

The Third Byrd

No Man's Land

by Steve Pendleton

If you thought every piece of land on Earth was claimed or occupied by a nation, you'd be wrong. There is a huge piece of Antarctic real estate — a triangle-shaped section between 90°W and 150°W longitude, ending at the South Pole — that has no nation's name on it.

There's a good reason for this. The coastline in that area is almost unapproachable due to ice. None of the early explorers ever set foot on this land. Chile, Argentina, Norway, France, and the United Kingdom all made territorial claims on the continent and surrounding islands, but this area (now commonly named on maps as Marie Byrd Land) remained untouched.

The United States maintained a policy of not recognizing such claims — but reserved the



The USS *Bear* in Antarctica, January 10, 1941.

right to make them in future. Americans had sailed to the Antarctic as sealers and whalers since the 1820s, and government expeditions under Charles Wilkes and James Ault had visited, but the United States had not mounted major exploring efforts such as those led by Scott, Shackleton, Mawson, or Amundsen.

In 1929–30 and 1934–35, however, this changed. American private expeditions led by Richard Byrd had established a base at Little America (on the edge of the Ross Sea Ice Shelf), and American political leaders, especially President Roosevelt, were interested in making possible land claims. Also of concern was the interest shown in the Antarctic by Hitler's Germany. And, in fact, the Germans sent the Schwabenland expedition south in 1939.

Third Byrd

In early 1939 the U.S. government created the United States Antarctic Service, and appointed Byrd as its head. This would be the first government-sponsored polar activity of modern times. Byrd quickly organized what would become known as the “Third Byrd” expedition. Its goals were to explore “No Man’s Land” and leave notices of sovereignty at prominent locations. These particular places, however, were not to be publicly announced.

While the government contributed much of the budget for the undertaking, private donations also were solicited. Two supply ships — the USS *Bear* and the USS *North Star* — were acquired and men recruited. Many had gone with Byrd



on his earlier ventures.

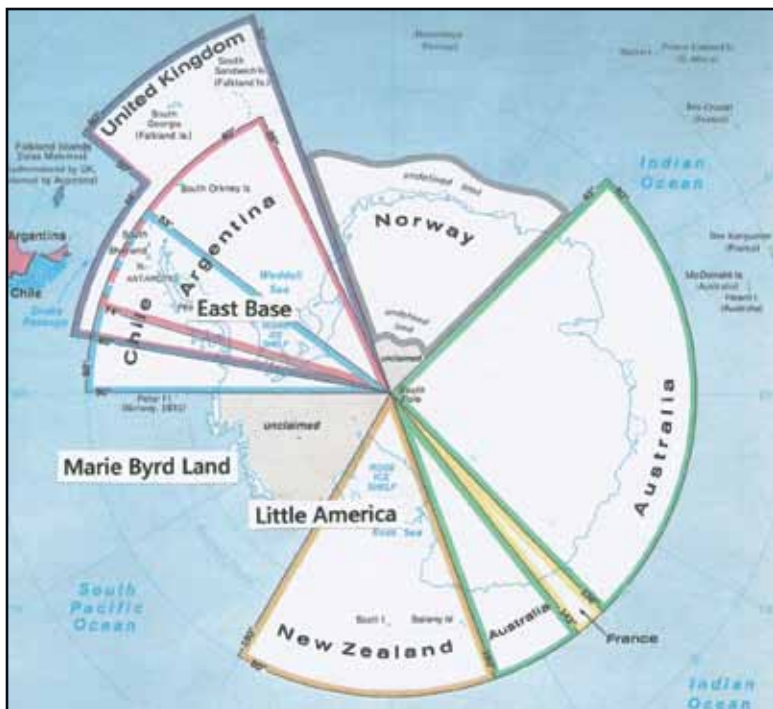
In addition, the expedition acquired no fewer than four aircraft, as aerial surveying had been found to be a vital tool in mapping the polar regions. These included two Curtiss Condors, a Beechcraft monoplane, and a Barley-Grow floatplane.

The most unusual item — other than a small tank — was what has been nicknamed the

“Snow Cruiser.” I suspect this machine is the closest association most philatelists might have with this expedition. It garnered a great deal of publicity, and featured on commemorative philatelic covers.

The cruiser was a giant enclosed tractor measuring 55 x 20 feet. It had huge inflated tires, room for several crew members, a range of 5,000 miles, and space for a year’s sup-

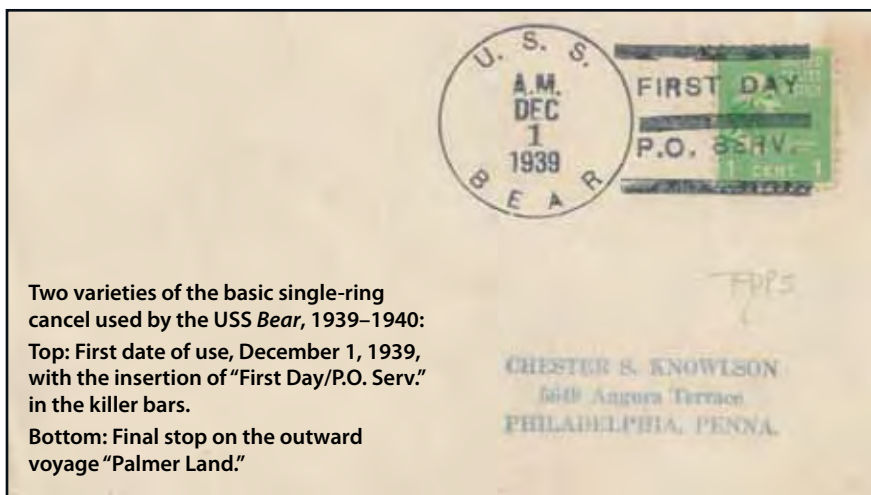




Map showing the current political division of the Antarctic.

ply of food. The behemoth was invented by Thomas Poulter of the Armour Institute in Chicago. After a tour of the United States the cruiser joined the ships.

The plan was to establish two bases in the Antarctic. One was to be on the Little America site of the first two Byrd ventures. From there a number of reconnaissance surveys would be made into Marie Byrd Land. The second was called East Base. The first choice for its location was Charcot Island. This is a large mass to the west of Alexander Island and south of the Bellingshausen Sea, where the Antarctic peninsula joins the main continent.



Two varieties of the basic single-ring cancel used by the USS *Bear*, 1939-1940:
 Top: First date of use, December 1, 1939, with the insertion of "First Day/P.O. Serv." in the killer bars.
 Bottom: Final stop on the outward voyage "Palmer Land."

The Expedition

The two ships sailed in the late fall of 1939. After stops at the two isolated islands of Pitcairn and Rapa, they approached the Antarctic continent. On January 12, 1940 the *North Star* reached the site of Little America; the *Bear* showed up on the 14th.

It was immediately apparent that the Snow Cruiser was useless. It could not override the snow that formed in front of its wheels. Eventually, it was abandoned on the ice, where it was visited as late as 1957 by members of Operation Deepfreeze.

Meanwhile, an attempt to reach Charcot Island proved futile due to the icepack. Finally, a site was found on Stonington Island, a small outcrop in Marguerite Bay, on the west coast of the Graham Land peninsula but quite a bit farther north than Charcot. Under the leadership of Richard Black, buildings were quickly constructed.

For the rest of 1940, preparations were made for a number of long exploring surveys. Parties were to head out of Little America, bound for the western parts of Marie Byrd Land. From East Base, sledge parties were to cross the peninsula to the Weddell Sea. There also were plans to survey the southwestern area of the Antarctic Peninsula. In addition, a number of flights were to be made from both bases.

On November 11, 1940 four of the field parties from Little America converged on a site at Mt. Grace McKinley. Here the leader of the party, Leonard Berlin, signed a paper making a claim for the United States on the lands to the east of 150°W. The paper was deposited in a cairn on the mountain, but its existence was not made public until much later. In addition, the American flag was raised at a half dozen other points within the desired area.

By early 1941 all the field parties had returned to their bases. They were then



confronted with a major problem: funding had been cut by Congress. This was, of course, due to rising concerns about the war in Europe. Both bases had to be evacuated.

Little America was abandoned in February 1941. East Base, however, proved to be more difficult. Finally, the men were able to be flown out on March 22, and the ships returned to the United States in May.

Expedition members dispersed to other military duties. Many of them would return in future Antarctic expeditions, some in command positions. The United States has never formally claimed Marie Byrd Land; however, it has established bases (Byrd and Byrd Surface) and many temporary camps within its borders.

Expedition Philately

Mail from the “Third Byrd” was entirely carried aboard, and serviced by, the *Bear* and the *North Star*. There was also a very interesting — and little known — alternative way of getting messages to and from group members.

The *Bear* maintained a ship’s post office, and created a number of postmarks. As was the custom in the 1930s, the names of locations were placed within killer bars. The *North Star* had no such post office, so there are no covers known with the ship’s postmarks. However, there was a lot of activity using cachets, as well as special covers created to note visits to islands on the voyage.

In addition, the Fidelity Stamp Company of Boston produced a special commemorative cover for the Snow Cruiser. This venture created some interesting covers — as well as some major mistakes.

Finally, expedition members could communicate with loved ones in the United States via a program called the Army Amateur Radio System.

USS *Bear*

During the 1939–40 season, the *Bear* used a basic single-ring cancel reading simply “U.S.S. BEAR.” The first date of use is December 1, 1939, with the insertion of “First Day/P.O. Serv.” in the killer bars. This was in Boston. Then, in order, the following locations can be found in the killer bars:

- At Sea
- Little America
- Antarctic Continent



Cover canceled at Little America but with an East Base cachet. (“Little America” is typed in below the cachet.) The cover was forwarded to Admiral William L. Calhoun, who was serving on the USS *Argonne*.

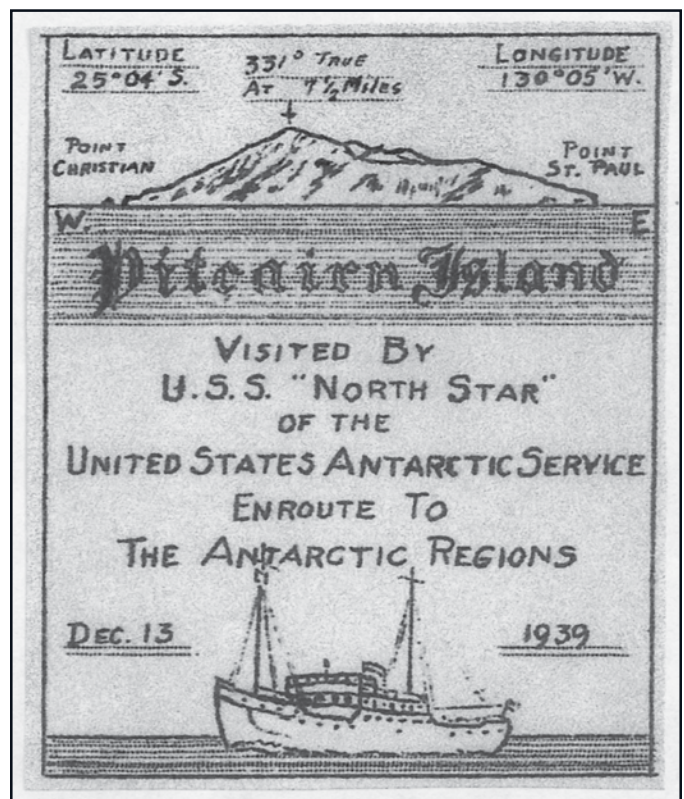
- Palmer Land

On the return voyage there were cancels for::

- Around Cape Horn
- Balboa
- Key West
- Philadelphia

Cancels in 1941 included, in order:

- Annapolis
- Balboa



Cachet design for the USS *North Star*'s visit to Pitcairn Island.

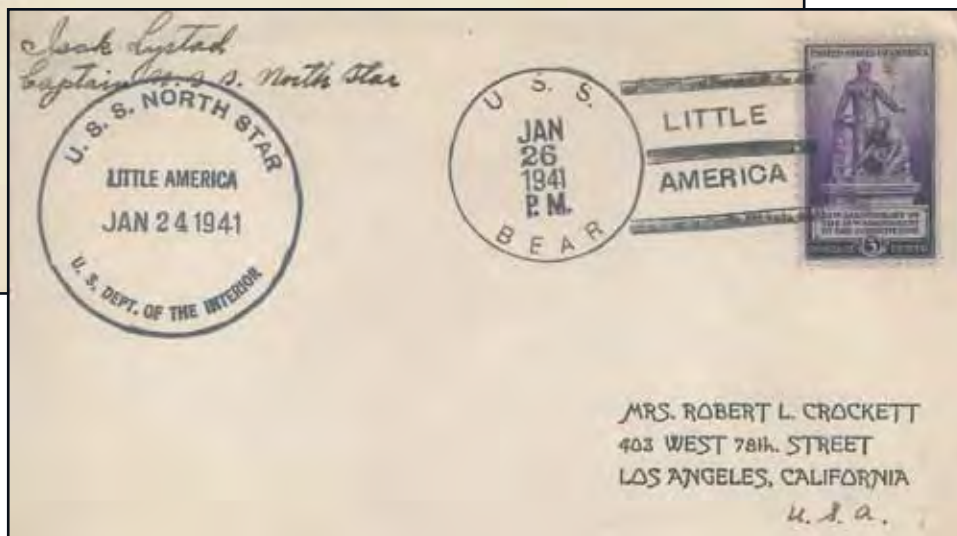


North Star covers with different cachets canceled at Little America: (top) 1940, (right) 1941.

- Galapagos
- Pago Pago
- Suva
- Dunedin
- Little America
- East Base
- Evacuation East Base
- Rounded Cape Horn
- Buenos Aires
- Boston

The last Antarctic cancel is the “Evacuation,” dated March 22, 1941. As some of these were applied to only a few covers, obtaining a complete collection would be quite a feat.

Much less common are double-ring ship cancels. There also are “parcel post” and “registered” markings known.



USS North Star

One of the first philatelic ventures aboard this ship created a classic cover not only for Antarctic collectors but for Pitcairn aficionados as well. While sailing southwest from the Canal Zone, it was decided to stop at Pitcairn to obtain provisions. On December 13 and 14 the *North Star* lay off the island. Richard Black designed a stencil that commemorated the visit.

The design showed an island profile at top and a depiction of the ship at the bottom. Covers were created and stamped with New Zealand stamps (Pitcairn having a New Zealand postal agency at the time) — at least until the stamps ran out. Island personalities such as Alta Christian and R.E. Christian signed them. A few made their way to the Antarctic, while many were eventually canceled in Auckland.

An additional stop was made at Rapa, one of the most isolated French Polynesian islands, on December 17, 1939. Expedition covers were canceled at the island’s main settlement and post office, Ahurei. Almost all of these were covers with a corner card of the Snow Cruiser/Armour Institute. There were a few covers canceled on both islands.

While the ship was in Antarctica, covers were cacheted with several types of

THE SNOW CRUISER
REACHES THE
SOUTH POLE



(In this space the time of arrival at the South Pole will be inserted in a Straight Line Marking.)

RESEARCH FOUNDATION OF THE ARMOUR INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

THE SNOW CRUISER
which is to transport the Byrd Expedition to the South Pole, leaves Boston on

Nov. 1st.

We doubt if we can maintain the 50c price on orders received after November 15th.

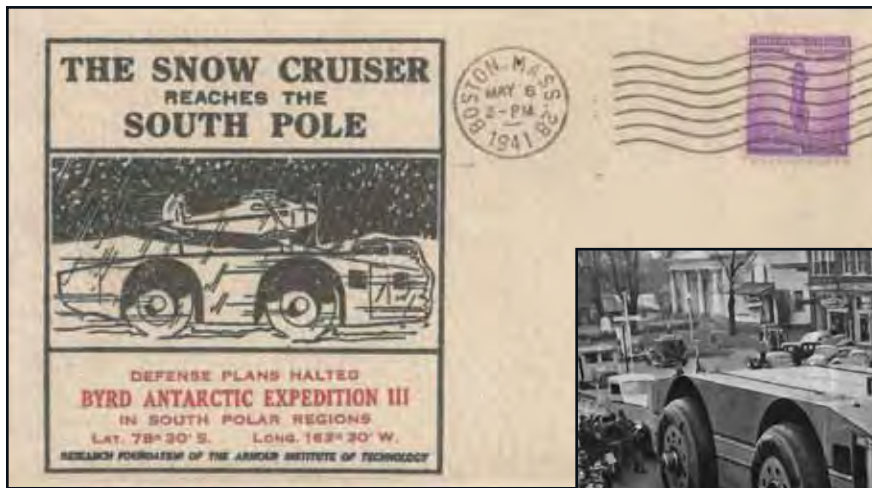
THIS IS A SAMPLE of the Cover, which will be mailed with a current U. S. Commemorative, either from a Postoffice in Antarctica or the first port of entry.

Price - 50c Each
12 for - \$5.00
(Special Discount to Dealers)

FIDELITY STAMP CO.
945 Pa. Ave. N.W. Washington, D.C.

U. S. A.
Commemorative Stamp Here

Advertising example of proposed Snow Cruiser cover, with optimistic message about its South Pole arrival.



In 1939, the Snow Cruiser's route to Antarctica went through Akron, Ohio, on its Goodyear tires.

Snow Cruiser cover with "Defense Plans Halted" added marking.

round markings. They read "U.S.S. NORTH STAR, ANTARCTICA/U.S. DEPARTMENT OF INTERIOR or LITTLE AMERICA or PALMER LAND." Some received the autograph of the ship's captain, Isak Lystad.

One of the more esoteric collecting areas of this expedition is the use of illustrated cachets. These designs were used on either ship — and sometimes on both. One of the better-known is the "standing bear." It has the wording "Antarctic continent" and shows a bear with both paws up. Another one, used at East Base, has a standing penguin on the left side. There is even one that combines a penguin, a husky, and a sailing ship.

If you look closely you might notice covers with cachets or cancels from both ships, but with varying dates — sometimes more than two months apart. The minor date differences on the 1941 cover with January 24 and 26 postmarks can be explained because covers were canceled on the *North Star* then sent over to the *Bear* while both were unloading supplies at Little America. Another example is dated January 17, 1940 aboard the *Bear* but March 20 on the *North Star*. The cover had been canceled at Little America but was held on *North Star* until both were involved in supporting the construction of East Base.

A few covers were flown. These originated primarily at East Base. One variety was flown on all the exploration surveys, as well as on the final crew evacuation.

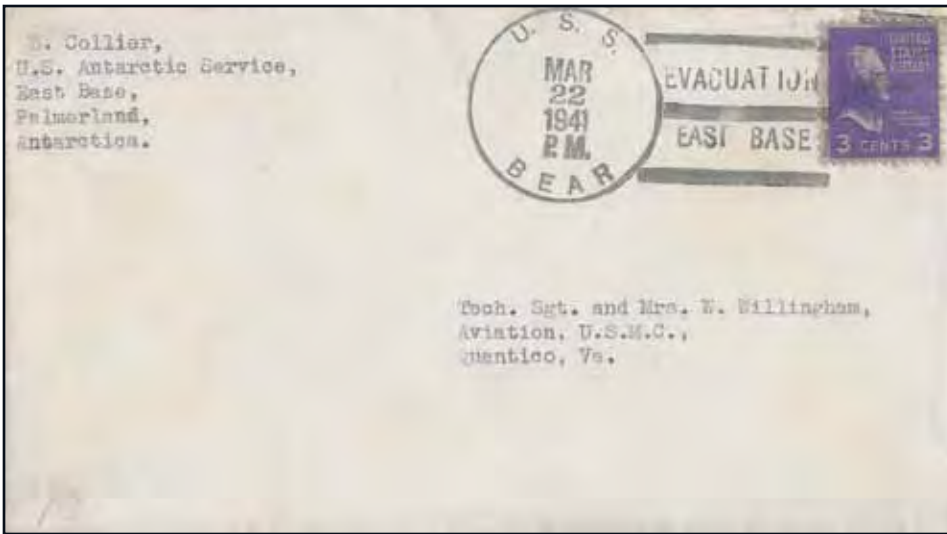


Snow Cruiser

Event organizers love a publicity item, and the Snow Cruiser was certainly that. It gained a lot of publicity during a pre-expedition tour of the United States, as well as having commemorative covers made up. The Fidelity Stamp Company of Boston printed several thousand pictorial covers, which were carried on the trip. They were certainly optimis-



"Evacuating East Base" postmark with cachet noting that the cover had been carried on "every exploration flight made from East Base including emergency evacuation flights made March 22, 1941." Signed by the pilot and crew.



Commercial cover from Zach Collier, "U.S. Antarctic Service, East Base, Palmerland, Antarctica," postmarked March 22, 1941.



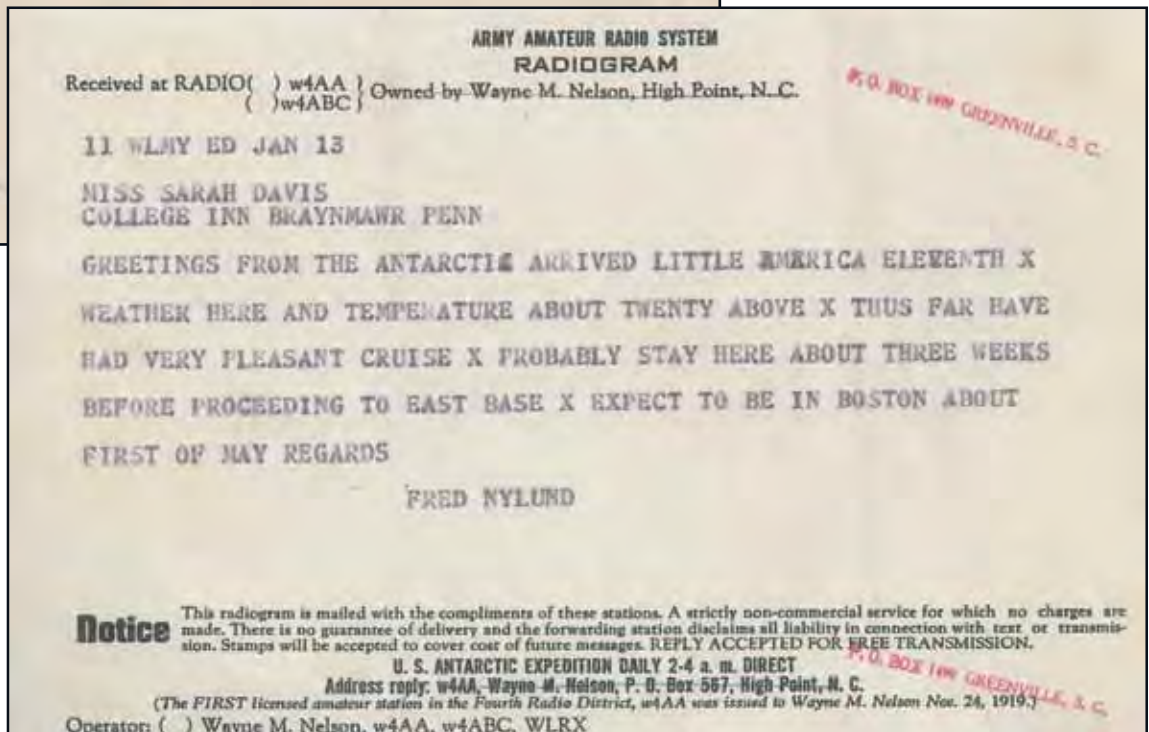
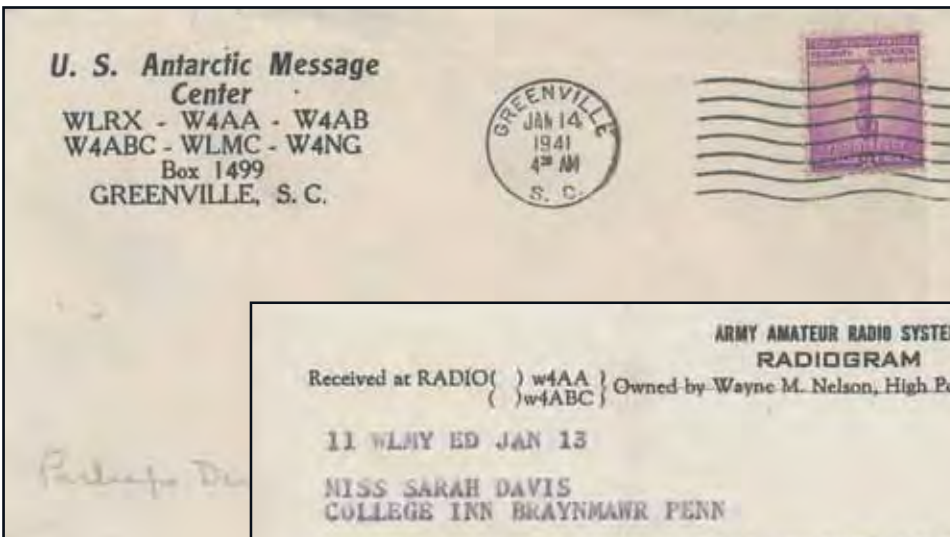
One of the biggest concerns of the older Antarctic expeditions was the isolation. In the Third Byrd, for example, it was ten months between mail deliveries for the men.

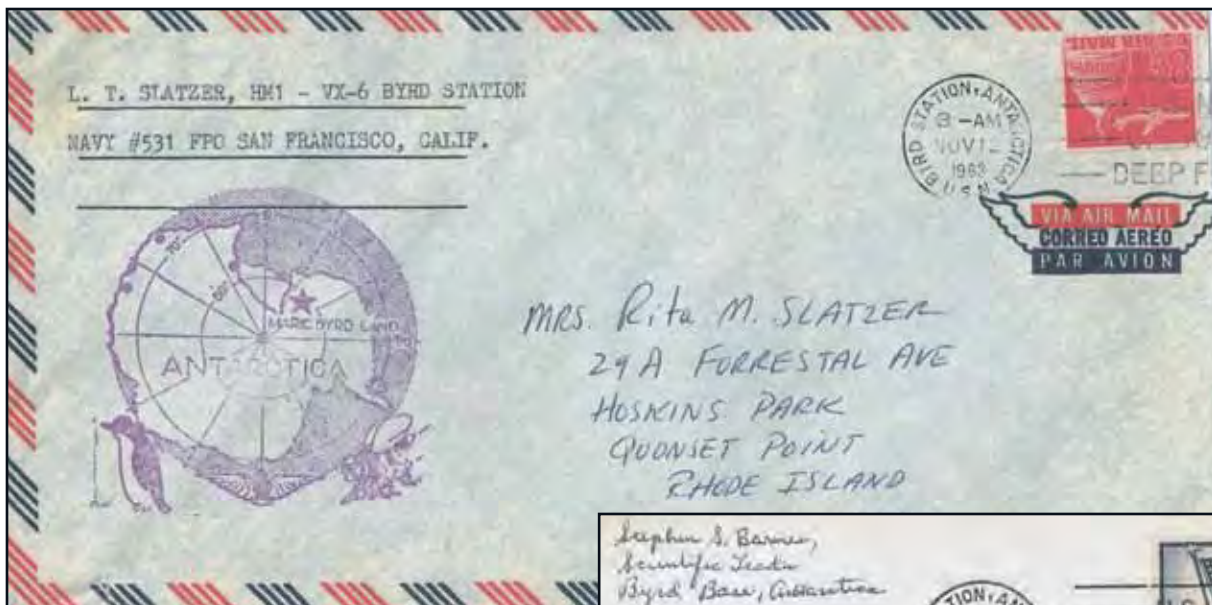
tic that the machine would arrive triumphantly at the South Pole. The advertising sample provided by the Fidelity to market the covers included a box in the cachet with the note: "In this space the time of arrival at the South Pole will be inserted in a Straight Line Marking"

Instead, the covers bore the final imprint: "Defense Plans Halted BYRD EXPEDITION III in South Polar Regions Lat. 78° 30' S. Long. 163° 30' W." While broadly true, as mentioned earlier that's not what actually stopped the snow cruiser on its journey to the Pole. As late as 1957, blank covers were being rescued from the abandoned vehicle (long buried in the snow at Little America) and appropriately marked.

Covers returned by the expedition also have a notation on the back that they were carried by the *North Star* and registered. While the first part is certainly true, there's no evidence of actual registration.

A new way to communicate? Radio message from expedition crew member to lady friend at Bryn Mawr College, sent via the U.S. Antarctic Message Center.





The United States establishes a base in No Man's Land: covers from Byrd Station.

The Army Amateur Radio System

One of the biggest concerns of the older Antarctic expeditions was the isolation. In the Third Byrd, for example, it was ten *months* between mail deliveries for the men.

One partial solution was devised by Wayne Nelson of High Point, North Carolina and later Greenville, South Carolina. A pioneering radio amateur (holding a license since 1919), he organized the Army Amateur Radio System, also known as the U.S. Antarctic Message Center. This group (he may have had as many as six helpers) voluntarily recorded messages from Byrd's expedition sent via radio, then forwarded them in the regular mail to their destinations. One surviving "radiogram" was from expedition member Fred Nylund to a lady friend, a student at Bryn Mawr College.

Postscript

Just as in the days of the Third Byrd, the unclaimed ice remains just that. However, in 1957 the United States established Byrd Station, well inland of the Bellingshausen Sea Coast. Several types of cancels and cachets are known from this base. Later, during the summers, the Byrd Surface Camp was utilized.

Although these bases are no longer in use, many smaller investigations under the patronage of the United States continue. Who knows — sometime in the future we may have a new colony in the far South.

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1QtGVVt1Kw>

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HK_De7vBBfI

The Author

Steve Pendleton, a retired teacher, has collected Antarctica and Pacific and ocean isles for more than thirty years. He has had more than 750 articles published in philatelic and regional magazines. He also has made two voyages to Easter and Pitcairn Islands.