

## Sir Hubert Wilkins Pole to Pole Pioneer

### Synopsis (December 2021)

George Hubert Wilkins (1888 to 1958) is most noted for his achievements as a polar explorer, where he was most distinguished for his aircraft navigation skills. These were key to the success of the 1928 First Trans Arctic Crossing and the 1929 First Antarctic aircraft flights. While Wilkins is not a name that may be familiar to many in terms of polar exploration, he was a key figure of his time and this exhibit details the major milestones he achieved, including his background and interest in Arctic/Antarctic exploration, as well as his skills in photography and navigation which were key to his success.

This success is also charted philatelically by the mail he carried on his expeditions, beginning with the 1928 Trans Arctic Crossing. While this and subsequent mail is philatelic in nature, and was organised to raise funds for each expedition, it does add very much to the historical record. The exhibit also contains a number of Wilkins commemorative stamps from Australia, United States, British Antarctic territories and Tristan da Cunha (final stop of the 1922 Shackleton-Rowett expedition where Wilkins was present as expedition photographer and naturalist). These adhesive stamps also indicate the importance of what Wilkins achieved in his exploration and particularly in his polar flights.

All of Wilkins personal archives were donated to the Byrd Institute in Ohio, which it has been my privilege to have visited, albeit that his handwriting is particularly hard to read.

### Significant Items in Exhibit

1. *Original 1918 Military Cross similar to that awarded to Hubert Wilkins after the battle of Ypres in World War I, but without the bar that Wilkins subsequently got when he was awarded a second Military Cross.*
2. *Original photograph of Wilkins trapped at Beechly Point Settlement while he awaited rescue from his back up pilot (unique item).*
3. *Cover carried on the failed 1927 attempt to fly across the Arctic Ocean, cancelled at Barrow on 30 April 1927. Cover bears a "WILKINS-DETROIT NEWS EXPEDITION" large circular magenta cachet, which is signed by G.H. Wilkins, with the initial G. being dropped from future philatelic signatures. The handwritten details on cover are likely added by A.C. Roessler and are incorrect for distance travelled, as plane flew only 550 miles on outward journey (1100 miles total journey) before attempting to return to base. There were 240 covers carried on this flight, the first philatelic item to record Wilkins polar expeditions. While this is a large number of covers, it has taken me almost twenty years to find a copy at auction.*
4. *Cover carried on successful flight from Barrow to Spitsbergen on 15 April 1928. This is one of 96 covers carried on the flight, cancelled at Barrow on 14 April, receiving a "cancel" at Svalbard Radio on landing in Spitsbergen when cover was also signed by Hubert Wilkins on 21 April 1928. Many of these covers were given as gifts, so did not end up in the hands of philatelists. Cover is annotated as No. 55 on reverse.*
5. *Cover sent from expedition member on Deception Island to Port Stanley, bearing Falkland Islands KGV ½d pair tied by "Wilkins Antarctic Expedition/Deception Island" expedition cachet in violet, with receiving cancel at Port Stanley on reverse (30 April 1929). Violet colour cachet was used on mail actually cancelled on Deception Island as opposed to green on the pre-cancelled mail at Port Stanley. Cover not recorded in American Airmail Catalogue.*
6. *One of 150 covers carried by Wilkins on his 20 December 1929 Antarctic flight; cover bears green, double circle "Wilkins Antarctic Expedition/Deception Island" cachet. Cover has 1d Falklands KGV definitive postmarked on 29 October at Port Stanley, Falkland Islands, in preparation for the for the first Antarctic flight. These Antarctic covers were intended for sale but an agreement on price could not be reached with his philatelic agent (Roessler). Cover is signed*

- by Wilkins and Eielson and all were carried on 1931 voyage to North Pole and are known as pole to pole mail. The cover has 2 cent US definitive postmarked on 1 June 1931 three days prior to start of the Arctic submarine voyage, and on 5 October 1931, in London, after completion of voyage to North Pole. Covers originally had a rubber stamp address to "A.C.Roe, Orange, New Jersey" (Roessler's address). A number of unsigned covers (estimated at 49) were also carried on the Nautilus voyage, these being postmarked London 29 October.
7. Letter written by Sir Hubert Wilkins and posted on final leg of around the world flight (Los Angeles to Lakehurst, 27-29 August 1929). Letter written on Graz Zeppelin 127 stationery and posted on board on 28 August 1929. Cover carried on full around the globe flight, correctly franked at 10 RM, Lakehouse, New Jersey green arrival cancel on reverse (unique item).
  8. Selection of national press original photographs of submarine Nautilus and her crew, the craft that Wilkins attempted to sail to the North Pole. This original photograph selection has been assembled over a period of fifteen years.
  9. Rare cover (one of twenty) marking the christening of the Nautilus submarine.
  10. Albert C. Roessler's "NEW YORK TO BERGEN" forgeries, now rarer than the real mail from this location. These are readily identified by the cachet of Wilkins holding the mail bag as well as a number of errors on the expedition cachet. This is one of three forgery types.
  11. Commemorative medal awarded to each crew member of the Nautilus on its successful voyage to the North Pole in 1958.
  12. Cover from Lincoln Ellsworth's pilot (Balchen) to his wife, on the 1933 Antarctic expedition, managed by Hubert Wilkins.

## Bibliography

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16. Vogel, H. (2018), *B.U.T.Column*, ICE CAP NEWS, Vol. 63, p4, p32 and p89.
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The references attributed to Hal Vogel in Ice Cap News are the most useful in understanding the philatelic trail left by Wilkins. The reference attributed to Callan (exhibitor) details a number of the items displayed in exhibit.



# Hubert Wilkins -Australian Pole to Pole Pioneer-Land, Air, Sea and Submarine

Hubert Wilkins (1888 to 1958) is most noted for his achievements as a polar explorer, but he also achieved fame as a photographer, pilot/navigator, soldier, geographer and ornithologist. Wilkins first came to notice for his exploits as a photographer on various Arctic expeditions, most notably the controversial 1913 Vilhjalmur-Stefansson Canadian Arctic Expedition.

Wilkins joined the Australian Flying Corps in 1917 and was appointed as official war photographer the following year in World War I. He went on to receive the Military Cross twice for his efforts to rescue wounded soldiers. After the war, Wilkins served as ornithologist on the Shackleton-Rowlett Southern Ocean Expedition, then as navigator on one of the unsuccessful flight teams in the 1919 great air race from England to Australia.

However, one of Wilkins's most notable achievements was the 1928 First Trans-Arctic crossing he made with his pilot Carl Ben Eielson, from Barrow Point in Alaska to Spitsbergen in Norway, which led to him being knighted the following year. Wilkins continued his polar exploration by being the first to fly over Antarctica the following year, which then on to him taking part in the 1929 "Around the World Zeppelin Flight". It was during this flight that he and the Graf Zeppelin commander hatched a plot to travel to the North Pole, the commander by Zeppelin airship and Wilkins by submarine. While the latter journey was not successful, at least for the submarine, it did achieve much in terms of scientific discovery, further establishing his credentials as a geographer. Wilkins always claimed the drive for polar exploration was centred on his desire to learn about how to predict the weather, which arose primarily from his family's hardship in the South Australia "Federation droughts of 1901".

The Wilkins Sound, Wilkins Coast and the Wilkins's Ice Shelf in Antarctica are all named after him, as are the airport at Jamestown, South Australia and a road at Adelaide Airport. When he died in 1958, the US navy took his ashes aboard the US nuclear submarine USS Skate and scattered them at the North Pole. This single fact speaks of the impact of the man.

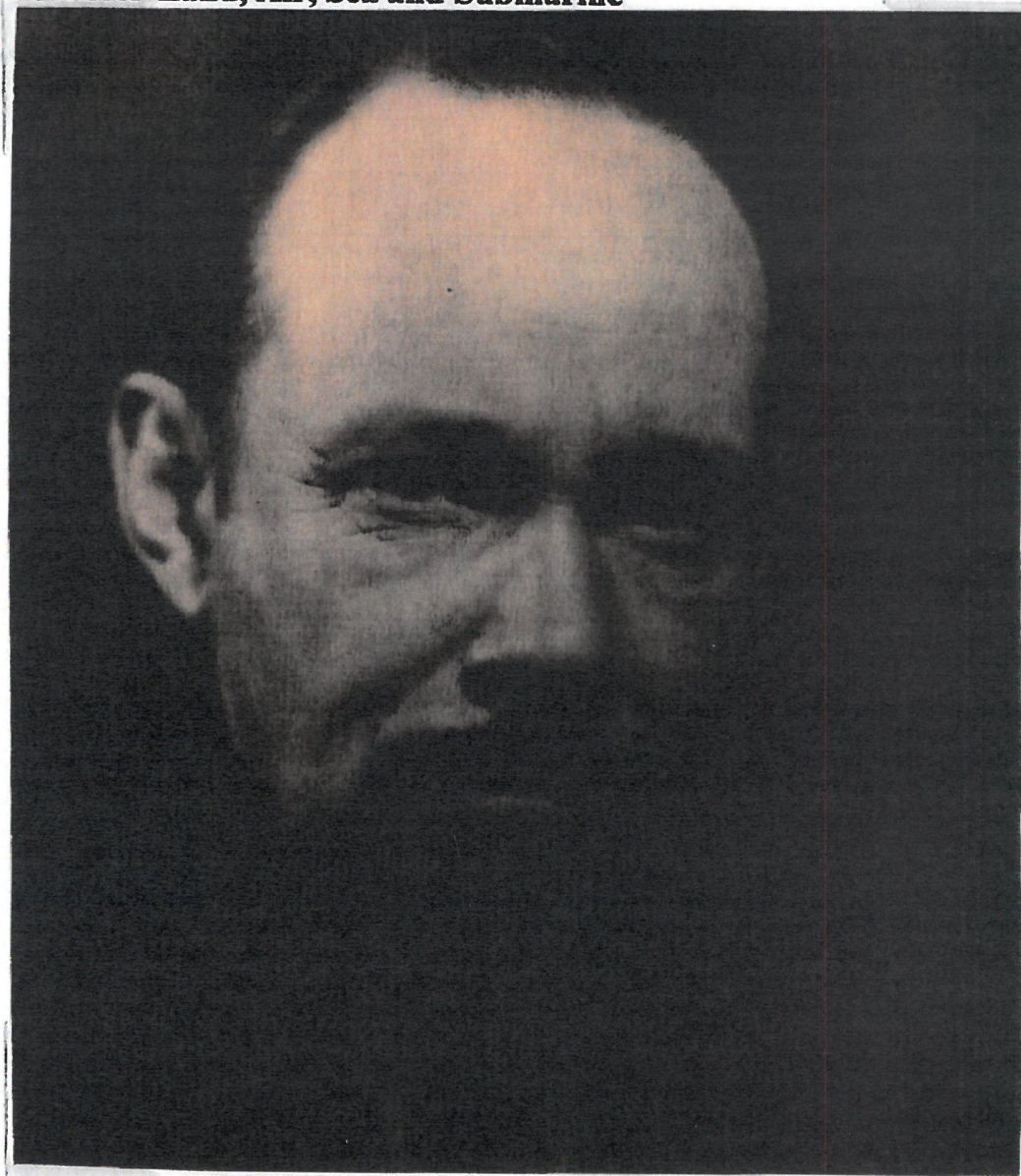
## Exhibit Objective

The objective of the exhibit is to lay out the details of Hubert Wilkins's achievements across the world but primarily his polar exploration in both the Arctic and the Antarctic, where he made pioneering flights in both territories. Of particular note is his attempt to reach the North Pole by submarine and the efforts he made to push back the borders of scientific knowledge about the earth's climate.

## Exhibit Plan

Exhibit follows the life of Hubert Wilkins and is presented in four sections:

1. Wilkins's early life and early polar expeditions, including World War I fame and polar voyages with Shackleton and Vilhjalmur.
2. Wilkins's pioneering flights, including England to Australia Flight in 1919, First Flight over the Arctic in 1928, First flight over the Antarctic in 1929, Around the World Graf Zeppelin 127 flight in 1929.
3. Wilkins's voyage to the North Pole in 1931, including Submarine adaptation and refit, Submarine trans-atlantic journey, Submarine failed rendezvous with Graf Zeppelin 127.
4. Epilogue, including Final Antarctic exploration, Laid to rest at the North Pole.



Original Camera portrait autographed by Herbert Wilkins "with kindest regards to Charles Servanti"

Rare items depicted  
with red border/text/dot

## Bibliography

1. Sir Hubert Wilkins, by Lowell Thomas, 1961 Arthur Barker Ltd., London.
2. The Last Explorer, by Simon Nasht, 2005 Arcade Publishing, New York.