

Colonel Norman Vaughan: “Boy was it cold out last night! It was seventy-three below zero!”

The recent interest in polar explorer Ernest Shackleton reminds us of the difficulties in exploring the Arctic and Antarctic. In his attempt to cross the entire Antarctic continent, starting in 1914, his ship Endurance was crushed by the ice, stranding his men. Shackleton led a dangerous ocean mission to a nearby island to get help, and all his men were safely rescued.¹

A century ago, no human had traveled to either the North or the South Pole. The polar regions remained the greatest exploration challenges for humans. On April 6, 1909, Robert Peary reached the North Pole.² On December 14, 1911, Norwegian Roald Amundsen reached the South Pole.³

With the advent of aviation at the same time, the next great challenge was to fly over the Poles. Admiral Richard Byrd was ready to try. Byrd, born in 1888, served in the Navy for year and fought in World War I. In 1925, he used an airplane to map over 30,000 square miles of frozen Greenland. The same year, he planned a flight over the North Pole and began raising funds. On May 9, 1926, he and Floyd Bennett reached the Pole and circled it several times. He then planned a similar flight over the South Pole.⁴

In December 1928, Byrd’s expedition arrived in Antarctica and established their base, known as Little America, on the Ross Ice Shelf. On November 28, 1929, Byrd and three other men took off for the South Pole in his plane named the Floyd Bennett. On takeoff, the headwinds were strong and the plane struggled to gain altitude over some threatening peaks. Byrd and the crew threw 250 pounds of supplies out of the plane, and it safely cleared the mountains.⁵ Over the South Pole, Byrd dropped an American and a British flag; the historic flight took ten hours in all.⁶

Colonel Norman Vaughan lives in Alaska. He has led a fascinating and non-conventional life, seeking out adventure in all forms. As a young man, he became an expert dog sled driver. He left Harvard once to help the famous doctor Wilfred Grenfell deliver medical supplies in Labrador. Vaughan returned to Harvard, but left again to go to Antarctica with Admiral Byrd. During World War II, he went on a dangerous mission to rescue the top secret Norden bombsight from some American planes forced to land in Greenland. In 1967, he drove a snowmobile from Alaska to Boston. He represented Alaska in the 1977 Inaugural Parade and has raced in the Iditarod, the world’s most famous dog sled race. In 1994, Vaughan returned to Antarctica to climb a mountain that Admiral Byrd named for him some sixty-five years earlier. Today, Colonel Vaughan is the last man from Byrd’s Antarctic mission. He speaks in a strong voice touched by a New England accent from his youth.

¹ Ralph K. Andrist, *Heroes of Polar Exploration* (American Heritage Publishing Company, New York: 1962), page 121-127.

² Andrist, page 78-79.

³ Andrist, page 109.

⁴ *American National Biography* (Oxford University Press, New York: 1999), Volume 4, pages 133-134.

⁵ Andrist, pages 132-133.

⁶ Derek Cullen, *Exploring The Poles* (Schoolhouse Press, Needham, Massachusetts: 1988), page 41.

I was born on December 19, 1905 in Salem, Massachusetts. My parents were New England people. My father was a tanner and he invented something for nurses's shoes. It was the idea of white leather, so that if you cut into the shoe, it was white all the way through. The trade name was Vaughan's Ivory Sole Leather.

As a kid, I camped out in the wintertime in Massachusetts. A friend of mine lived five miles away, and we'd camp outside. This was unheard of by parents there. They thought it was dangerous and we'd freeze to death.

I first saw Admiral Byrd when I was at the Milton Academy. He gave a talk there one night. I don't remember a single thing he said per se, but it was about the Antarctic. I fell in love with the idea of going with him if I could. I first heard of his Antarctic mission when I was at Harvard. The door opened and I saw the evening paper, the *Boston Transcript*. The headline had five words 'Byrd To The South Pole.' I read it out loud and I said to my roommate 'Gee, look at this. I've got to go!' Byrd needed dog drivers and that fit me just right.

I didn't know Byrd before the mission. But I knew I had to find a way to talk myself onto the expedition. I went to his house and asked to see him. At the front door was this buxom woman who said I couldn't see Byrd and stated that no one gets past her. She put up her arms like she meant it. So I went and spoke with the newspaper people at the *Boston Transcript*. I spoke to W.A. MacDonald, who broke the Byrd to Antarctica story. He spoke to Byrd for me and told the Admiral that I was enthusiastic to go and would do anything. He accepted me and my two friends, Eddie Goodale and Freddie Crockett. We went for nothing, we didn't get paid at all.

Byrd assembled the dogs at Wonalancet, New Hampshire, so we went there. Dogs were arriving every day. We'd immediately put them in a harness to see if they would work. Those that worked, we trained, and those that didn't, we sent back to the owners. We spent the entire winter of 1927 training them. We worked with over one hundred dogs and found only ninety-seven suitable to go. Each dog had his own crate. We traveled with them on the deck of the ship to New Zealand and then onto the ice. We shoveled coal into the ship's furnaces and cleaned out the ashes. We had to do all types of work on the ship.

Byrd was successful because he did the most important thing – he took care of his men. He thought of them as shipmates and thought first of their safety. He did anything to save lives. And if a leader does that, he will do well. We enjoyed his command and respected him. He was still just a Commander. Didn't become Admiral till after the flight over the Pole. He liked to drink, for he had a cocktail at the end of the day. But I never saw him drunk. He was a well dressed man and he never wore rags. He was always arranged and pressed.

Let me give you an example of Byrd's character. We were on the poop deck of the boat which was docked to the Antarctic ice. A sheet of ice fell off and hit the ship's bow. The boat rocked and one man, Benny Roth, was thrown in the water. He started screaming that he didn't know how to swim. He grabbed a piece of ice and started floating by the ship's stern. Byrd started to take off his parka to go in after Roth. We grabbed him and said 'We don't need two of you in the water.' We held Byrd down. Suddenly, he jerked up and jumped over the ship's railing. We threw a life ring at Byrd. Byrd grabbed it with one hand and Roth with the other. We lowered a lifeboat, picked them up and returned them to the ship. It was very cold and their clothing was frozen

stiff. We took them to the warm engine room and were able to strip off all their clothing. They were there naked. We put shoes on their feet to keep the cinders from their bare feet.

For Byrd's mission, I was a dog sled driver. I helped unload the boat using the sleds. There was 650 tons of equipment and supplies that needed to be offloaded. I moved heavy loads between the boat and the camp, Little America, nine miles away. The Antarctic is beautiful. It is snow covered and ice crusted and you walk on top of the crust. The mainland is solid and you can dock your boats easily in the water.

Admiral Byrd said he wanted to test two types of winter clothing, furs and a man-made suit. Goodale put on one type and I put on the other. We laid our sleeping bags on the ice and went to sleep. When it's that cold, it keeps you up at night. So I'd be awake and look over at Goodale and see him asleep. I didn't know this then, but he'd be awake and look over at me, thinking I was asleep. Morning came and we were the first ones up. We went in the kitchen and the cook was in there. We were having coffee at the dining room table when the meteorologist came in through the tunnel. There were tunnels connecting everything so you didn't have to go outside so much. He came in and said 'Boy was it cold out last night! It was seventy-three below zero!' It was a good thing we didn't know how cold it was before we went outside because I didn't think I could stand that. No wonder we shook and shivered all night. Byrd asked about how our clothing withstood the weather, and I told him that it was so cold that we couldn't tell which one was colder.

Byrd's goal was to fly over the South Pole and I was part of his advance team. We headed towards the Pole and went about seven hundred miles from camp. We could travel about thirty or forty miles a day with the dogs, so it took about three weeks. We never actually got to the Pole on the trip because you have to climb over some mountains to get on the Antarctic plateau. We helped Byrd complete his flight by using these hand held radios. We also created a place for him to land in case he was in trouble. We also made it easy for Byrd to find his way. See, the dog sleds leave a trail in the snow that are easily seen from the air. All he had to do was follow our tracks. We radioed back about the weather ahead of him. About four hours later, we heard the roar of a plane over us. It was awfully low. I was thinking to myself 'I hope he doesn't land here because it's all snow and ice.' He kept on coming until he got over us. He dropped a box about the size of a shoe box with a homemade parachute. We ran over to get it. There was a note for each one of us on the trail. The day before, he sent a wire to our families at home, and each family sent us a message. Mine sounded just like my mother! She sent her love and was praying for us. Byrd's mission helped humanity because we gained a lot of meteorological knowledge. We learned to better forecast how clouds and wind affect the weather. And our Boy Scout, Paul Siple, later went on to come up with the wind chill factor. Back in the States, we had a ticker tape parade on Wall Street. Byrd was in the first car with his other officers. I was in the car just behind him. I also got a special medal from Congress. There is a very lovely inscription on the medal about how we were heroes to the country.

Byrd called me, Goodale and Crockett to his house after we returned from the Antarctic. He said that we did a great job and we wanted to pay us, but he was broke. He did something special for us though. He named an unclimbed Antarctic mountain after each of us. I thanked him and vowed I would climb it one day. He told me that I

probably will. The last time I saw Admiral Byrd was just before his death. I was traveling through Boston and I stopped at his house. I spent ten or fifteen minutes with him and he was very happy to see me. I feel great pride in the fact that I am the last one alive from the mission.

I was in the 1932 Olympics. I was stationed up by Lake Placid, New York, and they came to us and asked if we could make a demonstration of dog racing. We harnessed our teams and put on an exhibition. We had races but it didn't count for the standings. I'm no longer dog sledding. I had heart trouble in the last year. But Byrd called me, Goodale and Crockett to his house after we returned from the Antarctic. He said that we did a great job and we wanted to pay us, but he was broke. He did something special for us though. He named an unclimbed Antarctic mountain after each of us. I thanked him and vowed I would climb it one day. He told me that I probably will. The last time I saw Admiral Byrd was just before his death. I was traveling through Boston and I stopped at his house. I spent ten or fifteen minutes with him and he was very happy to see me. I feel great pride in the fact that I am the last one alive from the mission.

I did the Iditarod thirteen times, the last one in 1992 at the age of eighty-four.

Three days before my 89th birthday in 1994, I climbed to the top of Mount Vaughan [elevation 10,302 feet]. This year, for my centennial, I am going back to the top again. Mark it down on your calendar – December 19th. I have a specially made dog sled designed for me. The snow is deep and I will try to ride the sled all the way up. We practiced last week. My guides are all chosen, and the lead guide is from my 1994 expedition.

Electricity is the greatest change I've seen in my lifetime. We rely on it for nearly everything we do.

I say you have to eat well, don't drink, don't smoke, sleep well and exercise. If you do those three things, you can do whatever you want. If you eat junk food, you start to weaken, which will affect your exercise. I'm still going and I remain active. With my upcoming trip to Antarctica, I'm proving that centenarians can still do great things. The motto I live by is "dream big and dare to fail."