



Sir George Hubert Wilkins. MC and bar

An unsung hero of of Antarctic Exploration.

Hubert Wilkins was born at Mount Bryant East, South Australia on October 31st, 1888, the 13th child born of a South Australian sheep farming family. While he first studied engineering part time at the School of Mining in Adelaide, his passion was photography and cinematography. Nevertheless an official biography would list his career as war correspondent, polar explorer, naturalist, geographer, climatologist, aviator, author, ballonist, war hero, reporter, secret agent, submariner and naviagator. A truly exceptional man.

Wilkins was the third photographer appointed as an official Australian war photographer during the First World War. Another was Frank Hurly. Before Wilkins' appointment in August 1917, he had spent three years photographing the final Arctic expedition of Canadian explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson, having earlier covered the First Balkan War for Britain's *Daily Chronicle* newspaper, where he became the first person to take film footage of combat, and to make use of the aeroplane as a means of gathering photographic intelligence.

In May 1917, he enlisted with the Australian Flying Corps (AFC) in Melbourne, intending to become



a pilot. But in late July, two weeks after he arrived in London, a medical inspection showed him to be colour-blind and thus unfit for active aerial service. Instead he was transferred to the Australian War Records Section and sailed with Frank Hurley to France. Wilkins became famous for his bravery and recklessness on the battlefield, where he went to great lengths to secure records of the service of Australian soldiers.

The life of a wartime correspondent and photographer was deadly dangerous. As Ian Affleck (curator, National War Museum, Canberra) pointed out during an ABC television broadcast on Anzac Day 2006 "You do need to remember that action photographs on the Western Front are not all that possible and you'd only stand up out of the front line once and take a photograph once because the

second time you'd do it, you'd be dead." The Australian war artist Will Dyson, who was himself known to be fearless, is reported to have observed Wilkins at work and asked "Is Wilkins trying to get himself killed?" Wilkins was awarded two Military Crosses for his service, and produced some of the most important images of the Western Front, where he spent over two years. In 1919, he travelled to Gallipoli with *Charles Bean to photograph the battlegrounds over which Australians had fought during 1915.



[C.E.W. Bean (pictured)] was an Australian journalist, war correspondent and historian who is renowned as the editor of the 12-volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*. Bean wrote Volumes I to VI himself, dealing with the Australian Imperial Force at Gallipoli, France and Belgium. Bean was instrumental in the establishment of the Australian War Memorial, and in the creation and popularisation of the ANZAC legend. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.]

Why is it, then, that Frank Hurley has become a national icon, while the photographer who stood beside him is, in essence, virtually unknown in his own country? Were *all* those famous photographs taken by Hurley? Some light has recently been thrown on the issue. While researching his book on Wilkins (*The Last Explorer* – published 2005) Simon Nasdht discovered the existence of 135 photographs printed by Wilkins himself and now held in the Bird Polar Archive in Ohio, USA. There are also a number of Wilkins' personal papers. This also obviously raises the question, what was Wilkins, an Australian, doing in America? The answer is simple. In the USA Wilkins is honoured as one of the truly great men of the 20th century and with good reason.

After witnessing the carnage of the First World War, Wilkins set out to explore the globe., particularly the ice-caps. First, he did it by plane, flying across the Arctic Sea from America to Europe. Following the flight Wilkins, at least briefly, became world famous and was awarded a knighthood. At this time he was also introduced to a man who was to play a significant role in future ventures. Carl Ben Eielson, 26 year-old former pilot for the U.S. Army, (known to the Eskimos as

“Brother to the Eagle”) was now an Alaskan bush pilot who flew through treacherous weather and topography on just about a daily basis.

Engaging in further polar exploration, in 1920-21 Wilkins made his first visit to the Antarctic, accompanying J. L. Cope on his unsuccessful voyage to Graham Land. Wilkins next took part in Sir Ernest Shackleton's *Quest* expedition of 1921-22 on which he made ornithological observations.



Wilkins in outback Australia..

In fact Wilkins had earned a reputation as a talented naturalist and ornithologist. In 1923-24 the British Museum sent him to North Australia to collect rare native fauna and report on Aboriginal tribal life.

However, this activity was not to hold his interest for long. The time spent with Hurley had intensified his

interest in an expedition to the Antarctic where he felt a combination of the aeroplane with aerial photography could lead to extensive exploration and discovery.

In 1925, Wilkins proposed that the Australasian Polar Pacific Expedition fly from the Ross Sea across King Edward VII Land to Graham Land. The South Australian branch of the Royal Geographic Society attempted to raise funds for the expedition but the money was not forthcoming. In order to gain financial support for his Antarctic adventure, Wilkins turned to the Arctic where, together with his friend Ben Eielson, Arctic sojourns between 1925 and 1928 earned both of them a place in the aviator's Hall of Fame. Their Arctic adventures culminated in a great journey in April and May of 1928 when their tiny Lockheed Vega monoplane flew from Point Barrow, Alaska to the Norwegian island of Spitzbergen, a flying time of 20 hours and 20 minutes across a distance of 2,500 miles, most of it above uncharted territory. Thus, they became aerial pioneers as the first to fly from the New to the Old World.

Wilkins was now ready to turn his attention seriously to the Antarctic. He longed to finally fulfill his original dream of being the first to fly an aeroplane across the Antarctic continent. Wilkins approached fellow Australian Major R.G. Casey, an official at the High Commission office in London, for financial backing from the government. Wilkins pointed out that his expedition could

assist in establishing an early foothold on the Antarctic rim where meteorological reporting stations could subsequently be set up.. However, despite Casey's strong support, the application was rejected.

Fortunately for Wilkins., the United States *was* interested. Endorsements came from the American Geographical Society and the Detroit Aviation Society. Millionaire publisher William Randolph Hearst pledged \$25,000 for the exclusive press and radio rights

The *Wilkins-Hearst expedition* sailed from New York on September 22, 1928 with two aircraft, *The Los Angeles* and *The San Francisco*, aboard the whaling vessel *Hektor* which would serve the men with living quarters for the next five months. Wilkins' ultimate dream was to fly across the continent to the Ross Sea and the vicinity of *Framheim*, Amundsen's camp on his 1911 South Pole Expedition. This plan would require two planes, with one used to refuel the other for the final push.



Hauling the *Los Angeles* back to land

On November 4 *Hektor* tied up at the whaling station at Deception Island. The party immediately set to work to open the dormant Norwegian (Amundsen's) buildings while Wilkins, Eielson and the others began to ready the aircraft for the forthcoming flights. However on November 16th

there was a set-back. Eildon had taken *Los Angeles* on a short flight. As he came in to land the plane slid dangerously towards the edge where the ice was thin and brittle. The aircraft went nose over, splashed into the icy water and sank up to its wings. It took eighteen hours to haul it safely back to land.

After this, it was decided not to risk longer journeys in *Los Angeles* so, at 8:20 a.m. on December 20, 1928, Wilkins and Eielson took to the air in *San Francisco*, signalling the start of a new chapter in the exploration of the last unknown continent from the air.

The plan was to fly east across the Bransfield Strait and then head down the Antarctic Peninsula. In a 20-minute period Wilkins sketched a map covering 40 miles, knowing it would have taken three

months to do the same had they been sledging. "I felt liberated," he said. "I had a tremendous sensation of power and freedom". A magnificent scene of pure natural beauty unfolded before them, prompting Wilkins to enter a note in his diary:

"For the first time in history, new land was being discovered from the air".

Beyond the Antarctic Circle they dropped closer to the surface and discovered a group of small, thin channels twisting their way deep between the mountains. Wilkins named one of the channels Casey Channel, after his friend R.G. Casey at the Australian High Commission in London. Fighting gale-force winds, Wilkins opened the hatch and dropped the territorial proclamation on behalf of the British government. Mountains and plateau continued to loom southward, but with their fuel gauge close to the half-full (more significantly half-empty) mark, Wilkins reluctantly ordered Eielson to turn the plane around. They headed north across the Larsen Ice Shelf, filled with the satisfaction of having explored 1000 miles of previously unexplored Antarctic territory. Storm clouds hovered above and around the vicinity of Deception Island upon their return. With fuel running short in the plane's tanks, the clouds suddenly parted to give them a glimpse of the airstrip below. Eielson quickly put the *San Francisco* into a steep descent to get through the low ceiling before the clouds once again closed in. In short order, *San Francisco* was safely landed.

The account of Antarctica's first exploratory flight is best summed up in Wilkins' final entry in his diary following the historical event: "We had left at 8:30 in the morning, had covered 1300 miles -- nearly a thousand of it over unknown territory - and had returned in time to cover the plane with a storm hood, go to the *Hektoria*, bathe and dress and sit down at eight o'clock to dinner as usual in the comfort of the ship's wardroom".



The Nautilus, 1931

The second *Wilkins- Hurst Expedition* returned to Deception Island aboard the factory ship *Melville* in late November 1929. No new discoveries were made but Wilkins was to lose his companion on so many adventures. Eielson took off on a mercy mission to locate

a stranded fur-trading vessel and, on attempting to land in heavy fog, crashed into a hillside and was killed. Wilkins said he felt the loss of a brother -- a "Brother to the Eagle".

On returning once more to the northern hemisphere in 1928-30, Wilkins purchased a surplus World War I submarine for one dollar, re-named it *Nautilus* and attempted to cruise beneath the ice to the North Pole. The old ship broke down and the expedition failed. Modern submariners point out that he was, in fact, 23 years ahead of his time. For the 1931 submarine adventurer this was his last individual and private expedition.

From this point he accepted a post as manager to his friend and supporter, American millionaire Lincoln Ellsworth, in an Antarctic association which lasted until 1938. Lincoln Ellsworth went on to become the first to successfully fly across the Antarctic continent. In each of the three attempts, between 1933 until success on November 22, 1935, Hubert Wilkins was a participant.

Wilkins' last trip to Antarctica came in 1957 as a guest of *Operation Deepfreeze*, the first of a series of United States missions to Antarctica with the goal of advancing world knowledge of Antarctic hydrography and weather systems, glacial movements and marine life. He carried with him a miniature of the Australian flag, just as he had on all his previous flights. While he settled in the United States and worked in World War II for the American government, he never surrendered his Australian citizenship of which he was intensely proud.

A fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Meteorological Society (1923), Wilkins could be dismissive of conventional scientific method. He was primarily a field explorer and pioneer who worked to a clear, long-range plan, based on his conviction of the necessity for a world-wide meteorological organization. Yet, his curiosity drew him irresistibly to new ideas and projects. In 1955 he was granted an honorary D.Sc. by the University of Alaska. Despite his solitary nature, he was a good mixer and companion. Tall and athletic, he had physical drive and courage to match his mental endurance, and he held deep religious convictions.

Wilkins lived to learn in August 1958 of the under-ice transits of the Arctic Sea by the submarines U.S.S. *Skate* and U.S.S. *Nautilus*. He died suddenly at Framingham, Massachusetts, on 30 November 1958 and was cremated. Four months later his ashes were scattered from the *Skate* at the North Pole.

A portrait of *Sir George Hubert Wilkins MC and bar* hangs at the entrance to the Wilkins arctic test-chamber in the Army Quartermaster Research and Engineering Center, Natick, Massachusetts.

Key achievements

1913: Canadian Arctic expedition

1917: Enlisted in Australian Imperial Force as official photographer

1918: Awarded Military Cross

1919: Bar added to Military Cross

1920: British Imperial Antarctic Expedition

1923: Became fellow of the Royal Geographical Society and the Royal Meteorological Society

April 1928: Completed the successful flight across the Arctic

June 1928: Received a knighthood

16 November 1928: Completed first flight ever made in the Antarctic

1928: Awarded the Patron's medal of the Royal Geographical Society of London

1928: Presented with Samuel Finley Breese Morse medal of the American Geographical Society

1955: Awarded honorary Doctorate of Science from the University of Alaska



Sir Hubert, Lady Wilkins and Jean Jules Verne (grandson of Jules Verne, author of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*) at the christening of the *Nautilus*, March 24, 1931

To learn more about the *Nautilus* visit <http://library.osu.edu/sites/exhibits/nautilus/submarine.html>

References.

www.adb.online.anu.edu.au

www.awm.gov.au/people.asp

www.awm.gov.au/fiftyaustralians/50

www.south-pole.com/homepage.html

Antarctic Region



