

Commander Richard E. Byrd, U.S. Navy (Highest Rank Rear Admiral). Citations for Exploration in 1926: For distinguishing himself conspicuously by courage and intrepidity at the risk of his life, in demonstrating that it is possible for aircraft to travel in continuous flight from a now inhabited portion of the earth over the North Pole and return.

Biography: Read Admiral Richard E. Byrd, Jr., U.S. Navy, specialized in feats of exploration. He was a pioneering American aviator, polar explorer, and organizer of polar logistics. Aircraft flights in which he served as a navigator and expedition leader crossed the Atlantic Ocean, a segment of the Arctic Ocean, and a segment of the Antarctic Plateau. Byrd's claimed his expeditions had been the first to reach the North Pole and the South Pole by air.

Byrd was born in Winchester, Virginia. He was a descendant of one of the First Families of Virginia. His ancestors include planter John Rolfe, and his wife Pocahontas, William Byrd II of Westover Plantation William Byrd II, who established Richmond, and Robert "King" Carter, a colonial governor. His brother was Governor of Virginia and U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd; his father served as Speaker of the Virginia House of Delegates.

Family: On January 20, 1915, Richard married Marie Donaldson Ames. They had four children – Richard, Evelyn, Katharine, and Helen. In late 1924, the Byrd family moved to 9 Brimmer Street in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood. It would be Byrd's primary residence for the rest of his life.

Education: Byrd attended the Virginia Military Institute and the University of Virginia before entering the United States Naval Academy on May 28, 1908.

Early Naval Career: On June 8, 1912, Byrd graduated from the Naval Academy and was commissioned an ensign. On July 14, 1912, he was assigned to the U.S.S. *Wyoming* and later assigned to the U.S.S. *Dolphin*, which served as the yacht of the Secretary of the Navy. While serving on board *Dolphin*, he met future Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy, then the *Dolphin*'s commanding officer, and Assistant Secretary of the Navy, Brother Franklin D. Roosevelt, who used *Dolphin* for transportation. He was assigned to *Dolphin* during the U.S. intervention in Veracruz, Mexico, in 1914.

On March 15, 1916, Byrd was medically retired, promoted to the rank of lieutenant junior grade, assigned as the Inspector and Instructor for the Rhode Island Naval Militia in Providence, and was soon commissioned as a commander in the R.I. Naval Militia. On April 25, 1928, by act of the R.I. General Assembly, he was promoted to captain in the R.I. Naval Militia for his 1926 North Pole flight.

World War I: Byrd served as a retired officer on active duty during WW I. Realizing that aviation was expanding rapidly, Byrd volunteered to become a naval aviator and earned his pilot wings in August 1917. He pioneered many techniques for navigating airplanes over the open ocean including drift indicators, the sun compass and bubble sextants. Byrd was assigned to the Office of Naval Operations and served as secretary and organizer of the Navy Department Commission on Training Camps and trained men in aviation at the aviation ground school in Pensacola, Florida. He then commanded naval air forces at Naval Air Station Halifax in Nova Scotia from July 1918 until the armistice in November.

He was promoted to lieutenant on September 2, 1918, and to temporary lieutenant commander on September 21, 1918.

Post War: After the war, Byrd planned the flight path for the U.S. Navy's 1919 transatlantic crossing. Of the three flying boats that attempted it, only Albert Read's NC-4 aircraft completed the trip, becoming the first transatlantic flight.

Byrd commanded the aviation unit of the arctic expedition to North Greenland led by Donald MacMillan from June to October 1925. This position gave Byrd an appreciation for the benefits aircraft could bring to Arctic exploration.

On May 9, 1926, Byrd and Navy Chief Aviation Pilot Floyd attempted a flight over the North Pole in a Fokker F.VIIa/3m Tri-motor monoplane. The flight went from Spitsbergen (Svalbard) and back to its takeoff airfield, lasting fifteen hours and fifty-seven minutes (including 13 minutes of circling the pole). Byrd and Bennett claimed to have reached the pole, a distance of 1,535 miles.

When he returned to the United States from the Arctic, Byrd became a national hero. Congress passed a special act on December 21, 1926, promoting him to commander and awarding the Medal of Honor.

Controversy: Since 1926, there has been heated controversy over whether Byrd actually reached the North Pole. The general claim is that the time and distance do not match the airplane's speed capability. version of the flight. If Byrd and Bennett did not reach the North Pole, then the first flight over the Pole occurred a few days later, on May 12, 1926, with the flight of the airship *Norge* that flew from Spitsbergen (Svalbard) to Alaska nonstop by Roald Amundsen. Amundsen had been the first to reach the South Pole in December 1911.

In 1927, Byrd announced he had the backing to build aircraft to complete non-stop flights across the Atlantic Ocean. Byrd was one of several aviators who attempted to win the Orteig Prize in 1927 for making the first nonstop flight between the United States and France. During a practice takeoff, the airplane crashed, severely injuring Bennett and slightly injuring Byrd. Brother and fellow National Sojourner, Charles Lindbergh, won the prize by completing his historic flight on May 21, 1927.

First Antarctic expedition (1928–1930): In 1928, Byrd began his [first expedition](#) to the [Antarctic](#) involving two ships and three airplanes. A base camp named was constructed on the Ross Ice Shelf and scientific expeditions by snowshoe, dog-sled, snowmobile, and airplane began. Photographic expeditions and geological surveys were undertaken for the duration of that summer, and constant communication was maintained with the outside world. After their first winter, their expeditions were resumed, and on November 28, 1929, the first flight to the South Pole and back was launched. Byrd and others flew the Ford Tri-motor to the South Pole and back in 18 hours, 41 minutes. They had difficulty gaining enough altitude, and they had to dump empty gas tanks, as well as their emergency supplies, in order to achieve the altitude of the Polar Plateau, but they were ultimately successful.

As a result, Byrd was promoted to the rank of rear admiral by a special act of Congress on December 21, 1929. As he was only 41 years old at the time, this promotion made Byrd the youngest admiral in the history of the U.S. Navy. He is one of only three persons to have been promoted to the rank of rear admiral without having first held the rank of captain.

Second Antarctic Expedition: On his second expedition in 1934, Byrd spent five winter months alone operating a weather station where he narrowly escaped with his life after suffering carbon monoxide poisoning from a poorly ventilated stove. Byrd's radio transmissions alarmed the men at the base camp, who attempted to rescue him. The first two trips were failures due to darkness, snow, and mechanical troubles, but finally the rescue crew arrived and found Byrd in poor physical health. On October 12, an airplane from the base camp picked up Byrd.

Antarctic Service Expedition (1939–1940): Byrd's third expedition was the first one on which he had the official backing of the U.S. government. The project included extensive studies of geology, biology, meteorology and exploration. In March 1940, Byrd was recalled to active duty in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. The expedition continued in Antarctica without him.

World War II: As a senior naval officer, Byrd served on active duty during World War II (1941–45), mostly as the confidential advisor to the Commander in Chief, United States Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Ernest J. King. From 1942 to 1945, he headed important missions to the Pacific, including surveys of remote islands for airfields. On one assignment he visited the fighting front in Europe. Byrd was present at the Japanese surrender in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945. In recognition of his service during World War II, Byrd was twice awarded the Legion of Merit.

Operation Highjump (1946–1947): In 1946, Byrd was appointed officer in charge of Antarctic Developments Project. Byrd's fourth Antarctic expedition was Operation Highjump. It was the largest Antarctic expedition to date and was expected to last six-to-eight months. The expedition was supported by 15 U.S. Navy ships, 6 helicopters, 6 flying boats, 2 seaplane tenders, and 15 other aircraft and 4,000 personnel. They arrived in the Ross Sea on December 31, 1946, and made aerially explored an area half the size of the United States.

Operation Deep Freeze I (1955–1956): Byrd commanded the U.S. Navy Operation Deep Freeze I in 1955–56, which established permanent Antarctic bases at McMurdo Sound, the Bay of Whales, and the South Pole. This was Byrd's last trip to Antarctica and began a permanent U.S. military presence in Antarctica.

Death: Byrd died in his sleep on March 11, 1957, of a heart ailment at his home in Boston. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

Military Awards: Admiral Byrd was one of the most highly decorated officers in the history of the U.S. Navy. His medals include the Medal of Honor, Navy Cross, Navy Distinguished Service Medal, Distinguished Flying Cross, the Silver Life Saving Medal, and all three Antarctic expedition medals. Byrd was one of only four American military officers in history entitled to wear a medal with their own image on it. As Byrd's image is on both the first and second Byrd Antarctic Expedition medals, he was the only American entitled to wear two medals with his own image on them.

Masonic History: Byrd was an active Freemason. He became a member of Federal Lodge No. 1, Washington, D.C. on March 19, 1921 and affiliated with Kane Lodge No. 454, New York City, September 18, 1928. He founded First Antarctic Lodge No. 777. He was a member of [National Sojourners](#) Chapter No. 3 at Washington DC.