

SIR HUBERT WILKINS IN SEARCH FOR THE LOST SOVIET AVIATORS

Somewhere in the Arctic wastes, probably in the Arctic Ocean, lies the wreckage of an airplane in which on August 12, 1937, six Russians led by [Sigismund Levanevsky](#) set out to fly across the North Pole from Moscow to Fairbanks, Alaska.

The plane never reached Fairbanks. For seven months after the plane disappeared, searching parties from Russia, Canada and Alaska flew over the Arctic seeking the lost flyers. I had the honor of leading one of the searching expeditions which operated north from Canada and Alaska. No trace of the missing machine or its crew has yet been found. Our expedition, however, was not wholly in vain, for we flew over and explored 170 000 square miles of the Arctic Ocean of which at least 150000 square miles, an area, larger than Montana, had never before been seen by human eyes.

We flew a total distance of 44000 miles, made the first winter flights by moonlight ever undertaken in the Arctic, and gained experience which I believe will greatly increase the usefulness of airplanes in the Arctic during the months of winter.

Levanevsky's ill-fated flight followed the brilliant success of two single-engined airplane flights from Moscow to the United States earlier in 1937. He had a four-engined plane, and with his improved equipment success seemed assured. He had passed the North Pole and was some 300 miles on the Alaskan side when his last authentic message was received.

On the basis of that message Professor [Otto Y. Schmidt](#), In Charge of the Northern Sea Route Administration of the USSR, directed the search to an area along the line of 148 degrees west longitude and between the Alaskan coast and the North Pole.

The search was begun at once. One pilot of the MacKenzie Air Service started a flight along the Alaskan coast on August 14, landing and questioning every group of Eskimos he saw. Only one group, on Barter Island, off Alaska, reported a clue.

These Eskimos, busy butchering reindeer for the fall food supply, had heard what they thought to be the roar of an outboard motor. They could see no sign of a boat, however, and as the noise lasted only a few minutes, they resumed their butchering. On the basis of this report, several American and Russian flyers searched the Alaskan mountains from the air, but without result.

On August 15, I was asked by Counselor [Constantine A. Oumansky](#), then Charge d'Affairs of the Soviet Embassy in Washington, to assist in the search.

In my opinion August is the least favorable month to fly in the Arctic, especially in a plane fitted with wheels, as was Leveneovsky's. At that time of the year the Arctic floe ice is much broken. The summer rains have melted the ice surface and deep gutters have been cut in the ice, making it treacherous for any landing on wheels. There was, in my opinion, only one type of machine suitable for the search - a long range flying boat.

The difficulties encountered with the weather during our first two flights pointed to the need for some weather forecast to prevent a great deal of useless flying. We wirelessly to the Soviet Embassy in Washington, requesting further meteorological co-operation, and received immediate response. Not only the Governments of the United States, Canada and Russia, but the meteorological bureaus of all other countries bordering the Arctic Ocean agreed to furnish reports having a bearing on Arctic conditions.

Mr. Edward M. Vernon, of the United States Weather Bureau, was sent to Fairbanks to assist Mr. Michael V. Beliakov, the Soviet meteorologist, in correlating all the data and issuing to us a 36-hour forecast of weather conditions over the whole of the Polar area.

Thus we obtained extensive international co-operation in forecasting weather over the arctic regions (*One more Australian - flight engineer Brown took part in the search - VK*). Throughout our search, the forecasts given by [Beliakov](#), Vernon, and later by Mr. Howard J. Thompson, also of the United States Weather Bureau, were remarkably accurate. The information from the Russian North Pole station, adrift on the ice, was extremely valuable, and we also had helpful reports from Spitzbergen, Greenland, Fridtjof Nansen Land (Franz Josef land), New Siberian Islands and Wrangel Island.

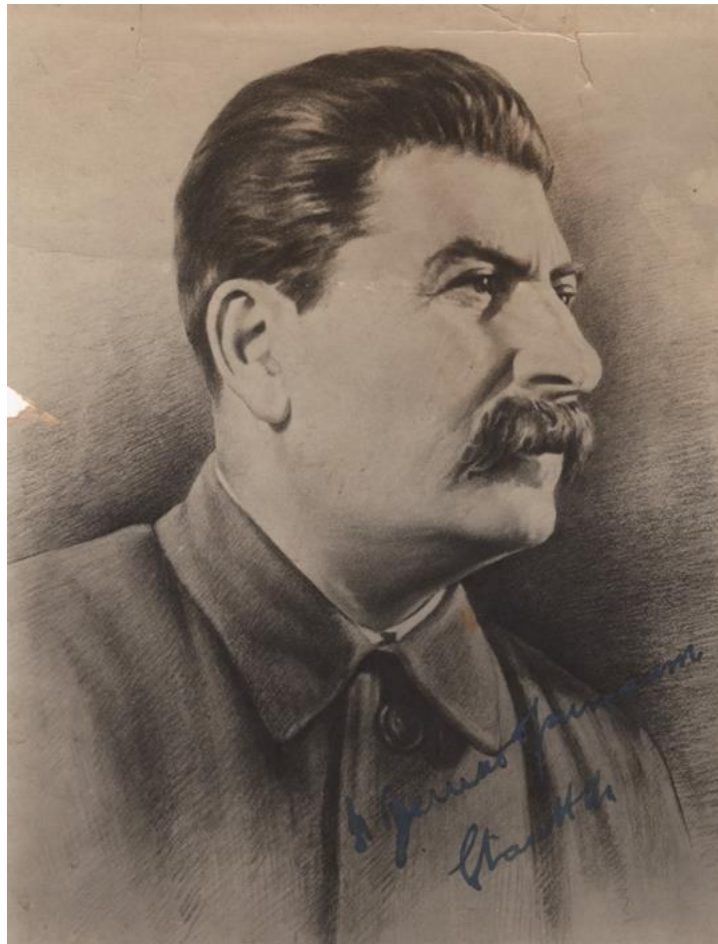
At the end of the season for flying boats, there came a period in which it would have been impossible to fly, for the thin ice on the water would not be strong enough to support a machine on skis. The Soviet Embassy in Washington, most anxious to continue the search, bought for me the plane flown by Dick Merrill across the Atlantic and back in May 1937. Skis were fitted on it at Edmonton, Alberta.

We were looking forward to making two more single flights over the Arctic before the season for using skis would close, about the end of March [1938]. But upon our return from the last long flight, I received a telegram from Ambassador [Troyanovsky](#), of the USSR, informing me that the Soviet Government had decided to stop all searches from the Alaskan and Canadian coasts. We flew over to New York, arriving March 25.

We regret sincerely that our efforts did not succeed in locating Levanevsky. While I think that there is very little chance for his safety, it seems to me not impossible that he or some of his crew may some day find their way back to civilization.

But even should they not return, their efforts - perhaps more than those of any others - will inspire their development which eventually will open the shortest routes for aerial transportation between the big cities of the Northern hemisphere.

In June 1938, upon completion of his search, by invitation of Stalin Wilikins visited the USSR where he was received at the highest level. A special excursion in Moscow and Leningrad program was organized for him. He held a speech in the Soviet Academy of Science. However, no more details of this episode of his life are known. There is a Stalin's photo presented to him by the Soviet leader during their personal meeting...



That very photo...

By Sir Hubert Wilkins. Our Search for the Lost Aviators. An Arctic Area larger Than Montana First explored in Hunt for Missing Russians. The National Geographic Magazine. Vol. LXXIV, No. 2. August, 1938