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Cecil Munsey, PhD
13541 Willow Run Road
Poway, CA 92064-1733
USA
PHONE: 858-487-7036
E-MAIL: cecilmunsey@cox.net
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Admiral Byrd and His Antarctic “Silent Messenger” Bottles



Researched, organized, illuminated and presented

by

Cecil Munsey, PhD
Cultural Historian

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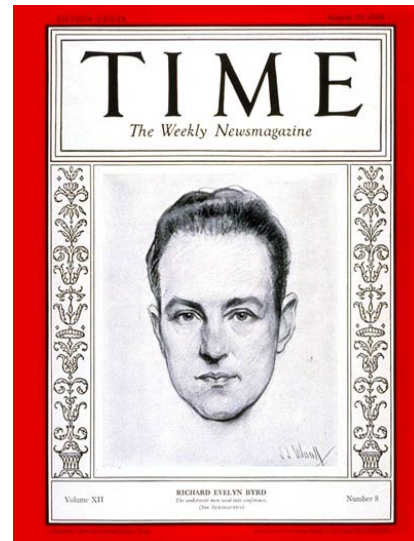
Introduction:

Wikipedia online encyclopedia identifies: **Rear (2-star) Admiral Richard E. Byrd, Jr., USN** as an “...American naval officer who specialized in feats of exploration. He was a pioneering American aviator, polar explorer, overwater navigator and organizer of polar logistics.”

He was among the group of the first men to fly over the North Pole – in **1926**; he was in the group of men who flew in the second Trans-Atlantic flight in **1927** (Charles Lindberg was the first – also in 1927); and Byrd planned and executed the first Antarctic (South Pole) expedition, **1928-1930**. It was during this first Antarctic expedition that he carried with him the “**Messenger Bottle**” he developed, that is the *focus of this article*.

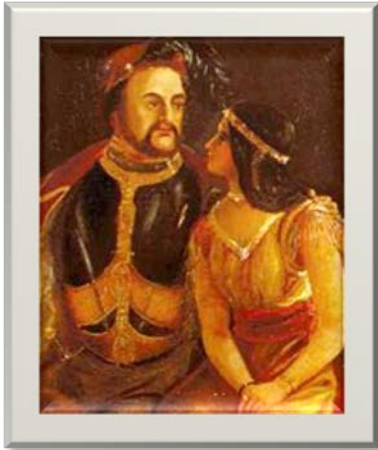
Ancestry:

Richard Evelyn Byrd, Jr. (1887-1957) (**Fig. 1**) was the son of Esther Bolling (Flood) a gracious Southern belle who encouraged her three sons, Tom, Dick and Harry to restore the luster to the family name she perceived had been lost during the Civil War.



(Fig. 1 Richard E. Byrd, Jr. in military uniform; and Richard E. Byrd on Time magazine cover)

Richard Evelyn Byrd, Sr., his father was a descendant of **John Rolfe** one of the first settlers in the New World to cultivate tobacco. Interestingly, Rolfe married **Pocahontas (Figs. 2; 3; 4)**, the daughter of a Powhatan Indian Confederation Chief.



(Fig. 2 1850's painting of Pocahontas & Rolfe)



(Fig. 3 Pochontas by Simon van de Passe 1616)



(Fig. 4 Pochontas)

Byrd was the brother of Virginia Governor and U.S. **Senator Harry S. Byrd** a dominant figure in the Virginia Democratic Party between the **1920s** and the **1960s**.

A sense of adventure marked Richard Byrd from an early age. When he was only 11, he traveled halfway around the world by himself to visit a relative in the Philippines. His dispatches along the way were published in local newspapers. As his brother Harry set out to build a political dynasty in Virginia, Richard chose the military as his path to accomplishment.

Education and U.S. Navy:

Richard E. Byrd, Jr. attended the Virginia Military Institute before he transferred and graduated from the U. S. Naval Academy in **1912**. He learned to fly airplanes in World War I during a tour with the U. S. Navy. He developed a passion for flight, and pioneered many techniques for navigating airplanes over the open ocean including “drift indicators” and “bubble sextants.” His expertise in this area

resulted in his appointment to plan the flight path for the U.S. Navy's **1919** first ever Trans-Atlantic crossing.

1926 North Pole flight

On May 9, 1926 Byrd and pilot **Floyd Bennett** made a flight over the North Pole. The trip was financed by automobile heir, **Edsel Ford**, and oil heir, **John D. Rockefeller, Jr.** This trip earned Byrd widespread acclaim, including being awarded the **Medal of Honor**, America's highest military honor, (**Figs. 5; & 6**) and enabled him secure funding for subsequent attempts to fly over the South Pole. The citation with the medal read:

“For distinguishing himself conspicuously by courage and intrepidity at the risk of his life, in demonstrating that it is possible for aircraft to travel in continuous flight from a now inhabited portion of the earth over the North Pole and return.”



(Fig. 5 Admiral Byrd's Medal of Honor)



(Fig. 6 Byrd being awarded the Medal of Honor)

Trans-Atlantic flight:

In **1927** Byrd announced he had the backing of the **American Trans-Oceanic Co., Inc.**, which was established in 1914 by **Rodman Wanamaker** (Philadelphia department-store magnate) with the purpose of building the aircraft to complete the

journey. Byrd was one of several aviators who attempted to win the prize of \$25,000 for making the first nonstop flight between the United States and France. **Charles Lindbergh** won the prize in 1927 with his famous solo flight from New York to Paris.

Richard E. Byrd and His Antarctic “Silent Messenger” Bottles

According to a **1928** article in the *Toledo* (Ohio) *Blade* newspaper:

Navy Comdr. Richard E. Byrd, after successfully flying over the North Pole in 1926, decided to make an expedition to the South Pole in 1928 (**Fig. 7**).



(Fig. 7 Cmdr. Byrd photo in parka)

In preparation for the trip he contacted the **Owens Bottle Company** in Toledo, Ohio and ordered three and one-half gross (500+) four-ounce prescription bottles (**Fig. 8**).



(Fig. 8 Four-ounce prescription bottle made in the 1920's by the Owens Bottle Co. of Toledo, Ohio)

The special rush order for the “Messenger” bottles from Cmdr. Bryd was unexpected and the Owens Bottle Co. was honored and proud to fulfill it with the utmost haste.

On Saturday prior to the departure of the Byrd ships from New York, the order was received in the Owens offices. Glass engineer **Dr. Julian H. Toulouse** – pioneer bottle collector and author of the book, “**Bottle Makers and Their Marks**”, received the order. He turned it over to **T.K. Almroth**, Owens’ advertising manager and the man who conceived the bottle’s special design. Almroth had the Owens’ artists execute it, and hurriedly got the design off in that afternoon’s mail to the company’s factory in Charleston, W. Virginia. The proper molds were made and the entire casting of 500+ bottles were quickly completed and sent by express mail to the Byrd expedition headquarters in New York City on Tuesday.

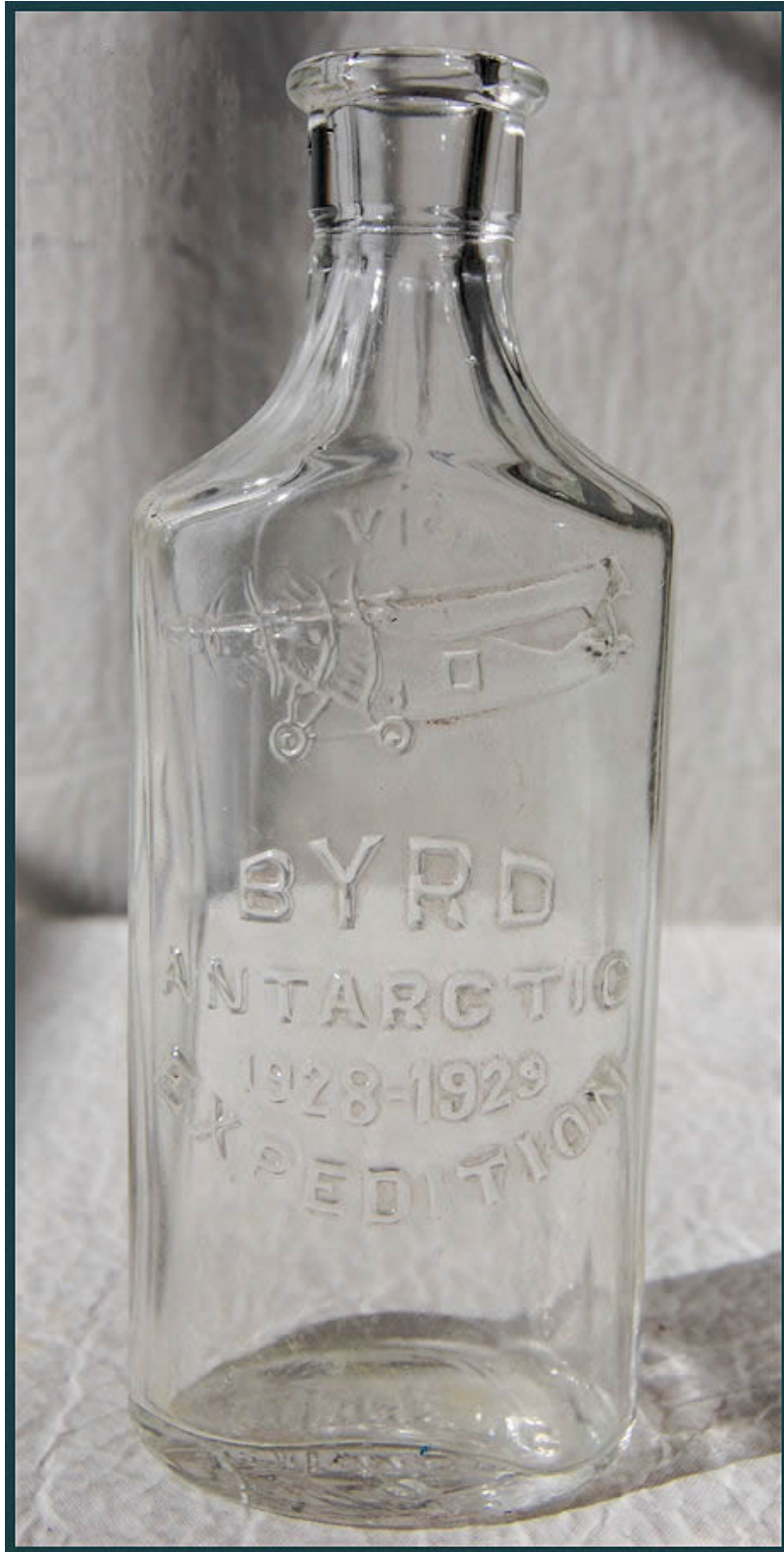
The bottles were delivered to Cmdr. Byrd early Wednesday, less than 100 hours from the time the special order was received in the Toledo offices. That was only a few hours before the expedition vessels sailed away for the South Pole seas and their unknown adventure.

Messages that Comdr. Byrd planned to send back to civilization from time to time would contain invaluable scientific data were to be placed in the special ordered Owens' prescription bottles as needed. He named the bottles “*Silent Messengers*” of science.

The bottle had a special embossment design on its face: Just below the neck of the bottle was an embossed picture of one of Byrd's expedition airplanes (**Fig. 9**); and below the plane was this wording: **Byrd Antarctic Expedition, 1928-1929 (Fig. 10)**. The reverse of the bottle featured an embossment that remains a mystery: “**3IV**” see **Fig. 11**



(Fig. 9 Tri-Motor aircraft flown by Byrd and his pilot who flew from Little America over the South Pole in 1929)



(Fig. 10 Byrd Antarctic 1928-1929 Expedition bottle obverse)

The Owens Bottle Company Trademark was embossed in part on the bottom-left of Byrd’s “messenger” bottle [O-in-a-square] (Fig. 12). The use of the “O-in-a-square” trademark came to an end in 1929 (*just after the special order was produced for Cmdr. Byrd in 1928*) when the Owens Bottle Co., with its subsidiary, the **American Bottle Co.**, merged with the **Illinois Glass Co.**, to become **Owens-Illinois Glass Co.**, Toledo, Ohio with the trademark “I” in a **Circle**.



(Fig. 11 Byrd Messenger bottle reverse)



(Fig. 12 Messenger bottle bottom)

First Antarctic expedition, 1928–1930:

In 1928, Admiral Byrd began his first expedition to the Antarctic (**Fig. 13 & 14**) involving four ships, three airplanes, 95 dogs, 650 tons of supplies (including the “Messenger” bottles), and 42 men. A base camp named "Little America" was constructed on the Ross Ice Shelf and scientific expeditions by snowshoe, dogsled, snowmobile, and airplane began.



(Fig. 13 Byrd “Little America”)



(Fig. 14 Map of Antarctic with Ross Ice Shelf Marked with red X)

Photographic expeditions and geological surveys were undertaken for the duration of that summer, and constant radio communications were maintained with the outside world. After their first winter, their expeditions were resumed, and on November 28, 1929, the famous flight to the South Pole and back was launched. **Byrd**, along with pilot **Bernt Balchen**, co-pilot/radioman **Harold June**, and photographer **Ashley McKinley**, flew the Ford Tri-motor plane to the South Pole and back in 18 hours, 41 minutes. They had difficulty gaining enough altitude, and they had to dump empty gas tanks, as well as their emergency supplies, in order to achieve the altitude of the Polar Plateau. However, the flight was successful, and it entered Byrd into the history books. After a further summer of exploration, the expedition returned to North America on June 18, 1930.

Upon arrival, Byrd was once again given a hero's welcome. The Navy promoted him to the rank of Rear Admiral. To millions of Americans, Byrd was known as the “**Admiral of the Antarctic.**”

“**From Ohio to the Bottom of the World and Back Again**”

by Raimund E. Goerler, Ph.D (Ohio State University)

In a research paper by Dr. Goerler, he discusses a Richard E. Byrd “Messenger” bottle used during the 1928-1930 Antarctic Expedition (see above). He states it is the only bottle in the massive 1.5 million items in the **Richard E. Byrd collection** in the library/archives of **Ohio State University**.

The bottles were cast adrift from one of the expedition's ships or dog sleds or airplanes or scouting parties afoot. They contained information as to where the location at which they were liberated. Very few of these bottles have survived.

Ten years ago another one of the bottles was found on the beach at St. Martin's Island, Otago Harbor, near New Zealand.

Some time later another one showed up on e-Bay, the electronic auction house on the World Wide Web. After the sale the bottle became the property of Ohio State University, and currently is in their archives.

As each of the bottles were retrieved from here, there, and everywhere, throughout the world, their recovery is noted and added to the accumulating data base of scientists who study the intensity and direction of the various currents in the southern waters and their effect on the seas.

Throughout the ages have come farewell and other messages in bottles from many shipwrecked souls (See **Article #1291** on website, **cecilmunsey.com.**) but never before have they been called on to act as “*silent messengers of science*” from the frigid regions of the Far South.

In any event, as these bottles are found they will or have become the envied possessions of private collectors of curios, of museums, of historical associations, and other similar enterprises.

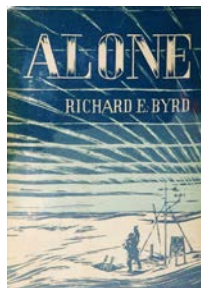
Byrd's later Antarctic expeditions:

Byrd undertook four more expeditions to Antarctica from **1933–35**, **1939–40**, **1946–47** and **1955–56**.

On his second expedition, in **1934**, Byrd spent five winter months alone operating a meteorological station, “Advance Base”, from which he narrowly escaped with his life after suffering carbon monoxide poisoning from a poorly ventilated stove. Unusual radio transmissions from Byrd finally began to alarm the men at the base camp, who then attempted to go to Advance Base. The first two trips were failures due to darkness, snow, and mechanical troubles. Finally, **Thomas Poulter**, **E.J. Demas**, and **Amory Waite** arrived at Advanced Base, where they found Byrd in poor physical health. The men remained at Advanced Base until October 12th when an airplane from the base camp picked up **Dr. Poulter** and Byrd. The rest of the men returned to base camp with the expedition’s tractor. Byrd describes this part of the expedition in his autobiography “**Alone**,” (**Fig. 15**).

From that popular book, he came to attaining transcended insights:

“And here I was, near the axis of the world, in darkness where the stars make a circle in the sky. At that moment the conviction came to me that the harmony and rhythm were too perfect to be a symbol of blind chance or an accidental offshoot of the cosmic process; and I knew that Beneficent Intelligence pervaded the whole. It was a feeling that transcended reason; that went to the heart of man’s despair and found it groundless.”



(Fig. 15 Book cover of Richard E. Byrd's book, Alone)

As might be expected, at the end of his heroic life in 1957 at the age of 69, Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd Jr. was placed at rest in **Arlington National Cemetery** adjacent to Washington, D.C. where more than 14,000 veterans, including some of those who fought in the Civil War are buried (**Fig. 16**).



(Fig. 16 Byrd gravesite in Arlington National Cemetery)

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**Cecil Munsey, PhD
13541 Willow Run Road
Poway, CA 92064-1733
Phone: 858-487-7036**

E-mail: cecilmunsey@cox.net

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