

Richard E. Byrd

Explorer (1888 – 1957)



Richard Byrd, Jr. was a descendant of one of the First Families of Virginia, counting among his ancestors planter John Rolfe and his wife Pocahontas, William Byrd II, who established Richmond, and Robert “King” Carter, a colonial governor. He was the brother of U.S. Senator Harry Byrd.

Byrd attended the University of Virginia before transferring to the United States Naval Academy in 1912. He learned to fly in World War I during his tour with the U.S. Navy and pioneered many techniques for navigating airplanes over the open ocean. His expertise in this area resulted in his appointment to plan the flight path for the U.S. Navy’s 1919 transatlantic crossing. Albert Read’s aircraft, the NC-4, completed the trip, becoming the first-ever transatlantic flight.

On May 9, 1926, Byrd and pilot Floyd Bennett attempted a flight over the North Pole from Spitsbergen (Svalbard) and back. Byrd claimed to have reached the Pole, though doubts lingered among experts for decades. This trip earned Byrd widespread acclaim, including being awarded the Medal of Honor, and enabled him to secure funding for subsequent attempts to fly over the South Pole.

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. But during a practice takeoff, with Tony Fokker at the controls and Floyd Bennett in the co-pilot’s seat, the airplane crashed, severely injuring Bennett and slightly injuring Byrd. As the plane was being repaired, Charles Lindbergh won the prize.

In 1928, Byrd began his first expedition to the Antarctic, involving two ships and three airplanes. A base camp named “Little America” was constructed on the Ross Ice Shelf and scientific expeditions began. On November 29, 1929, Byrd, with a team of three, flew to the South Pole and back in 18 hours, 41 minutes. The flight was successful, and Byrd entered into the history books.

Admiral Byrd undertook four more expeditions to Antarctica between 1934 and 1956, and died on March 11, 1957 at his home in Boston.