

Photo of the Month

Jack Keck



Jack Keck of Rogers, Arkansas
United States Navy, mid 1940s
Courtesy Martha Bintliff

Adventure can be found in one's own back yard or at the ends of the earth. Jack Keck is pictured at right and is a local individual who found adventure in one of the world's most inhospitable places. He grew up in Rogers and was the captain of the high school football and basketball teams before graduating in 1934. By the late 1930s, Jack was serving in the United States Navy. In 1939 he was ready to leave the service but his selection to join an Antarctic expedition led by Rear Admiral Richard Byrd changed his mind – he was one of 160 servicemen and civilians selected for the mission. Every man on the expedition came largely from the regular Navy and Coast Guard or scientific community, each had to be a “jack-of-all-trades” and a specialist in at least one, and all had to be able to endure trying conditions.

Exploration of the arctic poles was one of the most exciting missions of the U.S. Navy during the 20th century. In a letter to home dated January 16, 1940, Jack described his impression of Antarctica: "Well, Red I am just about as far away from home as a fellow of my age could get, almost at the jumping off place. Not so bad down here, of course it is summer here now, it is only 20 degrees above zero, but it doesn't seem that cold, there is ice and snow everywhere, we even got the ship tied to the ice. Wish I could describe this country to you, but I don't know how to start, except as far as you can see is just hills of ice with 8 or 10 foot of snow, it snowed the first day we was here, but the rest of the time has been nice."

Their ship was called the U.S.S. Bear and had an equally fascinating service life. She was built in 1874 in Scotland as a sealing vessel and purchased by the Navy in 1884. Rigged for sails, the ship also had a diesel engine. The Bear was deployed in several arctic missions before being reassigned to the Coast Guard. Interestingly, the Coast Guard sold the ship to the City of Oakland, California in 1929 for use as a museum, but she was later transferred to Admiral Byrd's 1933-35 Antarctic expedition. In 1939 the Navy eventually repurchased the vessel for further exploration use.

His journal of the adventure described the ship, crew, and work in Antarctica between November 22, 1939 and April 20, 1940. During this time, the personnel supported the weather and geology studies conducted by the scientists, helped put up buildings, and tested cold weather clothing. Many of the entries described the cold weather, rough seas, ice, and driving snow. They also discussed life at the bottom of the world. "One cannot stand straight up in the wind," Jack recorded. "It will blow him backwards, he must bend forward to walk. We are now going through water where no ship has ever gone through before. Temperature today 21 degrees. We have not seen the sun for several days. We have plenty of books and magazines to read. Also, Admiral Byrd gave us a Gramophone and several records, so when we can't get music over the radio, we play it."

The February 26, 1940 journal entry reflected the sense of adventure and danger associated with the mission: "Was cloudy early part of the morning, but was clear by noon, so plane took another flight with Lt. Dufek, Snow and Perch. Admiral Byrd did not go. He has been feeling pretty bum the past few days. They went much farther this flight. Saw more mountain ranges. Their radio went out just after they left the ship and was out the rest of the flight. They were gone over three hours that we did not hear from them. Everyone was getting worried about them. They could hear us but we could not hear them. Visibility had decreased a lot and was getting cloudy. After we picked up the airplane we headed east working our way through the ice pack. Temperature today 16 degrees, sea calm, but great fields of ice all around us. Saw vast numbers of whale. They came within 20 or 30 feet of the ship." Jack further commented that the information from the flights would be used to make a map of previously unknown land, coast, and ocean features.

Jack stayed in the Navy and retired in 1957. He and his wife, Lenora, returned to life in Northwest Arkansas with memories that many people can only dream of. He was avidly interested in nature and worked for the Rogers Street Department. Mr. Keck died on June 3, 1983.