Magic Words

Only moments before, I had walked down Brimmer Street, totally downcast. My stride picked up and I half ran for more than a mile. Each step built up my sagging morale. Until I reached the *Boston Transcript* building, I didn't pause. Once there, I walked casually inside, filled with an air of confidence.

My plan was to meet W. A. McDonald, a longtime reporter and highly respected journalist who had written several articles about Byrd and obviously knew the famous naval commander well. I would ask him to speak with Byrd on my behalf. Although I had never met the newsman, surely he would be delighted to function as my appointment maker.

I asked for the reporter at the desk, prepared to argue if anyone tried to stop me. To my surprise, the man sent me straight to the editorial department. When I reached the right floor, someone pointed out McDonald's desk.

I looked him over as I approached. He was short, in his midforties, with salt-and-pepper hair; the first aging lines had etched themselves across the contours of his face. He wore glasses so thick I couldn't see the

color of his eyes. He sat behind a large desk heaped with stacks of newspapers. Next to the papers rested a telephone, a typewriter, and a pad of paper, leaving him a small area for work.

I introduced myself and said, "I read your fine story about Commander Byrd, and I want to go on the expedition."

He leaned back in his chair and stared at me, his face devoid of any expression. "Why come to me? I don't have anything to do with the expedition."

"I realize that, Mr. McDonald," I replied confidently, having already prepared myself for his answer. "But you know him. Besides, I've already been to his house and I couldn't get in to see him. I want to go on that expedition. I've got to go!"

"That so?" Despite his noncommittal answer, I detected a spark of interest.

"Yes, sir. And I'll do anything to get that chance."

"I see," he said. "And what qualifications do you have?" His face took on a sternness.

I hesitated, wondering if I would have to fight the same hostile protectiveness that the maid had shown. I could almost hear him say, "You're nothing but a stranger, riffraff, just a youngster. You're not going to get by *me*."

This time I was not going to give up; McDonald was going to intercede for me. I inhaled deeply and said, "I'm a dog driver and I've had a lot of experience."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, it is. I spent the winter of 1925 driving dogs for Doctor Grenfell."

"You mean Doctor Wilfred Grenfell? Tell me about that."

I told him I had dropped out of Harvard two years earlier to work with the much-admired Sir Wilfred Grenfell. A successful British physician, Grenfell left England in 1892 and had been serving ever since as a medical missionary to the Eskimos in Labrador and Newfoundland. He traveled the coastal waters in a specially equipped hospital ship and went overland by dog sled. For eight months I drove his dog sled in Labrador and observed a dedicated humanitarian ministering to the health and

educational needs of the fishermen of the region, winning their respect and international recognition for his unceasing devotion to their welfare. He had established schools, hospitals, nursing centers, stores, even industrial projects in that barren land.

"You actually worked with the dogs?"

"I certainly did," I said. "And I still do. When I finished my work with Grenfell, I brought back my own dog, Storm, along with two others. My friend Eddie Goodale has a dog, and so does my father. I could have five dogs available for the expedition."

"So you're a dog musher, huh?" He leaned forward, making me feel I was undergoing a police interrogation. "Where do you drive dogs? This part of the country isn't like Labrador."

"I do it right here in New England all the time." I explained that I belonged to the New England Sled Dog Club, which fostered the breeding, training, and racing of sled dogs.

"I've heard of the club over the wires," he said, "but I don't know much about it."

Ever the reporter, eliciting facts, he gave me the opportunity to talk about one of my favorite topics. I told him far more about dogs and the sled dog club than he probably wanted to hear. But he continued to listen. Since there was still a chance that he'd refuse to make contact for me, I kept talking lest he turn me down.

Although occasionally interrupting with questions, he listened intently. The stern expression drained from his face, and he relaxed. Encouraged now that he might do what he could for me, I said, "And while reading your article in yesterday's *Transcript*, I felt I had to go on the expedition."

"Oh? Feel that strong, huh?" he said, the first hint of a smile on his face.

The evening before had decided it. Five of us were studying at a table in a Harvard dormitory. Hearing the outside door open, I glanced up, always ready for a disruption from my books. The other four, deeply involved with their assignments, paid no attention to the paperboy who tossed me the *Boston Transcript*.

I unfolded the paper, intending to read only the headlines before

resuming my studies. In large, bold letters I read five magic words that would change the direction of my life: BYRD TO THE SOUTH POLE.

"Listen to this!" I dropped the paper on the table and pointed to the headline. "He's going to do it! Byrd's going to the Pole!" My eyes hurried down the two columns, and I turned the page. The already-famous U.S. navy commander, Richard Evelyn Byrd, was going to fly over the South Pole—a feat never before attempted.

Like most Americans, I had been avidly following the career of Byrd, who had emerged as one of the world's great explorers alongside Robert Scott, Robert Edwin Peary, and Roald Amundsen.

Like them, he was determined to conquer the North and South poles. Since the turn of the century, the exploration of the two polar regions had captured the attention of the whole world. These events were taking place in my lifetime, and I had read voraciously about the men and their achievements, often picturing myself traveling with these pioneers.

An American, Robert Peary, had reached the North Pole by dog team in 1911. In that same year Roald Amundsen, a Norwegian, had planned to reach the North Pole. On learning that Peary had already started north, he secretly headed his crew southward to compete with a British naval officer, Lieutenant Robert F. Scott, who was attempting to discover the geographic South Pole.

When Scott reached the Pole, he saw the Norwegian flag already flying; Amundsen had arrived thirty-one days earlier. Shocked and dejected, Scott headed back to his base. While Amundsen rode his sleds back to base camp, Scott and his four companions laboriously walked and occasionally skied toward their food cache at One Ton Depot. En route two died, and with only eleven miles to go, the last three, including Scott, froze to death.

By the time he planned his expedition to the South Pole, Byrd had already made headlines with three important feats.

First, he developed the sun compass and worked out the compilations for navigating a plane across the Atlantic to the Azores, a group of volcanic islands west of Portugal. For two months in 1926 he had lived in Trepassey Bay in Newfoundland, working with the three Navy-Curtiss

planes that the U.S. Navy had assigned to fly the Atlantic. Byrd planned to navigate the lead plane. Hours before the flight, the Navy Department, concerned about the dangers of the undertaking, pulled Byrd and replaced his weight with additional fuel. But because he had already navigated the mission on paper, the Navy records gave Byrd full credit for the success of the flight.

Second, he flew from Kings Bay, Spitsbergen (a group of islands to the north of Norway), over the North Pole and back, a flight no one had ever tried before. He and another famous flyer, Floyd Bennett, were the first to reach the Pole by air.

Third, on June 29, 1927, Byrd flew the first multiengine plane across the Atlantic. It was also the first flight to carry overseas air mail.

Now, according to the *Transcript*, Byrd would take a party of forty men with him to Antarctica. The expedition would also conduct geographic and geological surveys. He expected to leave the United States by the fall of 1928, contingent on his raising half a million dollars to finance the trip. He was asking individuals and corporations to contribute.

"He plans to live there—in Antarctica—for a year!" I read a few paragraphs aloud. Had I stopped to think about my companions, I would have realized they were more interested in their homework than in Byrd's plans. But the news excited me, and I couldn't stop talking about the expedition.

"This will open up the South Pole," I said. "Think of the minerals that might be under the ice. The only land on earth not yet explored—and no American has ever set foot on Antarctica . . ."

"It'll be a history-making event, all right," Freddie Crockett said, dropping his head toward his books.

Eddie Goodale, my best friend since childhood and a fellow volunteer with Grenfell, expressed a mild interest. "Sounds like an exciting trip. Would be quite an adventure to go along. But how could you get on board?" He, too, returned to his books.

Silence descended on the room, broken only by the turning of a page or the scraping of a chair. I read the entire article and then reread it, pausing to daydream about being on that still-unexplored continent.

Having lived with Grenfell under Arctic conditions for eight months, I had some idea of life in a subzero land. Once again I could feel the sharp winds ripping mercilessly at my face, despite the fur hood of my parka. The sled dogs viciously scrapped among themselves yet were instantly ready to go out on the trail. Once again I tasted the food we had called hoosh, a concoction high in protein and fat, ideal because of the cold temperatures and the strenuous work of traversing rugged land. This fatty soup, with its generous portions of meat and spices, produced an aroma like nothing else in the world.

In imagination, I sniffed the air—clean and unsullied by factory smokestacks. The snow-covered ground remained white, disturbed only by the occasional prints of dogs, sleds, and skis.

"I've got to go!" I said. "I must go with Byrd!" In speaking those words aloud, I had made my decision. I would become part of Byrd's expedition even though I didn't have the slightest idea how to get invited. But I would find a way.

I was twenty-two years old, back at Harvard for the second time. On my return from Labrador, I had promised myself and my parents that I would study hard, make up my missed work, and graduate. Now, only a year after reenrollment, adventure beckoned again.

Priding myself on being in top condition, I was a husky six-footer who could meet any kind of physical demands. Having once proven it in the Arctic region, I was now ready for the ultimate test: living in Antarctica.

Young and infused with enthusiasm, I didn't allow a negative thought to influence me. Had I analyzed the situation, I would have realized that Byrd didn't have the funds to hire people. Not once did I ask myself why Byrd would want me with him. I didn't even stop to consider that taking off for another year would delay my career plans—and incur the disappointment and displeasure of my parents.

"Sir, please help me. I *have* to go with Byrd to the South Pole."

"Yes, yes," McDonald said. "But I still don't quite understand why you came to me."

"Because you can get to Commander Byrd and tell him about me. If you talk to him, he'll listen and he'll take me."

Those words sound brash as I repeat them. Yet I honestly believed that once Byrd knew how badly I wanted to go on the expedition, he would naturally want me. I concluded, "I came here for one reason. I want your help. I'd like you to talk with Commander Byrd. Ask him to give me a chance. I will leave college immediately and travel to New Hampshire, where he is assembling his dogs and supplies."

When McDonald made no comment, I added my final salvo: "Tell Commander Byrd I'll leave for New Hampshire with absolutely no obligation on his part. Furthermore, I'm prepared to work for nothing for one year, driving dogs, training dog leaders, building their cages, and doing whatever is necessary to get those dogs ready for his expedition to the Antarctic. At the end of the year he can examine what I've done and then decide whether he wants to take me."

"I don't see how he could turn that offer down."

"That's why I made it, sir."

"I'm willing to do what I can," he said with kindness in his voice. "I'll contact Commander Byrd and tell him about you. Then I'll get back in touch and tell you what he says."

"Thank you, Mr. McDonald! Thank you!" I must have sounded foolish, thanking him again and again, but I meant it. McDonald was going to push the door open for me.

My worries of just the hour before disappeared. I knew Byrd wouldn't turn me down. He couldn't! Yet for the next two days I could hardly wait for McDonald's phone call. I cut all my classes and stayed in the dorm. Every time the phone rang, I rushed to answer it.

When McDonald finally phoned, he gave me a message that sounded more like a telegram: "Commander Byrd has accepted your proposition."

I was so overjoyed, I ran through the dorm, yelling at anyone who would listen. "I'm going! I'm going with Byrd to the South Pole!"

Once I calmed down, I knew that I had to tell my family before I could make any further plans. Although they hadn't fully approved, my parents had allowed me to drop out of Harvard to go with Grenfell.

Father, highly successful in business, understandably wanted me to get my degree, settle down, and lead a normal, productive life.

When I started out on the twenty-seven miles to our home in Hamilton, Massachusetts, that evening, I planned to arrive just as my parents finished dinner. Being a few minutes early, I waited outside, peeking through the dining room window, until I saw the butler take the coffee into the living room. That ritual was my cue. Mother and Father would come in immediately, and I could be alone with them.

Father, a large-framed man with a dark complexion, looked up in surprise as I entered. "Norman, what are you doing here? Aren't you supposed to be in college today?"

"Yes, but I had something important to discuss with you." I sat down across from him. Mother poured a cup of coffee and handed it to me.

Father listened while I told him about Byrd's expedition to the South Pole. I rushed on, not giving him a chance to interrupt or argue me out of it. Mother, who said nothing then or later, listened with a helpless expression of dismay. Despite my enthusiastic commitment, I hated myself for bringing sadness and disappointment to her life. While she had given me nothing but encouragement and affection, I was causing her misery by departing from what she wanted me to do. Believing a college education was the best thing for me, Mother wanted me to finish my schooling before I did anything else. She had silently given in when I went to Labrador, and now I was asking her approval for a second postponement, one that was potentially life-threatening.

Speaking with more bravado than I felt, I said, "Father, I want to go on this expedition. I must go. It's the most important thing in the world to me. I know it's a disappointment to both of you, but it's something I must do."

"You feel that strongly about going, do you?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," I said. "As a matter of fact, I've already told Commander Byrd I would go." Naturally, I didn't tell him the conditions under which Byrd had accepted me. As I explained my role in the expedition, not once did he offer an opinion or state how he felt.

When I stopped, he looked up at me and asked several practical questions. "Norman, have you met Byrd himself?"

"No, not yet. He sent me a message, though."

"When will you meet him?"

"He'll be coming to New Hampshire to meet me."

Finally came the question I had dreaded: "What kind of salary are you going to receive?"

"No salary," I said.

Even if I hadn't known Father well, his startled expression would have told me that my answer was not what he wanted to hear.

"Do I perceive this correctly?" he asked quietly. "You will have no salary from Commander Byrd, even though you'll work for him for a year before you leave for Antarctica? Who'll take care of your expenses?"

His question hinted that I had won his approval, even if reluctantly given. More confident now, I said, "Don't worry, Father. Commander Byrd is going to take care of me."

"I see." Father turned to Mother and said, "We won't need to send him his allowance then, will we?"

I hadn't counted on that response. My parents sent me $25 a week—a good sum in those days. I just assumed that once they had granted me permission, they would continue to send my living allowance. But I couldn't backtrack. Besides, I had overcome my two big obstacles: Byrd had accepted me, and my parents had acquiesced. Nothing would stop me now.

As I drove away, stark reality set in. I faced one hell of a problem. I would be gone a year, and I would have to eat. What would I do without money? I would have to solve that problem once I reached New Hampshire.