

‡12 Byrd, Balchen, & the North Pole by Rawlins

A1 On 1926/5/9,¹ airman-lobbyist Richard Byrd claimed to have made the 1st flight to the North Pole, from Kingsbay, Spitzbergen, in the Fokker trimotor airplane *Josephine Ford*. Various oddities of the claim have caused wide skepticism of it. But too much² of that doubt is based upon B.Balchen's long-after report³ of an alleged detailed confession by Byrd's co-pilot (& Balchen's very close friend)⁴ Floyd Bennett.

A2 After 3 crackups left Byrd sleepless (fn 13) about getting off the ground at all (Byrd *Skyward* NYC 1928 p.183), he & Bennett finally "sneaked to the plane" (*NYTimes* 5/16:3:4=5) and lifted off on 5/9 at 00:50 GCT. They disappeared to the north, lost radio contact,⁵ & returned unexpectedly early (with a leaking engine) 15^h1/2 later. Debt-ridden Byrd profitably claimed they reached the Pole but, while filming the scene, forgot (Rawlins 1973 p.264) to drop their cargo of hundreds of US flags, potentially visible to the dirigible *Norge* at the Pole (3^d later) during its pioneer flight across the Arctic Ocean.

A3 Byrd's sole companion Bennett (died 1928/4/25) told his closest friend, the great aviator & WW2 hero B.Balchen (1928 Feb, Chicago), that: "the truth about the North Pole flight . . . would shock you through your heels. It makes me sick to think about it."⁶

A4 So much is credible. But the same §A3 passage continues with a revealing fact: "By some kind of silent agreement we never mentioned this subject amongst us any more." Thus, Balchen's much-later detailed embellishments (fn 3) upon the brief statements of §A3 must be regarded as simply his own theory of the truth of the 5/9 trip (which he believed Bennett wanted to tell him), put into Bennett's mouth for effect.

B1 The *JoFord*'s takeoff time from Kingsbay (78°55'N, 11°9 E) was reported as 00:50 by Wm.Bird, the *NYTimes* correspondent with the Byrd expedition.⁷ Byrd's 5/12 telegram (*NYT* 5/13:3:2) to SecNavy said he reached the Pole c.9:15. Curiously, he later⁸ altered

¹ All dates here are 1926 unless otherwise stated. All times are GCT (Greenwich Civil Time).

² DR's initial (1972) skeptical paper on Byrd (*Norsk Geogr Tidsskr* 26:135) was not based upon Balchen's testimony. DR's *Peary . . . Fiction* Wash 1973 Chap.21 used some late Balchen data, all of which should be treated with caution unless verifiable from contemporary records or an independent source. E.g., his decades-later report (Balchen *Come North With Me* NYC 1958 p.43) of the time of Byrd's return (16:07) is simply Byrd's own final-version (§B1) takeoff-time (00:37) plus 15h1/2. However, Balchen's report (e.g., NARS autobio Intro B p.3) that Byrd did no celestial navigation in the Antarctic is verified by US-born Dean Smith & Larry Gould (E.Rodgers *Beyond the Barrier* USNavInst pp.188-189). And the slowness of the *JoFord* (which Balchen noted while he & Bennett together later flew the plane around the US to promote Byrd) is confirmed by the mean 78 knots ski-less long-distance speeds of its "sister" Fokker (piloted by the great Chas. Kingsford-Smith: see A.Fokker *Flying Dutchman* NYC 1931 p.281).

³ R.Montague *Oceans, Poles, & Airmen* NYC 1971 pp.47-48.

⁴ Balchen was also a Norwegian-born protégé of Byrd's Norse competitor R.Amundsen. Ultimately, Balchen & his former employer Byrd (whom he flew to near the S.Pole in 1929) were enemies, though not necessarily when §A3 was written. A far more able airman than Byrd (though lacking the gumption to be born a top Senator's brother), Balchen was a good man who (frustrated by years of power-suppression of rational debate: ‡15 fn 24) finally tried (wrongly) to defend a higher truth (*Norge* priority) by bending factual truth, just as Byrd bent facts to promote the equally valid higher truth that airplanes (whatever their 1926 unreliabilities), not dirigibles, were the future.

⁵ The exact time of the last apparent radio-message is variously reported. (E.g., *Baltimore Evening Sun* 5/10:1:1; *Pravda* 5/12:2:8.) In any case, no pole-attainment message survives from anywhere near 9:02. (So Byrd was for awhile not committed on key parts of his story.) By contrast, Amundsen's *Norge* told the world immediately of its success by radio, direct from the N.Pole: *NYT* 5/12 headline.

⁶ Balchen manuscript narrative. (Original at Maxwell Air Force Base.) Basis of virtually identical passage in Balchen unpubl. autobio (NatArchiv) p.142. Balchen's last (1928/4/21) chat with Bennett: p.152.

⁷ *NYT* 1926/5/10:1:7. Oslo's *Aftenposten* 5/10:4:6 has 00:55 GCT.

⁸ London *Times* 5/28:16:4, *NatGeogrMag* 50:385&373, and Byrd unpublished typescript (carbon at NatArchiv, found by Herman Friis) of 1926/11/24 navigation report [BUR] pp.2&6. Note: this report's [easy-to-manufacture] sextant data (the original records of which have never been found) exhibit a remarkably small mean error, for solar altitudes allegedly taken with a 1919 vintage (BUR p.1) bubble-artificial-horizon. (Byrd's detailed 4-part *NYT* 5/14-17 account describes use of his dr-instruments [drift-indicator & compasses]; but his sole mention of the sextant during the flight just says it got broken: *NYT* 5/17:1:3=4.) Compare to the truth of Byrd's real if inexact 1929 S.Polar flight: Rodgers 1990 p.189. Note: for the suspect N.Pole claims of Cook, Peary [*DIO* 1.1 ‡4 & *DIO* 2.2], & Byrd: all sextant data were taken by the leader of (and chief investor in) the expedition: none shared with companions. (In contrast: Amundsen's S.Pole & N.Pole trips were both verified by shared sextant data.)

both figures⁹ by -13^m to: 00:37 & 9:02, resp. The problem: though Byrd says his drift-measures showed speed c.77 knots (BUR p.2), his reports (*NGM* 50:386; BUR p.3) have him at Amsterdam I. (79°48'N, 10°8 E) at 1:22, a trip of 53 nautical miles (nmi) in 32^m (if 00:50 isn't memory-holed), mean speed c.100 knots (awful on fuel & engine).

B2 Byrd says he left the Pole at 9:15 and then (BUR p.6) became so aided, by a conveniently sudden wind from the north (just-as-conveniently absent during the northward leg of the trip), that he averaged 92 knots for the first 6 hrs of the return, thus placing him at 80°50'N (c.15°E) at 15:15 (a datum Byrd never published: see BUR p.6). His expedition's original version (W.Bird *NYT* 5/11:1:7=8, mapped 2:3=4) has him continuing south from there to Verlegen Hook (80°04'N, 16°3 E), "thence west to Amsterdam Island and home" to Kingsbay¹⁰ at 16:20 or 16:25. But 163 nmi in 70^m is 140 knots; and, using the 65^m between 15:15 & (the Byrd expedition's own *NYT* reporter's fn 10 return-time datum) 16:20, it's 150 knots, twice the plane's ski-less cruising speed! (The *JoFord*'s skis caused air-drag.) One can see why Byrd later: [a] forgot¹¹ Verlegen, [b] said he swerved towards Amst.I. ere reaching land, & [c] privately alleged [BUR p.6] he reached Kingsbay at 16:34, another¹² convenient Byrd falsehood (never published until Rawlins 1973 p.270).

B3 The implicit original-report §§B1&B2 superman-speed-discontinuities only add to the unacceptability of a claim where: [i] radio contact was lost; [ii] neither pilot used celestial navigation on subsequent witnessed trips; [iii] photocopies of putative original 1926/5/9 raw-data sheets (not a polished typescript), promised to world geogr socs (*NGM* 50:388), were never sent; [iv] NatGeogrSoc deleted (*NGM* 50:385) its own report's 1926/6/23-28 dates, to hide the embarrassment that it had publicly bemedalled Byrd on the *first* day (6/23) of its 5-day exam of his data! Before&after textual comparisons at Rawlins 1973 p.268.

C1 A theory consistent with the known data: Spitzbergen is too small for dr-navigation to surely hit it (on the return trip) from c.600 nautical miles away. So, unwilling to risk suicide (but equally unable¹³ to report failure), Byrd went far enough north to be invisible from Spitzbergen but not so far that the island was ever invisible to him.¹⁴

C2 Here, he intended to circle for enough hours that he could truly tell the world (& his conscience) that he'd gone the required distance. After about 13 hrs of this, an engine began leaking. So as not to chance being forced down upon rough, drifting ice floes, Byrd instantly sped for the nearest land, Verlegen Hook, and from there forthwith got back to Kingsbay coastwise (thus via Amst.I.). [This theory proved false. See *DIO* 10 fn 3 & §I.]

D1 Though this theory fits all available evidence, that circumstance does not prove its truth. But neither did Byrd provide credible proof that he reached the N.Pole. And, in science,¹⁵ the burden of proof is on the claimant, not the critic.

D2 Thus, we'll state the situation in a conservative, positivist fashion: the first nonsuspect claim to the N.Pole is unquestionably that of the Amundsen-Ellsworth-Nobile *Norge* expedition, which arrived there on 1926/5/12 *en route* from Kingsbay to Pt.Barrow, AK.

⁹ Note: all outward dead-reckoning (dr) times (1:22, 2:22, etc [BUR pp.3-5]) are 2^m mod 5^m, as are 00:37 & 9:02; homeward dr times (10:15, 11:15, etc [BUR p.6]) are all 0^m mod 5^m. As if original dr times were entirely 5^m-rounded, but all the outward data were finally altered by -13^m. (Interim version at *NYT* 5/16:4:4=5 used 9:04.)

¹⁰ Kingsbay eyewitnesses: W.Bird (*NYT* 5/10:1:7) & A.Lebedenko (*Pravda* 5/11:2:8, transl. Linda Olsen) have 16:20; it's 16:25 for O.Arnesen (*Aftenposten* 5/10:4:6) & C.Tomaselli (Milan's *Corriere della Sera* 5/11:3:3).

¹¹ From the 15:15 point to Kingsbay via Amst.I. (final version: *NGM* 50:386) is 132 nmi, so doing even this shorter distance in 70^m or 65^m still entails about 20 knots of sudden speed-increase at 15:15.

¹² Note that BUR stretches his total airtime by about 1/4 hr at both ends. In opposite directions! Which enhances his suspiciously short 15h1/2 by nearly a half-hour. (The 13^m would be easy to sweep under-the-rug since it is nearly the difference between CET & Kingsbay LMT. Byrd's reports all state GCT, so there is no ambiguity — unless he didn't distinguish between zone & local mean time, in which case his claim can be discarded just on that basis.)

¹³ Byrd's frantic situation was not entirely fiscal: see Rawlins 1973 p.260 on NGS' 1926 nightmare.

¹⁴ Note prior N.Pole hoaxer&non-navigator F.Cook's 1908 shyness of leaving sight of land (Rawlins 1973 p.92).

¹⁵ But the popular arena is not scientific. Thus, without direct testimony to Byrd's nonsuccess, I anticipate that the easily-forced public may well end up half-re-accepting this rickety claim. In the short term, the issue will partly depend (see Larry Gould's revealing comments at Rodgers 1990 p.294) upon whether NGS has by now gained sufficient institutional maturity to react without its customary partiality & frontfolk. I genuinely hope it has.