

The Day I Met Norman Vaughan

by

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Norman Vaughan is one of those living legends one would like to meet, but never really expects to do so. I first heard of him a year or two ago. He was in Antarctica, attempting to climb the mountain named after him by the Father of Antarctic aviation, Admiral Richard Byrd. Colonel Vaughan drove dog sleds for Admiral Byrd's famous 1928 - 1930 expedition of conquering the South Pole by being the first to fly over it.

On December 13, 1994, fulfilling a sixty-year old dream, Col. Vaughan smiled at the world from the peak of Mt. Vaughan, three days before his 89th birthday. Photographers from National Geographic captured this event; a few months later, I saw the National Geographic special on TV.

In August, 1995, I quit my job with Lockheed as a test engineer on the space shuttle Ku-Band communications system. The call of Wintering-over in McMurdo, Antarctica to track satellites at a new NASA tracking station was greater than common sense telling me to stay home. In September, 1995, my new employer, AlliedSignal, sent me to Fairbanks, Alaska for training on similar satellite tracking systems at the University of Alaska and at Poker Flat.

On the day after arriving in Fairbanks, I bought Col. Vaughan's book, "With Byrd At The Bottom Of The World". Col. Vaughan wrote about reading the Boston Transcript, "In large, bold letters I read five magic words that would change the direction of my life: BYRD TO THE SOUTH POLE". He knew then, somehow, he was going to go on Admiral Byrd's expedition. In the Prologue, he described how he made an attempt to see Admiral Byrd, only to be turned away by a woman on Admiral Byrd's staff. "I was trying to think what else I might do with my life when suddenly an idea burst into my consciousness. The maid had slammed the door in my face; instead of figuring how to get past her, I would enter a different door. And this time, my plan would work."

Reading those words, I instantly made a decision, and knew, that I was going to meet Norman Vaughan. For years, I have often said, "God doesn't close one door without opening

another". I had no idea where to find him, all I knew is that he lived in Trapper Creek, Alaska. A few weeks later, I drove through Trapper Creek, on my way back to Fairbanks from Anchorage. On the off chance I would meet him, I had his book, and my photo album of Antarctica with me.

At a little cafe in Trapper Creek, I inquired and was given his phone number. From the outside phone booth, I called a couple of times. Both times, he answered, "Norman Vaughan speaking". Neither time could he hear me. I called him the third time from inside the cafe. I said, "This is Matthew Nelson. I have been to the South Pole six times, and am going to Winter-over in McMurdo." Somewhat reluctantly, he invited me to his cabin, and gave me directions. He and others were building a wooden shed. He would talk to me, but I know (and apologize) that I intruded.

He told me that at the entrance to his land was a "Beware of Dogs" sign. I was told to wait there, and he would come to the top of the hill. As I stepped out of my vehicle, a black dog silently came up to me. While I have had dogs all of my life, I am somewhat intimidated by large unknown dogs, since one bit me a few years ago. I honked, and nobody came. Three young kids riding bicycles stopped and said hello. The oldest, a girl about 15, had a pistol strapped to her waist. She was as comfortable wearing that pistol out in the Alaskan woods as city girls are with their purses over their shoulders as they go "Malling".

The kids left, the dog just sat down and looked at me. Never did he wag his tail. Finally, I built up my courage that the dog would let me pass. He looked at me like, "It's about time".

There he was, pouring fuel into his pickup out of a five-gallon can. White beard, red flannel shirt. He could have been Santa in the off-season. He asked me what I had with me. Besides looking like a gawking tourist with my camera, I had his book, my photo album, and my favorite South Pole T-shirt. I gave him the T-shirt. I had worn it the day before, to show my friend Dave Bieganski, who lived in Anchorage. Dave had Wintered-over at the South Pole in 1988. I hadn't thought about giving my shirt to Col. Vaughan until I saw it when I took the photo album out of my suitcase. Then I thought of how he described in his book the unusual methods of changing into clean underwear he used in Antarctica. I figured the shirt could be washed. He tossed it into the pickup, and now may be using it for an oil rag. But that's OK, too. I had the pleasure of giving him the shirt that had been on my back the day before.

He wanted to check how the construction of his new building was progressing. Using a single ski pole, he limped a little while walking to the area. Along the way, he told me that he had an artificial hip joint and knee. It was quite an accomplishment for him to climb a 10,000-foot mountain in Antarctica with artificial joints. I'm not sure I could do it with all my natural hip and knee pieces intact. Some other people were working on the shed, and his wife Caroline made mention that they had more help. Shortly afterwards, we went to the cabin and talked. When I left the cabin, he walked with me to where I had parked, and I never did help work on the shed. I feel guilty about that.

His A-frame log cabin is picturesque, but functional and well built. We took off our boots before entering. Using wooden matches, he lit the burners under the coffee pot. On the back wall was a stained-glass image of a deer. It reminded me of the stained-glass elk that my wife Karoline made for me. Now, my Antarctic photo album has a photo of Norman Vaughan with his stained-glass deer behind him.

While waiting for the coffee to heat, he looked at my photo album. Upon seeing Admiral Byrd's statue he silently paused. The New Zealand Scott Base still had dogs when I first came to Antarctica in 1986. He commented that it's a shame to have removed them. Upon looking at the interior photos of Scott's Hut located here in McMurdo, he asked if I saw the white line. I didn't remember seeing any, and didn't know what he was talking about. He said that the enlisted men were not allowed to cross over the line, which separated them from the officers who lived on the warm side of the hut. He said, "What a tragedy", or words to that

affect. I knew then that Colonel Norman Vaughan must have been a fair officer to his men, and one whom I would have been proud to have served under his command.

One of the photographs showed the New York Air National Guard playing football with the South Pole scientists and staff. His eyesight had not diminished too much; he was able to pick out the guys kicking the football. I have never been much of a skier, but one year I checked out some skis and skied around the world at the South Pole marker. It was one of those things I did just to say I had done it. When we came to the photograph of me skiing, I joked and said that I had skied around the world. He asked me how far I skied, and I had to sheepishly admit "About ten feet". He didn't reply, but must have thought, "What a wimp!"

Later, in our conversation, he said that he would be going back to the South Pole in November, landing in a twin-otter three miles from the Pole, and skiing the rest of the distance. Initially, I wasn't scheduled to come to the Ice until January, but then circumstances changed, and I was here on November 30th. In December, I was asked to go back to the Pole to check out some NASA satellite equipment I had previously maintained. I would have liked to have greeted him there, but he was there eight days prior to my arrival. I missed the three-hour talk he gave to the people there.

One of the rooms at the Amundsen Scott South Pole Station has photographs and letters of some of the early explorers. Roald Amundsen and Robert Scott photos dominate the room, since they led the first parties to reach the Pole. Colonel Vaughan had seen Roald Amundsen as a boy. A sweater worn by Admiral Byrd the day he flew over the Pole, on November 29, 1929 is in a glass case hanging on the wall. In 1979, a group of people went to the South Pole to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Admiral Byrd's flight there. Colonel Vaughan was with the group, and signed his name on the section of the commemorative map depicting the route. His name is also mentioned in a letter from the White House congratulating this team.

Dr. Charles Swithinbank is a member of the British Antarctic Survey. I first met him at the South Pole in 1988. He is known as an expert on glaciers, and has had some named after him. His photograph is in my album. When Norman Vaughan saw it, he told me that he had just seen Dr. Swithinbank in London one week earlier. I feel honored to have met two of the few great Antarctic explorers.

Among other names that Colonel Vaughan dedicated "With Byrd at the Bottom of the World" is "to the one man we all loved, Dr. Laurence McKinley Gould, second in command of the Byrd Antarctic Expedition 1928-1930, who is affectionately known as Mr. Antarctica". Dr. Gould wrote a book called, "Cold". I hope to read it here in McMurdo this Winter. Col. Vaughan told me that Dr. Gould had passed away four months earlier. Just by the sadness in his eyes as he told me this, I knew Col. Vaughan had had a powerful friendship with Dr. Gould, one that had lasted well over sixty years.

Colonel Vaughan has written a new book, "My Life of Adventure". I didn't have the cash money with me then to buy the book, but sent him a check a few weeks later. With it, I included some stories I had written, and about a dozen photographs from my album. I told him I would wait until I started Wintering-over before I read this book. A lie is intentional deceit. I did not tell him a lie. But I didn't make a true statement, either. At first, I looked at the photographs in his book, and then read the Preface, and four hours later hoped he wouldn't hold it against me for not waiting. I have both of his books with me on the Ice, waiting to reread them. Later, I received a second copy of "My Life of Adventure" in the mail. Now I have two copies that I can pass on to my two daughters. In the second copy, he wrote that I was an explorer. Coming from him, I took that as a compliment.

He signed the inside of "With Byrd at the Bottom of the World" with the following words: "To Matt - Thanks for coming all the way to Trapper Creek for a short visit. From one Antarctic to another - Greetings. Dream Big and Dare to Fail. 'The only death you die is the death you die everyday by not living.' Live Adventurously. Norman D. Vaughan"

I feel good to be called an Antarctic by Norman Vaughan. During our talk, I said that I hadn't really done much. All I do is fly in an LC-130 aircraft over the same route from New Zealand that has been flown for forty years. At this point, he opened the Adventure book, and showed me a quotation at the front: "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the gray twilight that knows not victory nor defeat." Theodore Roosevelt, 1899.

Just before we sat down to talk, Colonel Vaughan gave me two "Musher" cards, which are like baseball cards, only made for the Iditarod dog team drivers. On the face of his card, the words "Oldest and Slowest" are written boldly under his grinning face. I have one on my wall here in McMurdo. He has run the Iditarod thirteen times, all after the age of 70. Officially, that's 1049 miles between Anchorage and Nome. He wants to run the race on its 25th anniversary, which is in 1999, I think. I told him of my dream to travel in space before I die. I have one hundred per cent faith in God that this is going to happen. When I go, I will be carrying with me in my personal kit one of these "Musher" cards.

The area around his cabin is used to train dogs for the Iditarod. He told me of having just gone through a lawsuit, because somebody thought that he was using the land for profit by training the dogs. Fortunately, the plaintiff lost. At the time he was telling me this, in a remote log cabin, an Eskimo woman was talking about computer software with his wife. The Eskimo woman also raises dogs, and was also a defendant in the lawsuit.

We talked about him going back to Antarctica to climb Mt. Vaughan. When I told him that the day he reached the peak must have been one of the proudest moments of his life, his blue eyes just sparkled. What a fantastic accomplishment!

Colonel Norman Vaughan was gracious enough to invite me to his log cabin, a place where he trains the sled dogs that are part of his life's achievements. He was one of the few people who didn't ask me why I was going to Winter-over in Antarctica. He didn't have to. He knew. Had I been born forty years earlier, I may have been a radio operator for Admiral Byrd.

The technology has changed from the days he was here. The beauty of the place has not. In my life here, I use the strength and love of Jesus to help me make it through the isolation. While most of the time I don't do a very good job, I try to follow Jesus' example of living and treating others. When the cold wind is blowing, which is most of the time, I often think of Norman Vaughan. I think of him when I see penguins, the glaciers, the mountains, the ice, and the incredible colors of the place. The examples set by Norman Vaughan, Charles Switchenbank, Admiral Byrd, Dr. Gould, Robert Scott, Ernest Shackleton, Roald Amundsen, and others, give me courage. Thank you, Colonel Norman Vaughan, for inviting me to your place and taking time to have coffee with me, and talking about Antarctica.