

Chapter One

Glacier Sails South

“I relieve you, sir,” I said saluting Lt. Tom Dryden and taking the binoculars of command on the bridge of *USS Glacier* one early morning in 1963. With that salute I assumed responsibility for handling the “the free world’s most powerful icebreaker” as she sailed south toward Antarctica on this bleak February morning. Steaming through the “Roaring Forties” en route to McMurdo Sound, I was fulfilling a dream of exploring the same polar landscapes as leaders like Sir James Clark Ross, Sir Ernst Shackleton, Captain Robert Falcon Scott, Roald Amundsen and Admiral Richard E. Byrd.

Far more than following their journeys of discovery, I was earning citizenship in a community of adventurers typified by Byrd’s frontier town, Little America, built on the Ross Ice Shelf in 1928. What fascination there was in that outpost with its forty-two men, in their high-risk adventures and discoveries of mountain ranges and territories never seen by man. I never realized while navigating *Glacier* through uncharted waters that their experiences would become a guiding spirit, a metaphor, for my entire professional life as an educator.

Glacier was the largest ship in the US fleet designed to break through the thick ice surrounding and protecting the mysterious southern continent from too close observation. Antarctica’s massively thick white glaciers guarded the tectonic secrets of her origin just as the surrounding pack ice sheltered her coastal bays and inlets from human intrusion.

Glacier was a marvel of gray physical prowess in the ice. Whereas the men of the heroic age of Antarctic exploration had braved these waters in wooden sailing vessels named *Erebus*, *Fram*, *Terra Nova* and *City of New York*, my ship had a rakishly thick steel bow designed to ride up onto the ice, crush it and send cakes and flakes flying off to port and starboard. With no bilge keels she had a watermelon bottom designed to prance like a powerful stallion in fields of ice and to withstand the kinds of pressures that had strangled Shackleton’s *Endurance* many years before.

The US Navy built *Glacier* to penetrate the pack ice girdling and enlarging the continent in winter by one-third its area, and then to create channels for cargo vessels of lesser strength and durability to sail through and re-supply our various bases. It was the pack ice that had threatened to keep the men of sail from filling in the blank spaces of nineteenth century maps. *Glacier*’s mission on this voyage was to breach this icy lock-up and make way for modern day explorers.

It was 1963 and the US Navy was in the heat of the cold war.

As I stood on the centerline of this massive ice penetrator with her 21,000 horses of power driving through the dark seas, I realized that this morning’s watch would be different from any sea adventure I’d ever undertaken. The bridge was peopled with the normal complement of sailors acting as the nerve center of the ship, bosun mate, helmsman, talker to the engine room, messenger and, on

this special occasion, for me, Commander Edward Grant, Commanding Officer, sitting in his black leather chair on the starboard wing.

I saluted Commander Grant and said, “I have the conn, Captain.” “Very well,” he replied in every officer’s normal response to the presentation of information, vital or trivial.

This assumption of responsibility was a normal occurrence, but for me it was an experience of transcendent importance. For over a decade I had dreamt of conning a ship through the waters from New Zealand to the Ross Sea pack ice and thence down along the elusive often fog enshrouded coastlines of Antarctic. I was now just a quarter century beyond my birthing and looking out of the tall rectangular windows of the pilot house I saw the formidable adversary, waves tumultuous and towering right up to the level of the pilot house some fifty feet above our water line.

We were not sailing a straight and true course line south on the 185 East Meridian. No, we were wallowing in the troughs of these huge gray-black-green waves that sent our ship as powerful as she was rolling thirty degrees and more from port to starboard, back and forth relentlessly.

Before assuming the morning watch on this cloudy, dreary gray day, I had gone aft to the fantail to steady myself by standing on the ship’s centerline like a sumo wrestler—shifting my weight from one leg to the other to get the feel of the ship’s response to these gargantuan waves surrounding me. Back here I could feel through my boots the rumble of the ten Fairbanks-Morse diesel-electric engines driving the huge deck high Westinghouse electric motors that powered our twin propellers through the dark waters. The closer you were to the waterline the more stable you were and I felt terrific, proud of my presence on board and relishing every trough and wave crest we encountered. Now, I was sailing where Ross, Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton and Byrd had ventured before me.

Back here on the fantail early that first morning I loved the steep roll of the ship because it reminded me of Byrd’s voyages across these tumultuous seas in 1928 when he led his first expedition in a small three-masted sailing vessel, *The City of New York*. This much smaller ship had been my magic caravel escorting me lands away only a decade earlier and now I was rolling just as the sailors of that era had done only with much more power beneath my feet rumbling and churning ever southward.

I owned the seas, riding and rolling toward the pack ice with steep gray-black waves surging ever eastward. At last I was free of mindless school exercises where we had to memorize information and record it in a test booklet. This was life to be lived at its fullest, drunk to the lees and, like Tennyson’s Ulysses, I realized

*How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!*

I felt the power of these engines coursing through the soles of my boots and on up my legs to my gut where my recent breakfast was digesting itself. The engines’ rumbling made me feel more excited than even the sexual fantasies I’d

harbored as a seventh grader leering at women on the pages of *Esquire* magazine. On that day in February I stayed in the pilot house holding on to the railing affixed to the forward bulkhead near the Captain's Chair where Commander Grant sat watching the rolling dark waves and swaying with the ship at every trough. *Glacier* had a draft of 28 feet beneath the water line, more than some of today's ocean liners.

We were sailing through what explorers like Byrd had called "The Roaring Forties," where circumpolar currents rolled around the island continent of Antarctica unimpeded by any land formations. Over the course of millions of years, these currents had separated a once temperate continent from the landmasses comprising Gondwanaland, Australia, Africa and South America. Antarctica, now enshrouded in two-mile thick polar ice caps, had once been a warm weather landscape with strange and wondrous reptiles and dinosaurs fighting each other for survival. I wondered how this process worked, what could move a continent the size of Antarctica across the face of the planet?

"Now all hands remain clear of the weather decks," commanded the bosun mate over the ship's primary internal and external communications network, the 1MC. Bosun Peterson was a huge man, with forearms larger than my biceps, each with dark blue daggers and roses tattooed on them. Peterson was a gentle sailor whose bark if sufficiently aroused could send a lowly seaman apprentice cowering into a dark corner, but today, February 13th he was quietly assessing the status of bridge personnel under his control, the alertness of all telephone talkers, including the lookouts who were now stationed inside the pilot house because of the extreme weather we were encountering.

Glacier had been to Antarctica virtually every year since her commissioning in 1955. Among the geographical locations of historic importance that *Glacier* visited on this maiden voyage was the site of Admiral Richard E. Byrd's four bases called Little America, a frontier community I imagined living in with the intrepid explorers of his expeditions.

During that maiden voyage *Glacier* served as Admiral Byrd's flagship on what was to be his last expedition to Antarctica, the beginning of what we now called Operation Deep Freeze. Byrd had stood in this pilothouse where I now peered through the windows at Nature's fury dead ahead.

Byrd was the reason I had joined the Navy in Harvard's NROTC program back in 1956, just a year before his death. He more than any American had pioneered the exploration of this southern continent with the first Little America buried in the Ross Ice Shelf, a glacier the size of France stretching from the Ross Sea to the South Pole.

"What's our heading, Mr. Barell?" asked the Captain.

"184," I replied.

"Let's try to keep on track, please," he said quietly as he peered forward, always on watch, always on the lookout like every good captain.

"Yes, sir," I replied. Most captains will ask politely, often saying "please" as they give an order. Few will be the barking kind who rudely yell their orders at

you. Their “please” is as good as a “Do it now!”

Soon after assuming the watch on what our sailors called “The Mighty G,” I began to feel something strange down in my stomach, a familiar feeling I’d known as a kid.

As puffed up as I was with the setting where Byrd had stood offering suggestions about transiting the pack ice—something he’d accomplished more than any other polar explorer in history—I began to feel the engines of my innards rumble like those beneath our waterline.

Gone were the exultations of power and responsibility flowing through my body.

I had eaten a wholesome sailor’s sea breakfast thinking that because I’d been sailing for over three years, I’d be fine on the bridge. What I forgot was that I’d never encountered seas like these. The Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in their majesty had never been like the “Roaring Forties” in tumult and fury.

I was feeling the sickness of the sea, *le mal de mer!*

As part of the Harvard Naval Program, I had sailed on destroyers and heavy cruisers during summer exercises preparing for any naval engagement with Soviet vessels or submarines. Then as an officer in the fleet after graduation I had served on an ammunition ship carrying atomic weapons all over the Pacific and subsequently on an oiler just last year.

I knew the queasy feeling deep down in my gut caused by rolling, pitching and yawing vessels. It was always embarrassing to be standing in front of old salts with red hash marks for years of service sewn onto their blue sleeves—men who’d already sailed over more salt water than I’d see during my entire stint in the Navy—and feel sea sick, to feel as if you were going to throw up in their faces at any minute.

Not the smartest thing to eat such a huge breakfast! My mother used to say “John, your eyes are bigger than your stomach! Be careful!” But I didn’t always listen to her. In fact, at times I had little control over my impulses. “You surfeit yourself,” she said forcing me to consult a dictionary one more time.

No ship handled like *Glacier* and I was unprepared for walking up hill to get from one side of the bridge to another on the green linoleum tiles laid over the deck plates. I was unprepared to see waves that appeared to be higher than our tallest masts and got nervous.

“What if we capsized?” I thought. Godalmighty! This could be the end before the dream was fulfilled.

I remembered all those academic concepts I’d memorized in Marine Engineering three years back at Harvard: Center of buoyancy or was it the center of gravity? We’d defined the term and done some calculations to find that point on a ship, usually somewhere down by the engine room and learned later from our instructor whether we had mastered the concept on the hour exam. Now, when it

mattered a good deal more, I could hardly remember what I had almost mindlessly memorized.

I recalled with some sweat on my palms Admiral of the Third Fleet Bull Halsey's losing a ship (or two?) in a typhoon off Leyte Gulf in World War II. Somehow the ship got into the most dangerous quadrant, another concept we'd learned sitting at desks in school that was now very much on my mind. Which quadrant would suck you into the hurricane's vortex? Upper left, right?¹

Footnote 1. "In a nut-shell, the RIGHT SIDE of any tropical cyclone is referred to as the NON NAVIGABLE SEMI-CIRCLE (by shipping/marine interests) or the "DIRTY SIDE" of the storm. For example, if a storm is moving North at 20-MPH and has 100-MPH winds, the right side of that storm will have 120-MPH winds!" (<http://www.sky-chaser.com/schurr.htm>, accessed March, 2007)

My stomach was gurgling and destabilizing my systems no matter where the center of buoyancy might have been. I visualized it down below somewhere in the engine room spaces hovering over the huge diesel engines Lt. Tomcavage, our engineering officer, had shown me. The rotors of the electric motors were taller than I was and Norm opened a little gate and said, "Here, go inside and poke around." Amazing how electricity drove our huge propellers through these raging waters. Here was atomic power without uranium 235, power derived from electrons moving through a magnetic field.

I remembered the same feeling deep in my stomach while driving with my grandfather up the Merritt Parkway from Hartsdale to his home in Stamford, Connecticut. We'd have to stop and allow me to get out onto the grass to lose my last meal. And after seeing a double feature at the White Plains movie theater, I would get screeching headaches so severe that after eating dinner (a huge mistake!), I'd get sick in the bathroom at 2 AM with my mother sitting on the edge of the tub telling me to stick my finger way down my throat.

"It'll make you feel better if you throw up, John," she said.

I didn't believe her then, but struggled with those two fingers making myself gag and, eventually, throw up.

I usually awoke the next morning ready to go to school. You couldn't miss school. No one said as much, but it was an expectation from both my mother and father.

Now, looking at the inclinometer on the bridge move from its center position of even keel way over to the left as we rolled another thirty-five degrees, I longed for anything that would make me feel better—like being down below in my rack snuggled beneath a blanket and not in charge of all ship's systems as we rolled south.

I wanted to be anyplace but where I was, standing before God and the Captain with a stomach as riled up as the putrid green-gray oceans, feeling as if I were

naked in the cold.

“Maybe I should ask for a bunch of saltines?” No. For someone who idolized intrepid explorers most of whom survived being on the trail in flimsy orange or green tents at—50 degrees polar weather, my discomfort was absurd and ridiculous.

No, don’t ask for anything.

I yearned for the situation *Glacier* had encountered on that Bellinghausen voyage of discovery in 1960—getting stuck for four days in the ice with little hope of freedom. Even though we had huge ballast tanks that could rock and roll the ship, they were pitifully inadequate to free her from the vice-like grip of the crushing pack ice. *Glacier* experienced the same crunch Shackleton’s ship *Endurance* had suffered and sank from in November, 1915 in the Weddell Sea. I wanted that kind of frozen yet grisly stability just now, even though sailors onboard for that 1960 expedition became very angry about the possibility of “wintering over” for five months of darkness in the ice off some “god-forsaken coast line.”

Get us the hell outta here! they said to one another. *We’ll freeze our asses off.*

I continued to stare out the window and wished I had the freedom of the lone brown albatross winging its way effortlessly over the white crests of these towering spume spraying waves. No one would be out on deck this morning aiming to shoot this polar messenger out of the murky skies as Coleridge’s crew once did during the voyage of the Ancient Mariner in these same waters.

My uncle, Ken Cooper, had served during World War II on an LCI, Landing Craft Infantry, as a gunner’s mate third class. During the battle of Pelilu in October, 1944, General MacArthur’s stepping stone to his invasion of the Philippines, Ken’s ship carried men and materiel up onto the beach fending off Japanese shore gunners as they landed.

Years after his service while he was building up his business as the owner of radio stations in Bridgeport, CT (WICC), he counseled me on survival skills at sea.

“What you want to do, John,” he said leaning toward me and looking me in the eye, “is to keep your eyes on the horizon. That will help you keep your balance.” His ship had been 158 feet in length, flat bottomed, and probably bounced around far more than *Glacier* was doing now. I imagine some old salt had told a very young Ken Cooper this while he was manning his .20 or .40 millimeter canon sometime during the horrific invasion in September, 1944 that lasted two months with thousands of casualties.

I’d followed his advice all during midshipman and fleet cruises to WestPac.

“Keep your eye on the horizon.” He never spoke to me of his wartime experiences, as most veterans of that conflict do not. But he gave me life saving advice. Here in the “Roaring Forties,” however, I couldn’t see the horizon obstructed as it was by gargantuan gray-black waves mounting up nearly as high as the ship’s

bridge and cresting in sea spume flung so ferociously at us.

There was, however, a slight feeling of reassurance in the way we responded to the waves. The weight and depth of our machinery below the waterline gave the ship a ponderous wallowing roll deep in the troughs of the sky obliterating walls of water.

Eventually, with the men on the bridge watching me—the helmsman, the engine order telegraph operator, the telephone talker, the junior officer of the deck, the bosun mate—and the Captain sitting right there in his leather chair—I had to walk over to a sea green shit can lashed to the bulkhead and puke up the remains of breakfast, and then walk at a 30 degree angle back to my position on the starboard side to regain control of the ship.

No one snickered, but I was deeply chagrined at my condition.

I may have laughed self-consciously about it slightly when leaving the shit can strategically placed directly beneath the ship's 1MC communications system. Here's where the bosun made announcements throughout the ship:

“Now, all hands remain clear of the weather decks ... Now, all hands lash and stow gear ... Now all hands turn to. Commence ship's work.”

It was 0800 and I wondered what kind of work could anybody do this morning besides hold on? The sailors on the mess decks had to work to prevent hundreds of white ceramic coffee mugs from becoming low level, but lethal missiles flying through their air spaces. The wardroom table had its green felt cover replaced with a plywood fiddle board with cut outs for our dining plates.

“Don't worry, Mr. Barell,” said Captain Grant as he leaned forward to look for traces of ice this far north, “We're fine.” He re-assured me that sea sickness happens to all of us and that the ship was in good hands even if mine were glued to the railing, my knuckles were white and my ankles were getting as sore as when I was learning to ice skate years ago.

“Tell me how you came to be on board *Glacier*,” he said in his soft yet firm commanding voice. A former pugilist in college and patrol officer along the US Mexican border, Captain Grant had “that lean, mean fighting machine” kind of body that the officers admired—slim, trim, flat stomach and strong arm muscles. His face was etched deeply with lines from years at sea and his sandy, diminishing hair bespoke of a youthful elegance and handsome demeanor Hollywood would have found most appealing.

While holding onto the bridge railing right in front of the window looking out onto *Glacier's* bow plunging into the huge seas sending rockets of gray-green water almost as high as the pilot house, I told Grant how this adventure of mine had begun.

“My grandmother suggested I read a book by Byrd called *Little America* and that was the beginning,” I said. Florence Wright Ferguson had heard Byrd speak on Mary Margaret McBride's radio show one day in 1951. McBride was one of

America's first radio talk show hosts, bringing in guests like Byrd, generals of the Army, US Senators, authors and other newsmakers, both men and women. During the radio show, probably 30 minutes long, Byrd described his expeditions to her radio audience many of whom, like my grandmother probably remember his first broadcasts from Antarctica back in 1928. And knowing that I had to do what all seventh graders do, present a book report that usually concluded with these words: "I liked this book and recommend it to all my friends" my grandmother suggested I read a story of true adventure and daring.

"I became fascinated with the lives of forty-two men living in that frontier community, setting themselves off to the polar mountains and preparing to fly over the South Pole itself."

I told Grant about Byrd's flight in 1929 in the tri-motor aircraft *Floyd Bennett* and his major discoveries of Marie Byrd Land to the east.

As I struggled to maintain my balance and remove my hands from the security railing as if to appear more in control of my body on this wildly tilting platform beneath me, I told him about wanting to be so cold on a New England winter afternoon that I'd get frostbitten in furious snowball fights with my friends. I wanted sub-freezing temperatures and biting winds whipping through our suburban neighborhood to raise tiny white spots on my red cheeks that could deaden patches of skin and leave me with small blemishes of honor. Not pimples—frostbite.

I hoped the air would be so frigid while trudging through two feet of newly fallen snow at home in Needham, MA that shouts of joy at slamming someone with a snowball would freeze in front of my chapped lips and fall into the snow flakes as visible words.

If I made the mistake of touching any exposed metal on our 12 cylinder Lincoln Zephyr with my bare fingers, the flesh would stick and I'd be in agony pulling them away. But I was often tempted to try it just for the polar sensation of tearing my fingerprints right off.

In the dead of winter with the sun setting at 5 pm, I would tunnel into steep blue-gray snow banks to create little hideaways where I could escape family and friends and just be alone with my books, candles and a thermometer.

These polar explorers became my heroes, men who would offer up their warm bodies to unfreeze flesh or pull you out of freezing waters of the Bay of Whales should you fall overboard during unloading operations. In my imagination on endless flights of fantasy, I followed them from Little America to the South Pole and off to Marie Byrd Land.

I emulated their routines—up early in the morning, take a weather observation using the cloud identifications my grandfather, Llewellyn Ray Ferguson, had taught me. Like Bud Haines of Byrd's First Expedition I kept records of cloud cover and rainfall.

I also became a photographer like McKinley, snapping pictures not of vast unknown mountain ranges but of our house and my new very little sister, Robin,

as she learned to walk and talk.

Since many polar explorers seemed to keep very extensive journals, I started writing about my own little journeys into the snow. In one of my earliest journals I wrote that “I hope to go to Antarctica by the time I am fifty.”

Yes, I wanted to see the Great Ross Ice Barrier, as Byrd called it, and the Royal Society Mountains across from Scott’s last hut on Cape Evans in McMurdo Sound and what I thought was the only active volcano in Antarctica, Mt. Erebus. And I wanted to experience and survive the cold. But more than scenery what I wanted was the sense of camaraderie that comes with being on an important mission of exploration and discovery, working on a team of dog sled drivers moving supplies south to the Queen Maud Mountains, wondering what we would find of geological importance in these guardians of the South Pole.

Little America was my vision for all America, a community of daring, curious and self-sacrificing citizens working toward a common goal. While in junior high school I focused my turbulent emotions during these years at the center of the magic triangle created by three seventy-foot radio towers beaming signals of scientific exploits around the world. I lived at 23 Webster Park In Needham, but Little America had become my refuge from the boredom of school and the bedlam of my house.

As the seaman telephone talker repeated messages of “No contacts” from the radar room—meaning we had no icebergs on the scope, only static from the waves—I told Captain Grant about writing to many of the explorers and to Byrd himself.

“Yeah?” said Grant leaning forward to see the high white plumes of sea spray rocketing through our hawseholes forward. He relished this kind of seamanship just like my father loved being bounced around in a DC 3 over the Rockies.

“Yes, sir, and he responded to every one of the questions I asked him.”

One day, after weeks and weeks of waiting for what I feared would never come, and my mother saying “Well, he’s probably very busy, you know,” there it was, a letter from “Byrd Polar Expeditions” to “Master John F. Barell.” I read it with excitement, nervousness and deep appreciation for Byrd’s responding point-by-point to each of my questions about his discoveries and about the possibility of discovering oil beneath the ice. “You are entirely right,” he had said about such a possibility. “We found enough coal in the mountains near the South Pole to supply this nation for a long time. I am almost sure there is also oil at the bottom of the world.”

Byrd told me why Antarctica was important:

As you know, the world is in effect shrinking with an ever increasing acceleration. This is because of the ever better transportation and communication. Thus, areas once useless become useful. Therefore, Antarctica is getting closer and closer to us. And besides, it is an untouched reservoir of natural resources, which this country will need more and more as time goes on.

He wrote that there was an area as “big as the United States which has never been seen by man.”

That thrilled me, this huge, white empty space on the charts that maybe I could help explore. This letter, typed on heavy white bond paper in deep blue ink instantly became a treasure for a young explorer. I knew immediately that I would keep this for the rest of my life. It is only after years of being an educator that I realize how significant it was to receive a response from a world-famous explorer to your own questions. Here was a man who by 1935 had received no fewer than four ticker tape parades up Broadway for his accomplishments at the North and South Poles and he’d sat down and written to “Master John F. Barell.” I was thrilled, amazed and almost shocked that he had written what my mother most recently called “this very personal letter.”

Byrd even gave me his telephone number, CA 7-4334 and suggested I call him to borrow any *National Geographic* magazines I might be interested in. I already had a few of my own with stories from his early expeditions (1928-30 and 1933-35).

I couldn’t wrench up the courage to do that, even though while sitting in Algebra I would rehearse a hundred phone calls to Byrd. What would I say? What could I ask him over the telephone? I was confused, yet eager to press on, to delve more deeply into his own adventures.

Then one day Rear Admiral of the United States Navy, veteran of four of his own polar expeditions, Richard E. Byrd called from Boston to invite me and my family to view a film of his Operation High Jump, the Navy’s massive “assault” on the continent in 1946, using planes, aircraft carriers, cargo vessels, tractors and even a USN submarine, USS *Sennet*.

“You met Byrd?” Captain Grant asked looking over at me momentarily as he grabbed hold of the oak railing right in front of his Captain’s chair.

“Yes sir,” I said still holding on to my railing and trying to swallow often enough, and burp sufficiently to calm my angry stomach as we continued to roll so severely that a faded and chipped, white Navy-issue coffee mug somehow tore loose from its moorings, flew across the deck of the pilot house, slammed into the engine order telegraph and fell in one rugged, Navy-issue piece to the deck.

“He was most gracious with me, my mother and two little sisters,” I said burping again. “He commented on the flights over the continent where they quite unexpectedly found ice free lakes in the middle of the continent.”

“Imagine that, John!” Byrd had said to me as if I were a member of the expedition.

He mentioned revisiting the site of his Little America home bases during the 1928 and 1934 expeditions and there establishing Little America V for the International Geophysical Year in 1955. I didn’t mention that my little sister Robin, then fifteen months old crawled around during the film pulling on the electrical cord and untying the Admiral’s shoe laces. Nor did I mention that when my

mother took our picture, Admiral Byrd had said, “You have the smile of a Hollywood actor.”

Grant was fascinated with the history of Byrd’s expeditions and his chatter kept my mind working so it wouldn’t overly focus upon the subterranean eruptions brewing down below in my stomach.

“He was on here, you know.”

“Yes sir,” I said. “I remember—just before I started Harvard—reading about his last sailing on board this ship. It was her maiden voyage I believe.” Then in the spring of my freshman year, 1957, he died having only recently received another special commendation for his years of service from the Secretary of the Navy. At that moment I did not know of the horrible conditions Byrd encountered while sailing on *Glacier*.

After visiting the little green shit can once again, I told Captain Grant about volunteering for duty on *Glacier*. During the previous year, 1962, with President Kennedy enlarging our naval fleet to prepare for a possible nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union over intercontinental ballistic missiles in Cuba, my shipmates and I converted an old cargo ship into an oiler to service the Pacific fleet. When we were still in the Mobile shipyard, the President and Secretary of Defense ordered all US forces to stand ready for imminent attack, DEFCON ONE. We were on highest alert throughout the fleet because of the Soviet missiles pointed directly at Miami, Washington and New York City.

When my captain said he could help me serve on an icebreaker, I accepted his offer because I was still deeply intrigued by the south polar regions.

“That’s the story,” I said to Captain Grant who was getting ready to leave the bridge for his cabin just one deck below.

“Well, I think you’ll find working on *Glacier* a bit different from those sailing ships of Byrd’s.”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

It turned out to be very different in so many ways I couldn’t imagine then. I had told Grant most of the story, but there were parts that didn’t seem relevant at the time of our being tossed around by Nature’s high seas like a leaf in a turbulent wind.

I didn’t tell him about my father’s role in this whole saga, primarily because I hadn’t had a lifetime to figure it all out.

Ralph James Barell was a hotel man, an accountant, who claimed that he was responsible for creating the first corporate computerized reservation system while I was in high school in 1954. This was a major feat, since they—the engineers—kept telling him “Ralph, this can’t be done. You can’t make the machine do that!” The “machine” was one of the first computers to be used in the world of business.

My father insisted that you could do anything you wanted to. “There’s no such word as CAN’T!” he ranted. “God, How I hate that word! It ought to be banned from the English language. There’s always a way,” he would lecture me.

“Never, ever give up!”

He was so proud of his leadership, his spirit of innovation and creativity with this system he called RESERVATRON. Sending a room reservation from New York City to Dallas in under 2 seconds was an amazing, practical and efficient goal for him. Using the telephone always seemed fast enough for me.

My father represented the quintessential American Can-Do spirit. He was born and raised in Hibbing, MN, later Bob Dylan’s hometown, where they dug for iron ore in the Mesabi Range Mountains and fished for pike on nearby lakes. Ralph Barell deeply believed there’s nothing we can’t accomplish if we put our minds to it. He often quoted Thomas Edison saying that genius was “99 percent perspiration and 1 percent inspiration.” Make your plan and work your plan, he’d say, and you’ll achieve your goals. He believed his most important mission in life was “to produce...produce” for his company, for his industry. That word has lingered about in my mind as a command whenever I loaf or get lazy. The force of its message to get to work and leave something tangible for the day has been overwhelming.

His messages had become the sedimentary bedrock of my life.

Ralph J. Barell succeeded in pushing his engineers to the limits of their imagination and technical skills by creating this reservation system for Sheraton Hotels. I assumed it was the first in the land, something to be copied by all other hotel chains in the country. Maybe it served as a model for communications among corporations around the world.

What I might have told the Captain was that one of my prized garments of what the Navy called “foul weather gear” was a black and green sweater my father had given me back in seventh grade.

“Here, try this on,” he said one Saturday. “I’ve been saving it for you. I used to wear it out on the lake while ice fishing.” I wore it through many New England winters feeling the warmth of the thick wool with a little hole down by the belt line. My father must have been even slimmer than I was at thirteen. I wished I had had that sweater with me on *Glacier*. Even now more than fifty years after the event, I wish I knew where it was. It was a testament of my father’s commitment to my adventure, one I hardly recognized at the time.

The furious winds whipped our standing antennas back and forth and snuck through tiny cracks in our bulkhead doors on the bridge creating high pitched screeches like those of steel mill whistles. Every half hour the bosun repeated over the 1 MC a message that pierced the furiosity of the winds: “Now all hands stay clear of the weather decks. All hands remain below.”

“Mark your head,” I said to the helmsman as I rounded out my description of the past ten years for the Captain.

“Course, 185 degrees True, sir.”

“Very well,” I responded uttering the words one Captain had told me you always used to give you a few seconds to think about any potentially dangerous situation.

“Wait ’til we get into the pack,” said Captain Grant. “It’ll be easier then.”

“Yes sir,” I said picturing Byrd’s ships silently sailing through open leads in the encircling pack ice.

“I’m going below for a spell,” the Captain as he slid off his leather chair on the starboard wing of the bridge.

“And I hope we all live up to your expectations.”

“Thank you sir,” I said saluting him as he departed. You always rendered your respects to the Captain whenever he arrived and departed from the bridge.

“The Captain’s left the bridge,” Peterson reported for all to hear.

And we resumed our steaming south at the best speed we could make in these wallowing seas, about twelve knots or so.

My ankles ached, my stomach regurgitated itself every hour on the hour, but I was still in charge until noon, the longest watch of the day.

I wondered how long it would take to get out of the “Roaring Forties” and into “Furious Fifties.” Just then I saw two bright white Antarctic terns flying in tandem over the crest of the nearest wave. They zoomed up like fighter pilots in military formation and then started their dive down into the next gray, spray-strewn trough where they wove intricate flight patterns in and around each other. In their tandem formation these terns reminded me of my mother and father and their very different roles in nurturing this adventure that began when I was just thirteen.

“I hope we live up to your expectations,” the Captain had said. My expectations at the time were to explore the encampments of Scott and Shackleton, to stand at the South Pole where Amundsen had beaten out Scott over fifty years ago, and to live like the men on Byrd’s first Antarctic Expedition, working in teams to sledge across the ice into virgin territories and to help each other prevent frostbite.

But I had no idea that these journeys to the south polar continent would transform my entire life. Far more than the fulfillment of boyhood dreams to follow in Admiral Byrd’s footsteps, these days aboard *Glacier* guided my challenging young people to seek their own south poles.

In reflecting on these polar and subsequent journeys I have learned that a life of probing, searching for answers can begin with investigating a mysterious, fascinating

continent, one where snows, fog, blizzards, ice shelves, and pack ice hide its elusive coastlines and two mile thick polar plateaus have for eons obscured its submerged landscapes.

There are Antarticas in every domain we study, in every walk of life, in every wonder of nature, in all aspects of human relationships, their mysteries beckoning, calling forth our curiosities.

In recalling the seasickness and the flights into the unknown, I have learned more about my parents and how they made this journey of exploration, learning and experimenting possible. I've learned more than I wanted to know about Byrd, the man with weaknesses, than I wanted to know.

More important than all these discoveries about heroes who pioneered the exploration of the white continent enshrouded in frozen mysteries, I now realize that the real heroes in our lives may dwell in the spaces of our lives where quiet sacrifice, suffering and deepest love prevail.

And beyond heroes I have come to understand the transcendent importance of Little America. Admiral Byrd's frontier outpost became for me a mythic community of rugged, curious men seeking high adventure within supportive structures designed to avoid the ever-present dangers lurking below the surface of seeming civility—a model of democracy.

Little America was my Athens, my Philadelphia.

Finally, at 1145 that dreary morning, with the lining of my stomach aching from trips to the shit can, my relief, Lt. Dick Rice, blissfully said, "I relieve you, sir." No words had ever sounded so welcome. I handed over the binoculars of command and lay below to a dark stateroom, a bunk with an aluminum guardrail to prevent my flopping on the rolling deck. With a warm navy blanket pulled up tightly under my chin, I wondered about the kind of pack ice pilot I would become and about those two Antarctic terns swooping above the waves circling each other furiously and elegantly.