

## Admiral Byrd Visits Boquete

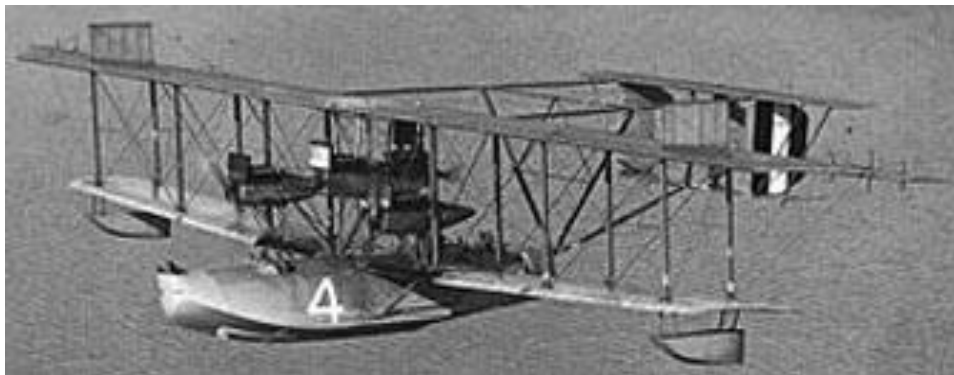


— Commander Byrd and the SS City of New York, 1928.  
Photos by [www.acepilots.com](http://www.acepilots.com) and [www.gettyimages.com](http://www.gettyimages.com)

Recently, Julius Grigore, a member of our “History Group” sent me a copy of a photo showing Admiral Byrd at the Panamonte Hotel in Boquete. He was wondering if I knew when and why Byrd was in Boquete. I did not, so I turned to the other members and this is what developed:

Richard E. Byrd graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy on June 8, 1912. However, an ankle injury while doing gymnastics at the Academy, led to his medical retirement on March 15, 1916. As a retired officer, he was promoted to Lieutenant, Junior Grade, and assigned to the Rhode Island Naval Militia in Providence as Inspector and Instructor. (1)

During World War I he served as a retired officer on active duty taking flying lessons and earning his wings in August 1917. As a pilot he pioneered many techniques for navigation over open ocean. This expertise resulted in his appointment to help plan the flight of the U.S. Navy Curtiss (NC) Flying Boats across the Atlantic. Of the three flying boats that attempted the crossing, in stages, only the NC-4 made across to Lisbon, Portugal, becoming the first ever transatlantic flight. (1) The plane is on display at the U.S. Navy Air Museum at Pensacola, Florida.



*Curtiss NC-4 in the USA after being returned from Lisbon and receiving an overhaul. The plane has 4 engines, three pulling and one pushing. NC stands for Navy Curtiss. Originally designed for WW I long range submarine patrol, but too late for action.*

From there, Byrd becomes known for his Polar Explorations and the controversies he created. And that is where the Panamonte Hotel in Boquete comes in.

In 1928, now Commander, Richard E. Byrd began the first of three expeditions to the Antarctic, utilizing two ships and three airplanes. The two ships were the *SS City of New York* and the *SS Eleanor Bolling*. The *City of New York*, Byrd's Flagship, was wooden hulled and used both sail and an antiquated steam engine of 200 HP for power. It measured 170 feet and was rated at 515 tons. The *Eleanor Bolling* was a steel-hulled freighter not much bigger than the *City of New York*, which being slower, sailed first from Hoboken, NJ, on August 25, 1928 and headed for the Antarctic via the Panama Canal. The *Bolling* followed on October 10. (2)



The "SS City of New York" on the left, and the "SS Eleanor Bolling".



Byrd's Ford Trimotor, the "Floyd Bennett", named after the recently deceased pilot of Byrd's previous expeditions, and the RMS Rangitiki he boarded on his return to Panama. Note his signature over the second stack.

Byrd's expedition to the Antarctic ended in April of 1930 and they headed for home. The *SS City of New York*, carrying Commander Byrd, stopped at New Zealand where he, and a part of his crew, boarded the *RMS Rangitiki* for the journey to Panama. He arrived at the Port Of Balboa, in the Panama Canal Zone, on May 19, 1930. He did this in order to stay in Panama, working in seclusion on his book about the expedition, while his two slower boats made their way back. The headline of THE NEW YORK TIMES read:

**SCHEDULE FOR BYRD MADE AT PANAMA;  
Capt. H.H. Railey, Arriving There to Meet Chief,  
Arranges Details of Explorer's Stay.  
MAY FLY TO MOUNTAINS  
Island Resting Spot Is Also Considered After  
Round of Official Engagements. Faces Two Years' Work  
Dentist to Recheck Men's Teeth. (3)**



*I am sorry to say that I do not know what publication carried the photo on the left. The photo on the right was sent to me by Julius Grigore and I believe the man on the right is Byrd working, with his ghost-writer, on his book at the Panamonte Hotel. Byrd's dog went to the Antarctic with him.*

It seems that the bid for the mountains won and Comander Byrd headed for Boquete staying at the Panamonte Hotel.



*The Panamonte Hotel in Boquete, Chiriqui Province, Panama, 2014*



*Views of The Panamonte Hotel in Boquete, Panama. (4)*

The Panamonte Hotel had its humble beginnings when Joseph Wright, a Texan and retired railroad conductor, opened the doors to a five-room establishment called "Pop Wright's Hotel". Its clientele those days consisted of weary travelers who had come to enjoy the mountain's cool weather and beautiful countryside. They came from David by train, ox cart or foot as there were no roads then. (Even in 1936, when I went as a 3-1/2-year old boy, we went on a motorized railroad vehicle.) In 1924, Hans and Vera Elliot purchased the hotel and expanded it to include 10 rooms and a formal dining room. Hans had originally come to Panama from Sweden shortly before as Captain of a Swedish merchant ship. As time went by, the hotel grew and Vera made beautiful progress in the landscaping. The food was always magnificent and the hotel, by now named Panamonte, became the exceptional retreat for diplomats, VIPs, and anyone desiring a first class accommodation with beautiful gardens and excellent cuisine. Among the notable guests that have stayed at the Panamonte one has to include Charles Lindbergh and Commander Richard E. Byrd. (4) This last one holed up at the Panamonte while working on his notes about his recent Antarctic expedition.

Upon completion of his work on his book about the expedition, Comander Byrd headed for home departing the Port of Cristobal, Panama Canal Zone, on June 3, 1930, on board the *SS City of New York*. He arrived at New York on June 18, 1930, to a tumultuous reception. Eventually he "journeyed back to his home state of Virginia where he was feted as an American Hero". (5)

Later in life Admiral Byrd, who received the country's highest award, the Medal of Honor, came under scrutiny about some of the claims he made during his Polar explorations and transatlantic flight. Nevertheless, his feats did provide much other vital scientific information about the areas he researched.

Meanwhile, the Panamonte Hotel, in the mountains high above the bussle and tussle of the big cities, continues to provide comfort and solace to those looking for relaxation, good food and beautiful surroundings.

Luis R. Celerier  
Longview, Texas  
August 2014

#### COMMENTARY

*A recent E-mail to Luis Celerier from Grigore questioned what ADM Byrd was doing in Boquete. It brought forth a number of comments that triggered my memories of Byrd. I'm not sure that the "Bits and Pieces" group is aware that Byrd's cousin Connie Byrd married the noted Panamanian architect Manuel Calderon.*

*They lived in his house which abutted the sidewalk, and as I remember had iron bars in the first floor windows. Inside the 3-story house was a large courtyard and garden. If I remember correctly the servants lived on the third floor; Manuel's mother lived on the second floor and he and Connie on the first floor. When they married Connie spoke no Spanish, and her mother-in-law spoke no English, so they couldn't communicate very well.*

*They had a vacation house in El Valle, and Manuel also had a finca of several hundred hectares up in the interior [full of ticks I might add – but that is another story].*

*I met Byrd on his Antarctic Expedition III. I introduced myself to him on the beach at Fort Amador; He said to come to the ship at the dock the following day. We went, carrying a Life Magazine with his picture on the cover. We got to see the Snow Cruiser and to empathize with the husky sled dogs, who were panting from the heat.*

*I was a great admirer of Byrd and have a collection of autographed covers, some covers from the first expedition and some cancelled by each of the ships. I got greatly disillusioned when I learned of some of his scurrilous acts like claiming to fly over the North Pole when he hadn't, and having Bernt*

*Balchen fly him over an Antarctic Mountain Range that Balchen had found the day before, so Byrd could claim he discovered it. There is more, but that will be in another installment.*  
*Alan Bentz, BHS '44*

## SOURCES

1. *Wikipedia*
2. [www.south-pole.com](http://www.south-pole.com)
3. *Barbara Baldwin, [www.query.nytimes.com/gst](http://www.query.nytimes.com/gst)*
4. *Panamonte Hotel History, [www.panamonte.com/history](http://www.panamonte.com/history)*
5. [www.rms.rangitiki.com](http://www.rms.rangitiki.com)

## PHOTOS

*Photos came from several Internet locations including some of the Sources listed above.*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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