

For Byrd and Balchen, the epic South Pole flight began 75 years ago this month.

Poles Apart

By Bruce D. Callander

In 1968, the late Rear Adm. Richard E. Byrd was enshrined in the National Aviation Hall of Fame. The hall, in its statement about the great polar explorer, noted that, in November 1929, he participated in the first-ever flight over the South Pole.

Five years later, in 1973, the hall enshrined USAF Col. Bernt Balchen. It said that Balchen, who served as chief pilot of Byrd's Ford trimotor during the 1929 Antarctic expedition, was the first man to *pilot* an aircraft over the South Pole.

It is a well-established fact that, on Nov. 29, 1929, Byrd and Balchen—with two other crew members—became the first men in an aircraft to reach the South Pole. That epic feat unfolded 75 years ago this month.

It turns out that Byrd, an American, and Balchen, a Norwegian native, had quite a bit of mutual history, and their 1929 South Pole adventure was only a part of it.

The hall's biographies describe Byrd as the first to "fly" over *both* the North Pole and South Pole. Balchen is described as the first to do so as a pilot. In 1926, Byrd and a Navy pilot made a flight that was said to have reached the North Pole. In 1949, Balchen piloted an Air Force



Honors. Navy Lt. Cmdr. Richard Byrd (left) and his 1926 North Pole expedition pilot, Floyd Bennett, both received Medals of Honor. Bennett died before the 1929 South Pole expedition. Bernt Balchen took his place.

C-54 that beyond doubt went over the North Pole.

Some have questioned whether, in 1926, Byrd's Fokker monoplane could have reached the North Pole in the amount of time it was away from its base on Spitsbergen, an island north of Norway. Byrd always said the 1926 trip was quick because he enjoyed tailwinds in both directions. Weather reports did not support that claim, but it was widely accepted; Byrd and his pilot, Floyd Bennett, were awarded Medals of Honor. Balchen, however, later contended that Byrd never made it.

Byrd and Balchen actually worked together on that 1926 flight, as well as on a 1927 transatlantic flight and the 1929 South Pole flight. In the

aftermath of those cooperative years, however, Byrd and Balchen became estranged. Byrd evidently believed Balchen was plotting against him. Balchen believed that Byrd was bent on sabotaging his military career. Balchen had suspicions about Byrd's self-proclaimed 1926 North Pole flight. He raised them after the admiral's death, provoking an outraged response from the admiral's family and friends.

Balchen and Bennett

Their story begins in the early years of aviation. Byrd was a handsome, ambitious naval officer. A 1912 graduate of the US Naval Academy, he earned his aviator wings in 1918 and spent the last

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months of World War I in Canada, responsible for two air bases in Nova Scotia. After the war, Byrd was reassigned to Washington and was credited with helping convince Congress to establish a Bureau of Aeronautics.

For his part, Balchen began his military flying career in 1920 when he joined the Norwegian naval air force and attended flying school. He served as a test pilot and maintenance engineer.

In 1924, Byrd was picked to be navigator for a US Navy dirigible flight from Alaska to Spitsbergen. When President Coolidge called off that flight, Byrd went on leave and organized his own, privately financed mission to the North Pole. In 1925, in the months leading up to that attempt, Balchen signed up to help Byrd and Bennett prepare their Fokker trimotor ski plane for that controversial mission.

Byrd claimed that he and Bennett conquered the North Pole during an epic flight on May 9, 1926.

After that flight, Byrd and Bennett planned to fly across the Atlantic in another trimotor. On a test flight with aircraft designer Anthony Fokker, however, the airplane crashed. Byrd and Fokker were only slightly hurt, but Bennett suffered major injuries. He was unable to make the Atlantic flight. Byrd invited Balchen to join his crew, and he did.

Byrd soon began making plans for a South Pole flight. Bennett, despite his injuries, continued his strong relationship with Byrd and was to have been on the crew, but he was the victim of terrible luck. In 1928, when a German airplane crash-landed near Newfoundland, Bennett joined the rescue effort. He contracted pneumonia and died in a Canadian hospital.

With Bennett dead, Byrd again chose Balchen to fill the gap. As a skilled pilot and mechanic experienced in cold weather operations, Balchen was ideal for the job. He was responsible for the maintenance and operation of the three airplanes that would make exploratory flights and, eventually, try for the pole. Byrd was the expedition leader.

Byrd and Balchen apparently never understood or trusted one another. Balchen kept compulsively detailed flight logs, and Byrd seemed suspicious that the Norwegian was trying to catch him at something.



Polar Stars. Bennett (left) and Balchen, two of the world's premier polar exploration pilots, became friends. Balchen and Byrd, however, apparently never understood or trusted each other.

For his part, Balchen disliked the admiral's habit of taking different members of the expedition into his confidence, apparently inviting competition.

While he served with the expedition, Balchen kept his mouth shut and gave Byrd the respect due him as the boss. And, while Byrd may have disliked Balchen personally, he recognized his true talents and picked him as pilot for the South Pole flight.

Four Pilots on Board

All four men on the mission were pilots. Balchen took the controls, while Harold I. June was co-pilot and radio operator. Ashley C. McKinley, a former Army captain, was aerial photographer, and Byrd was flight leader and navigator. The airplane, a Ford trimotor, was named *Floyd Bennett*, for the man Byrd would have preferred to have with him.

The crew's main concern was the weather. Laurence M. Gould, geologist, geographer, and expedition second in command, had gone ahead weeks earlier with a small party and 42 sled dogs. From a base camp in Antarctica that Byrd called "Little America," they were to explore the region, check the weather, and be ready to rescue the crew if necessary. On Nov. 27, Gould radioed that the weather was good.

Balchen had weighed and precisely

balanced the cargo, which included emergency food and supplies. At the last minute, Byrd ordered two more 150-pound sacks of food put aboard, making the airplane dangerously heavy.

There are three different versions of the flight. In the early 1930s, Byrd and McKinley wrote separate articles for *National Geographic*. Balchen's version of the expedition appeared in his 1958 autobiography, *Come North With Me*.

McKinley's description deals largely with his photographing the Antarctic throughout the flight, to create a long montage from which maps could be drawn. He gives little detail about the flight itself other than to praise Balchen's flying.

The other two accounts mostly agree, but Byrd and Balchen put themselves at the center of the action and minimize the contributions of the other.

Byrd's narrative deals with his role as mission organizer and leader. He takes credit for supervising the airplane loading and making certain every safety precaution had been taken.

In his account, Balchen says Byrd emerges from his quarters "in a big fur cap and parka and polar bear pants, poses a moment beside the plane as the movie cameras grind, and waves to the crowd."

The weather was clear and the air team was able to find and follow the tracks of the dog team. Before long,



North. On May 9, 1926, Byrd and Bennett took off for the North Pole in their Fokker trimotor, Josephine Ford—named for the daughter of Edsel Ford, a key backer of Byrd's expedition.

they caught up with the men and dropped supplies, cigarettes, and messages.

Toward the Mountains

Soon, however, the crew faced a problem that could have ended the mission. Their route lay over the Queen Maud Mountains, and, as the heavily loaded airplane strained for altitude, it was unable to get high enough without losing weight. June poured several five-gallon cans of fuel into the fuel tanks and threw the cans overboard. It made little difference.

In his memoirs, Balchen recalls being at 8,200 feet, "just about the Ford's ceiling with its present loading. I wave frantically to catch the attention of June, who is bent over his radio, and signal him to jettison some of our weight. His hand reaches for the gasoline dump-valve, and I shake my head and point to the emergency food. He kicks one of the 150-pound sacks through the trapdoor, and the plane lifts just enough to clear the barrier.

"A final icy wall blocks our way, steeper than all the others. A torrent of air is pouring over its top, the plane bucking violently in the downdraft, and our rate of climb is zero. June jettisons the second sack, and the Ford staggers a little higher," Balchen wrote.

In his *National Geographic* account, Byrd gives a different version of events. He wrote:

"Above the roar of the engines, Balchen yelled, 'It's drop 200 or go back.'

"'A bag of food overboard!' I yelled at McKinley. Over went a 150-pound brown bag. ... Slowly, we went higher. Again, the wheel turned loosely in Balchen's hands. 'Quick,' he shouted. 'Dump more.'

"I pointed to another bag. Mac nonchalantly shoved it through the trapdoor."

McKinley, meanwhile, treated the incident as an interruption in his filming. He wrote that as he was "methodically and carefully snapping the

photographs and keeping the record of the exposures, the plane began to wallow."

As June emptied a gas can into the reserve tank, McKinley wrote, "he would pass it back to me to drop through the trapdoor, between 'shots' with the camera. Then came word from the commander that we must drop the emergency rations. Again, it was necessary for me to leave the camera to drop the bags of food."

Ultimately, the lightened airplane lifted—but still not enough. Balchen gambled on finding an updraft he could ride up and over the ridge. He found it, and the aircraft reached the flat polar plateau.

There was another tense moment when the right engine backfired and missed. Balchen adjusted the setting and the engine smoothed. "At our altitude of 11,000 feet, two engines could never could keep the Ford airborne," he wrote. There was no further trouble on the approach to the South Pole.

Balchen wrote, "According to my dead reckoning, we should be at the pole in another 14 minutes. Our position is Lat. 89 degrees 40 minutes south, about 20 miles away, so our goal must actually be in sight."

Fourteen minutes later, at 1:14 a.m., Byrd sent a message to the cockpit for June to broadcast to the base.

Byrd's version read, "That imaginary point—the aloof and lonely bottom of the Earth—was beneath us. I handed June a message to radio to



South. For the audacious South Pole flight, Byrd chose the tougher, more powerful Ford trimotor, which he named Floyd Bennett. The 1929 flight drew worldwide attention, particularly to Byrd.

Little America! 'My calculations indicate we have reached the vicinity of the South Pole. Flying high for survey. Soon turn north.'

McKinley, still busy with his camera, almost missed the big moment. He wrote, "Between each shot, I glanced at the commander, hoping to have him signal that we had arrived." Suddenly, the airplane turned to the right and circled. "The commander opened the trapdoor and saluted as he dropped the Stars and Stripes," McKinley said.

The flag Byrd dropped was weighted with a stone from Bennett's grave at Arlington National Cemetery.

Balchen was introspective, writing that he was glad to leave the pole. "Somehow our very purpose here seems insignificant, a symbol of man's vanity and intrusion on this eternal white world," he said. "The sound of our engines profanes the silence as we head back to Little America."

The return was uneventful. "Eight hundred miles more of terrain were to be photographed, but this was done almost without incident," McKinley said.

Byrd described the scene as the airplane landed: "We were deaf from the roar of the motors, tired from the strain of the flight, but we forgot all that in the tumultuous welcome of our companions."

Of the landing, Balchen says, "The whole flight crew is picked up and carried on swaying shoulders to the mess hall for a celebration. I have been sitting so long in the pilot's seat that I am cramped and sore, and so I slip out of the mess hall quietly." He went skiing.

Fame for Byrd

The flight drew worldwide attention, particularly to Byrd, who was promoted to rear admiral on the retired list. Of the others, only June returned to Antarctica with Byrd. He served as chief pilot on the second expedition.

McKinley returned to the Army Air Corps, ferried airplanes to the Soviet Union, and was involved with cold weather testing and operations in Alaska. In 1943, he and another officer were given responsibility to



Recognition. Balchen (left) became a US citizen by act of Congress in 1931 and joined the Army Air Forces in 1941. Here, Gen. Frank Armstrong Jr. presents an award commemorating Balchen's 1949 flight over the North Pole.

develop a new type of weather testing lab. McKinley suggested a refrigerated hangar. On June 12, 1971, the facility was dedicated at Eglin AFB, Fla., as the McKinley Climatic Hangar. McKinley had died in 1970.

Byrd continued to return to the Antarctic to explore by dogsled and air. On one visit, he spent six months alone in a hut, almost dying of carbon monoxide poisoning from his stove. He continued his polar research until his death in 1957.

Balchen also continued to work in the Arctic and Antarctic. He was made a US citizen by act of Congress in 1931. In 1941, he joined the AAF as a captain and was given command of Bluie West Eight air base in Greenland. In 1942, he was a colonel, and, the following year, he joined Eighth Air Force in Europe and established an evacuation route between the UK and Sweden for those fleeing occupied Europe.

Late in the war, Balchen worked with the underground in occupied Norway and commanded the air operations that chased the Nazis from northern Norway and Finland. After the war, he returned to Norway.

In 1948, he asked for recall to active duty with the US Air Force and was named commander of the 10th Rescue Squadron at Ft. Richardson, Alaska.

In 1951, he came to USAF headquarters as a special assistant on Arctic problems.

Byrd died in March 1957. Evidently, Balchen had by that time begun writing a book. In a letter dated March 9, 1960, Balchen wrote to a friend about his book: "I had not written anything derogatory about Byrd. I had simply stated what I know to be a fact, that he had not reached the North Pole on his flight in 1926. I know this for two reasons: first, because the plane was incapable of making this flight in 15-and-one-half hours, which is the time Byrd was away from Kings Bay and, secondly, because Floyd Bennett told me so."

Eventually, Balchen's suspicions about the supposed North Pole flight came out publicly. The late admiral's son and other supporters protested what they considered a slander on the aviation pioneer.

Historians remain divided on the subject of whether Byrd actually made it to the North Pole in 1926. Some now concede that Byrd's claim is disputable. Many others continue to credit him with having accomplished what he set out to do. The argument is likely to continue for some time. It is not the sort of thing you can settle with DNA testing.

Balchen retired from the Air Force in 1956 and died in 1973. Like Byrd and Bennett, he is buried at Arlington National Cemetery, across the Potomac River from Washington, D.C. ■

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