

# To the North Pole

**I**t was one of Dick Smith's ambitions to fly a helicopter to the North Pole. His love of helicopters springs from the sense that flying in them is, he says, like flying on a magic carpet. The visibility from them is also excellent. 'Whenever you spy something of interest,' he says, 'you can simply land and have a look.'

Dick had had a pilot's licence since 1973. This licence was to fly fixed-wing aircraft. The term

fixed-wing aircraft is an aeronautical term used to distinguish aeroplanes from other aircraft such as helicopters, rockets, balloons and hang gliders. In 1975 he had bought an aeroplane for himself, but the discovery of how thrilling a helicopter ride is – he discovered this while searching for the wreckage of The Kookaburra in 1977 – led him to buy a Bell JetRanger helicopter in 1979. All he had to then do was learn how to fly it



Dick Smith

Dick has flown all over Australia in his helicopter.

and get a helicopter licence. The helicopter then became the family's main means of transport.

Whizzing about the countryside in a helicopter is very different from attempting to fly the machine to the North Pole. As always, Dick Smith looked to his aviation heroes for inspiration. In this case it was the example of Hubert Wilkins that inspired him (see box).

### **If at first you don't succeed ...**

Dick Smith's first attempt to reach the North Pole, in 1986, failed. He almost made it, but he had to give up just 670 kilometres short of his destination because his navigation equipment was beginning to fail and visibility had dropped to almost zero. Under those conditions it would have been foolish to go on. Depressed about having to turn back, the very low temperatures added to Dick's troubles. The cockpit of his helicopter was not heated and the temperature had dropped to  $-38^{\circ}\text{C}$ . He was particularly miserable because he had planned to fly a helicopter from pole to pole that same year. It began to look as if he couldn't even complete a trip to one pole, let alone both of



Dick Smith

Dick, dressed for the cold on his way to the North Pole.

them. Despite this disappointment, 1986 provided Dick Smith with a real highlight – he was named Australian of the Year.

Never one to give up, Dick Smith made two more attempts to reach the North Pole in his JetRanger Helicopter. The third attempt, in April 1987, was successful. It would not have been successful had he not been able to refuel in parts of the Arctic Circle where fuel was not available. He had the fuel delivered in an aircraft called the Twin Otter. This aeroplane could land and take off on ice or water and it could fly three times further than the helicopter on a tank of fuel. When Dick



### **Helicopters**

*'Let me make it clear that I love helicopters. Helicopters are the ultimate off-road vehicles.'*

reached the pole, his wife Pip was there to meet him and to take fuel out onto the ice for him. She had arrived in the Twin Otter.

The Twin Otter fixed-wing aircraft so impressed Dick with its capabilities that he decided that

he would use one, rather than a helicopter, to fly from pole to pole. Having become the first person to fly a helicopter to the North Pole, he began preparing to make this epic flight from pole to pole. For Dick Smith there is always one more adventure, one more challenge.

### **Sir George Hubert Wilkins (1888–1958)**

Sir George Hubert Wilkins is one of the most extraordinary explorers Australia has produced. Dick Smith believes that his achievements are underappreciated, that his name should be as familiar to us as Bert Hinkler or Kingsford Smith.

Wilkins was born in South Australia at Mount Bryan East. When he was 20 years old he worked his way to the United Kingdom. He was among the first people to experiment with parachuting and saw the potential for aerial photography at a very early stage. He worked as a photographer with a London newspaper and then with a newsreel company. He took some of the earliest known film footage of combat during the Balkans War of 1912–13.

Between 1913 and 1916 Wilkins worked in the Canadian Arctic. He did more than take photographs. He was second in command of a scientific expedition and he proved himself remarkably talented in a number of scientific fields. He also revealed a particular talent for polar travel, which in those days was incredibly difficult, uncomfortable and dangerous.

Wilkins became an official photographer attached to the Military History Department of the Australian Government and his work took him into the heat of battle. Showing enormous courage under fire, he was twice wounded and was awarded the Military Cross for bravery.

After World War I, Wilkins was appointed second in command of the British Imperial Antarctic Expedition of 1920–21. In 1922 he was the photographer on the great Antarctic explorer Shackleton's last expedition. Shackleton's work in the Antarctic convinced Wilkins that there was a place for aircraft in the exploration of the Earth's polar regions. In 1926 Wilkins bought two planes and had them shipped to Alaska. From there, with his co-pilot Ben Eilson, he made several flights including one over the Polar Basin. The following year they did an aerial survey of the area known as the Pole of Relative Inaccessibility. On the flight back from this remote place the plane ran out of fuel and had to be abandoned. Wilkins and Eilson walked for 13 gruelling days over drifting ice before they reached safety.

On 16 November 1928 Wilkins made the first Antarctic flight. He made further flights over areas of Antarctica, mapping the landscape. Demonstrating the extraordinary breadth of his abilities, he went on to prove the feasibility of using submarines under pack ice. Until the outbreak of World War II, Wilkins continued Arctic and Antarctic explorations. In all he made more than 30 polar expeditions. He won many awards for his work and was knighted in 1928. He died in the United States on 1 December 1958. His ashes were scattered over the North Pole.