

Curtiss-Wright aircraft company, on board to apply his technical expertise to the *Josephine Ford's* engines.

Despite the careful preparations, however, numerous problems arose. First, though many in the crew were not experienced seamen, they faced the challenge of securing the precious airplanes against potentially rough and ice-covered seas. When the *Chantier* reached King's Bay at Spitzbergen on April 29, a Norwegian gunboat, the *Heimdahl*, blocked the harbor. Its captain refused to move from the one pier—even for a few hours—because he feared that the ice floating near the harbor would damage his vessel.

Instead of waiting for the *Heimdahl* to move, Byrd, inflamed by the sight of Amundsen and Ellsworth's expedition making its preparations, ordered his crew to make a pontoon bridge from the *Chantier* to shore. The crew nailed planks across the ship's lifeboats and hauled the planes and other cargo to the island. Any wave or floating cake of ice could at this point have ended the expedition—and possibly the career of its commander.

Once Byrd was safely ashore, another problem awaited him. He had little experience with taking off and landing an airplane with skis. His previous experiences had been with pontoons and with wheels; skis were more fragile, and they had not been used on the 1925 expedition to Greenland. The weight of the plane and its three engines caused the first attempted flight at Spitzbergen to end in broken skis. Byrd and his crew experimented with lightening the load of equipment and supplies in order to reduce the stress on the skis.

In overcoming this difficulty, Byrd benefited from the advice and assistance of Lieutenant Bernt Balchen, a Norwegian

pilot assigned to Amundsen. Balchen, who was experienced in flying with skis, helped make new ones from the *Chantier's* oars, coating them with a special resin to reduce friction. In addition, he recommended taking off at night, when the cold would freeze the runway hard, and there would be less friction.

Finally, at half-past midnight on May 9, 1926, the *Josephine Ford* lifted off. Floyd Bennett did most of the piloting, Byrd acting as navigator. The navigator's role was in many ways a more active one than the pilot's, since the navigator had to operate several instruments, verify positions, and direct the pilot to adjust course. Byrd used the Bumstead sun compass to find direction, a chronometer to find longitude, a bubble sextant for latitude, and smoke bombs and a drift indicator in the trap door of the *Josephine Ford* to gauge the influence of the wind on the light plane.

Byrd described the navigation in an account published in the *National Geographic*: "Every minute or two he [Bennett] would look at me, to be checked if necessary, on the course by the sun-compass. If he happened to be off the course, I would wave him to the right or left until he got on it again. Once every three minutes I checked the wind drift and ground speed, so that in case of a change in wind I could detect it immediately and allow for it."<sup>12</sup> Much of their communication was by means of hand signals and handwritten notes, since the noise from the three engines was too loud for them to speak to each other. At some point in the flight, Byrd noticed oil spraying from the tank of the starboard motor. Instead of risking a landing on the

12. Richard E. Byrd, "The First Flight to the North Pole," *National Geographic Magazine* 50, no. 3 (September 1926): 371.



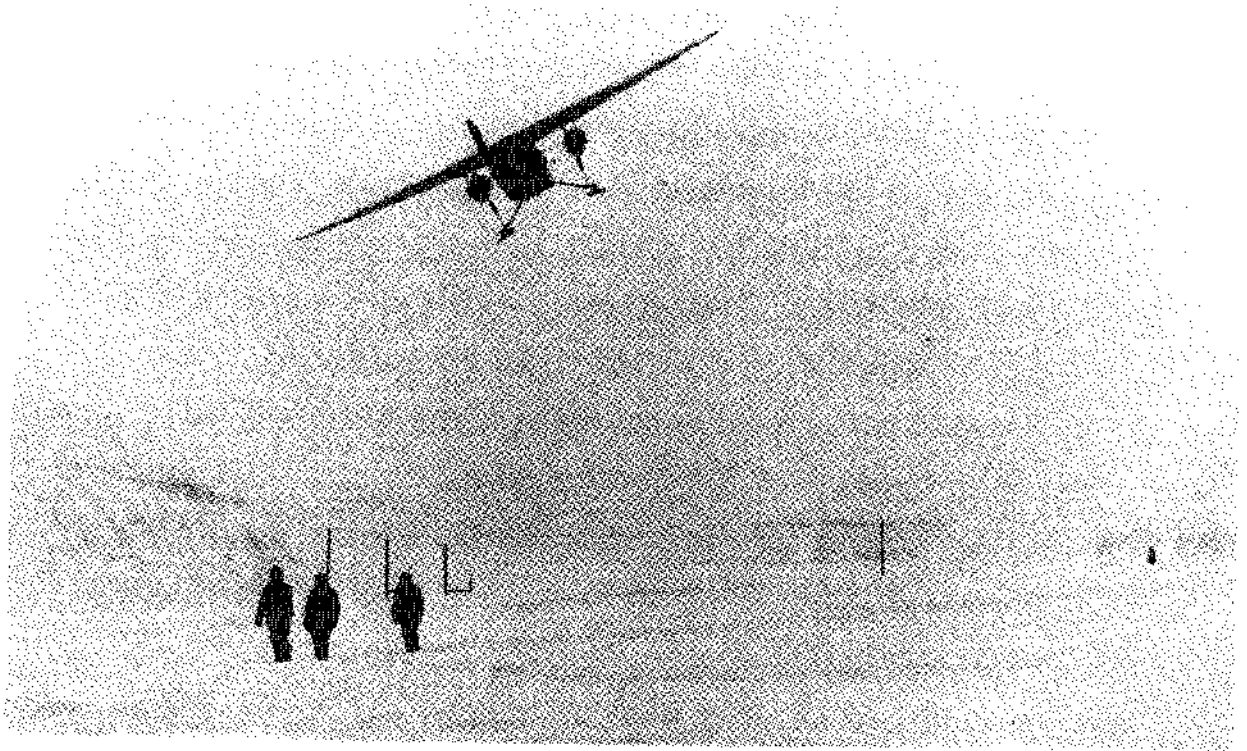
Pathe cameraman filming the *Josephine Ford* as it was being prepared for flight to the North Pole. (BP, folder 7739)

ice (especially on the hastily built skis) to check the engine, Byrd, believing that the *Josephine Ford* was close to the North Pole, directed Bennett to continue northward. They would rely on two engines to return them to Spitzbergen.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Byrd reported, “At 9:02 a.m. Greenwich Civil Time, our calculations showed us to be at the Pole! The dream of a lifetime had at last been realized.” Pilot and navigator took readings and motion pictures, circled, and returned. During the return, the sextant fell and broke, making it impossible to take sightings. After a total flight time of nearly sixteen hours, the *Josephine Ford* returned to Spitzbergen.

Byrd submitted the records of his North Pole flight to the U.S. Navy for scrutiny by a panel of experts at the National

13. Richard E. Byrd, *Skyward* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1928), 196–97.



The *Josephine Ford* returns to Spitzbergen from the North Pole (restaged for the cameras). (BP, folder 7739)

Geographic Society. This group confirmed the navigational calculations and instrumentation as accurate. While noting the absence of sextant observations on the return trip, the report concluded that the return demonstrated Byrd's skill in navigating along a predetermined course and stated that "in our opinion [Byrd's return] is one of the strongest evidences that he was equally successful in his flight northward. The feat of flying a plane 600 miles from land and returning directly to the point aimed for is a remarkable exhibition of skillful navigation and shows beyond a reasonable doubt that he [Byrd] knew where he was at all times during the flight."<sup>14</sup>

Byrd received numerous honors for his accomplishment

14. "Commander Byrd Receives the Hubbard Gold Medal," *National Geographic Magazine* 50, no. 3 (September 1926): 388.

and became a public hero. The National Geographic Society presented him its Hubbard Medal. Congress awarded him the Medal of Honor and promoted him to commander (after he rejected the idea of making him an admiral). New York City threw him a ticker-tape parade. Requests for lectures and interviews abounded. Byrd referred to his new status with both pride and exasperation as “the hero business.”<sup>15</sup>

Despite widespread acceptance of the National Geographic Society’s report and Byrd’s own account, some had difficulty believing that he had in fact reached the pole. Even in 1926, skeptics, especially reporters in Italy who had expected Amundsen, Ellsworth, and Nobile to be the first to fly over the North Pole, argued that Byrd had fallen short of his goal. The *Josephine Ford*, they believed, did not have the speed to traverse the pole from Spitzbergen and return so quickly.<sup>16</sup>

After Byrd’s death in 1957, more skepticism and controversy erupted. In *Come North with Me*, published in 1958,

15. Byrd, *Skyward*, 207–21.

16. Charles J. V. Murphy, *Struggle: The Life and Exploits of Commander Byrd* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1928), 204–5; Richard Montague, *Oceans, Poles and Airmen: The First Flights over Wide Waters and Desolate Ice* (New York: Random House, 1971), 12–13. Actually, the speed of the flight may not have been unrealistic. A telegram from *New York Times* correspondent William Bird to the *New York Times* reported that Byrd’s plane was “poleward” and was “expected back in sixteen to twenty-four hours.” See telegram of William Bird to *New York Times*, May 9, 1926, BP, folder 2536. The actual flight time was verified by Captain Michael J. Brennan. He recorded the plane’s departure and arrival in the log of the *Chantier* as 15 hours and 57 minutes. Takeoff was at 0037 Greenwich Civil Time; landing was at 16 hours and 34 minutes. See Michael J. Brennan to Commander Byrd, June 10, 1926, BP, folder 4319. In other words, the duration of the flight was only three minutes shorter than the minimum predicted at takeoff, a negligible difference.

Bernt Balchen disputed Byrd's ability as a navigator. In 1960, Gosta H. Liljequist, a professor of meteorology at the University of Uppsala, after compiling and examining meteorological records, concluded that there could not have been a strong enough wind to enable the *Josephine Ford* to return from the North Pole so quickly. In 1971 Richard Montague, relying on interviews with Bernt Balchen, published a story that Floyd Bennett, before dying of pneumonia in 1928, had confessed to Balchen that the *Josephine Ford* had developed an oil leak early in the flight. According to Montague, Bennett confessed that the *Josephine Ford* had circled out of sight of land just north of Spitzbergen, with Byrd just claiming that he had made it to the North Pole. Finally, in 1979, Finn Ronne, who had been with Byrd to Antarctica, published in *Antarctica: My Destiny* a story that Byrd had admitted to Isaiah Bowman, president of the American Geographical Society, that he and Bennett had been no closer to the North Pole than 150 miles.<sup>17</sup>

17. Bernt Balchen, *Come North with Me* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), 66; Gosta H. Liljequist, "Did the 'Josephine Ford' Reach the North Pole?" *Interavia* 5 (1960): 589-91; Richard Montague, *Oceans, Poles and Airmen*, 34-35, 47-48; Finn Ronne, *Antarctica, My Destiny* (New York: Hastings House, 1979), 188-89. Despite Ronne's recollections, Bowman and Byrd maintained a very cordial relationship, as their letters in Byrd's papers show. There is no evidence of or reference to the alleged confession of Byrd to Bowman.

Another prominent critic of Byrd's flight was Dennis Rawlins, *Peary at the North Pole: Fact or Fiction?* (Washington, D.C.: Robert B. Luce, 1973). In addition to issues of speed and the absence of sextant observations on the return trip, Rawlins also questioned why Byrd did not decorate the North Pole with the U.S. flags he carried on the plane (263-64).

One can only speculate about this matter. Byrd himself did not respond in detail, saying only that Peary had already done this. There are several possible explanations. One is that Byrd kept the flags to use as gifts to his prominent backers

Byrd also had his defenders. The National Geographic Society continued to credit his accomplishment. In 1973, Joe Portney, an expert in navigation, wrote an article that appeared in the *Journal of the Institute of Navigation* that questioned Liljequist's evidence of winds, reviewed Byrd's navigational instruments, and concluded that Byrd was likely to have come within at least fifty nautical miles of the North Pole, despite the primitive nature of his instruments.

Byrd's diary from the North Pole flight is revealing—but also mysterious. In his own words and at the time of the action, Byrd used the diary to record his feelings aboard the *Chantier*, his appreciation for his backers, and his crew. Byrd also voiced his mistrust of Roald Amundsen, believing him to be behind the *Heimdahl's* refusal to let the *Chantier* anchor at Spitzbergen.

Ironically, Byrd expressed appreciation for the help of Bernt Balchen, who would become his leading critic and skeptic. The diary proves that Byrd thought that Amundsen, public statements to the contrary, had not authorized Balchen to help. Byrd's information about Amundsen, however, could have come from Balchen himself, who must have been disappointed about not being included on the flight of the *Norge*, or from fellow American Lincoln Ellsworth, with Amundsen.

Particularly revealing are the communications from Byrd

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and to raise money after the flight, something that he did in fact do. Another is that the flags, which were said to number more than a hundred, may have been left behind to lighten the load, something Byrd would not have wanted to reveal when he presented the flags to benefactors. Finally, he may have been concerned about doubts that the flags' location might have cast on his claim to have flown over the pole. Winds, Arctic drift, and delays in the takeoff of the *Norge* could have moved the flags far from the pole by the time Amundsen would see them.