

Epilogue

RICHARD EVELYN BYRD,
1928-1957

BYRD'S ACCOMPLISHMENTS AT THE NORTH Pole and in crossing the Atlantic established him, along with Charles Lindbergh, as one of the much celebrated heroes of his time. Songs and poems were written in his honor, and some parents even named their children after him.

But Byrd's adventures did not end with his transpolar and transatlantic flights. He used the events of 1926 and 1927 as the foundation for a long career in exploration and scientific discovery in Antarctica. As early as 1925, he had predicted that airplanes would be the instrument of choice for exploring Antarctica as well as the Arctic.¹ Byrd exploited his heroic status to gain support for five expeditions to Antarctica. These expeditions created a lasting scientific legacy and led to an enduring

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

American presence on that continent. In the days before the advent of government sponsorship of polar exploration, Byrd obtained all the necessities for two expeditions and part of a third by lecturing and soliciting donations of cash, equipment, and supplies.

Besides raising money, Byrd also put his organizational skills to use in assembling explorations. His expeditions always involved enormous logistical challenges. In their day they were the largest expeditions in the history of Antarctic exploration. In his first two—privately financed—expeditions the burden of organizing and planning rested squarely on Byrd himself, not on a committee or a government agency.

Byrd's expeditions to Antarctica were more elaborate than their predecessors. Each expedition stayed in Antarctica for roughly two years. In addition to the traditional dogs and dog-sleds, they involved extensive use of aircraft, radio, motorized vehicles, and advanced scientific equipment. In many ways, Byrd's first two expeditions introduced the mechanical age to Antarctic exploration. Those that succeeded him, which were governmentally sponsored, ushered in the bureaucratic era.

By 1928 Byrd had raised enough money to buy two ships and three airplanes for his first trip to Antarctica. A crew of volunteers joined him. Some, like Bernt Balchen, Pete Demas, and George Noville, had been with him since Spitzbergen in 1926. A new member was Paul Siple, a Boy Scout who had won a national competition to accompany Byrd. Siple accompanied all of Byrd's Antarctic expeditions and became a distinguished scientist himself.

The expedition established a base camp, "Little America," at the Bay of Whales, near where Roald Amundsen had begun

his journey to the South Pole. A total of forty-two men, the largest expedition ever to have spent the winter in Antarctica, stayed there until the group returned to New York in 1930.

Byrd's first expedition accomplished much. In November of 1929, Byrd, with two pilots, Bernt Balchen and Harold June, and an aerial photographer, Ashley McKinley, flew a three-engine Ford airplane, the *Floyd Bennett*—named for Byrd's pilot in the 1926 North Pole flight, who died in 1928—over the South Pole. Another important but less spectacular achievement was the groundbreaking work of Byrd's second-in-command, the scientist Dr. Larry Gould. For three months, Gould and his party traveled to the Queen Maud Mountains to explore their geological history. Other important scientific work included the discovery of the Ford and the Rockefeller Mountains, magnetic observations, and ground surveys of the Bay of Whales, as well as the gathering of zoological specimens for the American Museum of Natural History in New York.²

Returning once again as a hero, Byrd was successful in drawing attention to himself and to Antarctica. Russell Owen published a prize-winning book about the expedition. Paramount Pictures released *With Byrd at the South Pole*, a movie about the expedition that continues to inform and entertain today. Byrd, of course, lectured, gave interviews, and published a book about the expedition, *Little America*. Even Byrd's dog

2. Kenneth J. Bertrand, *Americans in Antarctica, 1775-1948* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1971), 293-95; Eugene Rodgers, *Beyond the Barrier: The Story of Byrd's First Expedition to Antarctica* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press), 211-21. The most detailed account of this expedition is found in Richard E. Byrd, *Little America* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1930).



Byrd and his dog Igloo, a terrier who accompanied Byrd on his expeditions to both North and South Poles. (BP, folder 7641)

Igloo, who had been with him at Spitzbergen and Little America, became a celebrity, had a book written about him, and was mourned nationally when he died in 1931.

Promoted by an admiring Congress to the rank of rear admiral, Byrd turned his energies to continuing the work of

exploration and scientific discovery in Antarctica. During the Great Depression, however, the importance of exploring Antarctica was minimal to people whose receipt of a paycheck was in doubt. Under these economic conditions, raising money for airplanes, ships, and supplies was very difficult.

Nevertheless, Byrd succeeded. Aside from gifts of equipment and supplies, contracts with news and film media, and donations from individuals and organizations such as the National Geographic Society, Byrd found two unusual ways of financing his second expedition. First, he made an arrangement with the U.S. Postal Department that enabled him to raise money by setting up a post office at Little America II and selling postal covers. Second, he and CBS Radio signed a lucrative contract with General Foods, the maker of Grape Nuts and other cereals, to broadcast directly from Little America II to the living rooms of average Americans. The first broadcast took place on February 1, 1934, and weekly broadcasts followed. By these means, Byrd obtained sufficient financing to afford three airplanes, two ships, and enough supplies for fifty-six men to stay in Antarctica for two years.

The drama of the expedition was Byrd's nearly fatal adventure at a weather station, Bolling Advance Base, that he established 123 miles into the interior of Antarctica. The scientific purpose of the base was to measure meteorological activity away from the coast of Antarctica for the winter season and to observe auroral phenomena. Both were to be original contributions to scientific knowledge.

Another purpose of the weather station, however, was to raise interest in the expedition, both among the general public and at Paramount Pictures specifically. Like many other businesses, Paramount suffered financially during the Great

Depression and was reluctant to invest in what would be only a sequel to the documentary film they had made of Byrd's first expedition—and without the drama of covering the first flight across the South Pole. In June 1933 Byrd wrote Emanuel Cohen of Paramount to persuade him that there would be sufficient drama on the expedition to warrant the studio's investment. He assured Cohen that the second expedition would face more ice, do more flying, and create more news than the first expedition. Swearing Cohen to secrecy, Byrd wrote, "The point that I want to make clear with you is that I will go to infinite pains to get the proper kind of a movie. It is one of the ways that I can keep from being a bankrupt. When I went down before [the first expedition] I did not understand the importance of giving the movie men more of a chance than I did. . . . You will find plenty of drama this time . . . from the fact that two men will spend the winter night at the foot of the mountains only 300 miles from the Pole, where the temperature will be, as I have said, as low as 90 degrees [below zero]."³

According to Byrd's account in *Alone*, published after the expedition, he had planned to have three men spend the winter in a hut in the interior of Antarctica. The hut, which had been designed for speedy transport and construction, was only nine by thirteen feet with an eight-foot ceiling made of wood and insulation. It was sunk into the snow so that winds could not pierce the interior; trap doors and tunnels made it possible to reach the surface, and a ventilation shaft provided fresh air. In addition, Byrd saw to it that a "hurricane deck" made of bamboo sticks with orange flags surrounded Advance Base, so

3. Richard E. Byrd to Emanuel Cohen, June 1, 1933, BP, box 59, folder 2673.

that the men could take daily walks without the risk of being lost in blinding snow.

When the expedition reached Antarctica, however, storms and breaking ice slowed the unloading of supplies at Little America. According to Byrd, there was not sufficient time left to haul enough supplies for three people to Advance Base, and he decided to winter in the interior by himself. This decision aroused much controversy among his men, his sponsors, and his family because it appeared that circumstances were forcing him to put himself at needless risk. In fact, there is reason to believe that Byrd had planned to be alone even before the expedition left Boston. The letter to Cohen said that there would be two men in the hut, but in all of Byrd's accounts published later, he denied that the plan had ever been for two men. Byrd feared that two people in isolation would develop a dangerous hostility toward each other that three would not. But if the plan had indeed been for three people, why did Byrd not say so to Cohen? Perhaps he had always intended to be alone in the hut but feared to reveal this to his financial sponsors before the expedition began. Paramount would certainly have been fearful of their "star" putting himself at risk.

According to *Alone*, Byrd looked forward to the experience of a winter of solitude. The time would allow him to read the extensive library he had brought with him, make original contributions to science by collecting data every day, and free him from the details of coordinating activities at Little America. He assured Marie that he would do nothing to put himself into danger: "I realize this may worry you considerably but if you knew how I had planned the whole thing, I don't believe you would be worried. It seems utterly selfish of me to subject you to this

apprehension after all the apprehensions of the past, but I pray you will be able to overcome it as you have overcome all difficult things that have come your way. . . . I swear to you that I will be more careful than I have ever been, as careful as it is humanly possible. It is my faith in your poise and great strength that makes it possible for me to do this thing."⁴

On March 28, 1934, Byrd began his adventure in solitude at Advance Base. Only a schedule of wireless broadcasts from Advance Base to Little America connected him with others. By June 1, he realized that his sleepiness, exhaustion, and lack of appetite were evidence of carbon monoxide poisoning. So bad were his circumstances that he wrote notes to his family and stored them in a metal box. The notes were to be read only if he did not survive, just as in 1926 he had written to his son in the event of his death at the North Pole. On June 4, Byrd recorded in his daily log of aurora observations an entry that spanned five days and said, "My physical condition has been very desperate."⁵ He attributed the carbon monoxide to his stove, his sole source of heat. The drama that became the book *Alone* was whether Byrd could survive long enough for a rescue party to reach him through the hazards—the storms, the cold, the darkness, and the crevasses—of the Antarctic winter. Finally, a rescue party reached Byrd on August 11 and nursed him back to health. They warmed themselves at the stove; the actual source of the carbon monoxide was probably the generator Byrd used to send his wireless transmissions.

4. Radiogram, Richard Byrd to Marie Ames Byrd, undated (1934). BP, box 148, folder 5452.

5. Notebook, May 30 to June 4, 1934. BP, box 85, folder 3685.

Aside from the drama surrounding Byrd, the expedition was significant for the number of discoveries made by the scientists and other members of the team. They discovered the Rockefeller Plateau, established the limits of the western mountains of the Ford Ranges, and mapped many new peaks of the Queen Maud Mountains. Scientists uncovered fossils, made observations of the intensity of cosmic rays, studied the life history of the Weddell Sea, and collected species of moss and lichens.⁶

After returning to the United States in 1935, Byrd never wintered again in Antarctica, but polar exploration remained a focus of his life. His fame and popularity enabled him to raise some money for another expedition to Antarctica even in the bleakest years of Great Depression. This time, however, the federal government pitched in as well. President Franklin Roosevelt—who had befriended Byrd as early as 1919 when Byrd was involved in the U.S. Navy's transatlantic expedition and Roosevelt was assistant secretary of the Navy—concluded that the United States had a national interest in establishing a presence in Antarctica. Because other nations had also been active there, he felt that the United States needed a permanent presence in Antarctica to protect its claims.

With Roosevelt's support, the United States Antarctic Service took shape, drawing on the resources of the Departments of State, of War, and of the Interior, and on the Navy. Byrd led the expedition, combining his funds and his staff with those of

6. Bertrand. *Americans in Antarctica*, 316–19. The most detailed account of this expedition is given in Richard E. Byrd, *Discovery* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1935).

the new Antarctic Service. The expedition's goal was to establish two bases, East Base and West Base, that would be maintained by a wintering party of fifty-nine people.

Like Byrd's previous expeditions, this one included both ships (two) and airplanes (four). A particularly noteworthy feature of the expedition was the "Snow Cruiser," a mobile scientific base that included a laboratory, living quarters, and a small airplane. It was designed to stretch the limits of scientific investigation, but unfortunately the heavy vehicle was poorly suited to the variety of snows found in Antarctica.⁷

In 1940, the war in Europe ended the Antarctic Service and the attempt to establish a permanent presence in Antarctica. But much had been accomplished. Aside from geographical exploration, the scientific side of the expedition had included observations of the aurora australis, cosmic rays, and meteors, as well as investigations in geology, glaciology, geophysics, terrestrial magnetism, botany, zoology, oceanography, and meteorology.

But the short-lived Antarctic Service was perhaps most important for having reestablished the precedent—originally set by the Wilkes expedition of 1840—for government sponsorship of Antarctic expeditions. Since 1940, with the sole exception of the privately financed Finn Ronne expedition of 1947, governmental agencies and departments have shaped the direction and the extent of Antarctic exploration and scientific investigation by the United States.

7. Bertrand, *Americans in Antarctica*, 407–13. An informative and entertaining account of the expedition is Charles F. Passel's *Ice: The Antarctic Diary of Charles F. Passel* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1995).

During World War II, Rear Admiral Byrd returned to active duty in the Bureau of Naval Aeronautics of the U.S. Navy. In 1942, he was assigned the duty of inspecting islands in the South Pacific as potential sites for air bases from which to attack Japan. Later, he continued his inspections, but now with the objective of plotting air routes for commercial aviation.

When the war ended in 1945, Admiral Byrd once again took up his interest in the exploration of Antarctica. The Cold War pitted the United States against the Soviet Union throughout the world, including Antarctica. To the U.S. Navy, Antarctica seemed a safer place than the Arctic to test military equipment and tactics that could be used against the Soviets in a polar environment.

Operation High Jump, the fourth expedition to Antarctica in which Byrd had a prominent role, began in 1946 and ended in 1947. Byrd was the "officer-in-charge" and had technical control of operations in Antarctica. Because this was a naval operation, however, the actual command went to an active officer, Rear Admiral Richard H. Cruzen, who had participated in the U.S. Antarctic Expedition of 1939-41. Operation High Jump was principally a military exercise that used large numbers of naval vessels and aircraft to chart and take aerial photographs of a vast area of Antarctica. It involved approximately forty-seven hundred naval and marine personnel and forty-four civilians (scientists, observers, and reporters), thirteen ships, twelve airplanes, and a helicopter. This ambitious expedition saw the first loss of life in any expedition associated with Byrd: a plane crashed in bad weather, and three naval airmen died.

Operation High Jump was brief, but it made impressive



Programs since October 21, 1955, and for his contributions to Antarctic expeditions and to the development of permanent Antarctic legislation and international scientific understanding and good will.

Richard Evelyn Byrd died at his home in Boston on March 11, 1957, but his work left many legacies. After his death, Operation Deepfreeze continued to provide logistical support to scientific investigations in Antarctica, and these have contributed much to our understanding of the earth as a global environmental system. Byrd, through his status as a celebrity, attracted money and attention to the exploration of this remote and inhospitable area. His organizational skills and his willingness to test new technologies—airplanes, aerial photography, and radio communication—helped open polar environments for investigation and discovery. Finally, the scientists whom Byrd engaged on his expeditions not only made their own contributions but also became the teachers of generations of scientists who continue to visit Antarctica.

As one scientist recalled, “Although a complex and many-faceted personality, he [Byrd] was not a scientist and never claimed to be one. He became the superlative organizer and visionary generalist who made a continent safe, nearly, for specialists, in his own time and onward. The Antarctic Continent is now by far the largest area on the planet dedicated as an international scientific reserve and peace park. It was the work of Byrd and his multinational associates there, some famous, most obscure, which in large measure made this outcome possible.”¹⁰

10. Alton A. Lindsey, “Inside Byrd’s Second Antarctic Expedition,” unpublished manuscript, Alton A. Lindsey Papers, Byrd Polar Research Center Archival Program, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio.