

THE MOST EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIAN WHO EVER LIVED

Author Peter FitzSimons describes South Australian explorer, photographer and war hero Hubert Wilkins as the nation's greatest explorer. So, FitzSimons wants to know, why is he not a household name?

WORDS ANDREW HOLMAN

One can only imagine those haunting, harrowing moments when George Hubert Wilkins faced the firing squad in Constantinople almost 100 years ago.

Blindfolded and manacled, his heart racing, his arms are tied behind his back to an execution post.

So far from home. So far from his family, the youngest of 13 children, born and raised near Mt Bryan East in South Australia's Mid North. Memories of sheep that grazed harsh rocky paddocks, crops that swayed one way then the other as incessant winds howled on unforgiving land. Snakes that slithered, hawks that hovered and emus and kangaroos that ruled the land. His friendship with the Ngadjuri people, sharing their food, joining their corroborees. His days riding into the nearest town of Hallett.

Now here he is, from humble beginnings, a war correspondent covering the Balkans War sentenced to death on a false charge of being a Bulgarian spy.

There is wailing beside him, trembling and prayers as men on death row face their fate.

Gunshots boom in a deadly thunder. The wailing stops only to be replaced by

sounds of gurgling blood and last gasps. But Wilkins is unscathed. He is marched to the execution pole twice more in a sickening ploy to extract a confession which never comes.

Fate smiled on Wilkins, as it had many times before and would continue in the future – a daredevil who clung to the wires of primitive aircraft to capture the first aerial footage films, who took on, explored and tamed polar regions north and south, who photographed and filmed war but rescued the injured and who stared death in the face so many times.

An incredible man, an incredible life, chronicled by Australia's best-selling non-fiction writer and historian Peter FitzSimons in his latest book, *The Incredible Life of Hubert Wilkins – Australia's Greatest Explorer*.

"He really was the Forrest Gump of his era, the man in the middle of so many extraordinary historical moments," FitzSimons says.

"This guy did everything, went everywhere. Sir John Monash called him the bravest man in his command. He had more credentials than anyone else to elevate himself.

"I chiefly hope that this (the book) will put Wilkins back where he belongs:

regarded as the most extraordinary Australian who ever lived.

"He was there when the Red Barron died, he was one of the last to interview Lenin. He was there when Shackleton died. He told people he could take a plane over the top of the world – they said it couldn't be done.

"He told people he could take a submarine under the polar ice – they said it couldn't be done. They were right for the moment, but he did take it under."

He was fascinated by meteorology – most probably sparked by his family's battles with drought and the relationship of polar regions to weather patterns and forecasting. FitzSimons writes:

His theory is that the weather in the southern hemisphere is largely determined by the weather conditions prevailing over the Antarctic continent, and if regular bulletins could be issued thence to the meteorologists in Melbourne, Cape Town and Buenos Aires, weather forecasts could be both lengthened and improved.

He respected the indigenous both in Australia and in the Arctic – learning their ways to live in the land and survive, whether on an expedition through the

north of Australia or taming the piercing, stinging, blinding conditions of the North Pole.

He rubbed shoulders with royalty, generals, media magnates, explorers, world leaders – Vladimir Lenin, General Sir John Monash, William Randolph Hearst, Sir Charles Kingsford Smith, Sir Ernest Shackleton, Roald Amundsen.

All this from a humble man who studied engineering at Adelaide University and then gained employment in fledgling travelling tent-cinema shows after using his engineering prowess to repair a projector.

Wilkins' initiation into the front lines of World War I came in August 1917, in the Belgium town of Ypres.

Well, it used to be Ypres ...

Wilkins cannot resist filming the scene ... Ypres appearing like some badly preserved Roman ruin on its last legs, the frames of grand buildings standing stark and alone surrounded by the rubble that once made up the remainder.

... Wilkins films troops tottering through the towers of giant pick-up sticks, like a line of ants determined to make their way through any obstacle. Are these men searching for the dead or the living? Can



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Sir Hubert Wilkins

South Australian-born adventurer and explorer Sir Hubert Wilkins.

one make such a clear distinction in Ypres? The town itself is a grotesque ghost, if you could not see it, you would not believe it, once seen, you shall never forget.

As a photographer chronicling World War I his gallantry knew no bounds – he was wounded multiple times, and often carried the wounded to safety. He even trusted the Germans and would go out and set up his camera between enemy lines.

One way or another, as the weeks go by, Wilkins becomes an ever better known figure to the Diggers, the mad bastard who will ‘jump the bags’ on his own, ahead of the main rush and then set up his camera to photograph them charging, all the while with his back to the enemy.

What must the Germans make of it? Some, clearly, take pot shots at him. But surely, one reason he survives is that the Germans must be caught between bemusement at his foolhardiness and stunned amazement at his courage and do decline to shoot an obviously unarmed man in the back. This is certainly Wilkins’ belief, declaring the Germans can see that he is unarmed... and know it would not be sporting to shoot a photographer.

The Germans frequently waved to me

good-naturedly; they knew I was a photographer ...’

On April 21, 1918, Wilkins was again to be an eyewitness to history – a dog-fight of a plane battle which involved no few than 30 planes.

In his red Fokker, Baron Manfred von Richthofen – known to the British as the Red Baron, no less the deadliest pilot in the Deutsche Luftstreitkräfte, having accounted for no fewer than 80 Allied pilots is closing in for the kill ...

The aircraft is suddenly hit with a deadly accurate spray of bullets and visibly staggers in the air.

The Red Baron has strayed over Australian lines, and from below a gunner by the name of Robert Buei – an oyster farmer before the war, from Brooklyn – just keeps pouring bullets into the red plane.

George Wilkins watches closely as the red Fokker sideslips behind a hill. Once the red Fokker hits the ground though, the Diggers rush forward, just in time to hear the German legend get out one last word before expiring: ‘Kaputt.’

The corpse of the Red Baron is treated with enormous respect almost as if he was one of their own, and taken by stretcher to

Hangar 3, where a guard will be placed over his corpse until his funeral on the morrow.

Wilkins was there to catch historic footage, Diggers and British soldiers, paying their respect for their fallen foe notwithstanding.

And he was there to take command of a US platoon left leaderless in a battle of the famed Hindenberg line.

In November 1922, the call came from the UK Secret Service Bureau – soon to be MI6 – wanting Wilkins to travel to Bolshevik Russia. The purpose was to photograph the reality of conditions under the world’s first communist regime and to have an audience with Vladimir Lenin himself.

For cover, Wilkins will nominally be taking photographs and footage for the Society of Friends ‘Emergency and War Victim’s Relief Committee’ – a Quaker organisation of great repute – to highlight their famine relief operations.

He was accompanied by a fellow spy, Lucita Squier, an actor and scriptwriter due to wed an American journalist who was a personal friend of Lenin.

When he arrived in Russia, Wilkins >

1888 George Hubert Wilkins born October 31 at Mt Bryan East.

1904 Studied engineering at the University of Adelaide.

1905-08 Worked in tent-cinema shows learning cinematography.

1909-12 Moved to England to work as cameraman with Gaumont British Films. Worked in Europe, Canada and the US taking flying shots for the first known aerial films.

1912 Captured the first-known footage of battle during the First Balkans War.

1913-16 Made his first Arctic expedition.

1916 Appointed official photographer for the Australian Flying Corps.

1917-18 Covered battles on the Western Front during World War I. Awarded Military Cross and Bar for bravery.

1919 Entered England-Australia air race but crashed in Crete.

1920-21 Photographer on Antarctic expedition.

1921-22 Naturalist on Shackleton’s last Antarctic expedition.

1923-25 Led British Museum’s Northern Australia natural history expedition.

1926 Made experimental flights in the Arctic.

1928 Made first trans-Arctic flight and was knighted. Made first flights over Antarctica.

1929 Married Australian actor Suzanne Bennett.

1929 Made 22-day round-the-world journey in Airship, Graf Zeppelin.

1931 Made first under-ice voyage by submarine, navigating Nautilus in Arctic Ocean.

1933-39 Manager of four Antarctic expeditions, reaffirming some Australian Antarctic claims.

1953-58 Arctic consultant to US Army, testing cold weather equipment and rations on several Arctic and Antarctic expeditions.

1958 Died of heart attack in Massachusetts, US, on November 30. His ashes were scattered in the Arctic Ocean at the Geographic North Pole, from US submarine Skate.

ADVENTURER



Hubert Wilkins shows films to Inuit people in the Arctic at Christmas time, 1913. Picture: Ohio State University

was shocked at the amount of poverty, the lack of schools, a cuisine that was “little more than slops” and peasants eating grass to stay alive.

He was even more shocked to hear of an elderly woman who was in control of a gang of cannibals who were murdering people to eat.

Still, as ever a believer in his own star, Wilkins packs a generous supply of flour and black sausage and heads off to photograph this criminal crone. The first man he greets, ‘without hesitation delivered me such a blow on the head that I was knocked to the ground’.

Coming to, slowly ... Wilkins becomes aware of an angry squall of peasants all around him, engaged in furious argument. And yet now his weary eyes are drawn to a far more shocking sight.

“Imagine my horror when I saw on a bench the remains of several human arms and legs. The cannibal story was true after all, and I felt at last I had been too venturesome.”

Wilkins has faced some tough predicaments, but this one, providing dinner for strangers, is surely the toughest of the lot.

Before killing and eating him, however, they first go through his belongings, which brings a shout: The stranger has brought food with him! He has flour, and meats!

Suddenly they realise he has come to help them ... the peasants kneel about the prone Wilkins as if he were a visitation from heaven itself.

Some days later the audience with Lenin was granted at the Kremlin. The revolution might still be young, but Lenin, he no longer was. And he remained mentally sharp and began by asking if his visitors would care to speak in French, German or English.

Most interestingly though, the Soviet remains absolutely resolute in his experience of the revolution. For when Lenin asks Wilkins to count his experiences in Russia and the sight he has seen, and all the Australian tells him frankly more than a little of the horror of it all – the poverty, the sickness, the starvation so severe it has led to cannibalism – there is a pause.

It is a rare thing indeed for a dictator to be told such stark truths and his prisons are filled with some who have tried.

“While I believe,” he says carefully, “that I have done the right thing in bringing about revolution in Russia, after five years effort in Communism I have come to realise that I have made a mistake in regard to the rapidity of development possible within the Soviet Union.”

Lenin concedes that progress requires patience and for the moment he accepts that even a mind such as his cannot, “inject civilisation into the minds of humans and get an immediate response”. They farewell the ailing leader, aware they have witnessed a giant fading before them.

FitzSimons attributes much of Wilkins’ success to his innovation, his ingenuity, energy, respect for science and an ability “to work it out” – a common trait of Australians who grew up “west of Bourke”.

“It’s the power of leadership that rises up,” FitzSimons says. “In the case of Sir Hubert Wilkins, he goes on an expedition of the Antarctica as a photographer and ends up leading it because he’s the one with the leadership.

“When I went to his birthplace ... it’s the back, of the back, of the back of beyond and the idea that a fellow could be born there in the late 1800s and be so honoured that in the course of his life’s journey the ashes of the lad born there could be scattered at the North Pole by the Americans – that’s the arc of his journey.

“Can you think of anyone with a more extraordinary life?”

But 100 years later and in a travesty of history, the man conferred a knighthood, and awarded the Military Cross in 1918 for bravery for rescuing soldiers in the Third Battle of Ypres remains largely unknown.

“I hope you’ll agree that the Adelaide Airport should be named after him or that his image should be used on a banknote,” FitzSimons says.

The Wilkins Foundation Society in South Australia works tirelessly behind the scenes “to bring Wilkins home” in stating his memory and achievements as the most remarkable Australian ever.

Foundation chair Robin Turner, who accompanied FitzSimons on the tour of the restored Wilkins homestead in the state’s Mid North, says: “I think Wilkins is not just a great explorer, but the greatest of all time, a visionary, a leader, a philosopher, environmentalist.”

The foundation’s patron is Australian of the Year, cave diver, and hero Dr Richard Harris, who helped rescue 12 boys and their soccer coach who were trapped in a cave in northern Thailand in 2018.

Harris believes people are craving people like Wilkins to look up to and unlock their inner explorer.

The Incredible Life of Hubert Wilkins by Peter FitzSimons, Hachette Australia, \$49.99, is out now.

The Wilkins Foundation can be followed on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or LinkedIn.

The restored Wilkins homestead is off Mt Bryan East Rd, about 21km from Hallett. Keys to the property are available from the Hallett Country Store.

wilkinsfoundation.org.au

