gave him full credit for the Byrd Sextant, the bubble sextant he had invented. Also, other instruments he had perfected, such as the drift and speed indicator and the course and speed indicator. Byrd, in spite of his youth and junior rank, was getting a good reputation in Naval aviation.

Following the successful trans-Atlantic flight of the NC flying boat, Lieutenant Byrd reported for duty to Rear Admiral William A. Moffett, Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics. Byrd plunged into the duty assigned to him by Admiral Moffett, which was the establishment of naval reserve air stations throughout the country. The first went up at Squantum, Massachusetts. With little money but a great deal of enthusiasm and help from likely and unlikely sources, others followed at Minneapolis, Cleveland, Indianapolis, Chicago, Detroit, Sand Point in the State of Washington and at Rockaway, Long Island. Few of the weekend warriors that today fly from naval air reserve bases throughout the country know that it was Admiral Byrd who organized this program originally.

Even though engrossed in his work of base building Byrd never lost sight of the North Star, the one that shines so brilliantly over the North Pole. In 1924 he received the call that could result in fulfilling his dream. President Coolidge had approved the flight of the lighter-than-air craft SHENANDOAH over the North Pole. The flight would start from Point Barrow, Alaska, cross the Pole and land at Spitzbergen. Admiral Moffett ordered Byrd to Washington to participate in the planning by polar experts and scientific personnel. After several months of hard work he experienced another disappointment. The SHENANDOAH was severely damaged in a storm and returned to Lake-



hurst, New Jersey for major repairs. The expedition was cancelled.

Byrd, having been promoted to Lieutenant Commander, turned his thoughts to a private expedition over the North Pole by heavier-than-air craft. Herein he laid the pattern that would prove so successful in all his expeditions. He would obtain funds from private sources to defray the major cost of the expedition and borrow equipment such as planes, tractors and ships from government agencies. In return he would name newly discovered mountains, seas and lands for his benefactors and donate his photographs, charts and the results of his scientific investigations to the government. Dedicated explorers and scientists rarely prosper financially and Byrd was no exception. Although supported by private donations and government equipment his expeditions usually sailed in debt because he wanted the best and latest navigation and scientific equipment. When he returned home he paid off all these debts from the earnings of his books and lectures.

The operation of this Byrd-MacMillan expedition (1925) was also similar in pattern to Byrd's later expeditions. A ship to press forward through the ice, establishment of bases, and then exploration by aircraft. In this expedition Byrd was responsible for the flying and MacMillan responsible for the ship, base and over-land exploration. Byrd didn't reach the Pole by air but he learned a lot about flight operations, living in a hostile environment, and the rivalry of explorers in the polar regions.

In the fall of 1925 Lieutenant Commander Byrd's first story appeared in the National Geographic Magazine. This was the beginning of a valuable friendship with the magazine and the National Geographic Society. It would provide him with money, technical assistance and fame throughout the world in the next three decades.

In the winter of 1925 Byrd was planning his next assault on the North Pole. Instead of operating west of Greenland he planned to base at Spitzbergen, an island to the east. His take-off point would be King's Bay, 750 miles from the Pole. The Byrd Expedition, with one Fokker aircraft and a small Curtis Oriole, sailed in the CHANTIER in April 1926. The base was set up at Spitzbergen and the Fokker readied for flight. Byrd and Floyd Bennett took off for the Pole at approximately two a.m. May 9, 1926. After seven hours of flight they were over the

North Pole; they circled it and then headed south. The CHANTIER was a welcome sight to the tired Byrd who had been the first to fly over the North Pole, the second after Admiral Peary to reach that point. He landed on the runway at four-thirty p.m. to receive a hero's welcome by his shipmates. Boisterous as this was it was quiet in comparison to the reception by Mayor Jimmy Walker in New York City, which included a ticker tape parade down Broadway.

In 1926 Raymond Orteig of New York offered a prize of \$25,000 to the first man to fly non-stop across the Atlantic from New York to Paris. Byrd was not interested in the prize; it would cost him four times that much to get equipped properly. Here was a challenge that he had to accept just for the glory of it.

With the backing of the wealthy American, Rodman Wanamaker, Byrd acquired an improved three engine Fokker, equipped with modern safety devices, radio and navigation equipment. It was named AMERICA. He wished to prove on this flight that it would be practicable to establish a regular passenger service across the ocean. During the fall of 1926 quite a number of aviation enthusiasts threw their hats into the ring for the honor of being first across the Atlantic. In Paris, Charles Nungesser and Francois Coli were readying for a westward flight to New York. Lieutenant Commander Noel Davis, Rene Fonck, Charles Chamberlin and Charles Linbergh were all eager to win the "New York-Paris race."

Preparations and tests were hectic; within a month four crashes occurred. The Nungesser-Coli plane disappeared over the Atlantic. Chamberlin's plane crashed on a test flight, which put him out of the race. Lieutenant Commander Davis and his co-pilot crashed: both were killed. On April 20 Byrd, Bennett, Noville and Fokker tested their aircraft, the AMERICA. The plane was nose heavy due to the large reserve fuel tank in the rear of the fuselage which had not been filled for the test flight. Fokker, at the controls, could not keep the nose up when coming in for a landing. The plane crashed on the runway, cartwheeled, and turned over on its back. It took two months to repair the plane and the men. Another tragedy, another disappointment.

Charles Lindbergh, the young man from the west, took off from New York in his monoplane, "The Spirit of St. Louis" at



7:52 a.m. on May 20, 1927 and landed at Paris thirty-three hours later.

The AMERICA, with Byrd, Balchen, Acosta and Noville, departed New York on June 29, 1927 for Paris. They flew through the night. The afternoon of the second day found them over the English Channel, they crossed the French Coast at Brest, and set course for Paris. Then the worst possible news—fog over Paris. The plan circled the area for hours and then headed for the coast. It landed in the ocean, parallel to the Coast of France at Ver-sur-Mer. The men were rescued and returned to Paris and the United States to receive a hero's welcome.

While waving to the crowds during his second ticker tape parade in New York, Byrd was plotting the course for his next adventure. His arctic experience had whetted his curiosity for that mysterious land called Antarctica. Very little was known about it. The Norwegian, Roald Amundsen, had reached the South Pole by dog team in December 1911. The Englishman, Captain Robert Falcon Scott, reached it a month later, but he and his party perished on the return trip. Byrd would be the first to fly over both Poles. With his aircraft he would fly over vast areas of virgin territory, photograph it and claim it for the United States. He would take teams of scientists with him to unveil the secrets of this vast ice covered continent at the bottom of the world.

Byrd was a genius for organization, logistics and selection of personnel. He believed in delegating responsibility and authority. These fortunate characteristics allowed him to devote a good portion of his time to acquiring financial backing and assistance for his expeditions.

The first Byrd Antarctic Expedition sailed from the United States on August 28, 1928 for its destination via the Panama Canal and New Zealand. The fleet consisted of two ships, the CITY OF NEW YORK and the ELEANOR BOLLING. A Ford three-motored aircraft, a Fokker monoplane, a small Fairchild monoplane, one Ford snowmobile, caterpillar tractors, dog teams and fifty men rounded out the complement of the expedition. On January 1, 1929 Commander Byrd established a base on the Bay of Whales, Antarctica, that he named LITTLE AMERICA.

Explorations into the interior of the continent were made by aircraft and tractor train. Supporting parties were laid out towards the Pole. Byrd took off from Little America on November 28, 1929 in the ski-equipped trimotored monoplane FLOYD BENNETT for the South Pole. He was accompanied by Bernt Balchen, Harold I. June and Captain Ashley C. McKinley. He circled the Pole several times where he dropped the American flag. On his return to the United States in 1930 he was advanced to the rank of Rear Admiral.

Admiral Byrd was determined to return to Antarctica to explore more of the unknown portion of the continent. Despite the depression of 1929-30 he managed to launch a million dollar expedition. In 1933-35 he led a second expedition to the Antarctic and again established his base at Little America. Using modern transportation equipment vast new areas of the continent were discovered and photographed. It was on this expedition that Admiral Byrd lived alone through the winter night at an advanced base to record weather data. He nearly lost his life from carbon monoxide poisoning due to a faulty stove. He was rescued in time but the ill effects taxed his health for the remainder of his life. It is believed that it was during this isolation that the Admiral's thoughts began to change regarding the future of the Antarctic. Heretofore, the several nations interested in the continent had made claims to portions of it and in some instances they overlapped. Great rivalry among nations developed which led to what was called the "Antarctic Problem."

Byrd began to talk less of claims to the Antarctic and more about its future as an international domain for the good of all nations.

In 1939 President Roosevelt appointed Admiral Byrd commanding officer of the United States Antarctic Service. For the first time government agencies and money officially entered into Byrd's heretofore privately financed expeditions. It was to set a precedent for future American operations in the South Polar regions. The BEAR OF OAKLAND was commissioned in the Navy as the United States Ship BEAR, and manned entirely by a Navy crew. The U.S.S. BEAR and the NORTH STAR, a ship that belonged to the Interior Department, formed the small fleet that sailed as Byrd's third Antarctic Expedition. Two wintering over bases were established and scientific investigation assumed a more important role. The Admiral again flew over the South Pole and this time dropped the flags of all the nations



that had expeditions in the Antarctic. Byrd had planned to maintain his bases on the continent permanently, with ships returning annually to reprovision the bases and to replace the wintering over crews and scientists. However, the war clouds of World War II were gathering. Admiral Byrd evacuated his Antarctic bases in 1941.

When World War II came Admiral Byrd was ordered to active duty in the Navy's Bureau of Aeronautics. His experience in base building and aviation fitted him eminently for the task of surveying and reporting on the suitability of constructing airfields on the islands in the Pacific. In May 1942 Admiral Byrd and his inspection team departed San Francisco in the U.S.S. MACKINAC to conduct his survey. He inspected and made recommendations for bases at Bora Bora, Nouméa, Palmyra, Tutuila, Upolu, Wallis, Tongatabee, Suva Nandi and Efate. His reports contained detailed recommendations for base facilities, personnel, numbers and types of aircraft, defense, communications and weather reporting. Admiral Nimitz used these reports in planning his island hopping strategy. In 1943 President Roosevelt was thinking of commercial air routes across the Pacific when the war was won. Byrd was designated to head a fourteen man mission composed of Army, Navy and civilian air transport experts to conduct a survey for this purpose. For his war work Admiral Byrd received a letter of commendation from the Secretary of the Navy and two Legions of Merit. He was aboard the U.S.S. MISSOURI with General McArthur and Admiral Nimitz when the Japanese formally surrendered.

In 1946, with the war over, Admiral Nimitz, who was now Chief of Naval Operations, had a huge fleet on his hands that would take some time to demobilize. He had to keep his ships and men busy until the fleet was reduced to peace time size. The government had become interested in the "Antarctic Problem." Nimitz felt that the Navy should be trained to operate in all areas of the world, including the Polar regions. He called in his friend, Admiral Byrd, and together they planned "Operation Highjump." Byrd would head the largest Antarctic expedition in history. It would consist of thirteen ships, modern aircraft and tractors and 4,700 men. Byrd, the innovator, had something new up his sleeve. The Task Force Commander, Rear Admiral Richard Cruzen, led the cargo ships into the Bay of Whales and built a base at Little America Number 4. Byrd rode the aircraft carrier PHILIPPINE SEA and when north of the pack ice and

north of Little America, he took off in the lead plane of the four R4D Navy aircraft. The planes were fitted with special landing gear consisting of a combination of skis and wheels. Three inches of wheel protruded beneath the skis for take-off from the deck of the carrier. The skis were for landing on a snow surface. All planes landed safely at Little America. In addition to this air unit two seaplane tenders operated north of the pack and launched their huge PBM seaplanes from open water to scout the Antarctic Coast three to five hundred miles to the south. The seaplanes discovered hundreds of miles of new coastline. The huge planes at Little America discovered thousands of square miles of new Antarctic territory, scores of mountain ranges and several islands. Byrd flew over the South Pole again and dropped a box containing the flags of the United Nations.

When Admiral Byrd returned to the United States in 1947 he was fifty-nine years old. He devoted his time to the promotion of peace. He became chairman of the Iron Curtain Refugee Campaign of the International Rescue Committee. He was active in Operation Brotherhood which directed its efforts to helping the government of South Vietnam. His writings and lectures advocated the establishment of the Antarctic as an international laboratory for science. But always his thoughts were of returning to Antarctica which he thought of as his second home.

In 1954 the Secretary of Defense, Mr. Charles Wilson, agreed to furnish logistic support for our American scientists in the Antarctic for the International Geophysical Year (July 1, 1957-58). This involved the establishment and support of seven bases on the Continent, including one at the South Pole. He designated the Navy as executive agent.

<sup>14</sup> President Eisenhower appointed Admiral Byrd Officer-in-Charge, United States Antarctic Programs, and as such he became the senior United States representative charged with maintaining effective monitorship over all political, scientific, legislative and operational activities which comprised the total United States Antarctic program.

Admiral Byrd headed south for the last time in 1955. He received a warm welcome in Christchurch, New Zealand, where he had been made an honorary citizen. He took his usual walk to the statue of Captain Robert Falcon Scott that stood in a small park of flowers. He again read the inscription at its base.



“In seeking to unveil the  
Pole they found the hidden  
things of God.”

Admiral Byrd sailed for Antarctica in the icebreaker U.S.S. **GLACIER**. He again raised the American flag at Little America on the Bay of Whales. His untimely death in 1957 precluded his participation in the Antarctic Treaty (1959) which fulfilled his dreams of making Antarctica an international laboratory for scientific investigation. In general, this treaty provides that in this vast area larger than the United States and Europe combined, there shall be no nuclear explosions, no military bases or operations, and no claims to territory. There shall be free inspection of all bases and activities, mutual support and cooperation in and exchange of scientific investigations.

If Admiral Byrd, the Father of the Antarctic Treaty, were alive today he would be actively advocating a similar treaty in Space.

Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd died in his home at 9 Brimmer Street, Boston, Massachusetts on March 11, 1957. He was buried with full military honors at the National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia.

George Dufek  
Rear Admiral, USN, Retired

## AWARDS, MEDALS AND HONORS

### REAR ADMIRAL RICHARD EVELYN BYRD

In addition to the Medal of Honor, Navy Cross, Distinguished Service Medal with Gold Star, the Distinguished Flying Cross, Legion of Merit with Gold Star, the Commendation Ribbon, the Medals commending the Antarctic Expeditions of 1928-30, 1933-35, 1939-41, and the Silver Lifesaving Medal, Rear Admiral Byrd had the following service medals: Mexican Service Medal; Victory Medal, with Aviatric Clasp and Silver Star (for letter of commendation for World War I Service); American Defense Service Medal, American Campaign Medal; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal; European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal; and the World War II Victory Medal. He also earned the Sharpshooter's Medal, the Navy Expert Rifleman's Medal, and the Navy Expert Pistol Shot's Medal.

He had also received the following decorations from foreign countries: Legion of Honor, rank of Officer, from the Government of France, July 18, 1928, advanced to rank of Commander in this Order, February 1930; Commander of the Military Order of Avis, from the Government of Portugal, September 13, 1921; Illustrious Citizen and Diploma, from the Government of Chile, May 28, 1941; the Virtuton Aeronautica Commandor, from the Government of Rumania, June 1935; and the Vega Medal of the Swedish Society for Anthropology and Geography, April 24, 1948.

Rear Admiral Byrd also had Gold Medals from the following civil organizations:

Geographic Society of Cuba, 1928  
National Geographic Society, 1926 (Hubbard Gold Medal)  
National Geographic Society, 1930  
American Geographical Society, 1939 (David Livingston Centena Gold Medal)  
Smithsonian Institution, 1929 (Langley Medal)  
Pacific Geographic Society, 1937  
Chicago Geographic Society, 1929 (Helen Culver Medal)  
Chicago Geographic Society, 1930  
Philadelphia Geographic Society, 1926 (Elisha Kent Kane Medal)

He was member of more than two hundred societies and clubs.



## **Awards, Medals and Honors**

### **Rear Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd (Continued)**

On February 21, 1957 the Secretary of Defense awarded the Medal of Freedom to Rear Admiral Byrd for especially meritorious service in the interest of the security of the United States, and in recognition of his outstanding accomplishments as Officer-in-Charge, U. S. Antarctic Programs, and his humanitarian contribution to the world. Admiral Burke, Chief of Naval Operations, presented the Medal in Boston, "On behalf of the American people, as well as the Secretary of Defense and the many key officials of the Government who recognize Admiral Byrd's very great achievements and contributions in polar scientific and geographic exploration. The citation follows:

"To Rear Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd, USN, Retired, for exceptionally meritorious service to the United States. As Officer in Charge, U. S. Antarctic Programs, since October 21, 1955, Admiral Byrd has demonstrated outstanding leadership and great skill. By virtue of his unparalleled experience, he has made a unique contribution to the Antarctic expeditions of the past three years, the development of permanent Antarctic legislation and international scientific understanding and good will. He has exercised his special talents in the promotion of United States interests in the Antarctic with foreign countries and has personally laid the ground work for the present large-scale Antarctic effort of the United States. These accomplishments represent a lifetime of services which has encompassed unequalled exploits of skill, daring and imagination, including a flight across the Atlantic Ocean, the initial flights across the North and South Poles and five historic expeditions to Antarctic. His actions and performance of these duties have been in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Government service. It gives me great pleasure to award Admiral Byrd the Medal of Freedom."