

The Admirable Admiral.....

Brother Richard E. Byrd

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Many will recall hovering around their first radio loud speaker or listening on ear phones to hear the faint voice of Admiral Richard E. Byrd broadcasting from Little America. To that generation, his voice was as spectacular an accomplishment as the voices and pictures we have 'seen from the moon in more recent years.

Byrd, who became a Mason at the age of 32, has been called "the last explorer," but he was really a pioneer in a new breed using airplanes to cover vast areas of the earth which overland expeditions could never hope to reach.

The common denominator of his polar expeditions and his career in the United States Navy was! aeronautics, which led Admiral Nimitz to say, at the end of World War II, that if Admiral Byrd had never gone near the Antarctic he would still be one of the greatest figures in American naval history for his contributions to the naval aeronautics program.

In all that he did he was identified as an officer of the United States Navy. He was, indeed, a graduate of the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, but after four years of active service, he was retired for disabilities sustained in accidents as an undergraduate and during his first tours of active duty. All of his later achievements came as a retired officer assigned to active duty, and each of his promotions to the flag rank of Rear Admiral came through a special Act of Congress passed to recognize his achievement.

During World War I Byrd received temporary promotions to the rank of Lieutenant Commander while on active duty assignments. By 1921 the Navy had returned those in temporary ranks to their permanent ranks, and in the case of a retired officer, a permanent promotion in rank could come only by special Act of Congress.

In 1924 in speaking for the House of Representatives' bill to promote Richard E. Byrd, Jr., to the rank of Lieutenant Commander, U.S. Navy, retired, Congressman and Brother Fred Vinson pointed out his superior ratings and his seventeen citations for service to the Navy beyond the usual range of duties.

His advancement often irked many naval officers below the rank of Captain who were seldom seen or heard of outside naval circles.

By 1925 Byrd was capturing headlines with plans for a flight across the North Pole. In seeking Navy support for this expedition, Byrd predicted that in a few years an air route to Europe across the Polar seas would be in use during the daylight months.

On May 9, 1926, Lt. Commander Byrd, with Floyd Bennett as pilot, became the first ever to fly over the North Pole and the second to reach it. This flight also proved that there is no Arctic continent as Peary believed.

On their return, Congress promoted Byrd to Commander and awarded to Byrd and to Bennett the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In 1926 plans for a flight from New York to Paris captured the imagination of the country, spurred by Raymond Orteig's offer of a \$25,000 prize for the first to complete the flight.

Commander Byrd, too, was planning a transatlantic flight, although his choice of destination was Rome. Byrd's expressed purpose was not to be the first but rather to prove a flight could be made safely in a plane any competent pilot could fly and that it could be done any day in the week. Hence, of all the projected flights, Byrd's was the one to use a multi-engine plane with

Byrd as navigator. Byrd was sworn in as a United States Mail Pilot, and the expedition's plane America was designated as the first official transatlantic mail plane. On June 29, 1927, the America took off carrying four men and its pay load. Although the flight proved that the distance could be covered with flawless navigation, the Paris airfield and surrounding area was fog-bound and the plane could not land at its destination. Taking the plane off the coast of France, the flight was ditched in the surf. But the safety features which Byrd had insisted be built into the America kept it afloat, and using inflatable rafts the crew reached shore.

Brother Byrd's next great project was his Antarctic expedition, which reached the edge of the Antarctic ice in late December 1928. Although Byrd's expedition was not the first to use radio for communication, it was used to keep every phase of the Little America operation in constant touch with each other and proved invaluable in establishing the supply bases.

Between December 1928 and February 19, 1930, when the expedition set sail for home, the expedition had: (1) completed the successful flight over the South Pole, (2) made 1,600 mapping photographs, (3) had for nine months measured and studied Antarctic magnetism, the aurora, the temperature and constitution of the ice barrier, and (4) had made continual weather observations.

On his return, by Act of Congress, Commander Byrd was promoted to Rear Admiral.

Admiral Byrd almost immediately started planning and raising funds for his second Antarctic expedition with the objective of exploring the Pacific quadrant of Antarctica.

Part of the planning for this expedition called for the establishment of an advance base at which three men would make weather and temperature observations throughout the Antarctic winter months. When equipment breakdowns prevented supplying the advance base for three men, Byrd elected to man the base alone for seven months, including four months in winter darkness. The saga of this solitary exploit in which Admiral Byrd almost lost his life from carbon monoxide poisoning is recounted in his book, *Alone*.

In 1939 the third Byrd Antarctic expedition was undertaken under official United States Navy sponsorship with Admiral Byrd as an ex-officio member of the board through his appointment as chairman of the United States Antarctic Service. The purpose of this expedition was to map 1,000 miles of Antarctic coastline between Marie Byrd Land and Alexander Land. Although this was called the Byrd Expedition in the press, Admiral Byrd did not spend the winter in the Antarctic. After taking part in establishing the bases, he returned to the United States.

In 1940 with war clouds gathering on the horizon, Admiral Byrd was named consultant to the Secretary of War on cold weather clothing and military equipment.

With the United States entry into World War II, Admiral Byrd was called back to active duty with the Naval Bureau of Aeronautics and with a board of eight members inspected bases and proposed bases for naval air operations in the Pacific theatre.

Continued in November 2007