The Making
of an Explorer

RICHARD EVELYN BYRD,
1888–1924

Richard Evelyn Byrd, who was born on October 25, 1888, at Winchester, Virginia, belonged to one of the oldest and most influential families of that state. In 1671 Colonel William Byrd had established the family in Virginia and developed Westover Plantation along the James River, near Jamestown. After the Civil War, the Byrd family moved to Winchester. Richard Evelyn Byrd, the explorer’s father and namesake, achieved distinction as an attorney in private practice. He also pursued a political career, serving as a prosecuting attorney for twenty years, and as speaker of the house in the Virginia state assembly.¹

The family’s prominence seems to have inspired a desire for

achievement in all of its sons. Harry Byrd, the explorer's older brother, followed his father into politics and won election first as governor and then as a U.S. senator. He was a force in Democratic politics for many years. Richard's younger brother, Tom, became a successful businessman and owner of apple orchards.
A pivotal event in the life of the future explorer took place in 1900, when he was twelve, when he received an invitation from Adam C. Carson, who had been an attorney in his father’s firm, to visit him in the Philippines. Carson had been stationed there as the captain of a regiment that was putting down an insurrection against the American occupation in the wake of the Spanish-American War of 1898, and after the revolt he stayed on as a district judge.

This opportunity gave Byrd the experience of travel and adventure that shaped much of his life. He journeyed alone to San Francisco and then to Japan before reaching the Philippines. A year later, he traveled around the world to make his way back to Virginia. Not only did he have extraordinary opportunities to observe unusual places, events, and cultures; he also wrote about them. His letters from the Philippines ran as stories in the Winchester newspaper. Even as a teenager, Byrd was a celebrity, at least in Winchester.

For a young Southerner of distinguished family—and for anyone who liked to travel—a career as an officer in the U.S. Navy was a good choice. From 1904 to 1907 Byrd attended first the Shenandoah Valley Academy and then the Virginia Military Institute. After a brief career at the University of Virginia, where his brother Tom was a student, Richard Evelyn Byrd entered the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis in 1908.2

Byrd was adequate in academics and excelled in sports, especially football. While at the University of Virginia, he had been a second-string quarterback and had been injured in a game against Washington and Lee University. At Annapolis, he

2. For the early years of Byrd’s life, Struggle is the most detailed source. For a history of the Byrd family, see Alden Hatch, The Byrds of Virginia (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969).
Commander Byrd, for whom I predict a brilliant career, if only the opportunity for service can be given him.”

A year later, Byrd’s abilities as an organizer and an efficient planner earned him both recognition and a transfer to Washington, D.C., where he was first assigned to the Bureau of Naval Personnel and then to the Commission on Training Camps. Having had these positions later proved useful to Byrd as an explorer. At the Commission on Training Camps, he served as secretary to Raymond B. Fosdick, the chairman. Fosdick was a prominent attorney and an associate of John D. Rockefeller. He was president of the Rockefeller Foundation from 1920 to 1936 and a lifelong friend and supporter of Richard Byrd.

With Fosdick’s support, Byrd sought and won appointment as a naval aviation cadet at Pensacola Naval Air Station in 1917. A career in flying was an exciting one—and it did not demand long hours of standing on a weak right foot. Byrd earned his pilot’s wings and also a position as assistant superintendent at Pensacola, with responsibility for investigating crashes.

By redirecting his career into naval aviation, Byrd made significant contributions to a new field. When he won his wings, barely fourteen years had passed since the Wright brothers had first flown at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Byrd became an expert in night flying and took a particular interest in the problems of navigating airplanes. The speed of airplanes, the distance from landmarks, and the vulnerability of aircraft to winds posed unusual navigational challenges, and Byrd taught cadets about these topics.

6. R. Livingston Beechman to Secretary of the Navy Joseph Daniels, June 28, 1917, BP, folder 4126.
7. See BP, folder 4128.
The war in Europe, begun in 1914, was proving the usefulness of aircraft as military weapons, especially for observation of troop movements and submarines. Airplanes covered more area faster and were less vulnerable to weather and enemy fire than balloons. After the United States entered the war in 1917, Byrd proposed flying the flying boats to Europe instead of shipping them. The Navy promoted Byrd to the temporary rank of lieutenant commander and assigned him to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to watch for German submarines and to establish refueling stations, which would make flying boats’ transatlantic crossing possible.

When—unfortunately for Byrd—the war ended in November 1918, so did the urgency for getting airplanes to European battlefields. But he remained enthusiastic about a transatlantic crossing by flying boats as a natural development of aviation and navigation. In 1919 Byrd joined the newly created Transatlantic Flight Section of the Bureau of Aeronautics and continued to work on problems of navigation and logistics. Eventually he developed a bubble sextant and a wind-drift indicator that enabled navigators to fix their location quickly in flight, without reference to landmarks. On May 29, 1919, having set out from Long Island and after numerous stops at sea, the flying boat NC-4 reached Lisbon. This was the first transatlantic crossing. Two weeks later, on June 15, the Englishmen John Alcock and Arthur Whitten Brown completed a successful flight from St. John’s, Newfoundland, to Clifden, Ireland, in sixteen hours and twelve minutes—the first nonstop flight across the Atlantic.  

Byrd as a young naval officer. (BP, folder 7638)

Byrd himself had not made the U.S. Navy’s first transatlantic flight, but he had made important contributions to its planning and navigation. Although disappointed at not being on the transatlantic crossing itself, Byrd remained an influen-

tial figure in naval aviation. He returned to Washington and led the effort to create a Department of Aeronautics in the U.S. Navy. With the Navy, he joined in opposing Colonel Billy Mitchell's efforts to create an air force independent from those operated by the Navy and the Army. Byrd testified to Congress in 1919 in support of the Navy and its air force.

As a reward for his services and in recognition of his desire to participate in another transatlantic flight, Admiral William A. Moffett, chief of the newly created Bureau of Aeronautics, ordered Byrd to duty in England. His navigational expertise would be useful to the crew assigned to fly the British-made dirigible ZR-2 to the United States in 1921. In England, however, Byrd missed his train—and the takeoff of the ill-starred ZR-2. While in flight, the dirigible exploded. Forty-five people died, including fourteen American aviators. Byrd became responsible for making a report about the incident and for working with the U.S. ambassador in acknowledging expressions of sympathy and condolences.

Despite the fate of the ZR-2, Byrd returned to Washington still a firm proponent of naval aviation. In 1922, he successfully proposed that the Navy continue to maintain a corps of trained pilots by organizing veterans into naval reserve units. Byrd was charged with the task of creating an air station in Massachusetts to train reserve pilots. His success there led to assignments in Chicago to organize more naval reserve units.

In 1924 Byrd returned to Washington to help the U.S. Navy in a political battle with Congress. A frugal-minded Congress proposed reducing the salaries of all servicemen. Byrd's

Byrd to the Success of the Recent Transatlantic flight,” BP folder 4127. The story of this transatlantic expedition is told in Smith, First Across!
previous successes made him a central figure in the campaign not to lower military salaries. In the end, he managed not only to save salaries but also to win a congressional promotion—the only way for a retired officer to advance in rank—to lieutenant commander.

By 1924, the thirty-six-year-old retired naval officer from Winchester, Virginia, had achieved much, but not fame. He had demonstrated courage at sea, innovation in the air, leadership in his naval assignments, and political acumen in the capital. In the Navy and in Congress he had attracted the favorable attention of powerful and influential men. All these would be helpful to him in the future.