



HALIFAX MILITARY HERITAGE
PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Historical Paper No. 3: Byrd at Baker's Point

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Canadian naval aviation began in August 1918 at Baker's Point, now the lower part of 12 Wing Shearwater in Eastern Passage. It was not founded by Canadians however, but by a United States Navy detachment under the command of Acting Lieutenant-Commander Richard E. Byrd, Jr. Byrd later went on to international fame for his aviation and polar firsts. The short-lived detachment he established eventually became the basis for Canadian naval aviation and was later known successively as RCAF Station Dartmouth, HMCS Shearwater and CFB Shearwater. It is now a part of CFB Halifax.

The undersigned would be pleased to receive any comments or questions regarding this paper at contactus@hmhps.ca.

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Introduction

In September 1918, two Curtiss HS-2L flying boats roared across the Atlantic, heading skyward and seaward in response to a reported sighting of a German submarine some 50 kilometres southeast of the entrance to Halifax Harbor. Behind them, serving in the role of airplane guard, a torpedo boat brought up the rear. In the lead aircraft, the two pilots and an aviation mechanic—the latter seated well forward and pressed into service as an observer—anxiously scanned the water's surface.

The land rapidly disappeared behind them, but meanwhile something else had also disappeared—the other aircraft. The Curtiss crew circled back, eventually spotting the other plane adrift on the surface of the ocean. They then went in search of the torpedo boat and directed it to the downed plane. Finally, they turned back to the matter at hand: finding the sub.

Suddenly, there it was—what looked to be a periscope jutting out of the water. Elated at finally seeing some action, the pilot banked his craft and swooped in low for the kill. The crew tensed, adrenalin pumping. Just as they were about to release one of their two bombs, the “periscope” came into clear view. It turned out to be a floating spar.

Disappointed, Acting U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Richard Evelyn “Dickie” Byrd Jr. turned his plane and headed back to his base at Eastern Passage. His first mission as Officer-in-Charge, U.S. Naval Air Force in Canada, had just come to an anti-climactic end.

Byrd is of course best remembered for his long-distance flights and polar explorations. His May 1926 flight over the North Pole with pilot Floyd Bennett, the first ever, resulted

in the U.S Congressional Medal of Honor. It is America's highest award and one that is normally given in wartime. In June 1927, the month after Charles Lindbergh's record-setting solo transatlantic flight, Byrd made the same journey with three companions in 42 hours. France made him a Commander of the Legion of Honour for this feat.

In 1928, Byrd began his connection with Antarctica, which was to last the rest of his life. He explored large areas of the continent from the air, became the first person to fly over the South Pole, wintered alone at a weather station (perhaps the most controversial exploit of his career) and eventually headed the U.S. Antarctic programs. When he died in 1957, he was an international hero and was buried with full military honours.

Submarine Warfare

The story of how Byrd came to be in Canada during the First World War has its roots in a new type of warfare introduced by Germany during that conflict—the large-scale use of submarines (*Unterseeboote*, or U-boats) as commerce destroyers. Germany's unrestricted anti-shipping campaign eventually brought the United States into the war and Byrd to Nova Scotia.

The U-boat war began in earnest on February 1, 1915, after the Battle of the Dogger Bank in the North Sea the previous month. There, an outnumbered German battle cruiser force met a superior British fleet and suffered severe damage to its flagship, *Seydlitz*, as well as the loss of the armored cruiser *Blücher*. As over 70 shells and seven torpedoes slammed into her, the great German ship rolled over onto her starboard side, turned upside down and sank, drowning 782 of her crew.

Blücher's sinking was captured on film and a still photograph from it, showing hundreds of sailors sliding off the hull and into the sea, became a popular souvenir item. It was even engraved on the side of silver cigarette cases. In reaction to the disaster, Kaiser Wilhelm II ordered his navy to avoid all further risks of losing any more capital ships. The result was a U-boat campaign against merchant vessels, including neutrals, in British home waters with the aim of starving Great Britain into submission.

The move met with considerable success at first, as few effective anti-submarine weapons had yet been developed. But the political cost was great. The sinking of British passenger liners—in particular *Lusitania*, with the loss of 128 Americans—resulted in such outrage in the United States that Germany discontinued unrestricted submarine warfare on September 1, 1915. In the eight months of the offensive, however, U-boats sank more than 907,000 tonnes of Allied shipping. Here was a method Germany might decide to use again if necessary. And she did.

By 1917, the German High Command considered it essential to start another U-boat campaign. Germany's underwater fleet had continued to expand since 1915, and military leaders felt they could now definitely force Britain to surrender through a renewed onslaught. If that were to happen, they reasoned, the total collapse of the Allies would certainly follow. For the campaign to be successful, however, the U-boats had to be used ruthlessly: against belligerent and neutral vessels, warships, merchantmen and liners.

Such activity would undoubtedly bring the United States into the war, but this was a gamble the Germans were prepared to take. On February 1, 1917, Germany proclaimed unrestricted U-boat warfare against all ships found in British waters or bound for Britain.

Following the sinking of a number of American ships, President Woodrow Wilson and the U.S. Congress declared war on Germany on April 6.

Germany now had a limited time to achieve success before American forces were able to bring their weight to bear on the battlefields of Europe. Her naval planners reckoned it would take two years before American intervention would be fully felt, and they expected the British to capitulate within six months. They almost succeeded.

Allied shipping losses mounted rapidly, even though the British instituted a number of defensive measures—most notably the convoy system—as well as improvements in anti-submarine warfare such as hydrophones, depth charges, extended minefields and searchlights. During that same period, another new weapon, the airplane, made its debut against the submarine.

Naval Aviation

Glenn Curtiss, the father of naval aviation, developed the world's first practical floatplane in 1911 (which was what seaplanes were called until well into the First World War), and the next year he built the first flying boat. Before then, he was one of the founding members of Alexander Graham Bell's short-lived Aerial Experiment Association (AEA), established at Bell's Cape Breton Island estate in 1907 with the stated aim of getting a workable flying machine into the air. Curtiss shortly and unexpectedly left the organization and formed a separate company to manufacture and sell aircraft. In 1915, the AEA sold its patents to Curtiss for much less than their true worth, which Curtiss subsequently sold to the American government for a sizeable sum. Curtiss went on to design *America*, a large twin-engine flying boat, the forerunner of

H-12, H-16 and HS-1 flying boats that operated from shore bases for the protection of shipping during the war. Generally, however, the idea of naval aviation was slow to catch on. It was not until 1916 that the British and French intensified their aerial patrols against Germany's underwater fleet.

The U.S. Navy had only a dozen aircraft for training in 1914, but its pilots, air bases and training establishments all increased in number as the country's entry into the war approached. Nevertheless, America's declaration of war found it short of aircraft. Manufacturers in both Europe and the United States were unable to meet the demand, and the first U.S. Navy and Marine pilots arrived in Europe without aircraft.

The USN, as well as the U.S. Marine Corps, concentrated early on antisubmarine patrols, especially once American-built aircraft became available. They were among the first air arms to take an active and comprehensive interest in what eventually came to be called antisubmarine warfare. Before the perfection of the aircraft carrier, the flying boat was the best way to conduct maritime reconnaissance patrols against U-boats.

The Marines stationed a squadron of various types of Curtiss seaplanes on the Azores in January 1918, where the potential existed to control a substantial part of the mid-Atlantic.

The German U-Boat Threat

Shortly afterward, the British Admiralty said enemy submarines were expected off the Canadian east coast in the near future and recommended aircraft be employed by the Canadian government as an anti-submarine measure. There was only one problem with

this suggestion: the Canadian government did not own any military aircraft, nor did Britain have any spare aircraft to lend it.

Founded in 1910, the Royal Canadian Navy's main efforts were directed to ship procurement rather than naval aviation. The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) had not yet been created, although thousands of Canadians served with Britain's Royal Naval Air Service and Royal Flying Corps, including four of the top 10 Allied aces.

To sort out the issue of maritime air patrols over Canadian coastal waters, a meeting was held in Washington, D.C., on April 20, 1918, attended by representatives of the U.S. Navy, Royal Canadian Navy and Royal Navy. The participants drew up a comprehensive plan to establish air stations at Halifax, Sydney and Cape Sable in Nova Scotia, and Cape Race in Newfoundland, which was not then a part of Canada. Their concerns were real: in April 1917—the most successful month for the Germans—more than 453,000 tonnes of Allied shipping were sunk by U-boats.

Naval Air Stations in Nova Scotia

Halifax and Sydney, major seaports for convoys, were to receive the top priority—each station was to have six seaplanes, three airships and four kite-balloons. The Canadian government approved the establishment of the two air stations in May. Estimated costs for the first year were \$2,189,600, which included 12 seaplanes at \$15,000 each, eight balloons at \$32,000 each and six airships at \$50,000 each. Base locations were chosen at Baker's Point in Eastern Passage and at Kelly Beach in North Sydney on Cape Breton Island. Throughout the spring and summer, surveys were undertaken and plans drawn up for the new facilities.

The Americans agreed to supply the equipment and loan the personnel to man it until Canadians, who were to be trained in the United States, were ready for their new duties. The Americans would also let their personnel live in tents if permanent accommodation were ready by mid-October. To tie in with the air patrols, the U.S. Navy would lend six submarine chasers, two torpedo boats and a submarine.

Richard E. Byrd

It was at this time that Byrd entered the picture. After graduation from the Virginia Military Institute, Byrd entered the U. S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, Maryland, as part of the Class of 1912. Its members were the first to graduate as ensigns, rather than after two years of service at sea. Injuries and illness had plagued Byrd while he was at Annapolis and continued after graduation. In particular, injuries to his right leg at the Academy and aboard the battleship *Wyoming*, flagship of the Atlantic Fleet, left him with a limp that raised questions about his fitness for duty at sea. During his second year of active duty Byrd had a new experience: his first airplane flight. A few minutes in a Curtiss flying boat as it skimmed the surface of Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, were enough to convince him he wanted to be a pilot. But before he could pursue his new dreams, he retired from the Navy.

Byrd's lame leg had affected his career; after four years, he was still an ensign while his Annapolis classmates had been promoted to lieutenant junior grade. Disgruntled, he retired from active duty. On the day before his retirement in March 1916, he received his promotion to lieutenant, and five days later was appointed to a position with the Rhode Island State Militia. This was followed by assignment to the Bureau of Naval Personnel in Washington, as a retired officer on active duty. Dissatisfied with deskwork, and in

spite of his leg, Byrd managed to obtain an appointment as a naval aviation cadet. Off he went in the fall of 1917 to Florida's Pensacola Naval Air Station to learn to fly.

Byrd received his pilot's wings on April 7 the next year and remained at Pensacola on staff. He was anxious to get to Europe and into the war, but his injured leg counted against him. Besides, he was very valuable right where he was. Byrd studied the new field of aviation thoroughly, and within a short time he had become an expert in flight safety, administration of air services and the conduct of flight programs. He became convinced in 1917 that the next major step in aviation would be the crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, and he dreamed of becoming the first man to do so. His vision coincided with the start of construction of the Navy Curtiss *NC-1* in January 1918, a giant flying boat, with a wingspan of 38 metres, and powered initially by three 400-hp Liberty engines (later upgraded to four engines). The press referred to the huge new aircraft as "Nancies."

Byrd's Suggestion

Byrd suggested the way to deliver this plane to the war in Europe was to fly it to England via the Azores, and he initially sought civilian assistance while he made preparations. In addition to studying Atlantic weather patterns and fuel consumption rates, he installed compasses on planes and began to make flights out of sight of land, an unheard-of innovation. In early July, he requested permission from Washington, this time through official channels, to make a transatlantic flight in *NC-1*. Byrd's requests were considered at some length in Washington: admirals did not yet place much faith in flying boats or any other type of aircraft, nor were they prepared to be rushed into things

by pressure from outside the Department. But they felt the young lieutenant's ideas did have some merit.

Two weeks later, Byrd received orders to report to Washington. He was overjoyed—confident the Navy Department had approved his plans for the transatlantic flight, firm in the belief he would be on his way across in *NC-1* by October 1 at the very latest. When he got to the nation's capital he received what he called “the greatest disappointment of my life.” Initially, he had great difficulty finding out just what he was supposed to do. No one would make a firm commitment whether *NC-1* was or was not to fly to Europe, and whether or not Byrd was to be on board. Then, two weeks later, Byrd received additional orders that surprised him: he was to report for duty to Halifax, as Commanding Officer of a U.S. Navy Air Station that did not yet exist. He would have to establish it.

The orders went on to say that Byrd was “in direct command of the U.S. Air Forces in Canada” and “responsible to the Senior British Naval Officer...at HMS Dockyard, Halifax, N.S., for prompt response to all demands made upon your forces for co-operation in carrying out the General Mission of the Allied Naval Force in Canada.” He was also advised that his “situation as a United States Naval Officer commanding air forces in another country, though the relations with this country be intimate and though the United States and this country be striving toward the defeat of a common enemy,” required the “exercise of the utmost tact in every situation which arises.”

At first, Byrd did not know what to make of the orders. Was he being sidelined, or was this a golden opportunity? He asked an old friend in the Navy Department what it all meant. His colleague told him he was being given “an excellent assignment and one full of possibilities.” With German subs raising hell in the northwestern Atlantic, he would be

responsible to keep them clear of the coast and escorting Europe-bound convoys out of Halifax and Sydney. His friend then went onto state confidentially that when these duties were over, Byrd would “turn the station over to the Canadians” and take his men to France to join the Northern Bombing Group.

Byrd was somewhat relieved, but he was still concerned that the war would end before he could get overseas. A further set of orders from Chief of Naval Operations convinced him the department actually did intend to bridge the ocean. They directed him to investigate, with Newfoundland authorities, the possibility of the establishment of a seaplane refueling station somewhere on the east coast of the colony. Byrd later recalled, “It was evident now that the Navy Department was at last underway with final preparations for the great flight.” But he continued to worry over the lateness of the season and the growing unsettledness of the weather.

U.S. Naval Air Force in Canada

In early August 1918, Byrd arrived at Halifax along with the first men of his detachment and several train carloads of equipment. After they discovered the site chosen for them by the Canadians was more than eleven kilometres across the harbor at Eastern Passage, and that there were no trucks to haul them around the shoreline, the officers and men opted to float the wingless bodies of the HS-2L seaplanes across the water and roll them onto the beach with poles. The HS-2L was a two-seat general reconnaissance and patrol aircraft powered by a 360-hp Packard Liberty liquid-cooled V-12 piston engine. It had a range of 832 kilometres at a maximum speed of 137 kilometres per hour and a service ceiling of 2,800 metres.

Shortly, a bare plot of ground was transformed into what Byrd described as a “hustling camp” with a temporary steel seaplane hangar, known as “Y” hangar, built close to the water. On August 19, the hoisting of the Stars and Stripes signalled the assignment of Byrd as Officer-in-Charge, U.S. Naval Air Force in Canada, with the rank of Acting Lieutenant Commander. He was also to act as liaison officer between the American and Canadian governments in naval aviation matters.

Four Curtiss HS-2L flying boats were soon assembled, and on August 25 two of them made their initial flights over the startled citizens of Halifax. A letter sent from the garrison’s senior military staff officer to the naval authorities the next day indicates just how surprised the public was by these first flights:

Considerable excitement has been reported to me arising out of the unexpected appearance of the air service machines yesterday. No information has reached us regarding the addition of this service to the garrison. This I would be glad to get as the fortress is equipped with anti-aircraft defences. Enquiries from the civil population make it apparent that some notification is expected by the public.

As additional officers and men arrived, a similar station was started at North Sydney under the direction of Lieutenant Donahue, U.S. Coast Guard. Soon a friendly spirit of rivalry sprang up between the two camps, each vying to be the superior station with the best planes and pilots. Byrd worked out a patrol plan for the two stations with Canadian and British naval authorities on August 26. Europe-bound fast convoys would be met off the harbor mouth and escorted 105 kilometres to sea, while Halifax-bound ones would be escorted from 130 kilometres out. Slower convoys, travelling under eight knots, would have air cover for 80 kilometres outbound and 96 kilometres inbound.

Patrols from Baker's Point started immediately, but construction delays postponed the North Sydney ones until the third week of September. Once patrols began, the two stations built up an impressive log of flying hours in convoy protection, spotting for harbor defence guns and coastal surveillance for U-boats. With four planes available initially at the Eastern Passage base, Byrd developed a policy that two were to be used for convoy escorts, one for emergency anti-submarine operations and one in reserve. Each plane could remain airborne for four hours, cruising at 60 knots.

One morning Byrd received a surprise addition to his personnel complement when one of his men appeared at his tent with a huge Great Dane, which Byrd wrote was "the largest dog of any sort I have ever seen." The man explained the dog followed him and he thought that Byrd might like to have him. Byrd liked the dog, but felt sure such a magnificent beast must have an owner. His advertisement in the Halifax papers was answered two days later when the dog's master appeared. But by that time the animal, somewhat inappropriately named Violet by the men, had attached himself to Byrd—who was very pleased when the airmen chipped in and convinced the rightful owner to sell the dog to them for him.

Violet quickly became the station's mascot, joining in nearly every aspect of camp life. For example, when the great flu epidemic began sweeping the world, Byrd took certain precautions to protect his men. Once a day those not on flying duty lined up in front of the medical tent to gargle with disinfectant. Violet regularly got into line and gargled along with his two-legged pals.

During the period from May to October, five German subs operated in the area between Newfoundland and Cape Hatteras, three of them simultaneously from August to

October. Between them, they managed to sink nearly 100,000 tonnes of Allied shipping before they were recalled. In spite of reports of their sightings, none was ever seen by any of Byrd's aircraft. Although no German U-boats were sighted, the pilots got plenty of practice in flying in marginal conditions. According to Byrd, "The highlands and cliffs of Nova Scotia made the air rough and the fog kept it thick. Changes were sudden and violent."

He also recalled how he went up one morning in bright sunshine, flying out about 32 kilometres to sea when he noticed a black cloud in the distance: "Before I could get back to the station I was fighting a half gale that whipped the bay into a running sea. Just before I landed a wall of fog swept over the lower arm of the harbor. I slipped down not two minutes too soon."

By the end of the war, the stations at Eastern Passage and North Sydney operated their full establishment of six flying boats as well as two of the proposed eight balloons. The latter were operated from the former Canadian Survey Ship *Acadia*, pressed into wartime service with the Royal Canadian Navy as the patrol vessel HMCS *Acadia* and fitted with special winches for the purpose (today CSS *Acadia* is part of the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic and is moored on the Halifax waterfront behind the museum). Due to equipment shortages, no airships were ever used. As the war slowly ground to an end, Byrd remained ever hopeful the next dispatch from Washington would bring news *NC-1* was ready to start its transatlantic journey. While he waited, he carried out additional experiments at sea, using a sextant from an airplane to take the altitude of the sun and the stars, and achieved limited success.

He spent hours plotting the course on charts, studying weights and calculating food, fuel and clothing requirements. As a result, he was convinced that he was in every way prepared to fly the Atlantic. Then came November 11, 1918, when the Armistice was announced, and there was no longer a need for *NC-1* in Europe. Byrd was ordered to turn the stations over to the Canadians and return to Washington. He was happy the bloodshed of war was finally over, but he felt bitter disappointment that he had failed to achieve his personal goal of bridging the Atlantic by airplane.

The End of the War

In spite of his frustration, Byrd had enjoyed his relations with the Canadians. He had been warned beforehand that he might encounter anti-American feelings from the citizens of Halifax, who annually celebrated the burning of Washington by the British during the War of 1812. But to his great delight, he experienced only the most pleasant of relationships. "Never could any people in the world be more tolerant, helpful, cordial and hospitable than were our Canadian neighbors of 1918," he wrote. "It was there I learned the great truth that knowledge makes for understanding and tolerance."

The Canadians were equally impressed. At the end of Byrd's mission, the Director of the Royal Canadian Naval Air Service (RCNAS) wrote to his opposite number in Washington that "Lieutenant Commander Byrd has been a particularly outstanding case and has shown himself to be full of energy and resource and, at this same time, most tactful in his dealings with the naval authorities at Halifax."

When Byrd and his men departed Nova Scotia over the next few months, they left aircraft, equipment and the temporary hangar to be taken over by the RCNAS, a force only established on September 5. Unfortunately, this group was very short-lived. With

the end of the war and the process of demobilization, the RCNAS was disbanded after only three months of existence and the airbase Byrd established at Baker's Point lay dormant. Sadly, Violet had to be left behind as well; perhaps returned to her former owner after the Americans departed.

In May 1919, two of the flying boats were loaned to the St. Maurice River Valley Fire Protection Association in Quebec, where they were employed on patrols. The local Aboriginals called them *Kitchi Chghee*, or "Big Duck." In 1920, Byrd's abandoned seaplane base at Eastern Passage became the first east coast station of the Canadian Air Force (CAF), formed in February of that year. Using the HS-2L flying boats left behind, the CAF conducted photographic flights, as well as work for fisheries and forest fire patrols for federal government departments.

The CAF became the RCAF in 1924, and Byrd's flying boats continued their earlier tasks. To these were added new ones such as transporting officials to inaccessible areas, assisting against smugglers and illegal immigrants and flying traders, trappers, farmers and Aboriginals from remote outposts to medical facilities.

Baker's Point today forms the lower part of the air base at 12 Wing Shearwater, the center of naval aviation in Canada. After all these years, Byrd's "temporary" "Y" hangar, now an historic site, is still in use by the navy's Fleet Diving Unit (Atlantic).

Byrd's Dream

When Dickie Byrd left Nova Scotia at the end of the war, his dreams of being the first to fly across the Atlantic still unfulfilled, little did he realize he would soon return to Eastern

Passage. After *NC-1* successfully made its inaugural flight in October 1918, orders were given to build three more “Nancies.” The U.S. Navy planned to fly all four across the ocean. Those orders changed due to the end of the war. But it was only a temporary setback. Interest in a transatlantic flight was soon revived with support from Assistant Navy Secretary Franklin D. Roosevelt. Approval for the project finally came in January 1919 from Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels.

Byrd’s hopes that he would participate in the flight were dashed when he read, “No officer or man who has had foreign duty will be permitted to be a member of the Trans-Atlantic flight expedition. This includes those who have been on Canadian detail.” He understood the decision, but was severely disappointed. Despite this restriction, Byrd managed to wrangle a position on the project’s navigation team, where he contributed two important instruments—an air drift indicator and an aerial sextant. He also accompanied the planes as far as Newfoundland to test his inventions.

Byrd Returns to Baker’s Point

On May 8, 1919, *NC-1*, *NC-3* and *NC-4* (*NC-2* had been cannibalized for spares) departed the Naval Air Station at Rockaway Beach on New York’s Long Island on the initial leg of their epic flight to be the first to fly across the Atlantic. *NC-1* and *NC-3* reached the expedition’s first stop at Halifax safely, while *NC-4* ditched off Massachusetts due to engine trouble. *NC-1* and *NC-3* also had difficulties—the strain of the flight cracked four of their propellers.

Byrd, who flew on *NC-3*, recalled having extra propellers at Eastern Passage, and set off in search of them, finding six. With the damaged propellers replaced, Byrd

completed the next leg of the flight to Trepassey Bay, Newfoundland, where he left the expedition. All three Nancies reached the Azores, where *NC-1* sank and *NC-3* was damaged after ditching in rough seas. That left only *NC-4*, which flew on to Plymouth, England, via Portugal and Spain, landing to a tumultuous welcome on May 31. For the first time the Atlantic had been bridged by air.

Byrd at Baker's Point Today

Byrd still has a presence in Eastern Passage to this day. On April 10, 1995, Admiral Byrd's daughter, Mrs. Bolling Byrd Clarke, travelled from her home in Pennsylvania to 12 Wing Shearwater, as the base is known today, for a special ceremony. For the first and only time in Canada, an armed forces building was about to be named after a non-Canadian. Mrs. Clarke opened the Admiral Richard E. Byrd Building as the new base headquarters, dedicated to the memory of her father, 77 years after Byrd founded his seaplane station there.

Of the futuristic-looking building, his daughter said, "It's a most stunning and attractive building and I know that if my father knew of this honor he would say: 'Well, I don't really deserve this...but I'm human enough to like it just the same.'"