

## Air and Space this Week

### Item of the Week

# The First Flight Over Antarctica

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**KEY WORDS:** Antarctica Captain Cook Ernest Shackleton George Hubert Wilkins  
Carl Eielson Lanphier

*There are few unexplored places in the world these days, but a century ago, that wasn't true, especially for polar regions. The Arctic was more accessible, and by 1926, the North Pole had been visited, and overflown ([or was it?](#)). But there was no land at the top of the Earth, and no reason to explore for resources or territory. That was not true for Antarctica, and numerous countries had made territorial claims, or were thinking about doing so, even though the continent was still truly "Terra Incognita."*

*Roald Amundsen won the race to the South Pole in 1912, but most of Antarctica had not been visited, mapped, or studied. And certainly not been flown over, even a little, except a short balloon hop.*

*That would change on **November 16, 1928.***

### **Polar Exploration: Captain Cook, Shackleton, and Others**

The late 1800s and early 1900s were a golden age of polar exploration. Northern waters were easier to get to, but the area below the Antarctic Circle was almost unknown territory.

Captain James Cook led three great voyages of exploration in the late 1700s. Each cruise had a specific and important scientific objective, in addition charting everyplace visited accurately. The first trip was to make important astronomical observations of the 1769 Transit of Venus from newly-discovered Tahiti. He did so successfully, at a place to this day called "Point Venus." He then went to New Zealand to observe a Transit of Mercury, again successfully, and the place is still called "Mercury Bay." After this transit, Cook sailed southward, to seek the "undiscovered southern land" geographers (and Cook) thought must lay further south than anyone had previously explored. He was thwarted by ice, but his observations constrained the potential size of a possible Antarctic land mass. On his way home, Cook had a near-disastrous encounter with Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

Cook's second trip is the one germane here. He was sent to explore the south Atlantic and Pacific as far south as possible, a continuation of the effort he made on his first voyage. He circumnavigated the world at high southern latitudes, was the first to sail over the Antarctic Circle; the furthest south he got was 71° 10' S. His negative results were still very valuable; Antarctica, if it existed, had to be smaller than many had speculated about.

Cook's final voyage was final, indeed. His primary mission was to explore for the possible western end of the Northwest Passage. He didn't find that, but he did discover the "Sandwich Isles," aka Hawaii, but was killed by the Hawaiians in a dispute.

Captain Cook never saw land on his trips; the first land sightings would come in 1820, by several explorers and whalers. Several landfalls were made in the 1820s and 30s, and the continent was circumnavigated in the 1840s. The first significant land exploration was conducted in 1899, and in 1901, RN Captain Robert Falcon Scott led the first expedition to reach the South Pole, accompanied by Ernest Shackleton. They failed, but they did reach latitude 82° S, and, in early 1902, they used a hydrogen-filled balloon to extend the range of their reconnaissance. A German expedition similarly used a balloon a few months later.

Shackleton then went on to lead his own expedition over "land" in 1907-9; they got to within 100 miles of South Pole, but they, too, had to turn back.

Robert Scott came back for another attempt at the Pole in 1911, but so did famed Norwegian polar explorer, Roald Amundsen. Amundson and his team reached the Pole on December 14. Scott made it, too, but not until January 18, 1912. One can only imagine the disappointment Scott and his team felt when they finally made the Pole after an extremely arduous and dangerous journey, only to find the flag of Norway flying there! Alas, Scott and his entire party died of exposure on their return to their base. The official name of the research establishment now at the South Pole is "[Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station](#)," in their honor.

Ernest Shackleton wasn't done with Antarctica yet. In late 1915, he made another attempt for the Pole, but his ship got caught and crushed in the ice surrounding the continent. The crew set out for home, dragging their lifeboats and supplies a great distance before reaching open water. They then sailed northward, reaching previously-known Elephant Island. The crew stayed there awaiting rescue, while Shackleton and a few others braved the roughest seas on Earth in an open boat, finally reaching South Georgia Island. They knew there was a whaling station on the other side of the island, but to get to it they would have to surmount a large mountain range under extremely harsh conditions to get there. They made it, were rescued, and then Shackleton immediately raised a ship to go rescue the rest of his crew. He didn't lose a man. It was one of the greatest adventures of all time; the hike across South Georgia was only recently repeated, extremely tough even with gear much more modern than Shackleton had.

The edges of Antarctica and the seas around them were becoming more familiar, and whaling there proved more profitable. A number of countries were interested in establishing claims on the continent and the waters around it. A number of expeditions were mounted to assess the economic potential of the Antarctic region, but travel was so difficult on land under the harsh environmental conditions there. If there only some way to conduct reconnaissance without the difficulty of travel across the ice. Hydrogen-filled balloons had been tried before, and they were not effective. Oh, wait, the airplanes be developed after WWI might be the answer....!

## **George Hubert Wilkins**

George Hubert Wilkins of Australia was a very interesting person. He was born in South Australia in 1888, the last of 13 children of pioneering sheep farmers. He developed an interest in cinematography, went to England, and became well-known for his aerial photography. His skill and robustness caused him to be recruited to photo-document several Antarctic expeditions in the 1910s.

Wilkins returned home as WWI broke out, and enlisted in the Australian Flying Corps, eventually becoming an official war photographer. During the Third Battle of Ypres, he put down his camera and worked to assist wounded soldiers, earning the Military Cross in the process. Later, he took field command of a unit of American soldiers whose leadership had been killed during the Battle of the Hindenburg Line, directing their efforts until reinforcements arrived.

Wilkins had been impressed by the boldness of the Antarctic continent, and he had many interests apart from photography, so after the War he looked to continue to participate in expeditions “down South.” One of his other academic passions was ornithology, and he signed on for a study of bird life in Australia in 1923. At some point after that he met a fellow pilot named Carl Eielson...

Eielson was an experienced Arctic region flyer. He and Wilkins hit it off, and in March, 1927, they made a flight over deep ice-covered water north of Alaska, landed on an ice floe, and took sonar soundings of the very deep water beneath. This feat would earn Wilkins two important scientific medals. A year later, the two intrepid pilots flew from Point Barrow to Spitsbergen with a stop on Ellesmere Island, not directly over the North Pole, but over a large expanse of polar ice. Wilkins was knighted for this effort.

After their Arctic flight, Wilkins’ and Eielson’s attention turned to the Antarctic. Wilkins was asked by his government to secure information that would support Australia’s claim to a sector of Antarctica. Then they took the flight described below.

Wilkins would later go on to try to reach the North Pole by submarine. He failed, but he did show that subs could operate under the polar ice cap. He wrote a book about this mission that was well-received by the public, “Under the North Pole.”

Wilkins dropped somewhat out of sight during WWII, but he did make an appearance on “What’s My Line?” in 1958. Later that year, he passed away. His ashes were taken to the North Pole on the submarine USS Skate, and scattered there. Several prominent geographic features of Antarctica were named for him.

### **Carl Eielson**

Carl Benjamin Eielson was born on July 20, 1897, in Hatton, North Dakota. Like many men born around that time, he was smitten with the concept of flight and joined the Army Air Service in 1917 to learn to fly. He was undergoing training when WWI ended. He returned home to finish his degree at UND, and formed a flying club with a few flying friends in 1920. He enrolled in the law program at Georgetown University, and worked part time as a Capitol Police officer. Eielson met Alaska’s territorial representative in Congress, and was persuaded to go to Alaska to teach.

Eielson apparently liked flying as much or more than teaching, and in 1923 became the only pilot for the Farthest North Aviation Company. He began flying air mail, and in that part of the world, he could deliver in three hours what otherwise took 30 via dogsled! He moved with the seasons, and was the first to fly air mail from Atlanta to Jacksonville in 1926.

While in Alaska, he met George Wilkins, evidently kindred spirit when it came to polar flying, and they together made the flights described above.

In 1930, Eielson was asked to establish Alaskan Airways. He kept up his cold region flying. In 1929, a cargo vessel became trapped in the ice off North Cape, Siberia. Eielson decided to help by flying to the trapped ship and rescuing its crew. Alas, he and his mechanic died in the attempt.

A Liberty Ship, a mountain near Denali, a Denali National Park Visitor Center, a building at UA-Fairbanks, and Eielson Air Force Base were named in his honor. He's in the National Aviation Hall of Fame.

### The First Flight

Following the success of the Wilkins/Eielson flight over the Arctic in the mid-1920s, the pilots turned their attention to Antarctica. News of their Arctic flight had attracted the attention of newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, and he provided funding for their attempt down South.

The intrepid flyers took a Lockheed Vega 1 to Deception Island, one of the South Shetland Island group. On **November 16**, 1928, they took off and flew the over the length of Graham Land on the Antarctic Peninsula, the first time a powered flight had taken place in Antarctica. They would go on to make a number of additional reconnaissance flights of the region, discovering several new islands in the area, one of which Wilkins wanted to name "Hearst Land" after their sponsor (he had thought it was part of the Antarctic Peninsula rather than an island). The name, changed to "Hearst Island," stuck, see:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hearst\\_Island](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hearst_Island).

Recall that one of Wilkins' objectives of the flights was to gather information that would support Australia's claim on a big chunk of Antarctica. Such claims, at least for now, are not recognized for any country by international agreement under the [Antarctic Treaty](#). Alas, we'll see how well that holds up under the increasing pressure on Antarctic-area resources, especially as global warming and improved winter operations technology progresses. Sigh.

### CODA: You Know I Love Connections – Wilkins and Lanphier

Wilkins led an Arctic flying mission in 1926. One of the unofficial observers along was [Thomas George Lanphier](#), a friend, a business partner, and an early flight instructor for Charles Lindbergh. Lanphier even flew the *Spirit of St. Louis* in July, 1927! He would head the Transcontinental Air Transport Company (1928) and the Bird Aircraft Company (1931). He then retired from the military, and became a beer brewer when Prohibition ended. During WWII, he went back on active duty as a Lieutenant Colonel, serving as an air intelligence officer for Army

Chief of Staff George C. Marshall. After the War, he held several management positions with the Veterans Administration.

Lanphier had three sons. The youngest, James, became an actor; his most noteworthy role was in the first *Pink Panther* movie (1963), where he played Saloud. The middle son was a member of VMF-214, the famous “Black Sheep” squadron. His Corsair was shot down near Bougainville Island in 1943, and died in a Rabaul prison camp in 1944. But Lanphier’s oldest son, Thomas George Lanphier, Junior, also a fighter pilot in the Southwest Pacific, became much more famous/notorious.

Junior was one of twelve pilots selected for Operation Vengeance, the mission to kill Admiral Yamamoto, the architect of the Pearl Harbor attack, planned and led by John Mitchell in April, 1943. Allied codebreakers had learned of an upcoming morale-boosting visit by Yamamoto to air bases near Rabaul, which would put him in range of Guadalcanal-based P-38s. Mitchell planned a roundabout route that would bring them into combat range as the always-punctual Yamamoto approached. A flight of four planes, led by Lanphier, would do the shooting, the others would remain above as top cover.

What happened next is still debated in some circles. Yamamoto approached the Rabaul area in a group of two “Betty” bombers and six “Zero” escorts flying above. The P-38s approached from below. Lanphier claimed to have shot down a Zero and the Betty carrying Yamamoto. Rex Barber, his wingman, also claimed a Betty, as did element leader, Besby Holmes. Lanphier made it back to base first, and ran around crowing how he had just killed Yamamoto. Barber was low on fuel, and by the time he landed at a base north of Guadalcanal to re-fuel then fly home, Junior had already been bending the air officer’s ear; he would initially get credit for the two planes he claimed, including Yamamoto.

Subsequent post-War crash analysis and the testimony of one of the escort Zero pilots refuted Lanphier’s claims completely, but that didn’t stop Junior from going public, writing a 1966 Reader’s Digest article entitled, “I Shot Down Yamamoto.” Most experts disagree. The AAF refused to grant Barber’s sole claim, leaving the topic officially open. But the fact is, Rex did it. Lanphier made an important contribution by diverting the Zero escort at a critical moment, allowing Barber to deliver the fatal blow unmolested by the defense, but that wouldn’t give him the fame he craved.

The documentation I believe is the last word on the topic is a book written in 1990 by noted aviation historian Carroll Glines, “Attack on Yamamoto,” New York: Orion Books, ISBN 0-517-57728-3

## REFERENCES

### Polar Exploration

**Cook:** Cook was a remarkable expedition leader. His attention to the health of his crew, the acquisition of scientific data, and his skill at navigation and charting were second to none. I think the best sources for Cook were written by his biographer, J.C. Beaglehole: *The Exploration of the Pacific*. My copy is the paperback third edition, published by the Stanford University

Press in 1966, ISBN: 0-8047-0311-6; the original was published in 1934. This is a wonderfully-informative book! His biography, *The Life of Captain James Cook*, is outstanding, too. The Stanford University Press edition was published in 1992, ISBN-13: 978-0804720090. Read them now and thank me later!

See also the website of the Captain Cook Society:

<https://www.captaincooksociety.com/home/detail/jc-beaglehole-on-cook-as-a-commander>

**Shackleton:** <https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/shackleton/the-expedition>;

<https://shackleton.com/blogs/articles/shackleton-imperial-trans-antarctic-expedition>

His book: *South: The Endurance Expedition*, is outstanding; my paperback copy was published in 1999 by Penguin Group, no ISBN number available; it was originally published in 1919. Also good is Alfred Lansing's book, *Shackleton's Valient Voyage*, published by Scholastic Book Services in 1962, ASIN: B000NPUMTQ. Shackleton's photographer, Frank Hurley, also published a great book of the failed expedition, "*South with Endurance: Shackleton's Antarctic Expedition 1914-1917*," 2001, Simon & Schuster, ISBN-13: 978-0743222921.

### Amundsen

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### Scott

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison\\_of\\_the\\_Amundsen\\_and\\_Scott\\_expeditions](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_the_Amundsen_and_Scott_expeditions)

Antarctic Exploration Timeline:

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***Anyone who has had the pleasure of visiting Antarctica, and many who've only dreamed of doing so, cannot help but be moved by the [haunting lyrics](#) of balladeer [Al Stewart's](#) wonderful song, Antarctica, especially the references to being "haunted by your beauty" and "the hopeless quest of Shackleton and the dreamlike death of Scott"! Search YouTube for a performance of this song by Al and his very talented sidekick, Dave Nachmanoff.***

## George Hubert Wilkins

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## Carl Eielson

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## The First Flight

I was able to find the now-defunct U.S. Centennial of Flight Commissions' outstanding website, and its entry for "Antarctic Aerial Exploration;" it's full of information and links! See:

[https://www.centennialofflight.net/essay/Explorers\\_Record\\_Setters\\_and\\_Daredevils/south\\_pole/EX20.htm](https://www.centennialofflight.net/essay/Explorers_Record_Setters_and_Daredevils/south_pole/EX20.htm) *What a shame this wonderful resource is no longer generally available!*

Australian Antarctic Program: <https://www.antarctica.gov.au/magazine/issue-35-december-2018/history/opening-up-the-antarctic-skies>

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