

Coming home



Memorial to Sir Hubert Wilkins

TEXT BY DAVID SCOTT-MACNAB

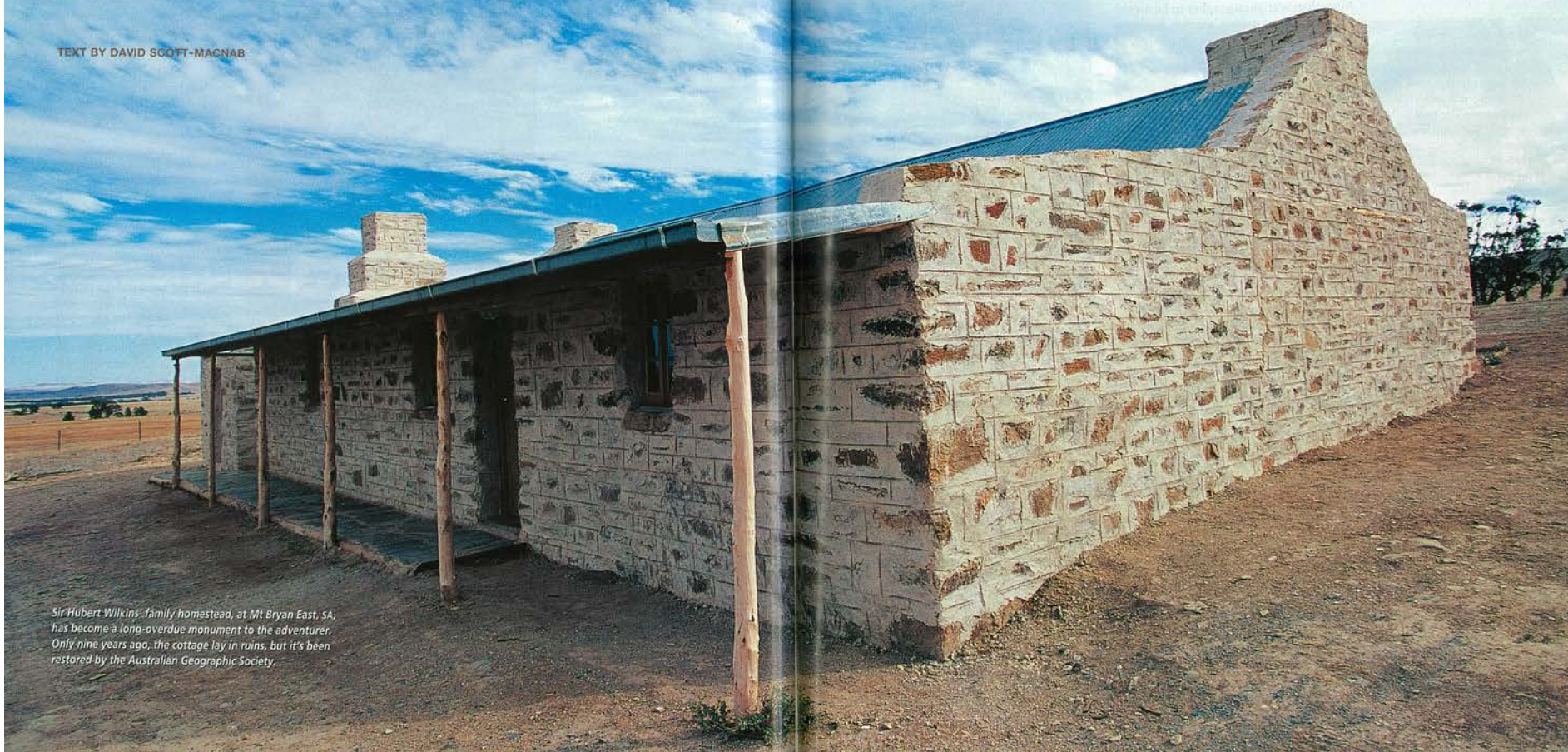
ON A CHILLY APRIL afternoon in South Australia's Mid-North, more than 500 pairs of eyes turned to the heavens to look for the aircraft whose engines could be heard as a distant throb in the still outback air.

"There it is!" yelled an excited, eagle-eyed youngster, and everyone squinted to where he was pointing.

The tri-motor Fokker – an exact replica of Sir Charles Kingsford Smith's *Southern Cross* – was little more than a distant speck, but slowly it grew larger and eventually passed directly overhead.

In the paddock below, Dick Smith, chairman of the Australian Geographic Society, was addressing an enthusiastic crowd of Society members, local well-wishers and relatives of Sir Hubert Wilkins, one of Australia's great unsung heroes, and possibly our greatest adventurer.

We'd gathered for the official opening of Sir Hubert's family homestead, newly restored with the help of donations from members, and the culmination of nine years work initiated by Dick after he spotted the homestead in ruins.



Sir Hubert Wilkins' family homestead, at Mt Bryan East, SA, has become a long-overdue monument to the adventurer. Only nine years ago, the cottage lay in ruins, but it's been restored by the Australian Geographic Society.



As the replica *SOUTHERN CROSS* flies over Sir Hubert's homestead, Society chairman Dick Smith (right) chats to the pilot by two-way radio. The original plane was once owned by Sir Hubert and flown by him in the Arctic in 1926-27. In 1931, Sir Hubert set out in his submarine *NAUTILUS* (below) for the world's first journey under the Arctic ice – an undertaking not repeated until 1958, when a US nuclear submarine, also called *NAUTILUS*, crossed the Arctic underwater.

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A life of adventure

BORN IN 1888 in the homestead at Mt Bryan East, near the township of Hallett, George Hubert Wilkins led an extraordinarily action-filled life. His interest in cinematography took him to the Balkans War of 1912, where he shot the first footage of battle and aerial combat. He was captured and beaten by brigands, enemy troops and even allied forces who thought he was a spy, and he faced three firing squads, but always escaped unharmed.

As official photographer of the Royal Australian Flying Corps in World War I, Wilkins was awarded the Military Cross for bravery on two occasions – the only Australian war photographer to be awarded such distinguished combat honours. In 1921 he joined two expeditions to Antarctica, and in 1923-25 led a scientific team through northern Australia.

Convinced that the best way to explore the world's polar regions was by air, Wilkins experimented with different aircraft in the Arctic – including the Fokker that would become famous as the *Southern Cross*. In 1928, he and US pilot Ben Eielson made the first flight across the Arctic – a journey of 3500 kilometres from Barrow, Alaska, to the Norwegian island of Spitsbergen – an achievement that earned Wilkins a knighthood from King George V of Britain. Before the end of the year, they'd also become the first airmen to fly over Antarctica.

Sir Hubert then turned his attention to explorations under the Arctic ice. He bought a submarine from the US Navy for \$1, had it refurbished and used it to dive under the polar ice in 1931. He had hoped to be able to surface at the North Pole, but numerous difficulties forced him to cut short this pioneering expedition.

By 1937, Sir Hubert was a recognised polar expert, so when a Soviet aircraft went missing in the Arctic in August that



DAVID SCOTT/MAGNUM

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year, the USSR government gladly accepted his offer to help find it. Over the next 9 months, Sir Hubert flew 284 hours over remote and uncharted territory, but failed to find the missing plane. He was nevertheless honoured by the Soviets for his efforts, and invited to Moscow to address the Russian Academy of Sciences on the scientific observations he'd made during his flights.

At the start of World War II, Sir Hubert was based in the USA, but immediately flew to Europe on a number of assignments for the US government. His plane was shot down over France by German fighters, forcing him to flee with thousands of refugees ahead of the Nazi armies. Reaching Paris, he managed to squeeze aboard one of the last planes to leave for London, where he succeeded in getting the British to place orders for new aircraft with US factories. He then set off on a series of secret missions – their purpose still unknown – one of which led to his discovery of the Japanese plan to bomb the American naval base at Pearl Harbor. Although Sir Hubert reported this information to the authorities, he wasn't believed, and had to wait for events to prove him right on 7 December 1941.

Returning to the US, Sir Hubert took on the job of Arctic Consultant to the US Army, a position he held until his death in 1958 at Framingham, Massachusetts. His wife, Lady Suzanne, declined the British Government's proposal for him to be buried in Westminster Abbey. Instead, she accepted an offer from the US Navy to scatter the explorer's ashes at the North Pole.

Sir Hubert's final journey could not have been more fitting. He had long dreamed of travelling to the North Pole by submarine, and in a sense he finally did, aboard the nuclear submarine *USS Skate*, which surfaced through the ice at the Pole on 17 March 1959. After a brief ceremony, a firing squad gave a final salute and Sir Hubert's ashes were scattered in the polar winds.

Sir Hubert remembered

AT THE TIME of his death, Sir Hubert had been honoured by several countries, including Norway, the USA, the UK and Italy, and was one of the best-known explorers in the world, yet he was almost unknown in the country of his birth. Listening to the recollections of relatives who'd travelled from all over Australia



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to be at the opening of the homestead, it's not difficult to discover why. Everyone remembers "Uncle George" as a supremely modest man. "He was very quiet, very retiring," said Clarice Williams, Sir Hubert's niece, who'd travelled from Adelaide for the celebrations. "He never pushed himself forward, and never talked about himself. But he always stayed in touch with his family, and loved the simple things in life. When he came to visit us on the farm near Port Pirie after one of his expeditions, I remember him saying,

Cramped but meticulous, Sir Hubert – seen here at a typewriter in his quarters aboard his submarine NAUTILUS – kept detailed records of all his expeditions, and the many scientific experiments he and his team conducted. The calendar behind him is open at June, the month in which NAUTILUS crossed the Atlantic from New York to Norway.



PHOTOS: DAVID SCOTT-MAGNAB



The opening of Sir Hubert's homestead attracted several generations of his relatives, including (top) Clarice Williams, 95, and Neta Lang, 82, both nieces of the explorer, whom they remember well. Damien Venema (above, at left), his cousin Georgina Spanos, sister Sonja and cousin Jon Spanos are all great-grandchildren of Sir Hubert's sister, Annie.

'Fancy sitting down to farm ham and farm cream again'."

Carolyn Robinson, of Brisbane, the explorer's great-niece, agreed. "He was very unassuming, and came across as just another member of the family. Though, of course, we were all told about the amazing things he did, and the family was very proud of him."

Dick Smith contributed his own theory about why Sir Hubert has been neglected. "He was just too successful," Dick told me. "He was a superb risk manager, and only ever lost one man on all his expeditions (through no fault of his own), so he never became notorious, as others did."



Alan Craig, Sir Hubert's nephew, was equally admiring. "He was always game to try anything once, was Uncle George. When he took his sub under the Arctic ice, he didn't get as far as he wanted because his crew got windy and virtually mutinied. But he'd have gone much further if he could."

A fitting monument

LITTLE HAS CHANGED in the windswept landscape surrounding Sir Hubert's boyhood home. Set on a slight rise among rolling, grassy plains, the cottage looks out on a long ridge of low hills. To the south-west, Mt Bryan (933 m) and Razorback (863 m) rise prominently above the largely bare, undulating countryside. It occurred to me that with the cottage restored, we were probably seeing exactly the same scenes Sir Hubert would have known back in the 1890s.

The afternoon had a festive air, and a strong sense of fulfilment. For many people, the restored cottage provided a tangible link with Sir Hubert, whose memory had faded with the passing years. And the opening ceremony marked a long-overdue homecoming for a man who'd spent so much of his life at the furthest corners of the earth.

Yet none of this would have happened without the enthusiasm and dedication of the explorer's many admirers, whose efforts had succeeded in creating the only significant memorial to Sir Hubert in his homeland. Australian Geographic director Howard Whelan told the gathering: "We hope that this memorial to Sir Hubert will inspire Australian adventurers for generations to come."

As the *Southern Cross* passed overhead for the last time, dipping its wings in salute, everyone cheered and waved enthusiastically. Dick Smith then

declared the homestead open, and invited everyone to look inside.

Builder Neil Schiller, from the nearby town of Burra, was pleased with his work. "It was practically just a pile of stones, with only the one side wall containing a fireplace standing when I started," he said. But a careful survey of the site allowed Neil to painstakingly reconstruct the homestead using authentic materials.

As people queued patiently for their turn to see the rooms in which Sir Hubert would have spent his childhood, tea and scones flowed from the refreshments tent, to music provided by the Clare Valley Concert Band.

Late in the afternoon, with the sun about to set, Sir Hubert's relatives and admirers were still swapping stories about the great man. "It's such a shame that he's been so forgotten in Australia," said Carolyn, "but perhaps this monument will start to change that."

Inspired by a day of celebration, the Clare Valley Concert Band strikes up *I STILL CALL AUSTRALIA HOME* — an appropriate tune for Sir Hubert, who spent most of his adult life overseas, but was always a proud and patriotic Australian.

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