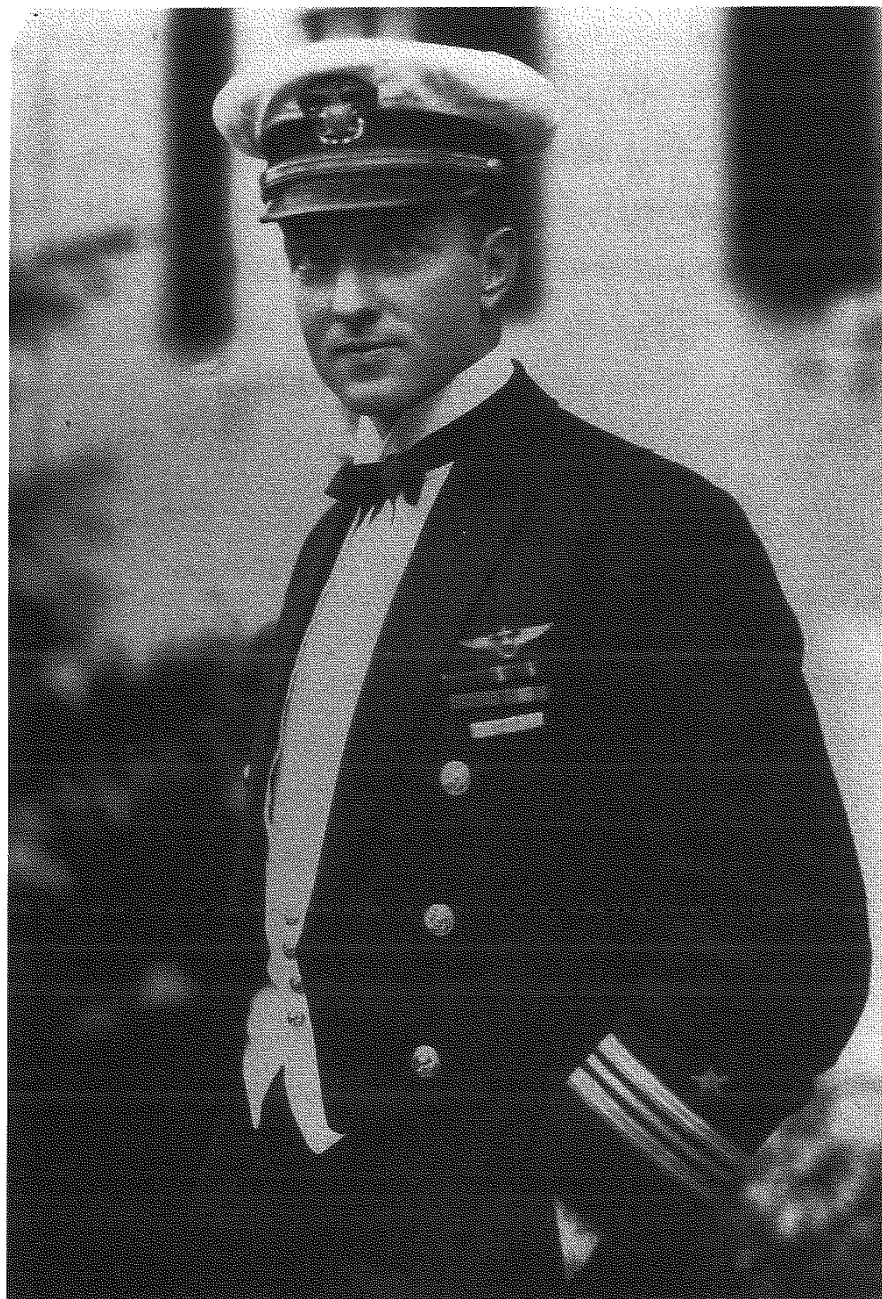


The war in Europe, begun in 1914, was proving the usefulness of aircraft as military weapons, especially for observation of troop movements and submarines. Airplanes covered more area faster and were less vulnerable to weather and enemy fire than balloons. After the United States entered the war in 1917, Byrd proposed flying the flying boats to Europe instead of shipping them. The Navy promoted Byrd to the temporary rank of lieutenant commander and assigned him to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to watch for German submarines and to establish refueling stations, which would make flying boats' transatlantic crossing possible.

When—unfortunately for Byrd—the war ended in November 1918, so did the urgency for getting airplanes to European battlefields. But he remained enthusiastic about a transatlantic crossing by flying boats as a natural development of aviation and navigation. In 1919 Byrd joined the newly created Transatlantic Flight Section of the Bureau of Aeronautics and continued to work on problems of navigation and logistics. Eventually he developed a bubble sextant and a wind-drift indicator that enabled navigators to fix their location quickly in flight, without reference to landmarks. On May 29, 1919, having set out from Long Island and after numerous stops at sea, the flying boat NC-4 reached Lisbon. This was the first transatlantic crossing. Two weeks later, on June 15, the Englishmen John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown completed a successful flight from St. John's, Newfoundland, to Clifden, Ireland, in sixteen hours and twelve minutes—the first nonstop flight across the Atlantic.⁸

8. Richard K. Smith, *First Across! The U.S. Navy's Transatlantic Flight of 1919* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1973), 191.



Byrd as a young naval officer. (BP, folder 7638)

Byrd himself had not made the U.S. Navy's first transatlantic flight, but he had made important contributions to its planning and navigation.⁹ Although disappointed at not being on the transatlantic crossing itself, Byrd remained an influen-

9. Richard E. Byrd, *Skyward* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), 78–99; also see “Statement of the contribution of Lieut. Commander Richard E.

tial figure in naval aviation. He returned to Washington and led the effort to create a Department of Aeronautics in the U.S. Navy. With the Navy, he joined in opposing Colonel Billy Mitchell's efforts to create an air force independent from those operated by the Navy and the Army. Byrd testified to Congress in 1919 in support of the Navy and its air force.

As a reward for his services and in recognition of his desire to participate in another transatlantic flight, Admiral William A. Moffett, chief of the newly created Bureau of Aeronautics, ordered Byrd to duty in England. His navigational expertise would be useful to the crew assigned to fly the British-made dirigible ZR-2 to the United States in 1921. In England, however, Byrd missed his train—and the takeoff of the ill-starred ZR-2. While in flight, the dirigible exploded. Forty-five people died, including fourteen American aviators. Byrd became responsible for making a report about the incident and for working with the U.S. ambassador in acknowledging expressions of sympathy and condolences.

Despite the fate of the ZR-2, Byrd returned to Washington still a firm proponent of naval aviation. In 1922, he successfully proposed that the Navy continue to maintain a corps of trained pilots by organizing veterans into naval reserve units. Byrd was charged with the task of creating an air station in Massachusetts to train reserve pilots. His success there led to assignments in Chicago to organize more naval reserve units.

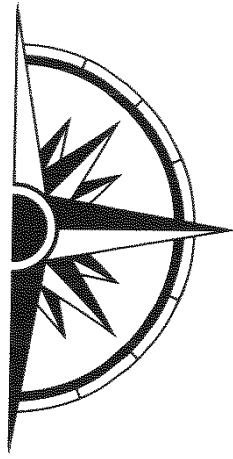
In 1924 Byrd returned to Washington to help the U.S. Navy in a political battle with Congress. A frugal-minded Congress proposed reducing the salaries of all servicemen. Byrd's

Byrd to the Success of the Recent Transatlantic flight," BP, folder 4127. The story of this transatlantic expedition is told in Smith, *First Across!*



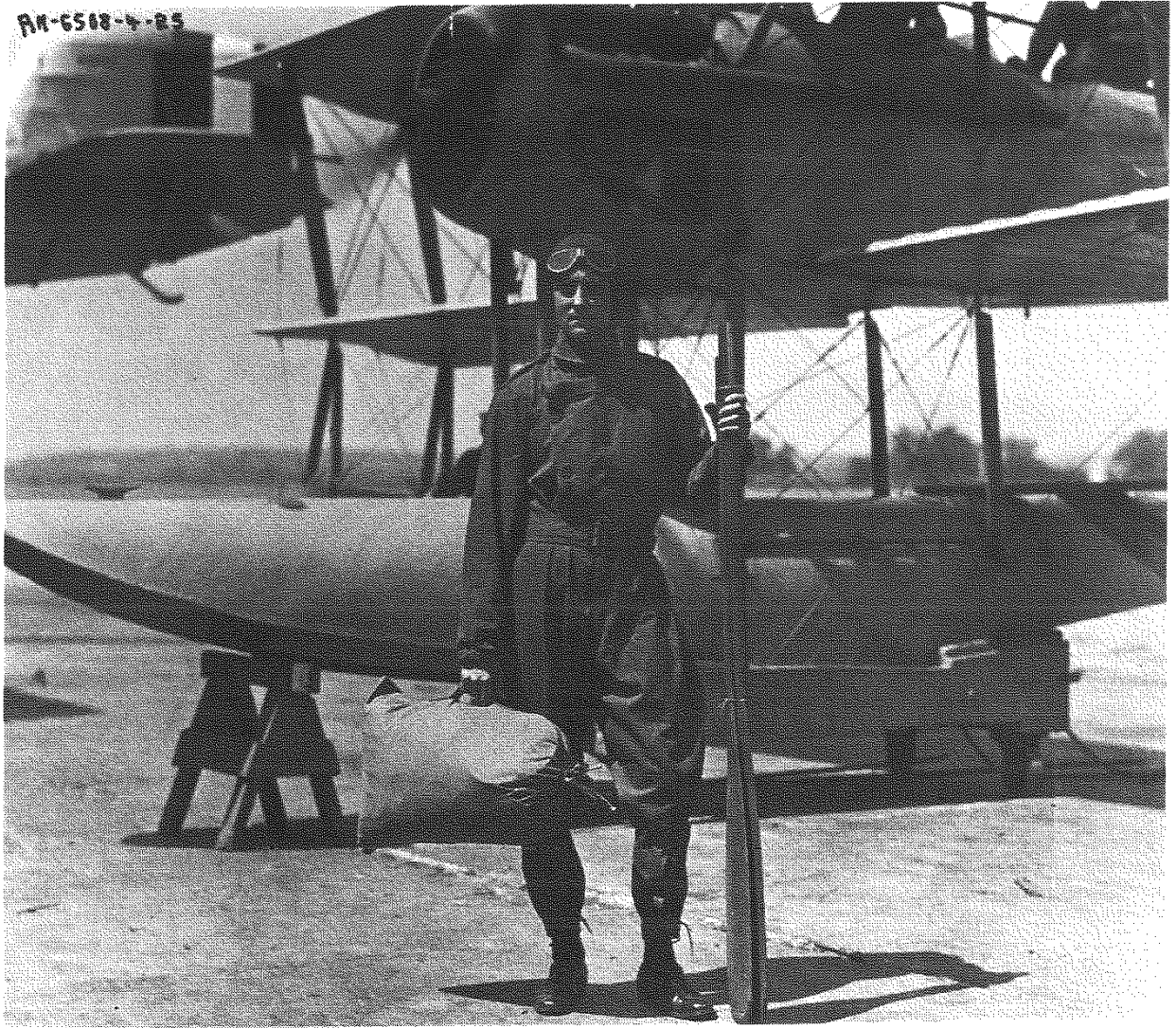
previous successes made him a central figure in the campaign not to lower military salaries. In the end, he managed not only to save salaries but also to win a congressional promotion—the only way for a retired officer to advance in rank—to lieutenant commander.

By 1924, the thirty-six-year-old retired naval officer from Winchester, Virginia, had achieved much, but not fame. He had demonstrated courage at sea, innovation in the air, leadership in his naval assignments, and political acumen in the capital. In the Navy and in Congress he had attracted the favorable attention of powerful and influential men. All these would be helpful to him in the future.



The Greenland Expedition of 1925

EXPLORATION OF THE ARCTIC BEGAN FOUR hundred years ago, first as a search for an ice-free passage for vessels and then as a quest for the North Pole. In 1909, when Richard Byrd was ten, Robert Peary, traveling by dogsled, asserted that he had reached the North Pole. Peary proved that there was no land at the North Pole and that there was no ice-free sea through which ships could pass, but his expedition raised new questions as well as answering some old ones. On his way to the North Pole, Peary had seen “Crocker Land,” which he had not been able to reach. Dr. Frederick Cook, who claimed to have reached the North Pole a year before Peary, had also reported the existence of a mysterious land (he named it “Bradleyland” in honor of his financial sponsor). What were these lands, and what did they contain? What lands and areas had the explorers overlooked in their quest for the North Pole? Much mapping and surveying remained to be done.



Byrd on the MacMillan Greenland expedition, posing with one of his airplanes, 1925. (BP, folder 7710)

Scientists had their own questions about the Arctic. They wanted to know about its climate and meteorology, terrestrial magnetism, ocean currents, natural resources, wildlife, and native peoples. Explorations on foot, however heroic, had barely opened the north for scientific investigation.

As early as 1897, the first attempt had been made to observe the Arctic from the air. Hot-air balloons had been used for battlefield observations, especially during the American

Civil War. A Swedish engineer, Salomon August Andrée, proposed to use a specially designed balloon to reach the North Pole and explore the Arctic. Backed by several scientific organizations and his government, Andrée and two companions boarded their balloon, the *Eagle*, and flew to the Arctic in 1897. From then on, nothing was known of them until, in 1931, a party of hunters found their bodies and their journals on White Island in the Arctic Ocean.¹

The disastrous result of Andrée's efforts did not stop others from trying aerial exploration. In 1907 and 1909, Walter Wellman, a journalist, flew powered dirigibles rather than balloons into the Arctic. In an attempt to stir up patriotic fervor for his cause, he named his crafts *America*. Wellman's dirigibles failed because of bad weather, logistical problems, and mechanical difficulties.²

The invention of the airplane by Wilbur and Orville Wright in 1903 and its development during World War I excited polar explorers, including Peary. Planes that took off and landed at sea might be able to use cracks in the ice to their advantage, as places to land and refuel. Another possibility was to attach skis so that the airplanes could land on snow—provided that the surfaces were smooth enough. But light airplanes depended on the internal combustion engine, which did not perform well in extreme cold, and the strong and unpredictable Arctic winds could easily push the fragile airplanes off course.

1. Clive Holland, *Farthest North: The Quest for the North Pole* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1994), 141–54; Pierre Berton, *The Arctic Grail: The Quest for the Northwest Passage and the North Pole, 1818–1909* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 498–510.

2. Holland, *Farthest North*, 181–92.