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**The Smoking Gun**  
**A Club Fellow Analyzes Byrd's North Pole Flight**

**By**

Hardy F. LeBel

(Angela: The conclusions in this paper were derived from an analysis of documents provided by Mrs. Audrey Balchen and prove Richard Byrd's claim to have flown to the North Pole on May 9, 1926 is false. )

## The Smoking Gun A Club Fellow Analyzes Byrd's North Pole Flight

By

Hardy F. LeBel, Ph.D. (F.N.94)

Richard E. Byrd feared and detested Bernt Balchen more than any other man. Balchen knew Byrd lied when he claimed to have flown the Fokker tri-motor Josephine Ford over the North Pole on May 9, 1926. What was more, Balchen had the proof. Balchen's vow not to reveal the information was scant consolation. A paranoid Byrd did his best to make Bernt's life miserable. He even sabotaged Bernt's air force career, but Balchen was true to his word.

Because most researchers are not aviators, their analyses concentrate on Byrd's "paper trail." They bog down analyzing his celestial sight reductions, suspicious erasures and lack of a flight log. However, when you look at the flight as Balchen, an aviator, did you wonder why anyone accepted Byrd's claim. The devil is in the flight log Balchen kept during the goodwill flight he and Floyd Bennett made in Josephine Ford to fifty-three American cities between October 7<sup>th</sup> and November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1926.

At lunch on March 9, 2000, Balchen's widow, Audrey, gave me the smoking gun, a copy of "Flight Record- the Josephine Ford- Fokker." In it are data that prove beyond doubt that Byrd lied.

### JOSEPHINE FORD

According to Fokker, the F-VIIA-3m had a maximum gross weight of 7,921 pounds, an empty weight of 4,730 pounds and carried a useful load of 3,191 pounds of which a maximum of 1,200 pounds could be devoted to 200 gallons of fuel carried in wing tanks. Byrd removed the passenger seats and installed two 110-gallon fuel tanks in the fuselage. He further augmented the Fokker's 420-gallon internal fuel capacity with 195 gallons of gasoline in 39 five-gallon cans carried in the cabin raising the usable fuel to 615 gallons.

## TETERBORO TESTS

Byrd claimed to have conducted careful tests before leaving for Spitzbergen and determined that the Fokker cruised at 100 knots (117 miles per hour) and consumed 27 gallons of fuel per hour. Undoubtedly, this claim is false. There were only 54 days between when he bought the airplane (February 10, 1926) and when he sailed (April 5, 1926). It would have been extremely difficult for Byrd to make the modifications, install the J-4 engines, do the tests, disassemble the plane and load it on the *SS Chantier*. Byrd's claim becomes ludicrous when one contemplates operating a ski-equipped airplane from Teterboro, New Jersey in March.

## BYRD'S CLAIM

At about half past three on the afternoon on May 26<sup>th</sup> Richard Byrd and Floyd Bennett landed at Kings Bay and claimed to have reached the pole, spent about half an hour there and returned. Richard did not present a flight log, therefore, the parameters of the flight can only be calculated based on the duration of their absence and the known distance to the pole.

## GOODWILL FLIGHT

What was Josephine Ford's actual airspeed and fuel consumption? Bernt Balchen's logs show average (mode) airspeed of 76.5 knots (90 miles per hour). A test by Curtiss/Wright in 1926 found the J-4 burned 11.5 gallons of fuel per hour at cruise. Under ideal conditions the Fokker flew at 76.5 knots and consumed at least 34.5 gallons of fuel per hour.

## POLAR FLIGHT

Two operational factors during the North Pole flight further erode these values. First, the wheels were replaced with skis. No data are available for the F-VII-3m on skis. However, similar planes suffer a 10% to 15% reduction in cruise airspeed when skis are substituted for wheels. The Fokker's cruise airspeed could have been no more than 69 knots (76.5 knots – 10% = 68.8 knots).

Second, the plane was seriously overloaded:

Empty Weight	4,730
615 gallons of fuel	3,690
39 five gallon cans	195
Emergency gear	400

Two 170 pound aviators	340
Minimum takeoff weight	9,355
Maximum allowable weight	7,990
Amount over gross weight	1,365
	(+18%)

A useful rule of thumb used by bush pilots holds that airspeed decreases and fuel consumption increases by at least half your percentage over-gross. Byrd's fuel consumption was no better than 37 gallons per hour ( $34.5 + 9\% = 37.5$ ) and the airspeed no faster than 63 knots ( $69 - 9\% = 62.8$ ).

### POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

From the above parameters we can construct the following scenarios for the 1,360 nautical mile round trip:

	Teterboro Tests	Byrd's Claim	Goodwill Tour	Polar Flight
Speed	100 Knots	88 Knots	76.5 Knots	63 Knots
Time	13.6 Hours	15.5 Hours	17.8 Hours	19.7 Hours
Fuel	376 Gallons	419 Gallons	614 Gallons	739 Gallons

### CONCLUSIONS

What, if anything, can be learned from the above?

First, the Teterboro tests are a myth. There were no meaningful tests done. Byrd in his haste to be off for the Arctic had no notion of the plane's capabilities.

Second, Byrd's claim to have reached the pole and returned in 15.5 hours is clearly outside the capabilities of the airplane. In that it was physical impossibility we may conclude the claim was a lie.

Third, experience with the F-VII-3m confirms the validity of the Goodwill Tour data, therefore we must accept that scenario as being the best Byrd could have achieved.

Finally, in that it considers the actual operational environment, the Polar Flight scenario, or something very similar, must be taken to represent how the plane actually performed on the day on the day in question.

Therefore, Richard Byrd's claim to have flown the Fokker F-VIIA-3m, Josephine Ford, from Spitzbergen to the North Pole and back on May 9, 1926 is false.