

Finally, and most important, Richard Byrd had one compelling motive to play the polar flight absolutely straight, a motive that neither his critics nor his defenders have ever emphasized but one that was, in fact, overriding. It was the possibility of land somewhere between the northernmost point the Amundsen-Ellsworth party had reached the year before and the pole. Peary had supposedly marched to the top of the world; Frederick Cook claimed to also. But neither man had taken the route that Byrd, Bennett, Amundsen, and Ellsworth had chosen. The notion that there might be some sort of landmass, however small, in the high Arctic near the North Pole had bewitched the polar community and the general public for years before the Byrd-Bennett flight to the top of the world and, indeed, for some years thereafter. In fact, one of Byrd's major stated objectives was to determine if any land existed in the high Arctic region, and it is clear from his un-

published account that he and Bennett constantly searched for signs. The general assumption was that if such a landmass did exist, it lay in the vast unexplored quadrant between Alaska and the pole.⁵⁸ But no one could be sure there might not be some sort of small land features elsewhere near the pole.

Amundsen was coming right behind Byrd in *Norge*. The world's leading polar explorer left Spitsbergen aboard the huge Italian airship shortly before nine in the morning on May 11 and reached Teller, Alaska, via the polar route seventy-one hours later.⁵⁹ (No one, incidentally, ever subjected Amundsen's flight to the brutal skepticism accorded Byrd; perhaps simple fairness dictates that they should.) The Norwegian and his flight crew aboard the big dirigible would surely check every mile, indeed every inch, of his competitor's claimed route. If there had been any unusual feature to be found in the polar sea ice field between Amundsen's farthest north penetration the summer before and the pole itself—a small, ice-encrusted island or two, perhaps, or even a point of rock in an open area of water—and Byrd had not reported it because in fact he had not been there, Amundsen would have revealed it in a heartbeat, and the American's reputation would have been irretrievably ruined. Richard Byrd would have gone down in history as the all-time fraud, *the* charlatan, of polar exploration. He thus had to try for the pole—to go all the way—or risk utter disaster in claiming a feat he had not, in fact, accomplished.⁶⁰