The Greenland Expedition of 1925

Exploration of the Arctic began four hundred years ago, first as a search for an ice-free passage for vessels and then as a quest for the North Pole. In 1909, when Richard Byrd was ten, Robert Peary, traveling by dogsled, asserted that he had reached the North Pole. Peary proved that there was no land at the North Pole and that there was no ice-free sea through which ships could pass, but his expedition raised new questions as well as answering some old ones. On his way to the North Pole, Peary had seen "Crocker Land," which he had not been able to reach. Dr. Frederick Cook, who claimed to have reached the North Pole a year before Peary, had also reported the existence of a mysterious land (he named it "Bradleyland" in honor of his financial sponsor). What were these lands, and what did they contain? What lands and areas had the explorers overlooked in their quest for the North Pole? Much mapping and surveying remained to be done.
Scientists had their own questions about the Arctic. They wanted to know about its climate and meteorology, terrestrial magnetism, ocean currents, natural resources, wildlife, and native peoples. Explorations on foot, however heroic, had barely opened the north for scientific investigation.

As early as 1897, the first attempt had been made to observe the Arctic from the air. Hot-air balloons had been used for battlefield observations, especially during the American
Civil War. A Swedish engineer, Salomon August Andrée, proposed to use a specially designed balloon to reach the North Pole and explore the Arctic. Backed by several scientific organizations and his government, Andrée and two companions boarded their balloon, the Eagle, and flew to the Arctic in 1897. From then on, nothing was known of them until, in 1931, a party of hunters found their bodies and their journals on White Island in the Arctic Ocean.1

The disastrous result of Andrée’s efforts did not stop others from trying aerial exploration. In 1907 and 1909, Walter Wellman, a journalist, flew powered dirigibles rather than balloons into the Arctic. In an attempt to stir up patriotic fervor for his cause, he named his crafts America. Wellman’s dirigibles failed because of bad weather, logistical problems, and mechanical difficulties.2

The invention of the airplane by Wilbur and Orville Wright in 1903 and its development during World War I excited polar explorers, including Peary. Planes that took off and landed at sea might be able to use cracks in the ice to their advantage, as places to land and refuel. Another possibility was to attach skis so that the airplanes could land on snow—provided that the surfaces were smooth enough. But light airplanes depended on the internal combustion engine, which did not perform well in extreme cold, and the strong and unpredictable Arctic winds could easily push the fragile airplanes off course.


The years 1924 and 1925 were eventful both for aerial Arctic exploration and for Richard Byrd. In 1924, President Calvin Coolidge authorized a plan according to which a U.S. Navy dirigible, the *Shenandoah*, would fly from Point Barrow in Alaska, pass over the North Pole, and then land at Spitzbergen in Norway. Scientists and veterans of polar exploration like Captain Robert Bartlett, who had accompanied Robert Peary in 1909, lobbied for the attempt. The expedition was the project of the Navy Bureau of Aeronautics and Admiral William Moffett. Byrd, who reported to Moffett, was responsible for planning the expedition and doing the navigating. Unfortunately, in January storms damaged the *Shenandoah*, and the expedition ended before it began.

Byrd and Bartlett, undaunted, continued to plan for an aerial expedition to the north. Because Congress seemed reluctant, they decided to raise the money from private backers, as Peary and Cook had done. Bartlett agreed to find a suitable vessel and generous donors; Byrd’s job was to ask the Navy for seaplanes and help with fund-raising. Byrd went to Detroit, met with Edsel Ford, and won his promise of $15,000. John D. Rockefeller contributed a similar amount, and the expedition seemed likely to become a reality.

Byrd and Bartlett were not without competitors. In 1924, Roald Amundsen, who had reached the South Pole by dogsled in 1911, planned to fly airplanes into Greenland and the Arctic. Amundsen allied himself with Commander Lincoln Ellsworth, the son of an American millionaire, to purchase planes and begin an expedition in 1925. Byrd had originally volunteered to join Amundsen, but he was rejected.

Another competitor and a veteran polar explorer was Don-
ald MacMillan. MacMillan and Bartlett had both been members of Peary's last expedition to the North Pole in 1909. MacMillan had remained active in exploring Labrador, Greenland, and the Arctic, and he had the kind of backing from universities and scientific organizations that Byrd lacked. Between 1913 and 1917, for example, the American Museum of Natural History, the American Geographical Society, and the University of Illinois had helped finance his explorations of northern Greenland, which disproved the existence of "Crocker Land." His expeditions included extensive work in geology, botany, ornithology, meteorology, ethnology, and anthropology.

In 1923 and 1924 MacMillan returned to Greenland and explored Cape Sabine and Ellesmere Island, again with the support of prominent institutions and organizations, including the Carnegie Institution and the National Geographic Society (which had given Peary large subsidies). With the help of the National Geographic Society, MacMillan proposed to return to Greenland in 1925. This time he planned to use seaplanes to extend his area of exploration, and he asked the U.S. Navy for assistance.3

MacMillan's request created a dilemma. The Navy had only three seaplanes available, certainly not enough to supply both Byrd's and MacMillan's expeditions. A decision to help out only one explorer would have been difficult to make—and probably controversial. On the one hand, MacMillan had earned the respect of universities and scientific organizations for his work. On the other, Byrd was an expert in navigation, a retired naval

Byrd inflating a new raft especially designed for the MacMillan expedition, 1925.
(BP, folder 7708)

officer, and a man who had wanted to stretch the limits of flight and aeronautical navigation for some time. Byrd also had some political influence both in Congress and among men of wealth, as well as a brother who had been elected governor of Virginia.

The result was a compromise. The Navy lent three airplanes and eight officers, mechanics, and pilots—under Byrd’s command—to MacMillan, who was in charge of the expedition as a whole. In this way the Navy could take credit, through Byrd, for any accomplishments in the air, while pleasing both men’s sponsors.

The expedition of two ships that left Wiscasset, Maine, on June 20 of 1925 proved to be an unhappy one. MacMillan commanded the USS *Bowdoin*, which he had specially designed for exploration in the Arctic. Byrd and his planes, three amphibious planes, NA-1, 2, and 3 (for “Navy Aircraft”), sailed on the
USS *Peary*, which was commanded by Lieutenant Commander Eugene F. McDonald. McDonald was a successful businessman, the president of the Zenith Corporation, and an investor in the expedition. He expected to be able to test his shortwave radio as an instrument for communication in the Arctic.

Byrd was often at odds with both McDonald and MacMillan. As the chief representative of the U.S. Navy, he had expected to be second-in-command of the expedition, a position that MacMillan accorded to McDonald. McDonald refused to observe U.S. Navy protocols in the use of the radio for communication, which naturally brought him into conflict with Byrd. The Navy insisted that its long-wave set be used when the planes were in the air. McDonald’s shortwave set was to be used only when no planes were in use. Byrd also disagreed with both MacMillan and McDonald over the ships’ speed, their course, and the proper conditions for air exploration. Much to Byrd’s disappointment, on only fifteen days was the weather suitable for flying. He complained that MacMillan was too cautious.

As if conflicts arising from personality differences and leadership issues were not enough, Byrd and MacMillan also had fundamentally incompatible objectives. Byrd’s goal was to test aircraft in the Arctic and, if possible, make a flight over the North Pole. MacMillan had less interest in the North Pole and more in the scientific investigation and survey of northern Greenland and the Arctic. The diary documents Byrd’s points of view and his frustrations.

Despite problems, the three months’ expedition managed to accomplish a great deal. MacMillan established a tidal observatory station at Etah in northwestern Greenland, conducted important ornithological studies, and took the first natural
color photographs in the Arctic. McDonald demonstrated that shortwave radio could be used in the Arctic for long-distance communication.  

Byrd and MacMillan continued to feud throughout the expedition, and at the end they also drew different conclusions about the use of fixed-wing aircraft in the northern Arctic. MacMillan wrote to his sponsors at the National Geographic Society, “I am more convinced than ever that far northern

Arctic work will never be done by heavier than air machines simply because landing places are uncertain and caches of food and gas cannot be depended upon. A fiord is free today and ice bound tomorrow. . . . The lighter than air machine can do the work and should do it at the earliest opportunity.\textsuperscript{5}

Byrd, however, as commander of the aviation unit, continued to have faith in fixed-wing aircraft for polar exploration, despite disappointing weather and mechanical breakdowns. To the readers of the \textit{National Geographic Magazine}, he reported, "We were all depressed that we could not go on with our work, for we were learning the location of the few water landing places and we never gave up the hope of accomplishing our mission. With more time and a better season, I am confident that the unexplored area could have been reached."\textsuperscript{6}

For Byrd himself, the expedition set the stage for his 1926 flight to the North Pole in several ways. First, it confirmed his stature as a leading navigator in the new field of aviation, and as an innovator in that field. The plans for the flight appeared in Byrd's article "Flying over the Polar Sea," in the \textit{United States Naval Institute Proceedings} in August 1925. Second, as a result of the expedition, he was able to establish ties with the National Geographic Society, which had assisted the expedition in matters of navigation in the Arctic. Albert Bumstead, the cartographer of the National Geographic Society, had developed a special sun compass that magnetic fields did not affect, and

\textsuperscript{5} Donald MacMillan to National Geographic Society, August 26, 1925, BP folder 4228.

it was successfully put to use on this expedition for the first time. In November 1925, the *National Geographic Magazine* published accounts of the expedition by both MacMillan and Byrd. The National Geographic Society later became a prominent supporter of Byrd and his expeditions. Finally, the 1925 expedition allowed Byrd to forge links to people—for example, Floyd Bennett, his pilot to the North Pole in 1926, and wealthy supporters like Edsel Ford and John D. Rockefeller—who would be critical to his future success.

This portion of Byrd’s diary also includes several references to his wife, Marie, and to his son, Richard Byrd Jr. By all the evidence in Byrd’s papers, their marriage of forty-two years was close, even though the circumstances of polar exploration separated them for years at a time. Filled with frustration over the weather and his disputes with McDonald and MacMillan, Byrd sought peace when he wrote privately in his diary, “To have Marie in the midst of chaos, that is enough.” There are many letters between Byrd and his wife and children in his papers at Ohio State, and it is clear from them that the publicly ambitious Byrd took an active interest in the news and birthdays and anniversaries of family life in Washington and Boston.

Marie Ames Byrd raised their four children—Richard, Katharine, Bolling, and Helen—managed the household, and in the frequent absences of her husband also took charge of their financial investments. The letters between Marie and her husband show that the explorer looked to her for practical advice and judgment as well as emotional support. On more than one occasion he counted on her to look into problems of expeditions while he was away.
Map showing the area explored by the MacMillan expedition. (Courtesy of the National Geographic Magazine)
Thursday, January 1, 1925

I wonder what the new year holds. Strange but the first seven months in every new year interesting things seem to happen to me. Every year seems to hold something unusual. I was married in January. Got severely broken up in [Ed.: “January” is crossed out here]. December 28. When I was a kid my trip around the world was decided in May. Entered the naval academy in May. Graduated in June. Went to Mexico in March. Left in England nearly dead with typhoid fever in June on one of the battleships. Went through Haitian and San Dominican revolutions in May-June. Went to war in April. Was assigned to aviation in June. Returned to states from war in January. Assigned to navigational preparations for first transatlantic flight in Jan. Was promised flight across Atlantic Ocean on ZR-2 in July. Escaped explosion of ZR-2 in August. Volunteered for Amundsen flight in Jan. but was ordered same month to Washington to assist Admiral Moffett in preparation for trans-Polar flight in Shenandoah. Got Bureau Aviation Bill through Congress in February.

I have been dreaming all winter of a trans-polar flight. I wonder if it will materialize. The President will not. I am sure, permit the Shenandoah or the Los Angeles to make the trip. When Congress adjourns, I shall wire Bob Bartlett and try to work out some scheme with him to raise some money and somehow or other get hold of a small dirigible—one of the e-type—and try the pack [ice] and unexplored region of the Arctic. I was greatly disappointed last year when the President called off the trans-
polar flight of the *Shenandoah*. There is a bill up in Congress to promote me. It will mean a tremendous lot to me but there are hundreds of bills on the calendar. What chance will my bill have?

*Saturday, January 3, 1925*

Is the human race an accidental by-product of the cosmical processes? If God directs us, remaining silent and inscrutable to us, then he means either that he does not want us to know him or he is indifferent or he has made the knowing of him a difficult task.

*Saturday, June 20, 1925*

The 20th has come at last and we left Wiscasset [Maine] at 2:45 PM today on schedule date. As anxious as I have been to get started on the expedition, I have felt so sad at leaving my precious family that I haven't been able to mention the subject to Marie. I am doing her (apparently) a miserable mean trick in causing her to go through all the apprehensions she has felt for weeks and will for weeks to come. I feel mightily low and wicked today on account of it and the wonderful send off we got from thousands of people has meant absolutely nothing to me for nothing could matter with this terrible ache I have tried so hard to hide.

Dear little Dickie [Richard Byrd Jr.] didn't realize what it was all about and that made me feel still more useless.
Poor little fellow. He is too young to realize what an irresponsible “dad” he has. Marie as always was a wonderful sport.

With all this on my mind, I had to make a speech on the City Common to hundreds of people and also accept for the naval unit wonderful hunting knives presented to the personnel by the National Aeronautic Association of Maine.

Tuesday, July 7, 1925
Met famous Mr. Perritt and family at Hopedale [Labrador].

Wednesday, July 8, 1925
Had a very narrow escape from death a few minutes ago. [Harold E.] Gray and [Paul J.] McGee had just run a heavy copper uninsulated cable from the radio room across the gangway about the height of my head. They were trying it out with 100,000 volts and watching and listening to anyone passing by. I had on rubber shoes and was coming from aft behind their radio room door which was half open so that they neither heard nor saw me. My head got six inches from that wire before I was stopped and the 100,000 volts would have jumped to my head had I gotten one inch nearer! Gray was white as a sheet.

7. The Perritts were Moravian missionaries.
There's another narrow squeak. The gods of chance have been good to me. That wire will have to be well insulated.

_Sunday, July 12, 1925_

At last we are underway again. I am so anxious to get to Etah that every day's delay seems like a week. We had another near tragedy today. While standing on the bridge about 2 PM taking some sights I saw some thick smoke coming from amidships. I was there in a jiffy and found a pile of life preservers on fire. They were piled against one of the wooden wing crates near the planes. I threw one of the preservers overboard and put the fire extinguisher on the rest of them. We are already short on life preservers, so the incident is unfortunate but it could have been so much worse. Another minute and the flame would have ignited the oil and kerosene the plane is soaked in and nothing in the world could have saved this ship with 7600 gallons of gasoline around her decks.

As a result of this fire McDonald has agreed with my recommendation to put on a fire watch including the personnel of the naval unit and the doctor, [Jacob] Gayer and Kelty of the last three will volunteer, which of course they will do. When I suggested a watch, [A. C.] Neld immediately volunteered to go on watch. I have never seen such spirit as my men have. They never require orders.

Got a ticker today. Chronometer "A" 3.5 seconds fast.
That is bad.
Wednesday, July 15, 1925

We should reach Disco [Island, near Greenland] tomorrow morning. McDonald told me today that MacMillan had given orders for us to wait for him at Disco. I told McDonald that the project might be a failure if we had to do that for it would probably be another two days before the Bowdoin would leave Hopedale and probably five or six days more getting here. Then a day or two wait here and we would get up at Etah too late to accomplish our mission. I urged McDonald in the strongest terms to ask MacMillan to let us leave Disco as soon as we get coal and water and to call his attention to the urgency of the matter. He promised to do that.

Thursday, July 16, 1925

Arrived Godhavn, Disco this morning 5:30. The local and district Danish governor came aboard early and gave us the startling information that we can get not a single ton of coal here. We haven’t enough coal to get up to Etah and back here. There seems to be no coal on the Greenland coast. It looks as if the expedition is ruined but we’ll get that coal somehow. The governor admits that he has coal and is mining it at the other end of the island but when winter comes he will have just enough for the eskimos here and in surrounding villages.

On top of this no one is allowed to go the village (about 150 esikmos) because the eskimos have an epidemic of whooping cough. The governor says he is afraid we will
carry the disease north and give it to the Etah eskimos.
I tried to get the governor to have some laundry done for
me but he said it couldn’t be done. There has been no
evidence what so ever of any hospitality.

Saturday, July 25, 1925
Do not the enigmas which life presents keep our interest
as nothing else could. It is the inscrutableness of the
sweetheart that keeps the lover happy and thrilled. There
can be few bored moments if one can be alive to the con-
tradictions which life presents. Does not there seem to be
wisdom used for our good.

Sunday, July 26, 1925
This is the day I had hoped to reach Etah but here we
are [at Godhavn].

Monday, July 27, 1925
Got underway this morning at 4:20. Seven more precious
hours lost. I wish I could see this thing as MacMillan sees
it. At 9:30 the Bowdoin hoisted sail and stopped her en-
gine. For an hour and a half we trailed after her making
only five knots.

Tuesday, July 28, 1925
7:45 a.m. Ran into flat pack ice today about 60 miles
north of Upernivik. At first the flat pack ice was in cakes
and far apart but gradually the cakes got larger and larger until about 5 this morning the Peary and Bowdoin were completely surrounded by an apparently unbroken field of ice. A number of the boys went over the ship's side on the ice and walked several miles from the ships seal hunting. [Bromfield?] from the Bowdoin shot a seal in the head (a seal floats only when shot in the head). The seal was in a lead opened up by the Peary as she came through the ice. We went after her in one of the Bowdoin boats. The Peary has been under a great strain bucking ice for the past seventeen hours. She is however very staunch and powerful and has stood the strain well.

10 PM A lead opened up for us about 8 AM and we got out of the solid ice but there was continual bucking of large flat cake[s] of ice until 6 PM. Now the water is a dead calm and only a few ice bergs are in sight.

Wednesday, July 29, 1925

About 5 AM ran into fog and thick ice-caked field of pack ice. It is now 10 PM and the fog still envelops us. After lunch we walked a mile and a half to the northward but there was no break of any kind. It was a curious sensation to be enveloped in fog out on a flat field of ice in the middle of the summer. [Peter] Sorensen and [Floyd] Bennett [both of the naval aviation unit] went with me. We did not pass a living thing the whole way.

After dinner walked two miles to the westward with [Albert] Francis and found an open lead that melted away
in the fog. It ran northwest and southeast, the direction we want to go. I told MacMillan about it hoping that we would follow it through. He could get into it by following the lead we came here in. MacMillan says we will get underway if it clears a bit. Another precious day has been lost. We saw the track of a huge polar bear near the Bowdoin but no sign of [the bear] Bruno.

Our plane could probably get off this snow with skis.

The snow is quite sloshy in places and I was glad to find my eskimo boots water proof. Francis went in up to his knees. I had two close squeaks from getting a wetting.

The trouble is that we are heading for land too far to the eastward. We are bound to get into ice.

Thursday, July 30, 1925

Fog cleared sufficiently to get underway this morning. Peary bucked her way through ice until she got completely stuck and couldn't move forward or astern. Bowdoin got stuck and Peary had to back and turn with great difficulty to help her out. The Peary smashed the ice around her so that she could get clear.

About 5:30 this morning [Vold?] saw a seal and fired at it, hitting it. But a polar bear had been stalking the seal and jumped up when Neld shot. She evidently had a cub on the other side of the lead from her for she swam across the lead right ahead of the Peary about 50 feet away.
McDonald shot her through the head. The *Bowdoin* came up and took her aboard. We will get some fresh bear steak now which will be a treat. Sorenson shot a seal today.

I seem to be the only one worried about this terrible delay. I wonder if the others realize how serious the situation is as regards having sufficient time to accomplish our mission. I urged MacMillan to get underway when the ice broke some at seven o’clock but he wouldn’t go as the fog had come down again.

I am the little ray of sunshine on this ship for I am continually after McDonald and MacMillan not to lose time. Of course we have been in ice. Should not have played game so damn safe.

*Monday, August 10, 1925*

I plead today with MacMillan to go north along the coast instead of over land. I believe there will be landing places here and there along the coast. McDonald knew of my desire to stick to water so he preceded me to the *Bowdoin* and had everything cut and dried before my arrival. He always does this. I was most vigorously turned down. This will probably mean the failure of the whole plan.

*Thursday, August 13, 1925*

Good weather has at last come. The NA-2 & 3 are out of commission. Bennett and I are going tonight for the
blessed old navy. We must make a showing for her. Everything went wrong today. NA-1 lost cowling overboard. NA-2 went down by nose. Almost lost her. NA-3 nearly sunk by icebergs and injured lower wing on raft.

Later. MacMillan wouldn’t let me go. He seems to have given up.

MacMillan seems to be in [a] great hurry to pack up and go back. Wonder what is in his mind.

Sunday, August 16, 1925
I have concluded that MacMillan’s hurry is due to coal shortage. I do not invite any confidence as long as McDonald is in power. He seems to be suspicious of everything and every one.

Monday, August 17, 1925
Begged MacMillan to let Bennett and me go today to Cannon Fjord but he would not agree. Wonderful day. Probably last chance.

The saving of the NA-3 from destruction by fire today was just another example of the fine spirit of the personnel the Navy has assigned to me for the duty. Whether we succeed or fail they deserve the highest success. They have overcome almost insuperable odds that the poor facilities and elements have brought about. They have
been near indefatigable and courageous and whenever they have a job to do they have needed no commanding officer to tell them to do it or to spur them to greater effort. What they have accomplished on this trip has been almost superhuman and even if we succeed in the highest measure it could hardly increase my pride in them. Their one thought seems to have been to live up to the best tradition of the navy.

_Saturday, August 22, 1925_

A remorseless cruel universe grinding out its destiny.

_Sunday, August 23, 1925_

To have Marie in the midst of chaos, that is enough.

_Bowdoin_ went aground today 3 miles west of Karna.

_Monday, August 24, 1925_

Laying in Booth Sound on account of bad weather.

_Tuesday, August 25, 1925_

Captain doesn't know where we are. So won't send a radio tonight. Reached Conical Rock finally. Laying behind here on account bad weather.
Wednesday, August 26, 1925
Laying behind Parker Snow Point on account bad weather.

Friday, August 28, 1925
McDonald suggested to MacMillan over radio today that publicity be procured from reporting coal giving out on *Peary* and that probably she would have to use wood work on ship, etc.

Saturday, August 29, 1925
Arrived Anoatok. Danish minister of Interior and director of all Greenland [illegible] on a Danish government steamer of about 40000 tons. Arrived here with just enough coal to make it. Pretty dangerous business in case of ice or a bad blow. We have had many close squeaks on this trip.

Sunday, August 30, 1925
Iceberg rolled over somewhere in bay making a tidal wave that nearly drowned bay, a very dramatic incident.

Monday, August 31, 1925
Cleanest dwellings I have ever seen at [blank]. Beautiful eskimo girl named Nuckleron [?].
Thursday, September 3, 1925
During the storm last night Peary missed an ice berg by about 15 feet—the third close squeak from destruction. We have certainly had good luck.

Saturday, September 5, 1925

Tuesday, September 8, 1925
Terrible storm tonight. Wind 80 miles per hour. Two small boats from Danish gunboat Island Falk could not make their ship. Came alongside our ship. Both boats sank and came within an ace of losing several of the nine or ten Danes—a very dramatic moment. I have only once before experienced such wind—a typhoon in the China Sea. Much excitement on board last night.