

To the Editor
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Columbia, MO 65201

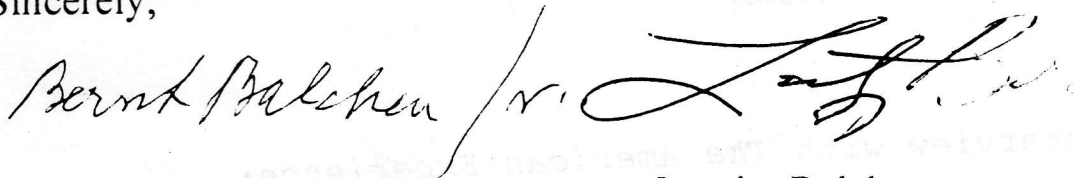
July 2, 2008

Re: Lisle A. Rose: *Explorer. The Life of Richard E. Byrd*

Dear Sir,

Mr. Rose's book contains so many lies and innuendoes about our father, Bernt Balchen, that we respectfully suggest that you stop the sale of this book. Please see attached list.

Sincerely,



Bernt Balchen Jr.
Lillevannsveien 63 A
0393 Oslo 3, Norway

Lauritz Balchen
1834 Mason Bay Road
Jonesport, ME 04649

CC:

Raimund E. Goerler
John C. Behrendt
The Explorers Club
Norwegian Polar Society
✓The Antarctic Society

Roger D. Launius
Norsk Luftfartsmuseum
American Polar Society
The Library of Congress
Colin Bull

Lisle A. Rose:

Explorer - *The Life of Richard E. Byrd*

University of Missouri Press, Columbia and London, 2008

The University of Columbia Press offers its grateful acknowledgment to an anonymous donor whose generous grant in support of the publication of outstanding manuscripts has assisted us with this volume.

In an interview with *The American Experience*:

<http://www.pbs.org/wqph/amex/ice/11mmore/reference/interview/rose09.htm>

Mr. Rose says: "Whether he (Byrd) actually got to the geographic northern-most point on the globe is another matter. I don't think he did."

On page 142 of this book, Mr. Rose writes: "To claim that the two Americans failed to reach the top of the world is simply wrong."

Mr. Rose puts forth no proof that Byrd reached the North Pole, but in order to "prove" that he did, he defames persons who knew the truth, mainly Bernt Balchen.

The following shows Mr. Rose's efforts to smear Balchen's reputation.

Page 113. "Balchen flew for many hours over the North Polar ice scape, hundreds of miles from help should he himself go down."

Reference?

113. "Thereafter, the young flier considered himself an expert on polar aviation and a top-notch pilot."

Reference? Mr. Rose never met Bernt Balchen.

117: "At this moment Balchen began to endear himself to the Americans."

Balchen worked on orders from Amundsen. In a letter dated January 30, 1950, Amundsen's second-in-command Hjalmar Riiser Larsen wrote to Louis Ruppel, Editor of *Collier's*: "Byrd had lot (sic) of troubles with his skis and asked Amundsen if anyone in his company could help him. Amundsen and I discussed the matter, and we picked out Bernt Balchen as the best one for the job, which he finished to Byrd's great satisfaction."

Amundsen and Ellsworth had inspected Byrd's sled and found it to be in bad shape. Amundsen asked Ferd. R. Arild, the expedition's carpenter, if he could make a better sled for Byrd, which he did, assisted by Balchen and others. (Arild: *Carpenter at Svalbard*, Norsk Luftfartsmuseum, Bodø 1999.)

118: An aside: Mr. Rose has misspelled Carl Ben Eielson.

124: "Balchen first publicly raised his own doubts (whether Byrd had reached the North Pole) in 1958, thirty years after Bennett's death and a year after Byrd died."

While Balchen was stationed in the Pentagon in the early 1950's, Byrd made life so miserable for him that he decided to come out with the truth, but Byrd died before he could do so. On October 13, 1953, during the Pilgrimage of the *Air Pioneers* at Kitty Hawk, N.C., Byrd took Balchen to the side:

'I am going to let you know that what you have been getting and are getting has got to stop [he meant publicity]. I am demanding and I am ordering you to stop this at once and forever. - Do not ever believe for a moment that I will stand for being stepped upon by you.'

Balchen papers.

After that, Byrd would call Balchen in the middle of the night and even when he was waiting for a flight at Idlewild Airport. The tapes can be found at the Byrd Polar Research Center, The Ohio State University, Columbia.

126. "In a 1998 television interview, Bess Balchen Urbahn reiterated her late husband's insistence that barnstorming around the country with Bennett..." Mr. Rose didn't pay attention: Not barnstorming, but an around the country tour for the Guggenheim Foundation. However, it was on a trip to Canada that Bennett told Balchen the truth. Also, Balchen was my former, not my late husband.

126. According to Mrs. Urbahn, her late husband boldly raised the matter with Bennett..." It was Bennett who *confessed* to Balchen.

127: "According to Rawlins, Grovenor and his staff 'deliberately doctored' Byrd's navigation report. Rawlins went so far as to claim that he had 'obtained elsewhere (presumably from Balchen) a copy of Byrd's original report proving that he and Bennett had not reached the pole.' Rawlins' report was published in 2000, 27 years after Balchen's death. Balchen's log from his flights in the *Josephine Ford* with Floyd Bennett (flights made for the Guggenheim Foundation) is in the Library of Congress. It shows an average of 79 miles per hour. With ski landing gear, the best the plane could average was 68 mph. The distance from Spitsbergen to the Pole is roughly 1550 miles.

128. "Nine years later, Byrd's longtime associate and sometime critic Charles J.V. Murphy, wrote that ,when I was Special Assistant simultaneously to both (U.S. Air Force) Secretary Finletter & the Air Chief of Staff, Vandenberg, friends of mine as well, I discovered that the high command of the Air Force was fed up with Balchen. The CIA had complained of his indiscretions and the Assistant Vice-Chief of Operations to whom Balchen reported wanted to shed of him.'
If this had been the case, it would show in Balchen's 201 file, which it does not.

129: "Balchen's initial charge against Byrd hinged on an alleged exchange between himself and Floyd Bennett while the two were flying the *Josephine Ford* on a rescue mission to Labrador---"
Corey Ford, ghostwriter of *Come North* insisted on making the story more dramatic, though Balchen wanted him to tell the truth, which Bennett had told him while the two were flying Fokkers to Canada.

129: "Who knew what was in the dying man's feverish mind?"
See the above.

129: "Balchen, and others, concocted varying tales of failure and fraud."
What "varying tales?"

129: "As their bitterness grew and deepened over the years, Balchen and Ronne naturally became susceptible to all the skepticism and criticism leveled by contemporary critics of the 1926 polar flight."
What does Mr. Rose know about Balchen's feelings? He wasn't bitter; he was angry that Byrd, who owed the success of the transatlantic and South Pole flights to him, could treat him the way he did.

130. „But Balchen knew of and should have acknowledged Byrd's insistence that he and Bennett had been airborne nearly sixteen hours, because the Norwegian at some point obtained and kept a copy of a document titled „Navigation Report of Flight to Pole" signed by Byrd, which was the formal report submitted to the National Geographic Society." Where is proof that Balchen had such a report? The Norwegian journalist Odd Arnesen wired his newspaper *Aftenposten* from Spitsbergen: „Byrd over Crossbay after fifteen and one-half hours flying; ten minutes later the two pilots landed in good shape. Pilots insisted to have been at the Pole, but judging by the time away doubt having been there."

135: „Froesch got back to Balchen some days later with the conclusion that could only have been discouraging to Balchen: „I have looked over the North Pole flight data of the *Josephine Ford* which you left with me and find nothing wrong with it." In fact, this corroborated Balchen's findings.

136. "...one of Balchen's earliest Scandinavian champions, Gösta H. Liljequist, insisted in an article two years later in a prestigious international aviation journal that the *Josephine Ford* must have been as underpowered as Balchen claimed."

No reference. Liljequist and Balchen met only once. Professor Harald Sverdrup, President of the Norwegian Polar Society, initiated the meeting. It took place on February 27, 1957 at the home of the Swedish professor Hans Ahlmann, an Arctic explorer of note. Ahlmann had invited Liljequist, and asked Liljequist to make a study of Byrd's flight. Why didn't Rose include Liljequist's findings? Liljequist concludes: "It would seem appropriate that a committee of aeronautical and meteorological experts be given access to the flight log and all

available data to study the question whether in actual fact he did reach the Pole." But there is no flight log.

In the spring of 1957, Balchen was approached by E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., the publisher, about writing a biography with Corey Ford as ghostwriter. After the treatment Byrd had subjected him to, Balchen had decided to come out with the truth about Byrd's flight north. Though Byrd died before the book could be published it was agreed among the three parties that the truth should be told. The book had been printed when the Byrd group got news of it. Dutton, Ford and Balchen were threatened with law suits by the Byrd family and friends. Dutton decided to destroy the first edition.

139. „Balchen had more than one ax to grind. Not only did he come to dislike Byrd, but joining Byrd so quickly after Amundsen's departure for the pole also identified him with an American triumph over his home country of Norway. One way to remain on good terms with his fellow Norwegians - who immediately expressed skepticism over the American claim - was to agree that Byrd, in fact, had not reached the pole first by air, therefore giving the triumph over to Amundsen." This is pure speculation.

140. „Bennett never indicated to anyone else that he and Byrd had not reached the pole. Indeed, he wrote his own account of the flight that corroborated Byrd's report, publishing it just shortly before the alleged confession to Balchen... The only man who could corroborate or refute Balchen's claims, first made public in the late 1950s, was Floyd Bennett, who had been dead for thirty years." Balchen's claims were not made public in the late 1950's. The Byrd group stopped publication of *Come North*, see above.

Balchen would not have come out with the truth about Byrd's flight, no matter what Floyd Bennett had told him, if it weren't for Byrd's constant persecution, abetted by a group of friends. Only after Balchen's death did letters from Byrd to various friends come to light. In a memorandum to James E. Mooney, dated November 12, 1953, Byrd wrote: „Ever since Balchen has been working with Americans he has been a traitor to whose (sic) with whom he worked. First of all, he betrayed Amundsen at Spitzbergen (sic) when he left him and went over to the Byrd camp because he wanted to come to the United States...Now Balchen is ready to betray the Air Force if the Air Force doesn't do what he wants.“ The Byrd Polar Research Center.

142. „Conspiracy theorists, such as Balchen, his wives, Rawlins, and others are adept at creating and rigidly maintaining alternative realities based on a single highly questionable assumption, be it that Byrd and Bennett could never have reached the North Pole, Harry Truman dropped the atomic bombs as a military demonstration against Stalin, or John F. Kennedy was the victim of a plot by the CIA and Soviets or perhaps FBI director J. Edgar Hoover. Such people will raise new perspectives and propose fresh arguments. Theories and theorists are seldom if ever amenable to reason or common sense.“ Why didn't Mr. Rose consult any of „the conspiracy theorists“ when he wrote this book?

161. „Vaughan's account is the most bizarre of all. He claims that ‚one day‘ Balchen told him what really happened on the flight. Acosta flew the first several hours over the ocean, then Noville relieved him and was forced to fly low, nearly clipping the ground.“ (They were over water!!) Vaughan, if indeed Balchen had discussed the flight with him, got it all wrong: Noville was not a pilot. Vaughan went on: „Noville and Acosta kept drinking and getting more and more obstreperous

until Byrd at last picked up a wrench and knocked both men out."

Nowhere did Balchen mention Noville's and Acosta's drinking, nor about Byrd knocking both men out.

Writes Mr. Rose: "They (Byrd and Balchen) got the two drunks out of the cockpit..." Had the two drunks been in the cockpit, the plane would have landed in the drink. Wrote Byrd during the flight: "Lights don't work so well. Found a long stick and hit Noville on the shoe with that."

(*To the Pole. The diary and notebook of Richard E. Byrd.* Raimund E. Goerler, Ohio State University Press, 1998.)

Tony Fokker was the person who insisted that Balchen go on the flight since he was the only instrument pilot. Balchen was then employed by Fokker, and they would be flying a Fokker plane. Writes Fokker in *The Flying Dutchman*: "In the light of what actually occurred, Byrd's description in *Skyward* sounds faintly ridiculous. About this stage (when they were approaching Ver-sur-Mer), Byrd wrote: 'I felt myself entirely responsible for the lives of my shipmates. I don't believe they thought there was much chance of getting down safely, but still they faced it gallantly... to the last they calmly obeyed orders. *Balchen happened to be at the wheel.* (The italics are Fokker's.) Balchen set the ship down on the flares, so accurately did he land... Balchen's nerves are of iron, but he uses his judgment, too. He has not gotten the credit he deserves, I suppose, because his extraordinary modesty shames the shrinking violet."

161: "Balchen's self-serving recollections are particularly suspect. Thirty years later he remembered many exact moments of the flight....."

Mr. Rose must refer to *Come North with Me*. How could he ever forget that flight????

233: "True, he (Balchen) had exhibited a tendency to allow 'publicity' to go to his head a bit,

,considerably' so ,in New York.' Fortunately, the Norwegian had ,snapped out of it after several bawlings out, and I could not ask for a better attitude than his has been for weeks.'

See Fokker's statement above.

241: „...Smith was one of the few „Byrd men“ – along with Balchen, Finn Ronne and Alan Innes Taylor – who came to harbor a bitter dislike of his commander.”

Balchen's „bitter dislike“ for Byrd came at a much later stage, when Byrd did everything in his power to ruin his career in the Air Force.

273: „Balchen, who became close to Smith in their mutual campaign to discredit Byrd...”

What campaign?

276: „While Byrd kept drinking, according to Balchen and June...”

No reference.

273: “In 1972, fifteen years after Byrd's death, while Balchen was in the midst of his own campaign to discredit his former employer...”

What campaign?

275: „Balchen believed they were close, within five miles, perhaps, but not at the pole itself...”

No reference.

275: „Shortly after leaving the pole he (Byrd) allegedly pulled a pint bottle of cognac out of his bag and began drinking...”

Who alleges?

276: „While Byrd kept drinking, according to Balchen and June...”

Where did June and Balchen relate this??

281: „Sitting off by himself, the perpetually suspicious and critical Balchen wrote: „The leader of the expedition now just promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral...”

No reference.

281: „Like Dean Smith and, later, Finn Ronne, Balchen concluded that Byrd was not only a poseur but an ignoramus.”

No reference.

281: „The man was a victim, his own witting victim, in fact, of ,public adulation and undeserved know how,’ which in a number of instances that Balchen chose not to discuss allegedly placed BAE I in jeopardy.”

No reference.

305. „Lincoln Ellsworth, Wilkins and Balchen never abandoned the idea.”

No reference.

306. „Balchen wrote in his diary---”

No reference.

307. „They were Bernt Balchen’s partisans.”

No reference.

434. „But Greenland, not history, was the catalyst that sent the Byrd-Balchen feud into orbit.”

No reference.

In January, 1949, Balchen, then head of the 10th Rescue Squadron in Alaska, wrote to Byrd: „I have studied the situation since I came to this command and have come to the conclusion that for efficient work in the Polar Basin we must have three key points established in the North American Sector, about symmetrically along the edge of the Arctic Ocean. With stations at Barter Island, Melville Island in the Canadian Archipelago and at

Thule in Greenland, we can satisfactorily cover the Arctic Ocean across to Siberia and Norway.... Looking towards the future, whatever that may bring, these stations will be of the utmost value in quick location of downed aircraft out over the polar ice. It will also give us an opportunity to train and perfect our crews in high latitude navigation....

I have sent in a proposal for a central arctic search and rescue organization along these lines, working with one type of aircraft only...." Balchen never heard from Byrd in this connection.

434: "Thereafter, both the air force and the navy moved swiftly under Byrd's overall direction to implement plans to establish both strategic air bases and weather stations in Greenland."

No reference. It was under Balchen's direction that Thule Air Force Base was built; it was then Senator Stuart Symington who got the Thule project underway after Balchen briefed the Senator about his ideas during Symington's visit to Alaska. No papers about Byrd's participation or overall directions to implement these plans exist in the Byrd Library.

438. "Finn Ronne suddenly emerged as a further source of irritation. The Norwegian came out of modest wartime service determined to carve his own niche in Antarctic exploration. Like Balchen, he fancied that Byrd was out to block him." No reference.

435. "Whether this incident took place, or can be characterized as Balchen reported it, is highly questionable." Rose accuses Balchen of lying.

435. „Only the most foolish naval officer could wish or hope to influence the air force promotion process--."

That Byrd tried is evident in a letter from his friend James E. Mooney dated December 8, 1953 (Byrd Library): „Further, Admiral, I am now in a position should any steps be made for Congressional initiation of a plan to have Balchen made a B.G. (Brigadier General) over the heads of the military establishment, that it will be squelched.

„There now remains only that part of your request to me covering the problem as to who outside of the Air Force is sponsoring Balchen, and if such sponsorship involves you as an individual as to prejudices or other grudges. I can assure you that we shall have these answers also."

454: „Balchen created, stimulated, or reflected the central anxiety that would dog the Antarctic community for years to come."
No reference. A serious accusation such as this should have been documented.

„-to say that Dick Byrd didn't make it to the pole or Dick Byrd did make it to the Pole, I think is too categorical. I don't think you can say that."
Lisle A. Rose, The American Experience.

Bess Urbahn
115 Barnestown Road
Camden, ME 04843

July 2008

Byrd and Balchen

The question remains: What caused Byrd's animosity against Balchen? The answer is simple: Fear and jealousy.

Fear, because he knew that Balchen was an excellent mathematician and had figured out that the *Josephine Ford* could not have made it to the North Pole; jealousy because Balchen made headlines on his own.

It wasn't always that way: On January 16, 1931, Byrd wrote to George Palmer Putnam:

Bernt is a prince. I shall never let go by an opportunity to show how I feel towards him.

But then Balchen got attention from the press. In March, 1931, Merian C. Cooper, producer of *King Kong*, had sent a crew to Newfoundland to make a movie about seal hunting. But an explosion occurred onboard; Cooper called Balchen for help. Wrote Cooper:

Balchen was wonderful - the greatest Arctic pilot who ever lived. We flew in bad weather low among icebergs, dropped supplies, blankets, food, etc., to scattered survivors, and guided them to shore - three or four days' desperate work, Balchen made incredible landings in broken ice--we should have been killed a dozen times.

During World War II, Balchen made more headlines. Along with Doolittle and Chennault, he was interviewed by Jon Hersey and sketched by Tom Lea; each of the three flyers had two full pages in the March 29, 1944 issue of *Life*. Several

newspapers wrote about the rescues Balchen had performed in Greenland; then came the book, *War Below Zero*.

It didn't help that *Life* printed an article, *How We Built a Giant New Air Base at the Top of the World*, mentioning Balchen but not Byrd. It was reprinted in *The Readers Digest*.

But it was Francis and Katharine Drake's story in *The Digest: Bernt Balchen, Viking of the Air*, that really got Byrd's goat.

Byrd and friends wrote to the editor, DeWitt Wallace, to complain. On February 27, 1953, Michael J. Brennan, captain of the *Chantier*, wrote a four and a half page letter: "*The story in the Digest incensed me and I thought about my friends, living and dead, so I decided to write you.*"

What Brennan's living and dead friends had to do with the article is a question. Byrd followed up with a letter on February 28; however it was not sent because Mrs. Wallace was sick.

Then on January 14 the admiral called Francis Drake to complain; on April 29 he sent Drake a bill for the phone call, which Drake refused to pay.

All this correspondence, along with a 14-page critique of the Drake article, can be found in the Byrd library.

When Balchen was transferred from Alaska to the Pentagon as project officer of the Thule Air base, the cards were stacked against him. Byrd had his relative, Senator Harry Byrd; the Air Force Chief of Staff, General Thomas D. White, was a relative.

The fact that Balchen had direct contact with Secretaries of the Air Force Finletter and Talbott made his superior, General Roger Ramey, furious. Balchen at that time had a desk in the Pentagon basement, and somebody or other had restricted him: he was a popular speaker but was not permitted to give more than one speech a month. He had nothing to do. An article in *Newsweek* appeared: *Will the Air Force Force fire a Great Arctic Expert?*

During this period he took refuge in his hobby, painting. On January 6, 1953 the Grand Central Art Galleries in New York gave an exhibit of his watercolors. The Finletters came, the Doolittles, Gene Tunney, C.R. Smith, Trygve Lie and others. Though Byrd was one of the sponsors, he did not attend the opening. Colliers had a big spread showing his paintings.

In 1955, friends in the Pentagon got Balchen transferred to Newfoundland, where he spent his last year in service under General Glenn Barcus. When he retired, Barcus presented him with the Distinguished Service Medal and read the citation:

Colonel Bernt Balchen distinguished himself by exceptionally meritorious service-----. His firm leadership, extensive background and selfless devotion to duty were instrumental factors in the successful accomplishment of several major projects of vital significance to the defense of the entire North American Continent.

Bess Urbahn
115 Barnestown Road
Camden, ME 04843

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