



The North Pole Flight of 1926

IN SPITE OF HIS LIMITED ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN Greenland, Lieutenant Commander Richard Byrd predicted, “Aviation will conquer the Arctic—and the Antarctic, too. But it will be difficult and hazardous. These things, however, only increase the extraordinary lure of the Polar regions. . . . The world was determined that the North Pole should be reached, and now it will not be content until the secrets of this unexplored area are revealed.”¹

At the time, others shared Byrd’s vision of using aircraft to reach the North Pole. George Hubert Wilkins, an Australian cinematographer, naturalist, and pilot, raised money from the Detroit Aviation Society and the North American Newspaper

1. Richard E. Byrd, “Flying over the Arctic,” *National Geographic Magazine* 48, no. 5 (November 1925): 519.

Alliance and began preparations for a transpolar flight from Alaska. He expected to fly from Point Barrow to Spitzbergen, and he invited Byrd to join the expedition as second-in-command. Instead of focusing on the North Pole, however, Wilkins claimed that his goal was to explore undiscovered areas and to find places for weather stations.²

Also in 1926, Roald Amundsen organized a multinational expedition to fly a dirigible from Spitzbergen to Point Barrow. The Italian government under Benito Mussolini sold a newly designed and improved dirigible, the *Norge*, to Amundsen at a discount. Umberto Nobile, the designer, was a member of the expedition. Amundsen chose a dirigible over an airplane as a result of the failure of his and Lincoln Ellsworth's 1925 attempt to fly planes to the pole. One of their two planes developed mechanical problems, and both landed on the ice; Amundsen and Ellsworth managed to fly one plane back to safety only after a perilous month spent on the ice. Their experience made the idea of a lighter-than-air vehicle capable of traveling great distances without refueling more attractive to both men. Private donations, the contributions of the Aero Club of Norway, and an exclusive contract with the *New York Times*, negotiated by Ellsworth, made their 1926 multinational expedition possible.

Richard Byrd organized his expedition with the North Pole as his objective. From the Federal War Shipping Board, the oversight agency for surplus vessels remaining from World War I, Byrd leased the USS *Chantier* for six months.³ Byrd

2. George Hubert Wilkins, *Flying the Arctic* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), 21.

3. Edwin P. Hoyt, *The Last Explorer: The Adventures of Admiral Byrd* (New York: John Day, 1968), 99, contains a statement that Byrd paid only one dollar

planned to carry his supplies, his crew, and his airplanes for the flight to the North Pole on the *Chantier*. Unfortunately, the ship was so small that the airplanes had to be disassembled for storage.

The choice of aircraft was a major decision. As late as January 30, 1926, Byrd was considering the possibility of using a dirigible rather than a fixed-wing aircraft, but then a three-engine Fokker became available for purchase at a reasonable price.⁴ The three engines offered more safety than one, as the plane could fly some distance on only two engines.⁵ In fact, Byrd's trimotor Fokker had demonstrated its superior dependability by winning the Ford Reliability Tour of 1925, a sixteen-hundred-mile schedule of intercity flights. Unlike Amundsen and Ellsworth in 1925, Byrd would not be forced to land because of difficulties with one engine.⁶ A second, single-engined

for the lease of the *Chantier*. Hoyt did not have access to Byrd's papers, which did not come to Ohio State until 1985. Among these papers is the contract for the *Chantier*, which was leased for \$3,375 for the first four months and \$968.75 for each of the following months. According to the contract, Byrd was responsible for repairs to the vessel and all port charges. See Charter, United States Shipping Board Emergency Fleet Corporation, March 24, 1926, BP, folder 4322.

4. Statement by Lieut. Commander R. E. Byrd, January 30, 1926, BP, folder 4256. See also the letter from Richard Byrd to Vincent Astor, January 13, 1926 (BP, folder 4243), in which Byrd reported that Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company had offered to sell him a 320,000-cubic-foot airship for \$18,000.

5. The two-engine aircraft of the time could not continue to fly safely if one engine failed. See Peter M. Bowers, *Yesterday's Wings* (Washington, D.C.: Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, 1974), 26.

6. The type of plane Byrd chose, a Fokker VII-3m, also established other endurance and reliability records. Fokker VII-3m's flew nonstop from San Francisco to Honolulu and from San Francisco to Australia. See Michael J. H. Taylor, ed., *Jane's Encyclopedia of Aviation* (New York: Portland House, 1989), 406.

plane, the *Oriole*, was to be used for rescue work and for filming the flight.

The importance of the three-engine airplane in this context cannot be overstated. The final statement to the press after the *Chantier* left New York City declared that while the expedition was “clean sport,” and the “adventurous side of this expedition appeal[ed] to every man going on it,” there was also a practical objective: “Conquering the Arctic with multi-motored planes will give an impetus to commercial aviation . . . the multi-motored plane is the answer. Science has made aircraft safe enough for commercial use. The stage is set. Confidence is all that is needed to lift the curtain on an era of rapid development in air commerce.”⁷

Byrd purchased the engines separately from the plane itself, choosing air-cooled motors from the Wright Aeronautical Corporation. Selection of a coolant was of special importance, for the cold of the Arctic challenged the viscosity of oils. Even Edsel Ford approved of Byrd’s selection of these motors over those of his own company: “Your selection of Wright air-cooled motors is a good one, and I believe this motor is by far the best worked out one of its type at the present time. The multi-motored plane is a great boon to safe transportation, and I believe eliminates 90% of the hazard, although I doubt that you will be able to find a plane that will stay aloft with one motor running only, under any consideration.”⁸

7. SS *Chantier* Farewell Statement, BP, folder 4298.

8. Edsel B. Ford to Lieut. Commander R. E. Byrd, February 2, 1926, BP, folder 4269. The actual contract with the Wright Aeronautical Corporation of Paterson, N.J., is in BP, folder 4327. Byrd purchased the airplane from the Atlantic Aircraft Corporation, a company owned by Anthony Fokker, for \$25,000. See R. E. Byrd to Atlantic Aircraft Corporation, February 10, 1926, BP, folder 4244.

Another fateful decision was the location of a base. Byrd knew from the 1925 expedition that good flying conditions in Greenland arrived late in the summer and departed soon after. Spitzbergen in Norway was more attractive than Point Barrow, the most northerly point in the United States, for two reasons. First, it was nearly four hundred miles closer to the North Pole than Point Barrow was. This relative proximity meant that Byrd's expedition need not (except as a precaution) stock fuel depots on the route to the North Pole, only to have to find them in bad weather conditions, land on the dangerous ice to refuel, and then take off again.

A second factor in favor of Spitzbergen as a base was its harbor. Warmed by the Gulf Stream, the harbor became open to shipping in the early spring. The *Chantier* could anchor in the harbor in late April or May. The Fokker could be reassembled on land and make its dash for the pole well before good flying weather came to Greenland.

For money to lease the *Chantier* and to buy the airplane, the engines, and supplies, Byrd turned to the same people who had helped him in 1925. Edsel Ford gave him \$20,000, even though Byrd had chosen a Fokker over a Ford. In gratitude, Byrd named the Fokker the *Josephine Ford*, after Ford's three-year-old daughter. John D. Rockefeller contributed an equal amount, and Byrd received additional donations from Vincent Astor and others.

To supplement this funding, Byrd turned to the news media,

This document contradicts a statement in *Yesterday's Wings* (26) that Edsel Ford purchased the plane for Byrd. After the national tour that followed the North Pole flight of 1926, Byrd gave his North Pole plane to the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan.

guaranteeing them stories if they would make the expedition possible. For example, Pathe News, a producer of newsreels, signed a contract with Byrd that gave them the “exclusive right to take motion pictures.” The contract also pledged Byrd to “prevent by every means possible, other companies or cameramen from taking any motion pictures whatsoever of the expedition or any of its operations.” In return, Byrd would receive financial support for the expedition, earnings from any of Pathe’s motion pictures about the expedition, and two prints to use in lectures.⁹ The *New York Times* also invested money in the expedition in exchange for stories. A contract with the Pond agency promised Byrd a lecture tour after the expedition as a way to defray any debts he had incurred.

Finally, Byrd signed a contract with David Lawrence of Current News Features which guaranteed financial support for the expedition in exchange for the rights to receive and sell articles and photographs about the expedition to other newspapers. The least Byrd would receive from his attempt, even if it failed, was \$18,000.¹⁰ A successful flight would earn as much as \$30,000 if Byrd wrote enough firsthand accounts.

On April 5, 1926, the *Chantier*, under the command of Michael J. Brennan of the Merchant Marine, left New York City with much publicity and celebration. The expedition exemplified Byrd’s skill as an organizer and careful planner. The *Chan-*

9. Pathe Exchange, Inc., to Lieut. Commander R. E. Byrd, March 10, 1926, BP, folder 4289.

10. Current News Features Incorporated to Commander Richard E. Byrd, February 6, 1926, BP, folder 4251. Byrd signed the contract, which eventually paid him \$30,000, on February 13.

tier carried two airplanes and their fuel, food to sustain the expedition for six months, and enough coal for fifteen thousand miles, or half again as much as Byrd expected to need—a lesson learned the previous year.

Also on board were fifty volunteers.¹¹ Originally, Byrd had expected to have to beg for volunteers from the Navy reserves, with whom he had worked during and after World War I, but excitement about the Byrd Arctic Expedition was so widespread that more men volunteered than could be used. Particularly noteworthy among the crew were the pilot Floyd Bennett, who had been on the 1925 expedition, and Lieutenant George Noville, a former naval officer and flight engineer with expertise in lubricating agents for aircraft engines. Byrd made Noville his executive officer, the individual responsible for directly supervising and coordinating the crew.

Another distinguished volunteer was Malcolm Hanson, a civilian on loan from the Naval War Research Laboratory. Shortwave radio was still in its infancy, especially in the Arctic, where magnetic interference made communication difficult. Hanson had the important responsibility of installing a reliable shortwave system in the *Josephine Ford* and the *Chantier*. Clearly, the Byrd Arctic Expedition expected to profit from advances in shortwave communication following the expedition to Greenland in 1925.

Byrd's selection of two other volunteers showed his caution and attention to detail. William C. Haines of the U.S. Weather Bureau helped identify the best conditions for a flight to the North Pole. Byrd also had Harold (Doc) Kinkaid, of the

11. A list of the members of the expedition is in BP folder 4252.