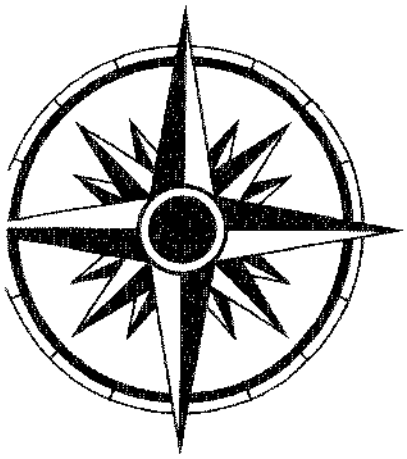

The Transatlantic Flight of 1927

A FEW DAYS AFTER THE *CHANTIER* AND BYRD RETURNED to New York on June 23, Rodman Wanamaker, the department store owner, sent the commander a letter of congratulations in which he said, "I hope you will have great success in carrying on to completion the wonderful pioneering scientific work of further exploration, which has reflected so much credit upon the United States." Wanamaker had been a financial contributor to Byrd's expedition. After Byrd's polar flight, Wanamaker made a final donation to cover part of the expedition's deficit, which totaled more than $32,000.[1] A

1. Rodman Wanamaker to Commander Richard E. Byrd, July 1, 1926, BP, folder 4328; Richard E. Byrd to Raymond B. Fosdick, December 31, 1926, BP, folder 4266.

grateful Byrd cooperated with Wanamaker, allowing him to display the *Josephine Ford* at his Philadelphia store as a highlight of its celebration of the national sesquicentennial in July 1926.[2]

On July 9, Wanamaker hosted a special luncheon in honor of the members of the Byrd Arctic Expedition. Instead of delivering a speech, he welcomed his guests by reading from a letter he had written to the president of the Aero Club of America in New York on February 4, 1914. "In the cause of science and in the interest of world peace I have the honor to announce first of all to the Aero Club of America my intention to make a scientific test of aeronautic power by crossing the Atlantic Ocean in one flight, if possible." Wanamaker believed that airplanes capable of transatlantic flight would end the military competition among nations to build fleets of huge battleships that could be "destroyed by one aeroplane dropping bombs from the air." Wanamaker also believed that once airplanes could cross the Atlantic without stopping, a transatlantic passenger airline industry would develop. In 1914 Wanamaker had commissioned Glen H. Curtiss, a pioneer in the development of airplanes, to design and build a plane capable of flying across the Atlantic.

Wanamaker's 1914 proposal, not surprisingly, was overshadowed by the outbreak of World War I. By restating it at a celebration of Byrd's polar triumph, Wanamaker implicitly challenged Byrd to attempt a transatlantic flight. "I have read this letter carefully to you. It seems but a child's dream compared with the wonderful expedition that Commander Byrd

2. Richard H. Waldo to Lieutenant G. O. Noville, June 29, 1926, BP, folder 4328; also Richard E. Byrd to Rodman Wanamaker, July 3, 1926, BP, folder 4328.

and his crew have just made, but it indicates to you just how quickly America forges ahead, and always will be ahead, and it will be for you men, with your daring and your pluck to go ahead."[3] Byrd himself had been interested in transatlantic flight since his days at Pensacola and his navigational contributions to the U.S. Navy's crossing from New York to Lisbon in 1919. The success of the flight to the North Pole reawakened his ambition to fly across the Atlantic.[4]

Byrd also shared Wanamaker's interest in the development of commercial aviation. After exhibiting the *Josephine Ford* at Wanamaker's, Byrd lent the plane to the U.S. Department of Commerce and the Guggenheim Aviation Fund for a "tour of the United States to demonstrate the practicability of commercial aviation and to help to open up air ports in various cities." Floyd Bennett and Bernt Balchen flew the plane from Washington to San Francisco and back, stopping along the way at forty-four cities.[5]

With Wanamaker's support, Byrd organized the America Trans Oceanic Company. Wanamaker's conditions for backing Byrd were that a plane be specially built to accomplish a nonstop crossing, that it be named *America* in memory of the plane

3. Speech given by Rodman Wanamaker at the luncheon in honor of the members of the Byrd Arctic Expedition, July 9, 1926, BP, folder 4327.

4. In *Skyward*, Byrd stated that he had a transatlantic flight on his mind during the return to New York from Spitzbergen: "When we hoisted anchor at Spitzbergen after the North Pole flight I turned to Bennett and said 'Now we can fly the Atlantic.'" Richard E. Byrd, *Skyward* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), 222.

5. See BP, folder 4282. On this national tour, Bernt Balchen studied the speed and fuel consumption of the *Josephine Ford* and reached his conclusion that the plane could not have reached the North Pole in the time Byrd reported.

Wanamaker had commissioned in 1914, and that its destination be France, where Wanamaker had once lived.[6] Byrd was responsible for planning the flight and selecting the airplane and the crew. He also raised money for the venture by selling stories to newspapers.

Wanamaker was not the only supporter of his earlier expeditions whose backing or participation Byrd solicited for his transatlantic attempt. Once again he chose Floyd Bennett to be the pilot. Lieutenant George Noville would be his engineer. Malcolm Hanson, who had worked so long on radio communications on the USS *Chantier*, designed a special radio set for the *America*. Doc Kinkaid, the mechanic for the *Josephine Ford*, assisted with the engines of the *America*. Finally, the National Geographic Society aided Byrd by providing the services of its chief cartographer, Albert H. Bumstead, inventor of the sun compass. (Byrd had made the first field use of this instrument during the 1925 Greenland expedition.)

In choosing a plane, Byrd again turned to a Fokker trimotor. Because Wanamaker was willing to pay for a new plane, Byrd was able to work with Anthony Fokker at his plant in New Jersey in designing and testing the airplane to which he would be entrusting both his life and his reputation. Many innovations were made in the interests of safety. For example, Byrd designed a special valve that allowed the crew, in the event of a disaster, to dump gasoline from the engines quickly. Bennett added a cutoff switch that would shut down all engines simultaneously if a crash landing and fire seemed imminent.

6. Byrd. *Skyward*, 222–50.

Another safety feature that in retrospect seems foolish was catwalks on the outside of the airplane. While the plane was in the air, the crew could in theory attend to any mechanical difficulties by hanging onto the catwalks and braving the wind and the cold.

Byrd saw to it that a luminous coating was applied to the plane's instruments so that they could be read even if the lights failed, and he prepared for the dangers posed by the weather by employing a meteorologist, as he had for the North Pole flight. The U.S. Weather Bureau assigned Dr. James H. Kimball of its New York office to make weather predictions, and for the first time in history, regular weather maps for aviation were made of the North Atlantic.

Byrd even had a special runway designed and built for the *America* at Roosevelt Field on Long Island, which Wanamaker had leased. A large, three-engine airplane needed a longer, smoother runway to reach the fast ground speed that would make the takeoff safer. To increase the plane's speed during taxi and takeoff without consuming extra fuel, Byrd had a hill built at the beginning of the runway.

All these measures reflected Byrd's characteristically careful organization, but he was also determined to advance the development of commercial transatlantic air service, for which safer planes would be a sine qua non. In addition, potential users of such a service had to be able to see that airplanes could carry more than just a pilot, a navigator, and the cargo they would need.

Consequently, the *America* was not designed with a heroic flight by a solo pilot in mind. It would carry a crew of four

and some eight hundred pounds of emergency equipment and cargo. Its stores included a kite for a wireless antenna if the plane landed on the ocean (the kite could double as a sail), two rubber rafts, enough food for three weeks, and special machinery to distill water. The *America* also carried a mailbag containing the first official transatlantic airmail.

Despite all the safety precautions, a spectacular accident marred the *America*'s first test flight, on April 20, 1927. Anthony Fokker himself was piloting the new plane, and Bennett, Byrd, and Noville were passengers. During the landing, the airplane hit the ground nose first and somersaulted on its back. Although the damage to the *America* was not irreparable, Bennett suffered such serious injuries that he had to withdraw from the project.

Byrd's setback worked to his rivals' advantage. The first to fly across the Atlantic would be seen as a hero and become a national celebrity. Cash as well as fame awaited the winner. In 1925 Raymond Orteig, the owner of a hotel in New York, renewed his offer of a $25,000 prize for anyone who would fly "from Paris or the shores of France to New York or from New York to Paris or the shores of France, without stop, within five years from June 1, 1925," which he had first announced in 1919.[7] Byrd, however, insisted that his team was not in competition for the prize. As early as March 28, 1927, the America Trans Oceanic Company issued a statement to the press that its goal was to "help the progress of aviation" and that "Mr. Wanamaker is simply trying to assist aviation progress and is even

7. "The Raymond Orteig $24,000 Prize," BP folder 4357; Richard Montague, *Oceans, Poles and Airmen: The First Flights over Wide Waters and Desolate Ice* (New York: Random House, 1971), 26–27.

Byrd being sworn in as an official mail carrier by the U.S. Post Office Department. (BP, folder 7747)