

PIONEER ARCTIC FLYING: MORE THAN A RACE TO THE POLE

By GORDON T. MORRIS

Normally, one name is associated with early polar air exploration: Richard E. Byrd. Yet despite the fact that he was the first to fly over the North Pole and environs, Byrd's success is overshadowed by the accomplishments of an also-ran: Sir George Hubert Wilkins. In his three Arctic flights Wilkins contributed more to the book on Arctic flying than any of his predecessors or contemporaries.

The Wilkins saga began in the "roaring twenties," when Billy Mitchell was being court-martialed for his defense of the airplane as a weapon of war, and detractors believed that airplanes could only be used on sunny, cloudless days in warm climates, and only for short distances. There were groups in the twenties, however, which envisioned the airplane conquering time, space, distance and weather. One such group was in Detroit. The Detroit Aviation Society was comprised of some of Detroit's leading citizenry—men like Edward S. Evans and William B. Mayo. For a while, they nurtured

their dreams on little but imagination, until an outlet for their hopes took shape in late 1925 in far-away Australia.

There, explorer and aviator Capt. George H. Wilkins proposed an expedition by airplane to a mysterious place he called the "Point of Relative Inaccessibility," somewhere near Point Barrow, Alaska, in the vicinity of the North Pole. The Detroit Aviation Society, fired by the opportunity, voted to back Wilkins' flight and Detroiters promptly set out to raise funds for the expedition. School children chipped in pennies, nickels and dimes to help finance the daring air expedition to the icy frontier. Wilkins promised them first-hand accounts of the expedition when he returned. Detroit businessmen held "North Pole Drives" to raise money for the expedition. The *Detroit News*, then 53 years old, contributed a large sum, making this the first newspaper-backed polar air expedition in history.

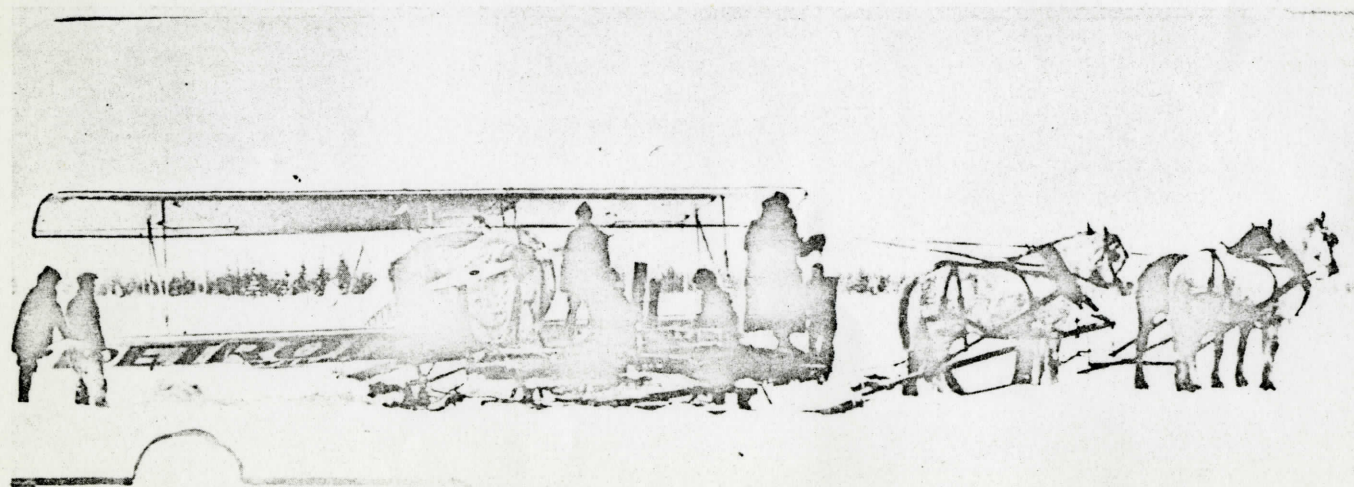
Excitement mounted in Detroit when Richard E. Byrd and Floyd

Bennett announced they were planning to race Wilkins to the Pole. In Norway famed explorer Roald Amundsen was readying a dirigible, the *Norge*, to fly over the North Pole and the Point of Relative Inaccessibility. It was now a race, and would end in victory for two, disappointment and tragedy for the third.

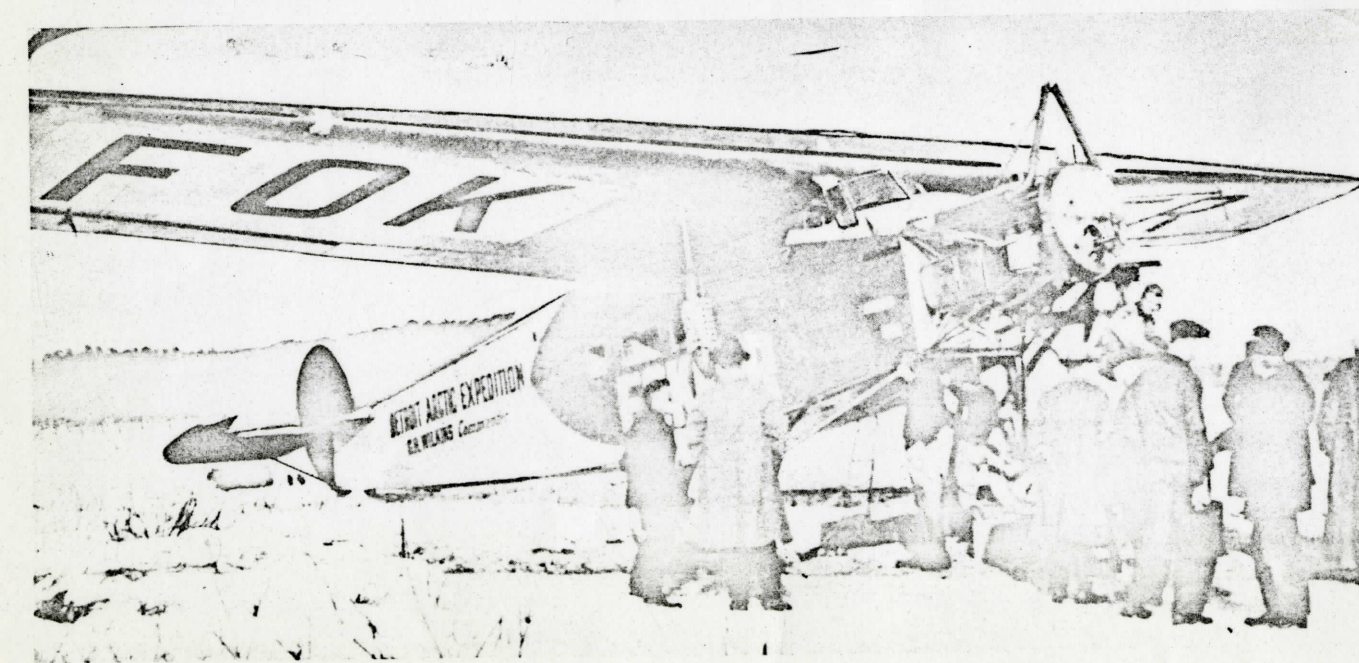
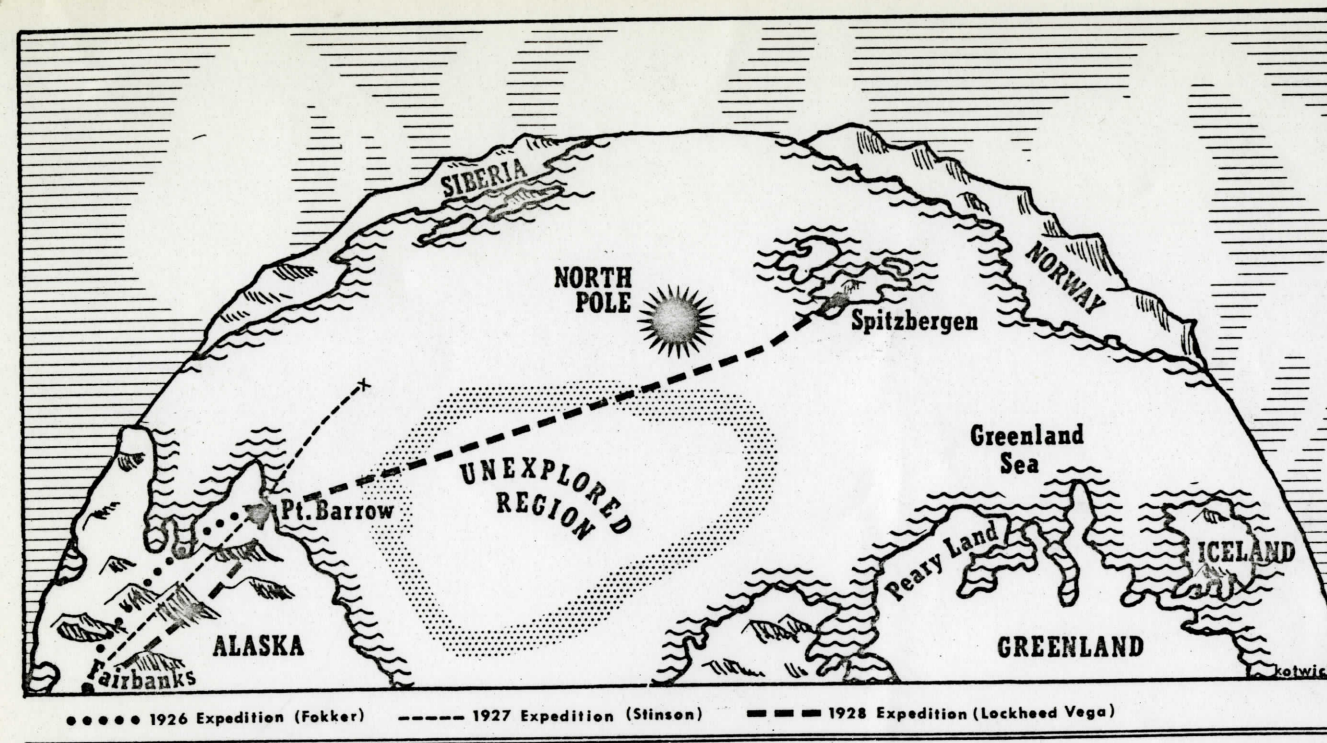
Wilkins chose as his companions for the adventure a daring World War I aviator, Lt. Carl (Ben) Eielson, and Maj. Thomas Lanphier, a flyer and navigator of international fame. The *Detroit News* assigned reporter Palmer Hutchinson to accompany Capt. Wilkins and relay to Detroit and the world the stories of the adventure. The assignment was to cost Hutchinson his life.

Expedition backers provided two airplanes—one a tri-motor Fokker equipped with Wright Whirlwind engines, and the other a single-engine monoplane. The Fokker was christened *The Detrouiter* and the monoplane *The Alaskan*.

The three started the trip to Alaska



Horse teams strain to pull the *Detrouiter* out of deep snow for the flight from Fairbanks to Point Barrow. (Detroit News photos).



With its engine out for repairs, the Fokker stands at the edge of the rough-hewn Fairbanks runway.



The *Alaskan* readies for takeoff from a snow-covered Fairbanks runway. Teams of Eskimoes shoveled out a 3,500-foot runway.

under gathering clouds of doubt. Amundsen told the world that airplanes could never conquer the tempestuous Arctic weather. Swedish explorer Capt. Hugo N. Pallin said that airship exploration of the polar regions was financially wasteful, and proclaimed that the old-fashioned seagoing Windjammer was the only logical way to reach the North Pole.

The Wilkins expedition arrived in Fairbanks in March 1926, and immediately began preparing for the dash to the Pole. The ground crew went overland from Tannax to Point Barrow with a team of 69 huskies and an Eskimo guide. They arrived at the forward station on the verge of starvation, suffering snow blindness, and with only 15 dogs remaining alive. The supplies were intact, however, and the base camp was set up to receive Wilkins, Eielson and Lanphier, to arrive later by plane.

Then began the long series of frustrations, hardships, and mishaps. At Fairbanks, The *Alaskan* was being readied for takeoff in a whirling snowstorm. She became stuck in the snow, and correspondent Hutchinson, wrapped in furs, hopped out of the stranded aircraft to help free her. Blinded by the driving snow, he

backed into the whirling propeller and was killed instantly.

On the next takeoff attempt The *Alaskan* rammed a stump protruding from one end of the rustic runway, and was damaged beyond repair. The accident, although it delayed the flight north, had a bizarre twist: while checking for cargo damage Wilkins discovered an attractive female Eskimo stowaway hidden among the gasoline barrels. Whether she was a runaway or simply wanted an airplane ride is not known, but she evidently had no idea where the airplane was headed!

Wilkins decided to risk using the heavier Fokker. It could carry 600 gallons of fuel and a crew of three, but whether it could cross the soaring 10,000-foot heights of the Endicott Mountain range was a moot question.

At Spitzbergen, meanwhile, Amundsen and Byrd were making frantic preparations to beat Wilkins. Reports of their progress were radioed to the discouraged but dedicated crew.

The men at Fairbanks waited patiently for the weather to subside. Temperatures dropped to 50 below zero. Wild winds lifted the men off their feet and tossed them along the

ground like dolls. Blowing snow trapped the Fokker in heavy drifts. Then, on 8 May the storm suddenly subsided, and Wilkins climbed aboard *The Detroider* for the flight across the unknown.

Teams of Eskimoes shoveled out a 3,500-foot runway and, finally the big plane rose from the frozen runway, pointed its nose toward the awesome Endicott Range and disappeared, gleaming in the Arctic sunshine, toward Point Barrow. Several hours after takeoff a weak short wave radio message was received from Point Barrow: the party had arrived safely.

The North Pole and the Point of Relative Inaccessibility lay ahead. What lay beyond the Pole? What secrets did this "Point of Relative Inaccessibility" hold? In 1918 Vilhjalmur Stefansson had penetrated it about 100 miles, and while some critics claimed the Wilkins expedition was merely a stunt, many world scientists insisted that aerial survey of the region would be helpful. Eskimoes reported stories of lush vegetation in this mysterious land. Temperatures were said sometimes to reach 90 degrees above zero, and strange animals were reputed to roam there. If these stories were true, the mapping and exploration of the area would be exciting indeed.

Some pessimists pointed out that several men had already left their footprints on the North Pole, and the area surrounding it had surrendered its secrets to whalers and earlier explorers. But the Wilkins expedition was not so much seeking to be first at the Pole as to demonstrate ability of the airplane to fly over and land on the polar ice cap, and to find out what lay beyond the Pole, about 800 miles off the coast of Alaska and many miles east of the Pole in the Arctic Ocean.

Yet, if Wilkins was not technically competing with the others to be first at the Pole, the world was chiefly interested in the race aspect of the expedition, and naturally Wilkins hoped to win it.

Then, with all in readiness at Point Barrow, came the lightning bolt, in the form of a radio message that Byrd had flown over the North Pole in a Fokker.

Detroit had lost its race, and Byrd had become an overnight national hero as the first man in history to view the North Pole from the air. The city was not daunted. "Carry on," it cabled Wilkins.

But on 12 May came another blow: Amundsen had successfully flown the *Norge* dirigible over the Pole. Detroit had lost again. Further details from the *Norge* expedition heartened Wil-



Wilkins and Eielson ready the Stinson *Detroider* for the takeoff from Fairbanks.

kins. Although the dirigible had flown over the area, very little had been accomplished. Fog and driving snow had made it impossible to see anything. Therefore, Wilkins could still contribute something substantial.

Again came the message from Detroit: "Keep trying," cabled Evans. But the Detroit expedition was doomed. Bad weather, more mishaps, and a near-mutinous crew kept Wilkins on the ground at Point Barrow, and finally Wilkins was recalled to Detroit. Vast sums of money had been spent. More was needed.

The city greeted Wilkins, Eielson and Lanphier with sympathy, and got a measure of return on its investment by hearing Wilkins' fascinating tales of ice animals, Eskimoes and violent weather. He toured Detroit's schools, showing pictures and telling stories to the schoolchildren whose pennies had helped him get to Point Barrow.

Long post-mortems began. Conversations with Byrd revealed that his plane had a wing span 12 feet shorter than Wilkins' Fokker. Experts decided the Fokker was not well suited to Arctic flying: a single-engined plane should be used. Then a really harrowing discovery was made: Wilkins had used regular, instead of aviation gasoline, drastically limiting the plane's lifting power. Wilkins had been lucky to cross the Endicott Range alive!

The *Detroit News* agreed to send Wilkins back to the Arctic, this time using two Detroit-built Stinsons with 200-horsepower, air-cooled Wright engines—and the right kind of fuel.

Wilkins again chose Eielson to accompany him, and the *News* sent along writer A. M. Smith to relay stories of the second expedition.

After arriving in Fairbanks the second expedition again encountered many weather delays, but on 27 March 1927, the two planes crossed the Endicott Range and landed safely at Point Barrow. Wilkins immediately prepared the *Detroit News*-Wilkins Arctic Expedition Stinson No. 1 for the run to the Point of Relative Inaccessibility. He warned his advance headquarters crew that should he fail and be lost, no attempt should be made to rescue him.

Wilkins and Eielson took off, and on 30 March Detroit got the dreaded message from Smith: "Capt. Hubert Wilkins and co-pilot Ben Eielson have disappeared over the polar horizons of America in search of unconquered land in the Arctic Ocean."

The weather had been crisp and clear when they took off, but later a devastating storm came raging out of the north. Smith wrote that if it continued, the pilots would never be able to get back, and would be forced down somewhere in the vast unexplored Arctic. For two days nothing was heard from Capt. Wilkins or Eielson, and fears mounted. Then, on 2 April a short, weak message reached Point Barrow: "Engine trouble."

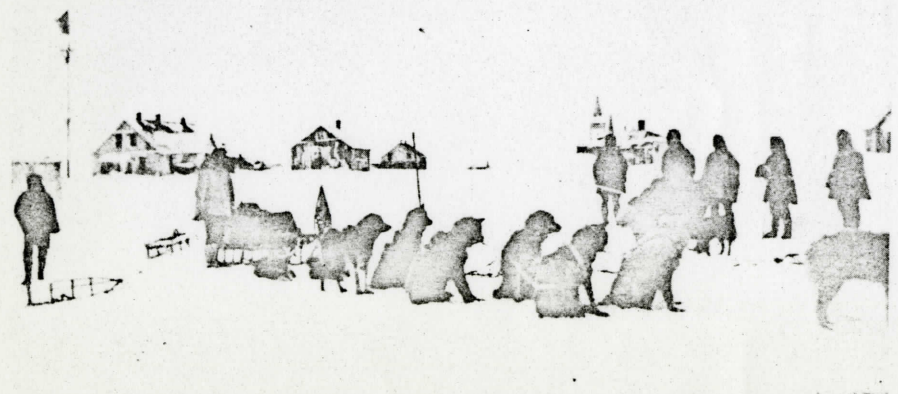
The men were down, but apparently safe. The temperature was 45 below zero, and the fierce storm continued. No further word was received. At Point Barrow alternate pilot Alger Graham disobeyed Wilkins' order and

took Stinson No. 2 into the air on a search. He was almost forced down twice, and returned to Point Barrow with no success. Twenty long days passed, and hope faded for the safety of Wilkins and Eielson.

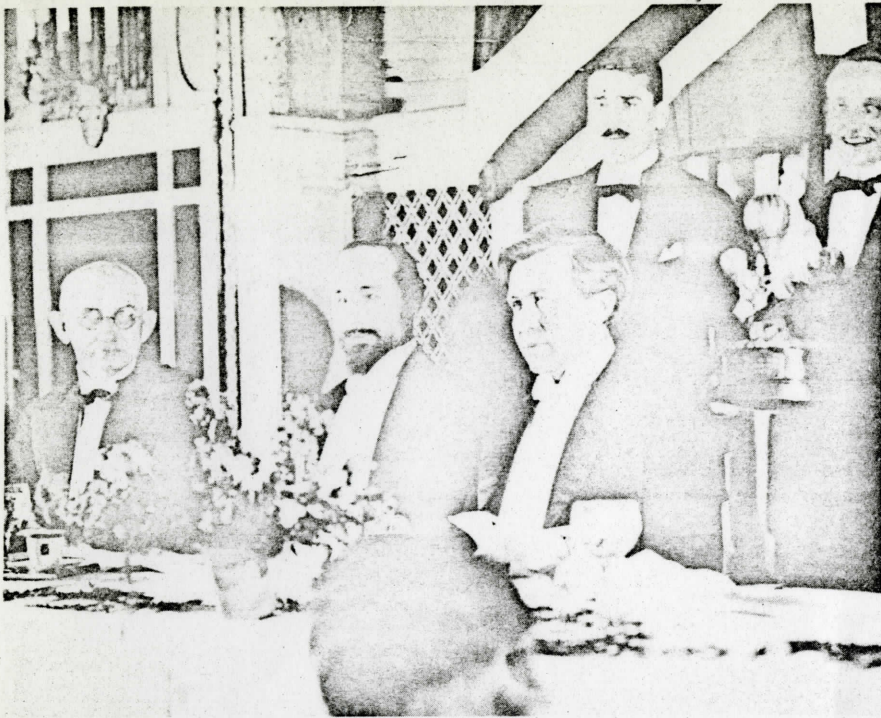
But too many people had forgotten Wilkins' genius for survival. On 20 April an Eskimo and dog team pushed its way into the camp at Point Barrow. Inside his parka the Eskimo carried a letter for Wilkins marked "Beachy Point," 180 miles southeast of Point Barrow.

Wilkins and Eielson had walked and crawled more than 80 incredibly-tough miles, through vicious snowstorms and across jagged ice fields, to reach the coast. They had been forced down three times—twice by the storm and a third time by a dying engine. Then, with heavy winds hurling snow and chunks of ice against the plane's fuselage, they remained in the plane's cabin for five days, rationing their dwindling supplies.

On the fifth day, with the plane still slowly drifting eastward on the pack ice, they had left and begun their bruising walk to the coast. The walk to the coast over jagged pack ice, with 80-pound packs on their backs, ranks as one of the great feats in Arctic history. On the first day Wilkins fell into open water. Eielson painstakingly built an igloo, and Wilkins shed his clothes in sub-zero temperatures to dry them out. Much of the way was a matter of crawling ten steps and then tumbling down icy slopes. They crawled on hands and knees over the high ice ridges. They spread-eagled as



Part of the advance team for the 1926 expedition arrives, frost-bitten and starving, at Point Barrow.



Wilkins (seated, center) at a Detroit Aviation Society dinner is flanked by industrialist William B. Mayo (left) and Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson.

they dashed across thin ice and water. Again, three days out, Wilkins fell into open water, and the whole laborious drying process began again. On the long trek, the two men were heartened by seeing seal, walrus, and the tracks of fox and wolves, indicating they were headed in the right direction. When they finally reached the coast and Beachy Point, haggard and exhausted, Eielson had a frozen hand that required the amputation of one finger. After a short hospital stay, they returned to Detroit.

Wilkins was still determined to reach the Point of Relative Inaccessibility. In 1928, financing himself, he tried again. With Eielson accompanying him for the third time, Wilkins crossed the great "no man's" land and landed by a minor miracle on minuscule Deadman's Island, off the Spitzbergen coast. There, again they spent five harrowing days in the cabin of their Lockheed Vega airplane while they weathered a violent island storm.

Finally, they took off and landed at Spitzbergen, and told the world that the land which they and so many others had thought existed between the North Pole and Greenland—the Point of Relative Inaccessibility—was not there. There was nothing there but ice and sea.

But it *had* been conquered. Knighthood followed for Wilkins, and as Sir Hubert Wilkins he made many trips to the other end of the world—Antarctica.

In late 1928 Wilkins announced an

air expedition to the South Pole. He hoped to fly south down the Antarctic Peninsula to the Weddell Seacoast, and then to continue across the continent to the Bay of Whales. Again, he lost out to Byrd, who with the financial help of John D. Rockefeller and Detroit's Edsel Ford, completed a successful \$800,000 expedition.

Wilkins' adventurous career was far from ended, however. He guided the early submarine, *Nautilus*, under the great ice floes of the Arctic. He flew a zeppelin around the world. He tried unsuccessfully to rescue Russian fliers lost in a Moscow-to-San Francisco flight across the North Pole.

Wilkins died of natural causes at Framingham, Mass. on 1 December 1958. Eielson was killed in 1930 while attempting to fly from Alaska to Siberia. Eielson Air Force Base, near Fairbanks, is named for him.

History records that the Wilkins/Detroit expeditions covered more than 4,000 miles north of the Arctic Circle, and 1,000 miles south of it. They crossed then-unexplored Arctic mountain ranges more than 10,000 feet high.

"Wilkins' expeditions were one of the outstanding achievements in aviation," said Naval Lieutenant George O. Neville, flight engineer on the Byrd polar expeditions in 1926. "Landing and taking off on northern ice fields is most hazardous. Capt. Wilkins, with Eielson's assistance, has demonstrated that it can be done under the most trying circumstances. Their flight con-

stitutes one of the greatest contributions to aviation and exploration."

Dr. Isaiah Bowman, director of the American Geographical Society, added, "The navigational difficulties Capt. George H. Wilkins overcame in his flight over the Arctic 'blind spot' was the most remarkable feature of his flight. These difficulties were greater than in any other flight ever made."

Dr. Bowman pointed out that the Byrd and Amundsen expeditions both traveled along known meridians directly toward and away from the Pole, while Capt. Wilkins was forced to cut across the meridians with a constantly changing compass deviation. Revised Arctic navigational charts resulted.

The ultimate accolade came in 1928 from Stefansson: "Capt. Wilkins was the first practical flier who ever traveled on or studied the moving Arctic ice pack. Indeed, he is the only man who as yet has flown in the Arctic and who before his flying had traveled afoot over the Arctic ice pack.

"He differs from Capt. Amundsen in that Wilkins has not only studied the pack afoot, but had done so from a flier's point of view.

"The pioneer's (Wilkins') main purpose was to find a way to explain to others how they can easily and safely use the pack ice. He said there was, on the average, a good landing spot on the ice pack about every five miles, and he proved it.

"The great pioneering value of the Wilkins flight is in the fact that the big cities and densely populated countries of the world lie in a circle that has the Arctic for a center. The nearest way from New York to Peking (Peking) is straight north. You can save thousands of miles by that route, as compared with flying by way of Seattle and Tokio (Tokyo). You can save hundreds of miles by flying from Detroit nearly north across the edge of the Arctic to Moscow.

"And when fliers like Wilkins have confirmed the theoretical conclusions of the scientists, no one will think it reasonable to fly east or west from the United States to China but only north.

"Wilkins . . . was the first to prove about Arctic flying conditions over an ocean what Byrd later proved more strikingly.

"In flying over extensive and unknown Arctic mountain ranges and regions Wilkins, Eielson, Lanphier and their comrades of the Detroit Arctic Expeditions are and will remain great pioneers."