



Certificate of Authenticity

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Antarctic Mayday by Stan Stokes

(Only 225 Prints in This Edition are Remarque'd by the Artist and Co-Signed by Jimmy Ball, Bill Kearns, and Jim Robbins.)

In 1946 Admiral Richard Byrd lead a 4,000-man mission to Antarctica to map the continent. This was the fourth of Byrd's polar explorations, and his most ambitious. The expedition was named, "Operation High Jump." One of the ships involved was the USS *Pine Island*, a PBM seaplane tender under the command of H.H. Caldwell. The three PBMs of the *Pine Island* were given the task of photo mapping the eastern side of the Antarctic continent, and the ship had moved as far south as possible to establish a base of operations. The ship anchored on the leeward side of a huge iceberg to provide a suitable area for the launch and recovery of the PBMs. The first flight was made by *George-1* on December 10, 1946 without incident. The second flight of this aircraft with a different crew would prove to be a life and death struggle. Under the command of Ralph "Frenchy" LeBlanc, co-piloted by Bill Kearns, and with Captain Caldwell aboard as an observer, the second flight of *George-1* began under hazardous sea conditions and at times near zero visibility conditions due to snowstorms. The aircraft was approximately 200 miles from the coast. Because of the bad visibility Kearns was preparing to execute a 180 degree turn and return to the *Pine Island*, when *George-1* crashed into a giant snowdrift. The aircraft was ripped apart by the crash, and a fire began almost immediately. Three of the nine on board perished in the crash. LeBlanc was pulled from the burning cockpit by Jim Robbins and some of the other survivors, none of which were without some injury. The six survivors of *George-1* now faced an indeterminate amount of time before any rescue might be possible. Fortunately, the six survivors showed solid American ingenuity, and went about the business of surviving and caring for the injured in the best way possible. With no working radio, the group had no way of knowing if help would ever reach them. It would be 13-days before the survivors would be spotted by the pilot of *George-2* Jimmy Ball. Ball's crew spotted a signal fire which the survivors had ignited when the second Mariner passed within several miles of the crash site. *George-2* dropped supplies for the survivors and a message that a pick-up might be possible if the group could move about six miles to the coast. The trek was not easy, but the survivors finally made it and were picked up by *George-3*. This limited edition by Stan Stokes is dedicated to the memory of the three men who did not survive the crash; Max Lopez, W.K. Henderson, and F.W. Williams, and to the commander of *George-1*, the late Frenchy LeBlanc. Frenchy lost both his legs as a result of the tragedy, but maintained a determination and a sense of humor which has both inspired and motivated the survivors of this Antarctic Mayday for the fifty years which have passed since that fateful day in 1946.

Capt. James L. Ball - USN

James L. "Jimmy" Ball joined the Navy in 1939. He completed his recruit training in Norfolk, Virginia, and was assigned to the *USS Reina Mercedes* at Annapolis, Maryland. Jimmy applied for flight training and in August of 1942 he graduated from Flight Training School at Pensacola. In August of 1943 he was commissioned an Ensign. From late 1942 through November of 1946 Jimmy served in Patrol Squadron 74 which was engaged in anti-submarine operations in the North and South Atlantic. During the War his squadron was credited with destroying a total of seven German submarines for which it earned a Navy Unit Commendation. In November of 1946 Jimmy volunteered to participate in Admiral Byrd's Operation High Jump. He was assigned to the *USS Pine Island* as a pilot of a PBM Mariner. As commander of the PBM *George 2*, Captain Ball was awarded the Air Medal for locating and assisting in the rescue of the survivors of *George 1* which had crashed on the Antarctic Icecap. The survivors had been stranded for fourteen days. Following the expedition Jimmy served in various aircraft squadrons, and also attended the University of Mississippi. Upon completion of his studies he was assigned to Staff COMFAIRWING-14, and completed General Line School in 1953. He served as an instructor in the All-Weather Flight School based at Corpus Christi, Texas. While stationed at Norfolk with Air Transport Squadron 22 Jimmy was involved in flying experimental routes over the North Pole from Alaska to Norway. In 1958 he served as Executive Officer of FASRON-104 in Kenitra, Morocco supporting the Sixth Fleet in its Lebanon Campaign. Captain Ball then returned to Naval Air Station Anacostia, Washington where he served as the pilot for the Chief of Naval Operations. From mid-1963 until mid-1964, Captain Ball commanded a P3A squadron which won several awards for anti-submarine warfare excellence. During this time he surpassed the 10,000 hour mark as a pilot with no accidents. In July of 1964 Jimmy reported to Staff COMFAIRWING as Operations Officer, and in August of 1965 he was promoted to Captain. From 1966 until 1968 Captain Ball was stationed in Iceland where he served as Chief of Staff and Aide to COMAIRKEFLAVIK. He was awarded the Navy Commendation Medal and was authorized to wear the Bronze Star in lieu of a second Navy Unit Commendation. He graduated from the Industrial College of the Armed Forces and George Washington University in 1969. Captain Ball's final assignment was as Commander of Fleet Air Wing Ten during the Vietnam War. He is married to the former Audrey Kolbe of Annapolis. The Balls have two daughters, a son, and three grandchildren.

Lt. William Kearns - USN

Bill Kearns was born in Lexington, Massachusetts in 1924. At the outbreak of WW II Bill was living in Panama where his father was Chief Engineer for the 15th Navy District. Bill decided to join the Navy as an Aviation Cadet. Within a year he had earned his wings and was commissioned at Corpus Christi, Texas. He was assigned to the Pacific where he served as a replacement pilot for F6F carrier-based squadrons. After the War Bill served as a flight instructor at Corpus Christi. Applying for a commission in the regular Navy, Bill was transferred to Florida for training in twin-engine seaplanes. Following his training he was assigned to Fleet Airwing Five based in Norfolk, as a co-pilot of a PBM-5 Mariner. Kearns volunteered for Operation Nanook, a six month assignment to the Arctic, where he flew numerous exploration missions. Upon his return, Bill was made aware of Admiral Byrd's large expedition to the Antarctic, Operation High Jump. Volunteering for the expedition, which was the largest exploration expedition ever mounted, Bill was assigned to the *USS Pine Island* as a PBM co-pilot. Bill was onboard *George-1* when it crashed in terrible weather. Flying in white out conditions, and with the aircraft heavily burdened with ice, the PBM gradually lost both speed and altitude. Bouncing off a mountain pass, some of the PBM's fuel tanks were ruptured. This resulted in an explosion with Kearns literally being blown out of the burning aircraft. Despite being seriously injured in the crash, Kearns braved the fire in the wreckage of his PBM to rescue his pilot, Frenchy LeBlanc. Although three died in the crash, the six survivors managed to survive horrific conditions for fourteen days until they were spotted by another Mariner piloted by Lt. Jimmy Ball. Following his rescue Kearns spent several months in the US Navy Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. He attended Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service after leaving the Navy. He became a Washington correspondent for several magazines including *Time*. Later he served in a number of overseas assignments, retiring from the company as head of its Latin American Division. Kearns retired to Florida with his wife S'Ann. The Kearns have six children, and fifteen grandchildren. One of Bill's sons carried on in aviation, retiring from the Air Force as a Colonel, having served as a pilot of Air Force One.

Aviation Technician Chief - James H. "Robbie" Robbins - USN

James H. Robbins, known as Robbie to his friends, was born in San Diego, California on April 28, 1926. He enlisted in the Navy on his seventeenth birthday. After completing all training necessary to become a TBF Combat Air Crewman, he was transferred to ASW Tailhook Sqdn. (VC-36) based at NAS Pungo Field, Virginia. Robbie was deployed on the *USS Mission Bay* where his squadron flew convoy escort and anti-sub missions. Robbie participated in the sinking of a German refueling submarine, and his squadron participated in missions to provide air cover for the task force which took President Franklin D. Roosevelt to the Malta Summit. VC-36 was decommissioned in July 1945 after VE Day. Robbie was then assigned to a PBM Mariner Air Crew Training unit at Bannana River, Florida. Following his training he reported to VP-19 based at NAS Norfolk, Virginia. Robbie volunteered for Operation Nanook in the summer of 1946, and he flew numerous Arctic exploratory missions while assigned to the *USS Norton Sound* anchored in Thule Harbor, Greenland. Later in 1946 Robbie was headed to the opposite pole, this time as part of Admiral Byrd's Operation High Jump. The purpose of this large scale operation was to map the Antarctic continent for the first time. Robbie's first and only flight during Operation High Jump ended in tragedy as his PBM crashed on the tip of the Thurston Peninsula. Three of the nine on board died in the crash and explosion which followed. The six individuals which survived owed a great deal to Robbie, who being one of the least injured, played a major role in the survival and eventual rescue of the survivors after thirteen days on the ice. Robbie's account of the flight, ordeal, and rescue is entitled *Antarctic Mayday* and is available from the Mariner/Marlin Association. He received the Navy Marine Corps Medal for heroism displayed during this mission. Robbie continued flying PBMs for several more years logging more than 5000 hours. His love of the PBM, and the close knit pilot/crew relationships which developed, remain foremost in his memories. Robbie was medically grounded in 1952, but remained in the Navy, serving at NAS Point Mugu, NATTC Memphis, Midway Island, NAS Miramar, and NAS North Island, until his retirement in 1965. Following his retirement from the Navy as Aviation Chief Technician, Robbie had a second career working for the Naval Electronics Systems Engineering Center in San Diego as a civilian employee for twenty-three years. Robbie is now happily retired and lives with Dale, his bride of more than forty-nine years, in Palm Desert, California. Robbie has a son Jim, and two grandchildren.