

## Sun Journal

# Byrd polar trip a flight of fancy?

■ **Explorer:** *Never mind the history books. There's considerable evidence that Richard Byrd falsified his log books and lied about flying over the North Pole in 1926.*

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

All three engines straining, the Josephine Ford lurches off an ice slope and into the sky over Spitsbergen, above Norway. The monoplane is attempting the first flight to the North Pole, laden with survival gear and fuel for a 22-hour flight. The pilot is Floyd Bennett. Lt. Cmdr. Richard E. Byrd, organizer of this risky undertaking, is navigator. It is 37 minutes past midnight on May 9, 1926.

Under the midnight sun, the competition watches.

Byrd is racing legendary Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, conqueror of the Northwest Passage and the South Pole. With partners Lincoln Ellsworth and Umberto Nobile, Amundsen is readying a dirigible for a crossing over the Pole to Alaska.

When Byrd and Bennett return at 4:07 p.m., Amundsen is among the first to greet them. The flight



**Keeping warm:** The crew of the Josephine Ford a few minutes before the Fokker triplane took off on the purported polar flight. Lt. Cmdr. Richard E. Byrd, organizer and navigator for the mission, is at the center.

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When Byrd and Bennett return at 4:07 p.m., Amundsen is among the first to greet them. The flight has taken 15½ hours. They reached the Pole at 9:04 a.m. — an outward trip of about 8½ hours — and circled it for about 13 minutes. The return took less than seven hours.

With his courtly manner and movie star looks, Byrd becomes an American media darling. He goes on to organize the first multipassenger aircraft flight across the Atlantic and the first flight to the South Pole, and pioneer a U.S. presence in Antarctica.

But is tomorrow the 75th anniversary of a milestone or a lie?

Suspicious that the Josephine Ford did not reach the Pole and that Byrd doctored his records surfaced in 1971, 14 years after Byrd's death, with the publication of "Ocean, Poles, and Airmen," by Richard Montague. Evidence suggests that the flight was not as Byrd claimed, that he erred in his navigation, deliberately distorted his cockpit log or both.

Montague extensively quoted retired Air Force Col. Berni Balchen and declared the flight a fraud. Balchen had met Byrd in Spitsbergen and later flew him across the Atlantic and became chief pilot for Byrd's first Antarctic expedition.

Balchen claimed that Floyd Bennett told him the Josephine Ford never made it to the Pole. Instead, after an engine developed an oil leak, the plane circled over the northern coast of Spitsbergen for 14 hours until Byrd ordered Bennett to return. Also, their flight charts were virtually blank.

Bennett might thus have been a witness and unwilling accomplice to a fraud. After Bennett died of pneumonia in 1928, his wife told Balchen, "This is the luckiest thing that ever happened to Byrd."

Balchen's charges were repeated in "Beyond the Barrier," by Eugene Rodgers, on Byrd's first expedition to Antarctica. More doubts were sown when Antarctic explorer Finn Ronne published "Antarctica, My Destiny" in 1973.

*Montague said that in 1949, Dr.*

**Keeping warm:** The crew of the Josephine Ford a few minutes before the Fokker triplane took off for the mission, is at the center.



**Hero:** Richard E. Byrd, pictured wearing his flying helmet in 1927, became a media darling.

Isaiah Bowman, director of the American Geographic Society, pressed Byrd, saying, "I asked to see his compilations and what navigational aids were used to prove that he had reached 90 degrees north. Byrd always gave evasive answers and said no one should question his integrity. But he had no proof."

Finally, according to Ronne, Byrd told Bowman that he had missed the Pole by about 150 miles.

Byrd's flight log contains notes to Floyd Bennett, navigational calculations and instrument logs. One entry instructs Bennett to radio that they are 230 miles from the Pole. Then, "motors going fine" before "the starboard motor has an oil leak." Later Byrd notes, "We should be at the Pole now," directs Bennett to circle, then asks how long they were "gone before we turned around." The response, "8½," is attributed to Bennett.

These entries apparently debunk the charge that they only flew back and forth. But the flight log is missing key data that Byrd later submitted to the National Geographic Society.

In his official report and accompanying charts, Byrd gave 10 sextant position computations. The flight log contains six, four labeled "example" and unrelated to the flight. Of the remaining two, one is repeated unchanged in the report to the society. All of Byrd's sextant computations are for the outward leg of the flight; his sextant fell and broke shortly after reaching the area of the Pole.

The speed of the plane and the mileage covered are also key. Byrd reported to the society that the Josephine Ford averaged 79.4 mph on the 8½-hour outbound leg of the flight. At that speed, the plane would have covered 675 miles of the 788-mile one-way distance. It supposedly averaged 92 mph during the nearly seven-hour return flight, a distance of 644 miles.

Balchen wrote: "Now I was chief test pilot for the Fokker factory which built the Josephine Ford, and with Floyd Bennett I flew it more than a hundred hours around the States, and we could never achieve a cruising speed better than 65 knots (74.8 mph). From actual test data... the best cruising speed that could have been squeezed out of the plane would have been no more than 74 knots (85.1 mph)."

"In Byrd's stated time of 15 hours and 17 minutes he could therefore have traveled a maximum distance of only 1,131 nautical miles (1,300.7 statute miles) and the farthest North Latitude he could have reached was 88 degrees 15.3 minutes, or 104.5 nautical miles (120.2 statute miles) short of the Pole."

Byrd did not stand by the figures he submitted to the society. In his 1928 book "Skyward," he said on the outbound leg the plane traveled "nearly 100 miles an hour" and that on the return leg "the wind began to freshen and change direction soon after we left the Pole, and soon we were making over 100 miles an hour."

The allegations are possibly confirmed by Byrd. His flight log contains erased sextant computations that astronomer and scientific publisher Dennis Rawlins says differ from those given to the society and prove that Byrd missed the Pole by at least 150 miles.

Thus, because of lack of precise instrumentation or faulty navigation, Byrd probably missed the Pole by more than the 10 miles allowed by the society. He thought he was correct during the flight, but when he later realized the mistake, he quietly developed data for the society with the expected sextant calculations. He might have also exaggerated his speeds but was caught between the plane's capability and its time in the air.

Byrd as the conqueror of the North Pole by air continues to appear in textbooks and authoritative publications of the geographic establishment. The society awarded Byrd its prestigious Hubbard medal before its panel of experts verified his data. Byrd was also paid handsomely for a series of articles on the flight.

The Smithsonian Institution has ignored the fuss. The late Vice Adm. Donald D. Engen, then director of the National Air and Space Museum, wrote a new foreword for the re-release last year of "Skyward," describing the flight as "a magnificent achievement." The Navy honored Byrd's first in 1981, a decade after the first criticisms, by including Byrd and Bennett among the first inductees into the Naval Aviation Hall of Fame.

Although the record probably should be revised, recognizing Amundsen as the first to the North Pole by air, Byrd's other accomplishments are not diminished.

His greatest critic, Balchen, wrote: "His importance lies in this vision he had, the concept of tomorrow's air age, and he belongs to the great company of pioneers who helped to usher in the new era of polar flight."