

PROFILE OF COURAGE



Australian polar explorer Sir Hubert Wilkins made historic first flights over both the Arctic and the Antarctic in 1928. (Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images)

Sir Hubert Wilkins

BY SUE DE PASQUALE

When Sir Hubert Wilkins gazed out the window of his roaring Lockheed Vega on a cold December day in 1928, he was captivated by the natural beauty spread before him. He paused for a moment from the map he was sketching to revel in the vastness of the Antarctic peninsula below. “For the first time in history,” he would later pen in his diary, “new land was being discovered from the air.”

The Australian-born Wilkins was no stranger to “firsts.” Just eight months before, with close friend and aviator Ben Eielson, he had earned a spot in aviation history by being the first to fly across the Arctic. The pair took off from Point Barrow, Alaska, on the morning of April 22, and 20 hours and 20 minutes later landed their tiny Lockheed Vega in Spitsbergen, Norway. The 2,500-mile flight, mostly across uncharted territory, made headlines and earned Wilkins knighthood from Britain’s King George V.

The historic flights confirmed what Wilkins had long been advocating: that the airplane would herald a new era of exploration. In a 20-minute period during his flight over the Antarctic, Wilkins sketched a map covering 40 miles — a feat that would have taken three months to accomplish by land party. “I felt liberated,” he would later say. “I had a tremendous sensation of power and freedom.”

By all accounts, Wilkins was a man of remarkably wide-ranging talents, whose expertise took him on adventures all over the world and often put him directly in harm’s way. A photographer and cinematographer, he shot footage and took photographs of the Balkan War in 1912, work that reportedly landed him at one point in front of a firing squad. A self-taught pilot, he served in the Australian Flying Corps during World War I. An able balloon-

ist, he rode helium balloons behind enemy lines in France, photographing nearly every major battle fought by the Australians and earning a Military Cross, as well as suffering exposure to mustard gas. An expert on botany, he served as chief of the scientific staff for the Sir Ernest Shackleton Quest Antarctic Expedition (1921-22) and lived among the aborigines of Australia as commander of a British Museum-sponsored expedition (1923-25).

In addition to these adventures, Wilkins traveled to Russia on a secret fact-finding mission for the U.S. government, flew aboard the Graf Zeppelin II during its trip around the world, was a passenger on the Hindenburg's maiden voyage to the United States, and even found time to get married—to Australian actress Suzanne Bennett.

Pretty heady stuff for a boy who started life in 1888 in remote southern Australia, the 13th child of a sheep-

farming family. Young Hubert was a voracious reader, often seen with a book when he was behind the plow. Thirsty for excitement, he stowed away on a ship bound for London at age 20 but was forced off in Algiers — only to be captured by a mob of gun runners, according to some accounts. He would eventually make it to England and embark upon the odyssey of adventures that would take him from the top of the world to the bottom, all within weeks of turning 40.

After his historic polar flights, Wilkins set his sights on achieving another dream: to be the first to reach the North Pole beneath the ice. He purchased a surplus World War I submarine from the U.S. Navy for \$1, refurbished it, and christened it the *Nautilus*. Uncharacteristically, Wilkins failed in his attempt, when the old vessel broke down. The necessary submarine technology—in the form of power, underwater

range and a navigational system—simply didn't exist at that time to make such a journey possible.

Wilkins would go on to write several books about his adventures and to lecture widely across the United States and the world. After serving on several fact-finding missions for the U.S. government during World War II, he continued as a government adviser until his death on November 30, 1958, at the age of 70. Just the year before Wilkins died, the American nuclear-powered submarine *Nautilus II* achieved his long-held dream when it submerged in the Chukchi Sea on August 1, 1957, and resurfaced in the Greenland Sea three days later.

On March 17, 1959, after a brief (and cold) memorial ceremony, Sir Hubert Wilkins received a fitting farewell when the submarine captain of the *USS Skate* scattered the great explorer's ashes across the North Pole.

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