

Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd – The Highflyer

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Richard Evelyn Byrd was born in Winchester, Virginia on October 25, 1888. Byrd was a US naval officer and explorer. He received the Medal of Honor, the highest honor for valor awarded by the United States.

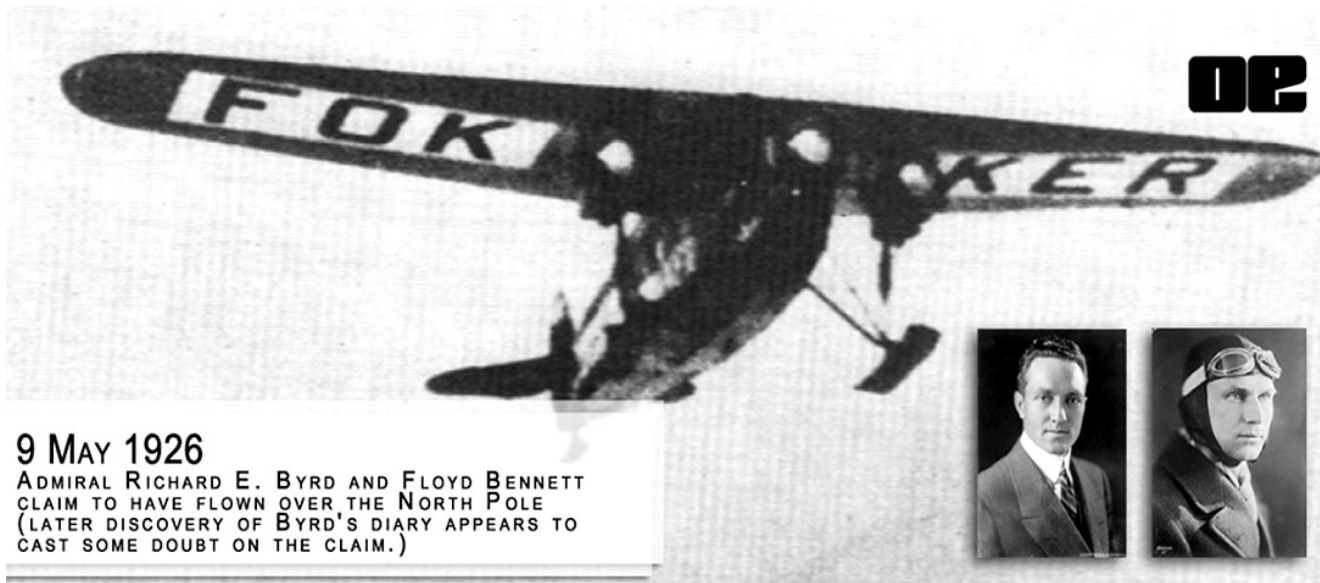
He was a pioneering American aviator, polar explorer, and polar logistics organizer. Flights in which he served as navigator and expedition leader crossed the Atlantic Ocean, sections of the Arctic Ocean, and the Antarctic Plateau. Byrd claimed that his expeditions were the first to reach both the North Pole and the South Pole by air. However, his claim to have reached the North Pole is controversial. Byrd died in Boston on March 11, 1957. (Photo: Ohio State University Archives)

The life of Richard Evelyn Byrd followed orderly military paths: Born in 1888 in Winchester, Virginia, USA, into one of the richest families in the state, he graduated from military school and served as a naval officer in Canadian waters during the First World War. In 1917, Byrd began flight training and became an avid aviator. In 1925, as leader of the McMillan Expedition, he traveled to the Arctic for the first time, where he and his team mapped nearly 80,000 square kilometers of ice and land.



Members of the MacMillan Arctic Expedition prepare one of their Loening OL-2 amphibious aircraft for a flight from Etah, Greenland, in 1925 (Photo: Ohio State University Archives).

No wonder, one evening he came up with the idea of being the first person ever to conquer the North Pole by plane – allegedly during a cheerful dinner with Roald Amundsen in Spitsbergen, who was planning to do the same. In fact, Byrd and his co-pilot Floyd Bennet set off for the North Pole on May 9, 1926, in a three-engine monoplane Fokker: three days before his friend Amundsen and his co-pilot Lincoln Ellsworth departed for the same destination. The latter reached the pole and, unlike Byrd, documented their success. While Byrd claimed to have been the first to get there, his performance is still disputed to this day.



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ADMIRAL RICHARD E. BYRD AND FLOYD BENNETT
CLAIM TO HAVE FLOWN OVER THE NORTH POLE
(LATER DISCOVERY OF BYRD'S DIARY APPEARS TO
CAST SOME DOUBT ON THE CLAIM.)

The flight to the North Pole started and ended in Spitsbergen and took 15 hours 57 minutes. Whether Byrd and Bennet actually reached the North Pole is still disputed today.

Didn't matter. One year later Richard Byrd flew across the Atlantic from New York to Paris, but could not land there because of bad visibility and made a clean emergency landing in the Normandy.

It didn't matter: the two unfortunate pioneering flights spurred the American on to turn his next project into a really big adventure: The very first flight over the South Pole. Byrd sold in advance the exclusive rights for the reporting to the "New York Times", the magazine rights got "National Geographic" and the film rights acquired Paramount studios, Byrd let himself be sponsored by John D. Rockefeller and Edsel Ford. He finally set off in the autumn of 1928 with a gigantic party in the direction of the Ross Ice Shelf. Equipment: Four ships, three airplanes, a mobile workshop, a photo laboratory, radio and radio equipment, 500 tons of material, 5000 individual parts. And the crew: a flight team, a communications team, geologists, meteorologists, engineers, physicists, doctors, a dog team with 100 sled dogs and of course the ship's crews. By the way, in the editorial office of the "New York Times" the obituaries of the most important expedition participants had been already readied in case something should go wrong.

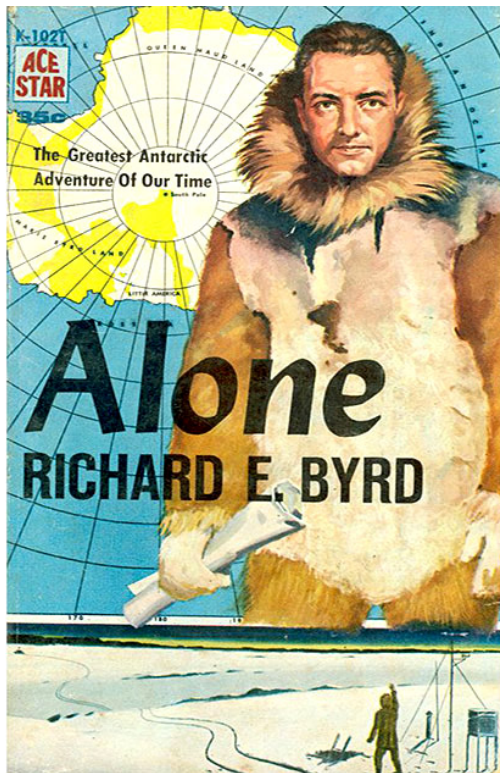


On November 28, 1929, the first flight to the South Pole and back was launched. Byrd, along with pilot Bernt Balchen, co-pilot/radio operator Harold June and photographer Ashley McKinley, flew the plane to the South Pole and back in 18 hours and 41 minutes. They had difficulty gaining enough altitude, and they had to jettison empty gas tanks as well as their emergency supplies to reach the height of the polar plateau, but ultimately, they were successful. (Photo: Ohio State University Archives)

After several test flights, the overflight actually succeeded on November 28, 1929: With a Ford Trimotor, Richard Evelyn Byrd, his pilot, his radio operator and his cartographer were the first people to see the South Pole from above after a flight of almost nine hours. This achievement was groundbreaking not because of the technology, but because of the perspective: Until then, Antarctic expeditions had been conducted exclusively on land. Now, for the first time, mankind gained an overview from high above.

Byrd, however, was only moderately enthusiastic about this one. In his report to the government he wrote: "The pole was in the center of an endless plain. No mountains were visible. That, in a nutshell, is all there is to say about the South Pole. You arrive. There is nothing more to tell." Always there: his cartographer had photographed the 2570-kilometre route from above during the outward and return flights.

The flight shows how adventurous this pioneering feat was nevertheless, because Byrd had difficulty estimating the height of the mountains. On the way, the crew had to drop 125 kilos of ballast to make it over the pass line of the Liv Glacier at the last moment.



In addition to a book by Richard Evelyn Byrd, stamps also commemorate the expeditions of the American.
(Photo: Archive)

Byrd earned public fame and military honor, the “New York Times” did not have to print a single obituary. In 1934 he again led an expedition to Antarctica and wintered alone in a weather station. From 1939 to 1941, he established two more stations on behalf of the U.S. government. In 1946 he led the military action “Highjump”, in which 13 ships, 4 helicopters and 13 airplanes were to be subjected to a cold test. 4500 people were on duty. The action was cancelled after a few weeks, until today without official justification.

The Admiral flew over the South Pole two more times. He died in Boston on March 11, 1957.

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