

Reprinted from Masonic Americana, 1976, pages 201-203 The Admirable Admiral...

Brother Richard E. Byrd-Part II
by Warren H. Deck

In 1943 President and Brother Franklin Roosevelt, looking beyond the end of World War II, began a quest for postwar air routes across the Pacific. Admiral Byrd was named head of the mission to determine suitable locations for commercial airports of the future.

In 1946 the Navy launched a fullscale Antarctic expedition called Operation Highjump, with Admiral Byrd as officer-in-charge but not commander of the 13 ships and 4,000 men. Following his return from Antarctica in April 1947, he was relieved of active duty. Two years later he was called back to active duty for Operation Highjump II, which later was canceled by President and Sir Knight Truman.

In 1955 President Eisenhower announced the United States would launch a new Antarctic expedition, and Admiral Byrd was named officer-in-charge, United States Antarctic Programs, but actual command of the task force for Operation Deep Freeze was given to Rear Admiral George J. Dufek, who had been navigator of the USS *Bear* on the 1939 expedition.

In February 1957 Admiral Arleigh Burke went to Boston to present Admiral Byrd with a special Medal of Freedom. Less than a month later, Byrd died at his home at the age of 68.

Richard Evelyn Byrd, Jr., was born October 25, 1888, in Winchester, Virginia, son of Richard E. and Eleanor Flood Byrd, both of whom traced their lineage to the first settlers of Virginia.

When he was only twelve, Byrd gave indications his career would not be law or politics, which led his brother Harry to Governor of Virginia and the United States Senate; nor would it be in the business world, in which his brother Tom was highly successful. In 1900 he received an invitation from Adam C. Carson, United States Circuit Judge for that newly acquired territory, to visit the Philippines. He spent nearly a year in the islands until an outbreak of cholera sent him home. The trip home was made on westward-bound steamers, so at 13 young Byrd had been around the world. Ambition for adventure so filled him at this early age that he confided to his diary his determination to become the first man to reach the North Pole.

Throughout his life, Richard E. Byrd (displayed a talent for preparing thoroughly for anything he undertook. Since he wanted a career as an officer in the United States Navy, he applied himself to acquiring the background he would need for Annapolis in his studies at Shenandoah Military Academy, Virginia Military Institute, and the University of Virginia. In 1908 he reached the required age for admission and received the "appointment to the Naval Academy's Class of 1912. Thus he became a member of the first class which would be commissioned as Ensigns upon graduation without first putting in two years of active service as Midshipmen.

Although slight in build, Midshipman Byrd was a competitor. He earned his Navy N in gymnastics and in football. In a 13-foot fall in gymnastics, he sustained two fractures of his right foot and a dislocated ankle. These injuries, coupled with later injuries sustained while on active duty on the USS *Wyoming* following graduation, led ultimately to his retirement on disability in 1916 at the age of 28.

During service in the Carribean area after graduation, he received his first official letter of commendation and later a Congressional Life Saving Medal for twice plunging fully clothed to the rescue of overboard seamen. Although throughout his career Byrd made copy for news media, magazines and radio; he was never mentioned for his lifesaving efforts or for his later efforts in 1921 to extricate trapped survivors from the collapsed Knickerbocker theatre in Washington, D.C. A passerby, he spent four hours in the rescue efforts.

Ensign Byrd's retirement from active duty marked the beginning of a career unique in the annals of the United States Navy. His first assignment as a retired officer was administrator of the Naval Militia of the State of Rhode Island. In this assignment he demonstrated the outstanding administrative ability that was to become a hallmark of his entire career, and the success of the assignment led to his assignment as executive assistant in the Bureau of Naval Personnel.

While in Washington, he applied for appointment as a naval aviation cadet at Pensacola and received his pilot's wings in April 1917. He remained at Pensacola as assistant superintendent, one of four regular Navy officers in the flight training school. His duties included the study of weather, night flying and aerial bombing, and he also sat as a member of the board investigating plane crashes.

With the entry of the United States into World War I, the Navy developed the NC class naval flying boat, the largest ever built. Lt. Byrd suggested delivering the NC-1 to Europe by air. This resulted in his appointment as commanding officer of the United States Naval Air Station at Halifax, Nova Scotia, to establish a refueling base for the big flying boats.

It was during this period that Lt. Byrd and Lt. Walter Hinton developed a sextant for aerial use applying the carpenter's level principle of a bubble glass to replace the sea horizon used by surface navigators.

When the first transatlantic crossing by air was finally made by the NC4 under Lt. Commander Read, the official Navy Department announcement acknowledged the contributions of Lt. Commander R. E. Byrd, Jr., to celestial navigation: the Byrd sextant, drift and speed indicator, course and distance indicator, and zenithal projection of the Atlantic eliminating lengthy mathematical calculations of the past. Although his ambition to be a member of the first group to fly across the Atlantic was thwarted, his contributions to the success of the expedition and to the later development of commercial aviation 'were many and great.

In the period immediately following World War I, while General Billy Mitchell crusaded for a separate air force and dramatized air power by sinking ships, Byrd played a decisive role in the Navy's efforts to develop the Naval Bureau of Aeronautics.

Byrd's position was unique. While older officers were sea dogs opposed to aviation, Byrd was regular Navy from Annapolis and a trained pilot. As a retired officer, he had no career to thwart and could not be cashiered for speaking out. The most severe penalty which could be invoked would be to return him to inactive duty. Byrd wrote a sample bill for the creation of a Bureau of Aeronautics in the Navy Department, testified before Congressional Committees in its behalf, and successfully lobbied in Congress for its passage.

It was at Byrd's suggestion at the end of World War I that a Naval Reserve program was established to afford Navy pilots an opportunity to keep up their flying skills after their return to civilian-life. In the establishment of the first reserve center in Massachusetts, Byrd not only recruited the former pilots to volunteer for the reserve training but even succeeded in getting them to give their time to building and renovating the facilities.

In addition to being an able administrator, scientist and explorer; Byrd was the author of four books: *Skyward*, *Little America*, *Discovery* and *Alone*.

Raised in Federal Lodge No.1, Washington, D.C., in 1921; he later affiliated with Kane Lodge No. 454, New York City. He was also a member of National Sojourners Chapter No.3 at Washington. Byrd dropped Masonic flags over both poles during his flights. Sixty of the 82 members of his Antarctic expedition of 1933-1935 were Freemasons. They established First Antarctic Lodge No. 777 of New Zealand in 1935.