

Intimate Glimpses Into Life of Admiral Byrd

Experiences and Achievements of Famous Explorer Told



Claude A. Swanson, Secretary of the United States Navy, who has known Richard E. Byrd since the latter's childhood and who has written many heretofore unpublished incidents in the life of the intrepid explorer.

By Claude A. Swanson
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As Told By
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REAR Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd, intrepid flyer, adventurer, and explorer, is today thrilling an admiring world with his new book, "Discovery," in which he so graphically describes the exciting adventures, the desperate trials, the scientific discoveries, and ultimate success in the long Antarctic months in which he and his men conquered the elements—the white ice mountains at the "bottom of the earth," to climb the naked shingles of the world and capture for America the distinction of being the first nation to fly over the South Pole.

Rear Admiral Byrd, now retired, has been in the public eye for many years. He is one of this country's national heroes. Thousands have read about him, but know him only for his explorations and air victories. In reaching for an insight into Admiral Byrd's background, who could better tell his story than Claude A. Swanson, the Secretary of the United States Navy, who knew him as a boy, watched him grow to manhood and looked upon his accomplishments with as much pride as if Byrd were his own son?

In commenting on Admiral Byrd's new book, "Discovery," recently published by G. P. Putnam's Sons, Secretary Swanson gives an intimate touch to the explorer's early life and background. In part he says:

"As a life-long friend of Dick Byrd and of his distinguished father before him, I can look back to his early youth and his official record in the Navy before he entered on his career as an explorer with a great deal of pride. Dick was a fine boy.

"As a member of the Senate Naval Committee for more than twenty years, and more recently as Secretary of the Navy, I have had exceptional opportunities to follow his brilliant career from the day when he entered the Naval Academy as a slender midshipman, until he electrified the world by his magnificent flights across the Atlantic and over the Arctic and Antarctic poles. It is not my intention to praise Byrd, but simply to record some unadorned and unknown facts.

"As a boy, Dick got into rather more than his share of mischief, and what his exasperated father used to call 'reckless deviltry,' though when not leading his gang of Winchester youngsters in some new and hitherto unheard-of form of escapade, he was a notably quiet and thoughtful lad.

"At times I think his father's brilliant denunciations of foolishness were more than justified. Certainly that was so when as a youngster, with little or no experience in handling boats, he insisted, over the violent protests of his seafaring hosts, on taking a small sailing craft across Hampton Roads in the face of a rising storm, and there and then came within an ace of ending forever his career of adventure.

"But perhaps it was from some of these heedless and oftentimes reckless adventures and experiences of his youth that he learned the need of preparedness when anything worthwhile is to be accomplished. Without the careful planning which has marked all his activities in later life he could not have achieved his marvelous record of never losing a man on his four separate expeditions to the Polar regions; or on the Naval Aviation Station he commanded during the war with a personnel of more than 200 men; or when, in the early days of the war, he developed and instructed his assistants in the then extremely dangerous art of night flying over water.

"And yet I must confess that my reading of the official reports of his personal activities on the Polar expeditions does not encourage me to believe that the leopard has changed his spots, or that Dick Byrd, the man, is any less willing to take a chance than was Dick Byrd, the youth. It has always been his own life, however, that he has placed in jeopardy. His impulsive response to the call of some new adventure has never involved unnecessary danger to the lives, the limbs, or the health of his subordinates, or needless risk to the successful accomplishment of his undertaking.

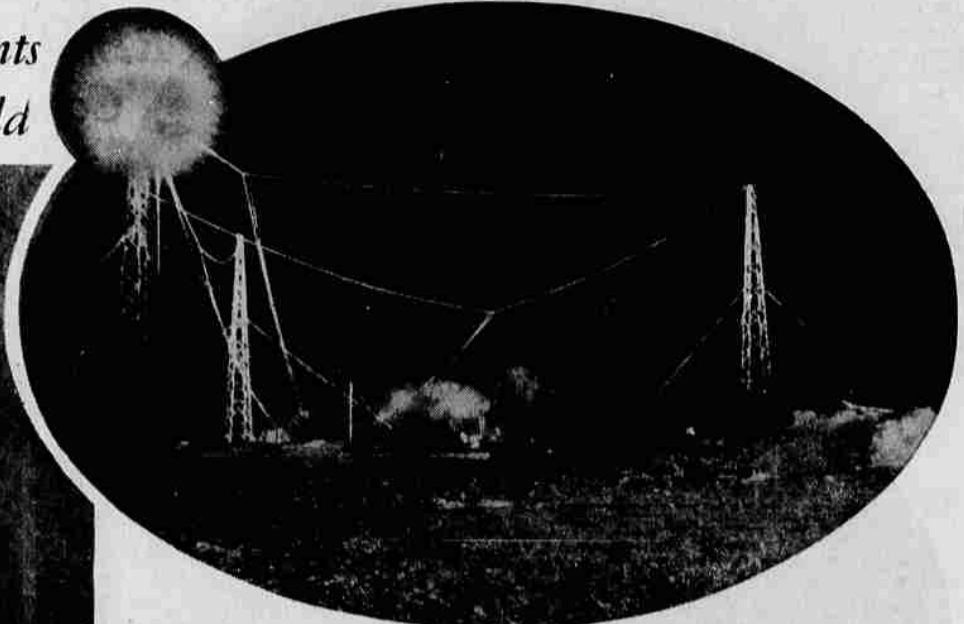
"BEFORE entering the Naval Academy, Byrd spent two years at the Virginia Military Institute and one at the University of Virginia.



Approaching the forbidding ice foot in the Antarctic. Caution in transferring supplies was necessary. An unforeseen mishap might have meant disaster to the entire expedition.



Like other famous polar explorers, Admiral Byrd made constant use of dog teams, but when it came to the final dash for the South Pole, he employed an airplane—and succeeded.



Little America, picturing the wireless station with which Admiral Byrd and his dauntless companions kept in touch with the outside world.



Admiral Byrd as he appeared during his explorations in the Antarctic.

Although he had missed a year's schooling when he adventured around the world, he was the youngest student at the Institute when he entered at the age of 15. The usual age requirement of 16 years had been waived in his case because of the notable progress he had made in the studies prescribed at the Institute, especially mathematics and elementary physics, and also because of his manifest ability to hold his own with any group of boys of advanced school age.

"His exceptional ability as a leader, that innate talent for leadership so highly prized in the Army and Navy, began to disclose itself on the day he entered the Naval Academy. He was elected chairman of his class in his plebe year, and he held more offices during his four years at the Academy than any other member of his class. Greatly devoted to football, Byrd was one of the most reckless players on the team in the bad days before the game was opened up to make football safe for the undergraduates; and in leading the gymnasium team, of which he was captain, he smashed his ankle in an attempt to perform an exceedingly hazardous feat on the flying rings.

"After graduating, this passionate liking for athletics brought about a rigorous regime of exercise and sports, which kept him so physically fit that when leaving on his first expedition his condition was as good as during his Academy days.

"But what manner of midshipman he was is best told in his class annual, which records the estimate of his classmates after four years of close and intimate contact. Here it is:

From Class Record
"Richard Evelyn Byrd: Athlete. Leader in all right things. Friend. Gentleman. From the time we entered as Plebes until the present, Dick has been putting his whole heart into everything he does. Including the little meeting behind the old hospital. Most of the time Dick moves around with a far-away look in his eyes. But go where he may he cannot hope to find the truth and the beauty of which he dreams. He has already lived a life rich in experience and he will live a life richer still. But he will always give to life more than he takes."

"I know it is telling tales out of school, but it is no secret now that the 'affair behind the hospital' was a memorable fight Dick had with a civilian in Annapolis. This young man had manhandled more than one of the midshipmen, and at a class indignation meeting Dick was selected to challenge the pugnacious youngster. The challenge was accepted. After a thorough

battle Byrd emerged the victor by a slight margin—so slight a margin that when they shook hands after the fight they had learned to respect each other profoundly, and from that moment they became friends. I could fill many pages with the story of Byrd's service in the Navy. But I believe that story is best told in the following extracts from his official record.

From Official Navy Records
"Twenty-two detailed reports of fitness on Lieutenant Byrd by different officers in the Navy made since 1917 show him to be above the great majority [the highest mark that can be given] in the following: Cooperative qualities, devotion to duty, education, force, industry, initiative, judgment, justice, leadership, physical energy and endurance, reliability, self-control, discipline of subordinates, loyalty of subordinates, efficiency of personnel [based upon the results which the officer concerned has accomplished in training, up or improving the material under his charge].

"Special remarks: Chief of Bureau of Aeronautics, April 1, to September 30, 1921: Lieutenant Byrd is an exceptionally loyal, capable and efficient officer. For his age and length of service he has remarkably good judgment, tact, and an ability to cooperate with others. He is zealous and indefatigable in the performance of his duty, persistent in accomplishing the end in view, and does so without creating friction or opposition. I have no hesitation in saying that he more than any one else by his own qualifications had much to do with getting passed the legislation creating the Bureau of Aeronautics in the Navy Department. It was by his knowledge of aviation, his relationship to the Navy, and by his tact and persistence in persuading those opposed to it, and also in making new converts, that the law was passed. His work in this connection was invaluable to the director of aviation and later to the chief of the bureau, and to the service. He has a pleasing and strong personality and brings credit to the service in his contact with civilians.

"On account of his original and valuable work in developing instruments and methods for air navigation in connection with the trans-Atlantic flight, he was detailed to go to England to return on the ZR-2 to assist in navigation. He was there during the loss of ZR-2, and rendered prompt and valuable assistance at this critical time, and received letter of thanks and commendation from the British authorities which, it is assumed, have been made a part of his record." [The above remarks concerning navigation refer to the first successful trans-Atlantic flight that took place in 1919. Byrd had charge of the navigational preparation for that flight.]

FROM these extracts from Byrd's record it can easily be seen that he made his mark in the Navy long before he became famous.

"None of Dick's Polar flights were sponsored by the Navy Department, although the Navy was always keenly interested and went the limit in furnishing him such moral and material support as were permissible under Navy regulations.

"As a result, in the maintaining discipline, Byrd was compelled to rely wholly upon his personal authority as leader of each of those expeditions. His authority began and ended with himself. He lacked the power to court-martial his men. Many, if not most of them, were volunteers without pay. He could not discharge them after they once reached the polar regions. Threats of docking their pay were, of course, meaningless. And yet he has never had a case of direct disobedience to his orders on any of his expeditions.

"Of course, there were instances of infractions of regulations. But these never seriously threatened the discipline of any of his expeditions, even to a slight degree.

"Another unique phase in the handling of his expeditions is the full responsibility that Byrd must bear single-handed. Other expeditions than his have been backed either by their governments or a group of men, whereas, in these enterprises of his, the largest ever sent to the polar regions, the full responsibility rested with him alone, to such an extent that the mistakes of any of his men could easily result in the loss of his reputation or plunge him into bankruptcy.

"It has been said that Byrd's last expedition was the most useful and, from a scientific standpoint, the most productive Polar expedition of all time.

"IN THIS connection I was informed that when the Congress had it in mind to vote him a special medal of honor after his flight to the South Pole on his first Antarctic Expedition, Byrd asked that medals be given to his men instead. It is only necessary to add that Congress broke all precedents by voting medals for every man as he requested.

"And now I shall tell one more tale out of school, I myself radioed Byrd at Spitzbergen after his flight over the North Pole that the

Navy and that Congress would promote him to the rank of Admiral in recognition of that magnificent achievement. By his reply, absolutely refusing to accept such an exceptional honor on the ground that his exploit did not, and could not justify such an exceptional exercise of the power of Congress, effectively squelched the movement. After his subsequent flight over the South Pole, the demand from the public for his promotion to the rank of Admiral was so insistent that he was promoted in spite of himself. His promotion was on the retired list, as Byrd wired that under no circumstances could or would he accept an appointment which would have prevented the promotion of a number of fellow officers, had he been passed over the heads of thousands of officers on the active list.

"I may add that, contrary to the widespread belief, his appointment as Admiral on the retired list carried merely a few dollars increase over the pay to which he was already entitled.

"I have tried to depict this man as he is known to his friends and his associates, but I feel that no account of him would be complete that omits the story of his long vigil in his advance weather base on his last expedition. I was deeply moved by the account written on the spot when it was still fresh in his mind by Dr. Thomas C. Poulter, his chief scientist, and second in command.

Doctor Poulter's Account

Little America, Antarctica—Our arrival at Commander Byrd's advance base weather station at the southernmost and coldest spot ever inhabited by man marked the end of a horrible ordeal endured by a man alone, cut off from human aid by a code that he made himself to break. Though, for two months, three of us were with our Commander, jammed in his 9 by 13 room, we learned next to nothing from him of his experience, for he told us no more than bare courtesy required. I had expected this, for I knew that the many thousands who heard him lecture on his last expedition were struck by the fact that not once did he mention himself. Therefore, when he writes of this expedition, he will, I am sure, as it is his custom, omit the part he played. That his experience may not be entirely lost, I record it here.

When we first saw him on August 10, we were shocked at his appearance. Emaciated, hollow-cheeked, weak, and haggard though he was, he met us cheerily, calmer by far than any of us. He spoke to us as if he had seen us only yesterday, but his ghastly condition and husky voice told us that in spite of this matter-of-factness, he had been through some terrific things. When I learned that his condition had been even worse, and that his most desperate time had been many weeks before our arrival in the very middle of the winter night, I realized dimly what his battle for survival must have been.

Since that time I have been collecting here and there the pieces that go to make a consecutive story of his trials. Some I have gathered from casual remarks he has dropped from time to time in conversation or in the discussion of his cold-weather problems. Some I have from his old friend Murphy, who received and handled his radioed instructions, and still more from his record, a part of which I had a chance to read. Putting the pieces together, I discovered that I have come upon something rare. It is a picture of a mighty trail of manhood and spirit, and reveals something of Byrd the man.

He went much further than his refusal to call for help, and in so doing lessened his chances for survival. Time and again he exhausted the slender reserve of strength he had struggled so desperately to gain in order to keep radio intact. After his engine broke down, he had to hand crank the generator. He knew that, in spite of his instructions to the contrary, his men at Little America would have fought through to him had radio communication with him suddenly ceased. He does not talk of this, but the facts show his reasoning.

These facts came afterward—we did not know them at Little America. When we did reach the advance base in August we were scarcely two weeks ahead of the sun. His need for aid had passed. He had fought it out alone and wholly within himself in June and in spite of recurring periods of weakness he was once more struggling uphill.

I don't know of anything finer than that in life or literature. The odds were so overwhelmingly against him that he should rightfully have lost his fight. Had he done so, his chivalrous regard for us would have been only too evident. It is natural that he should have our deep gratitude, for what he endured and for his willingness to face the supreme sacrifice in his thoughtfulness for our safety.

"To my thinking, this explains the real Byrd, and gives us an insight into his greatness."

Secretary of the Navy Swanson interestingly reveals something of Byrd, the man. Admiral Byrd's book recounts modestly, but forcefully and thrillingly, giving most of the credit to his men, the events of his last great expedition. Every American should read it.

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