

Sir Hubert Wilkins

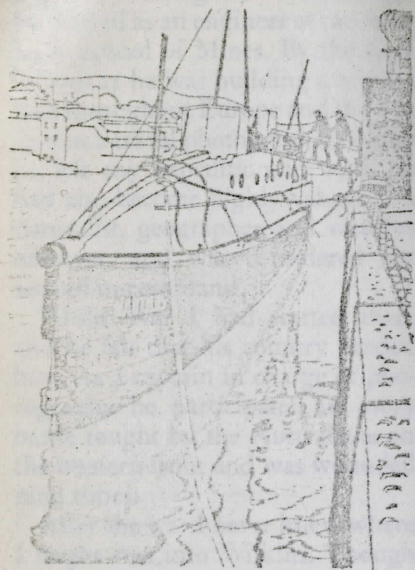
The Most Unforgettable Character I've Met®

By Vilhjalmur Stefansson
*Famed arctic explorer; author of
numerous books on the North*

AT 6 A.M. on Tuesday, March 17, 1959, in the ghostly dusk of the polar winter, a memorable event took place. At that time the U. S. submarine *Skate* lay amid broken ice floes, the first vessel ever to sit on the surface at the exact geographical North Pole. And, in a solemn ceremony, the late Sir Hubert Wilkins

joined the legion of lost explorers, when his ashes were scattered over the icy wastes in fulfillment of his lifetime wish.

No honor could have been more fitting, and no man more deserving of this unique tribute. Sir Hubert was the first man to make an exploratory flight in the antarctic, the first



Submarine *Nautilus* used by Sir Hubert Wilkins in his 1931 attempt to navigate beneath the ice to the North Pole

to demonstrate that planes could land on pack ice, the first to fly over the Arctic Ocean. After his "retirement" from a lifetime of exploration he became, at 69, a contributor to the recent International Geophysical Year studies in the antarctic. Yet he was so modest that not a single biography of him has ever been written. Few know more about him than the fact that he once tried to navigate a World War I submarine under the ice to the North Pole.

Even that remarkable attempt, in 1931, was never fully understood or appreciated because of misstatements in the press. His vessel—the Navy's first *Nautilus*—was a cantankerous, leaky model, so out-

moded that the Navy "sold" it to him for one dollar, with orders to sink it when he was through.

The project was plagued with engine trouble and equipment that did not function the way the designers claimed. It was rumored that three of his crew members, terrified at the thought of going under the ice, deliberately sabotaged the sub's diving planes. Wilkins never publicly spoke of this as anything but an "accident," and never revealed the names of the perpetrators, even to me. There wasn't the slightest streak of malice in him.

It was not until 27 years later that the real value of the voyage came to light. When the U.S.S. *Skate* completed her first polar voyage under the ice pack last year, her skipper radioed Wilkins: "Deeply aware of your vision and insight in regard to the use of submarines in the arctic . . ." Characteristically, Wilkins mailed the radiogram on to me with the following notation: "To Stefansson: MISTAKE. This should have been addressed to you." With that incredible magnanimity and memory of his, he had recalled that 43 years before, while we were hiking together across pack ice, I had remarked that a submarine could have made our work easier!

I first met Wilkins when he, a serious young man of 25, joined my Canadian Arctic Expedition of 1913 to explore the islands and ice pack in the Beaufort Sea. He was a six-footer, with a sinewy grace that belied his solid 190 pounds. His eyes

were as dark and observant as a panther's; yet they were infinitely kind, a quality that was reflected in the gentleness of his voice.

He came to us, sight unseen, from the Gaumont company (British film producers and distributors) as "the best photographer in the field." The year before, he had achieved notable success as a correspondent in the first Balkan War, having brought back the first movie films of actual battle. Prior to this, he had been a pioneer in taking movies from planes (lying flat on one wing), from balloons and moving trains, and from motorcycles at breakneck speed.

I did not know this then. I only knew that he was a reserved young man in a froth of a hurry, inwardly churning with impatience at my slow, easygoing methods. "Well, I like to be comfortable," I remarked one day after he had, with painful politeness, suggested that we could accomplish more if we traveled faster.

"Comfortable!" he snorted. "I could have stayed in London and been comfortable!"

I was soon to observe one of the man's most valuable qualities: adaptability. In this instance, he learned to live with my slower-paced methods. If the expedition was to make a 15-mile ice march in one day, he no longer urged that we try to make 25. Instead, he began taking side trips on his own while we were en route, studying whatever caught his sharp eye. Spotting

valuable specimens he felt should be preserved, he obtained a battered volume on taxidermy, and soon was up half the night mounting animals and birds with commendable skill.

I used to wonder how the man could be so inexhaustible, often rising at 4 a.m. and working until midnight. Finally I learned his secret. He was literally *inspired* by curiosity, and I doubt that he knew the meaning of the word "tension" in its modern connotation. For him, work itself was relaxation.

This astonishing vigor continued through his life. A rugged sergeant who knew him told me that when Wilkins, in his 60's, was doing arctic research in Alaska for the U. S. Army, he frequently had to make long treks over the snow with troops. Invariably the sergeant would hear men in their 20's ask if "that old fellow" was going all the way. And invariably Wilkins not only would wander repeatedly off trail to make side studies, but would beat the exhausted young troops to bivouac!

George Hubert Wilkins was born in 1888 on a sheep ranch in South Australia, the youngest of 13 children. His first adventure occurred in his teens when, given train fare for a holiday in Sydney, he decided to go by sea, paying the difference by working his way. Laughed out of the ship's office, he simply stowed away. The plan worked—and so did he, heaving coal.

This early taste of travel ultimately led Wilkins into photography as

means of seeing the world, though he trained as an engineer at the Adelaide School of Mines. By the time he was 27 he was building a reputation throughout Europe and the Far East as a travel photographer. When he left my expedition in 1916, he had also become highly valued as a naturalist, geographer and weather observer, and was considered my second-in-command.

World War I had started then, and he felt that his country needed him. As a captain in charge of photography he participated in every battle fought by the Australians on the western front and was wounded nine times.

After the war I never knew where I might run into Wilkins. Though he kept his Australian citizenship, he loved America and considered it his home as much as any place. After 1929, when he married Suzanne Bennett, a beautiful young actress, he divided his rare leisure time between their apartment in New York and a country place in Pennsylvania. But he felt he was becoming "sedentary" if he averaged more than four weeks a year in the comforts of home.

As second-in-command of the British Imperial Antarctic Expedition (1920-1921), Wilkins proved his value as a cartographer, spending days on end in an open whaleboat surveying unmapped sections of the icebound coast. Later he served for two years as naturalist for Shackleton's "Quest" Antarctic Expedition.

Impressed by his work in biology,

the directors of the British Museum persuaded him to lead the Australia and Islands Expedition, to bring back specimens of rare animals and birds threatened with extinction. He set out in 1923 and I saw him the following year when I went to Sydney on a lecture tour. He had flown 1000 miles from the bush country because—since I was a stranger in his native land—he thought I "might need something." He was the only man I ever knew who could accomplish this sort of thing (and he did it often for his friends) without once giving the impression that he had gone out of his way.

"Friendliness" is a thin word with which to explain the unique warmth that Wilkins radiated. He possessed a mystical magnetism and was always acutely sensitive to others' needs and wishes. Though great men praised him, no one ever came closer to defining the man than the simple Australian bushman who said to Wilkins in his pidgin English, "You set down quiet and listen allatime and eyes belong you lookabout see everything. Allabout feel quiet inside when with you. . . ."

Wilkins spent six months longer on this expedition than the two years estimated. Not satisfied with merely fulfilling his contract, he brought back more than 5000 specimens, some of them priceless, including rare plants and geological finds as well as the fauna requested. And the total cost came to only ten pounds more than he had asked for at the start.

Barely had the Australian expedition been completed when I received word from Wilkins—from London. With his usual calmness he told me that he was to be supplied with a ski-equipped cabin plane to attempt ice landings in the Arctic Ocean—long a dream of his. Though he was a qualified pilot, he was to concentrate on navigating, and would I find him another pilot? I contacted Lt. Carl Ben Eielson, a well-known flier of the period, and signed him up for Wilkins.

The expedition was a success—in the Wilkins manner. Despite engine trouble five hours north of Point Barrow, Alaska, the two men landed the plane on the ice as planned. On the return flight, however, just as they encountered a storm, the plane ran out of gas. Eielson had to bring it down in pitch-darkness through the blizzard, but a landing on the ice was made without mishap.

Three weeks went by with no word. Then one day they limped into a fur trader's hut. Though famished and exhausted, Wilkins had found it an exhilarating experience, not an ordeal. He came to see me shortly afterward, and his dark eyes flashed with satisfaction as he recounted the things he had proved about survival in the arctic. At one point, after falling through shell ice at ten degrees below zero, he tested an old Eskimo method for getting the water out of clothes before they freeze. Stripping off his outer gear, he stamped the garments in powder snow, which was so dry it acted like

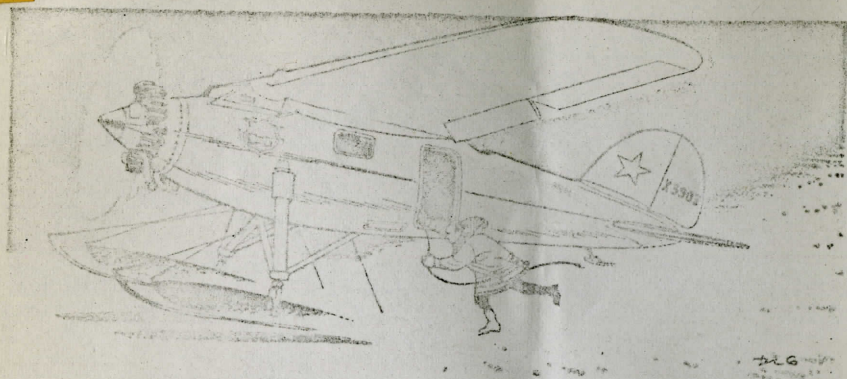
a blotter, absorbing enough water to avert catastrophe.

Wilkins hated only two things: sham and publicity. This was demonstrated graphically in what Adm. Richard E. Byrd called "the greatest airplane flight ever made in the North." Wilkins had long been enthusiastic about charting a feasible commercial air route from Alaska to Spitsbergen, Norway. I shared his enthusiasm, but others told him that not only would he face an ocean crossing similar to Lindbergh's feat the year before, but he would be flying in cold so extreme it turned aircraft oil to sludge.

Wilkins was undeterred. The epochal event began without fanfare and without a line of newspaper publicity. One day, after months of preparation in Alaska, he and Ben Eielson simply took off in a Lockheed Vega monoplane and headed for Spitsbergen 2100 miles away.

The weather was clear at first, but then a storm forced them down on an uninhabited Norwegian island, where they were marooned for five days. They got away only by a unique maneuver. To lighten the plane and give it initial momentum through the heavy snow, Wilkins stood on the ground and pushed. As the plane began to move he ran alongside until the final moment: then he grabbed a short rope he had left dangling from the open cabin and hauled himself aboard.

That June (1928) Britain conferred on him the honor of knighthood. During his lifetime he was



awarded medals from most of the geographical societies of importance in the world, along with two military crosses for bravery. He seldom mentioned such honors. "The only value of medals," he once said, "is that they show that a man has had an opportunity to serve."

Always Wilkins had in the back of his mind that he would take another, vastly improved submarine to the North Pole. But the outbreak of war abroad shattered his dream. Soon he was so immersed in helping improve arctic clothing and equipment for American troops that one would have thought this was the culmination of his ambition.

Always it was his habit to test new items on himself before exposing others to hazard. After developing a new type of fire-fighting suit, he wore it into an inferno of blazing gasoline to convince himself it was safe enough for others to use. The troops loved him. He had a great appeal for younger men. After the war, when my wife and I started teaching an arctic seminar at Dart-

mouth, he would come to Hanover and hold our students enthralled with his stories, told in his understated way.

Wilkins' life was so dedicated to simple living that it was almost monastic. At Framingham, Mass., where he lived in the last years of his life while working for the Quartermaster Research and Engineering Command, he occupied one small hotel room with no curtains or telephone. To him, luxuries were of no consequence, but improving a man's arctic equipment was a duty to which he was dedicated. One night in midwinter, a policeman walking his beat near the railroad tracks saw a dark figure lying in a snowbank. Sure that it was a near-frozen vagrant, he shook him roughly. Up popped Wilkins—he'd been testing a new sleeping bag.

Wilkins died the way he had lived—working. On December 1, 1958, he experienced some kind of attack at the Framingham research center, but made light of it and finished his day's rigorous labors. Looking back,

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I suspect he had had a premonition months before that his number was coming up, for he had been carrying on an increased correspondence with me, as though desirous of seeing that there were no loose ends.

Within an hour after reaching his room that evening, he was dead, surrounded by containers of Army experimental rations he had been trying out on the small burner he often used for his meals. After the

funeral, as I visited this simple place that was "home" to him, I thought how appropriate were these lines of Swinburne's which an admirer of Wilkins had penned on the flyleaf of an album of newspaper clippings about him:

He hath given himself and hath
not sold
To God for Heaven or man for
gold.

