Special End-of-Season Photo Edition
February 7, 1999

The Antarctic Sun

Published during the austral summer for the United States Antarctic Program at McMurdo Station, Antarctica.

Karen Pavich, one of 10 operations general assistants working at McMurdo Station this season, steadies barrels of water in a parked vehicle. Pavich spends her days at McMurdo and surrounding field camps doing everything from shoveling to stocking the freezer. Recalling a season of diverse manual tasks, Pavich said, "Gosh, it's all flown by so fast."

Low on the Totem Pole; High on Antarctic Experience

Life as a McMurdo GA

Story and photos by Ginny Figlar

It's 7:30 a.m., and operations general assistant Karen Pavich is ready to receive her fate for the day from labor pool foreman Barb Propst.

"You guys are working with Greg Krauss today," Propst tells Pavich and fellow GA Ty Milford. "He has some clean-up job for you."

That clean-up job is scrubbing the floor of building 121, where rotted beer and soda have seeped out of cartons and onto the metal floor of the warehouse. It smells like a fraternity house the day after a big bash, and brown, gooey puddles poke out from under stacks of wooden pallets.

"Ooh, this is a rancid mess," Pavich said with a grin.

Most people would cringe at the thought of being up to the elbows in this kind of filth. Instead, Pavich takes it in stride.

"This is a good duty," she said. "If I could pick jobs I'd probably pick this one.

"Maybe I should be irritated with work like this, but I'm not," she added.

Pavich, with just the kind of attitude Propst looks for in a GA, is one of 10 people chosen this season out of an applicant pool of 300 to do McMurdo's dirty work. Best described as the hired hands of the station, GAs do everything from counting bolts to flagging snow roads to chipping ice out from under buildings.

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INSIDE

20 Years On Ice

This month, two Antarctic Support Associates employees, Jules Uberuaga and Rob Robbins, have each worked in Antarctica every year for the last 20 years. In recognition of their dedication to the U.S. Antarctic Program, *The Antarctic Sun* decided to sit down with these two Ice veterans to get an inside perspective on their tenure.

Jules Uberuaga, a heavy equipment operator from Idaho, shares her insights on life on Ice.

What was your first job?

I was a General Field Assistant at South Pole Station.

Why did you want to come to Antarctica, and did you think you'd be sticking around this long?

Well actually, my mother worked for the company and she encouraged me to take the job two years before I actually did. And I wasn't that keen initially to come here at all. They recruited me into the company and sent me a brochure, and I started to read about it. Then, I read "Endurance," and I got excited. So I decided to come. And, no, not only did I not want to stick around, but I did two seasons at the South Pole and then I didn't sign up again. They actually called me and said why don't you come back.

How was the program different in 1979?

It was smaller, probably more elite. I believe that they required you to have a lot more skills than now. To work at the South Pole Station as a GFA, I had to have heavy equipment operator skills. To be a shuttle bus driver, you had to be able to perform your own periodic maintenance on the vans, and you had to have at the time what would have been a chauffeur's license.

What significant changes have you seen in the 20 years since then?

More efficiency in equipment; a lot bigger population; tremendous amount of modern conveniences, communications mainly I would say, living situation in town; certainly equality in the population in town; less disparity in gender. On the downside, I would say you're starting to see things like more theft and it's lost a lot of the old flair or flavor of a very small town. You're starting to get some of those big-city attributes. So there's good and bad.

Jules Uberuaga, who has been a U.S. Antarctic Program participant for 20 years, spends the afternoon in the Challenger, pulling fuel tanks and maintaining the road to Pegasus. Photo by Ginny Figlar.

If you were in charge, what's one thing you would change about the program?

Because it's so transient here year to year, you lose knowledge. It's problematic. Somehow some better standard operating procedures should be carried through, so people don't reinvent the wheel every year.

Have you had any "scary" or life-threatening experiences?

Sure. I was a passenger in a fuels delta that had a malfunction at the Scott Base hill. It drove off the cliff and I jumped out right before it went off the cliff. Got hit in the head with a 4x4. Fell 33 feet on a construction project. I've driven a Cat over a building that was buried and went through the roof.

What advice do you have for people who are considering making Antarctic work a career?

What's helped me is that I have a home, I have a place that I love. While I really love it here, it hasn't become the center of my universe. I say this because I know people who have nothing else.

If you weren't working in Antarctica year after year, what do you think you'd be doing?

Oh, I'd probably be doing a similar type job in Idaho.

What kinds of things do you do in the off-season?

I work heavy equipment a little bit and then mainly stay up in my mountain lair. I kayak, backpack, work on my house, hang out with my parents, fish.

You are being nominated to have a geographical feature named after you. Have you given any thought to what peak or area you'd like your name on?

No. I feel honored just to be nominated even if it doesn't happen.

You've been to a lot of different places around the continent. What's your favorite? Is there an area of Antarctica you've been dying to get to?

The Dry Valleys would be a favorite spot. I'd like to go somewhere along the coast, like Cape Crozier. The top of Erebus -- I've never been there.

What keeps you coming back to the Ice?

Money and familiarity. I love the landscape, and I love to be able to work in an isolated place. I like being in the winter and having daylight instead of long winter nights. I have a great job, and I work with great people.

Think you'll make it another 20 years?

No. I mean it's just human nature. Who would have thought I would have lasted the first one? I never envisioned this. ✹

The Antarctic Sun, part of the United States Antarctic Program, is funded by the National Science Foundation. Opinions and conclusions expressed in The Sun are not necessarily those of the Foundation.

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20 Years On Ice

Rob Robbins, McMurdo's diving coordinator, muses on 20 consecutive years of seasonal Antarctic work.

What was your first job?

I came down as a GFA, I worked in the Chalet. I worked for Jim Chambers my first season. General Field Assistant is the same as GA is now.

Why did you want to come to Antarctica, and did you think you'd be sticking around this long?

I never thought I'd stick around this long. I worked for Holmes and Narver out on Johnson Island for three years, and since they had the contract here and there I met a few people that had come down here to work, and I thought, wow, that's something I'd really like to do, go down to Antarctica someday.

How was the program different in 1979?

The biggest difference, I think, is the makeup of the population. Most of the people in McMurdo then were Navy. And the civilian contractor had a relatively small presence. And so you were part of a smaller community.

What significant changes have you seen in the 20 years since then?

I'd say the couple of biggest things is just the environmental deal. The first year I was here the dump was along the shoreline of Winter Quarters Bay and then it moved up to Fortress Rocks.There is no place that has an environmental attitude that McMurdo does. Everything goes back, gets separated. I think it is really amazing.

If you were in charge, what's one thing you would change about the program?

My biggest concern is the inequity in getting people out and I think that actually has changed from a system that was slightly more fair to now, which I think is not very fair at all. It used to be the 'boondoggle list' was fairly well regulated. It was a total lottery. It was a lot nicer. I can't complain. I get out all the time. It really bums me out that other people don't.

Have you had any "scary" or life-threatening experiences?

During the winter of '81 we had a camp out at White Island with Randy Davis, studying a Weddell seal population out there. We took a spryte out to look at the seals and when we came back we were following our tracks and we broke through a crevasse. We got out and looked and it was huge. That would have been bad.

Rob Robbins, McMurdo's diving coordinator, assists biology course diver Adam Marsh with a dive under the sea ice of McMurdo Sound. Photo by Ginny Figlar.

What advice do you have for people who are considering making Antarctic work a career?

I think it's a great place to work, I mean obviously, I've been doing it quite awhile. I encourage people. I think it is good for the program to have that continuity.

If you weren't working in Antarctica year after year, what do you think you'd be doing?

I'd probably be working as a diver in the Gulf. It seems likely. And this is much better than that.

What kinds of things do you do in the off-season?

I have a ranch in Oregon. I raise llamas, so that takes a lot of time. I go back and work around the ranch.

You are being nominated to have a geographical feature named after you. Have you given any thought to what peak or area you'd like your name on?

Yes. Just last season I spent about 17 days out a Pyramid cache which is just up the Cutletts Glacier. It's a nice area. I liked it. I was out there with Vince Gordon, the skidoo mechanic. We really had a good time. Something out there would be great.

You've been to a lot of different places around the continent. What's your favorite? Is there an area of Antarctica you've been dying to get to?

I'd say out of every place I've ever been in the world, Wright Valley has got to be the most spectacular spot. I really think that is a really nice spot. I'd love to go just about anywhere, there is so much to see down here -- anywhere new is always exciting.

What keeps you coming back to the Ice?

The draw is the scenery, but the lifestyle is hard to beat. I can come down here and work for five months, and although the last few years I spend significant amount of time in Denver, for quite a few years it was down here and I was home the rest of the year - that was very nice.

Think you'll make it another 20 years?

No way. I don't think so. Five years ago I didn't have a plan. I thought I'd just keep doing it. I'm planning on coming back next year. It's kind of a season-by-season thing.

Anything else you'd like to add?

It's really been a great experience for me. I met my wife down here. Being here has allowed us to buy a ranch, it's been an important part of my life. It's a great place -- a great place to work.

Pavich, working the night shift on a particularly cold evening, monitors fuel pumps near the D Farm while listening to the radio for further instruction. One of Pavich's many secrets to keeping warm is to stuff hand warmers into every pocket of her jacket. "Always have more than you need," she said.

Life as a GA

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"It's work that's not very glamorous," Propst admitted. "So they have to be able to roll with it and be happy."

To be hired, they also have to have a résumé that's all over the map. "What I'm looking for are people who have a lot of different job skills," she said, describing an ideal candidate as hardy, smart, outdoorsy and in possession of a great personality.

"Anytime I get a hint of arrogance they go in the reject pile," she added.

Now finishing her third season as labor pool foreman, Propst knows how to find what she's looking for. Aside from finding people who possess personalities that can mesh with diverse people all over McMurdo and surrounding field camps, the bottom line is that she needs to know if an applicant can handle the workload.

"You have to ask pointed questions," she said. "How do you feel about shoveling snow for 10 hours a day for seven days in a row?"

Pavich obviously passed the test. And the probing prepared her for what she was in for as a GA.

"There were no surprises," Pavich said. Propst told her it was "nasty work," she said. "We were going to get paid very little and work our rear-ends off."

And work in the freezing cold. For fuel offload, Pavich worked 12-hour night shifts outside to help with the unloading of 6 million gallons of fuel. On her second night, with a constant, biting wind, she was stationed at the fuel pumps near the D Farm, taking breaks in a truck to warm up.

Sitting in the truck, at her feet, is her bag of tricks -- a back-

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Pavich, left, stands in the muck of building 121, where she spent most of the day scrubbing rotted soda and beer off the floor.

With a smile, Pavich receives her task of the day from labor pool foreman Barb Propst at their daily morning meeting.

As night pier announcer for ship offload, Pavich keeps track of the cargo being hoisted off the M/V Greenwave.

With gusty, cold winds blowing at her face, Pavich sits on top of the D-2 fuel tank while dipping a weighted tape measure inside to determine the amount of fuel.

A GA's job never ends as Pavich takes it upon herself to wash the windows of a van.

Life as a GA

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pack filled with all the necessities of someone who often has to be a quick-change artist as jobs change daily and even hourly. Pavich reveals the contents: insulated coveralls, polar fleece jacket, three pairs of socks, extra mittens, sunscreen, goggles, hats, a camera, safety pins, first-aid kit, water bottle and, the most critical item, food. "If I took out all the food out of this backpack it would weigh 5 pounds less," she said.

"Everyone carries something different," she added. "Mary won't leave home without her walkman."

Kept on their toes, they never know what's in store for the day. And Propst likes it that way. She said she keeps the jobs diverse so the GAs won't get burnt out.

Pavich, who is most recently from Duluth, Minn., is no stranger to odd jobs. She has cleaned houses, bartended and, for the last seven years, worked full-time in a retail store. Her life of random work started as a teenager.

"When I got done with high school (in California), I packed up and moved to a dairy farm in Wisconsin," she said. "It was the single-most valuable experience with training."

As a hired hand on the farm, she fixed equipment and worked with a lot of different people and animals. "If I was standing knee-deep in cow manure, I was standing knee-deep in cow manure," she said nonchalantly of the grueling conditions of her farm work.

There's no cow manure in Antarctica, but that doesn't mean there aren't crappy jobs. Propst said two of the worst jobs this season were chipping ice out from under building 155 and cleaning Ansul out of every nook and cranny in building 174.

"You can do anything if you work with good enough people," Pavich explained.

Her unwavering optimism and glass-is-half-full attitude makes one wonder if the other nine GAs are as enthusiastic as she. "I would think they would have to be or they would go crazy," Pavich said.

Her experience as a GA has been such a positive one that she wants to come back to the Ice next year. She'd even come back as a GA if it weren't for the low pay. While Propst said she does think GAs deserve a slightly bigger salary, she's glad the job doesn't pay too well.

"If they got paid too much they'd stick around," Propst said. "I do not encourage them to come back as a GA."

Instead, Propst said she hopes they'll move on to a new job. Of anyone on station, GAs are in the perfect position to do just that because they are so mobile.

One of the most famous GA-turned-management U.S. Antarctic Program participants is Bill Haals, manager of operations at McMurdo, who got his foot in the door as a GA in 1988. Back then, he chipped ice out from under building 155 just as GAs did this season.

He recommends the job because GAs get to meet almost everybody and learn all the different aspects of the program. "It's not the highest paid job in the world," Haals said, "but it can be the most fun."

One perk is getting to work out at field camps, such as Lake Hoare, Upstream D, Siple Dome and Ford Ranges. "These guys have a really good deal, especially with the field work," Propst said. "They've all gotten out at least twice."

For GAs, the perks of their hard work may seem few and far between the endless days of sore shoulders and numb fingers. But, at the end of the day, satisfaction can be had in the roles that they have played in the progress of the U.S. Antarctic Program.

"Most of the functions that happen around here would not happen without the GAs," Haals said. "To me, they are the unsung heroes of this place." ✹

Operations general assistants for the 1998/1999 summer season are Carl Burdick, Anja Curiskis, Reed Gard, Ashley Giles, Liz Gorrilla, Mike Sobel, Mary Leonard, Ty Milford, Laura Porter and Karen Pavich.

Hefting an extension ladder up onto an elevated fuel storage tank, Murray helps train her fellow firefighters. “The question is: did we use our time to properly train for what might happen,” said Murray. “We train all the time, but we also conduct fire safety inspections and basically teach fire prevention.

The training never stops for, from left, Carl Giacchi, Shonda Murray, Sharon Digiacomo, Mike Satorie and Tom Horton who await a live-fire training exercise. Murray, a fire lieutenant and one of five women on McMurdo’firefighting force, dismisses any gender comparison with the men she works with. “Idon’t have any problems with the guys. They treat me well and give me respect, and I’m their boss,” she said with a smile. “They have to do what Isay.”

Fire on Ice

Story and photos by Alexander Colhoun

They may be some of the most misunderstood workers in McMurdo.

Thirty-eight strong, men and women of the continent's only fully-manned fire station stand by 24 hours a day, prepared for the worst, regularly putting in 72-hour work weeks.

Following standards established by fire stations throughout the metro Denver area, the McMurdo fire department may be the southernmost fire station in the world, but its routine and standard operating procedures are nearly identical to those of its brethren farther north

Despite these similarities, with half the week free to do as they please, there is a perception that firefighters here simply don't work. "Not everyone in town hates us," said Shonda Murray, a Missouri-based firefighter. "But there is a big number that does."

That's a perception McMurdo's Fire Chief Dave Turley, a 17-year veteran of firefighting, is working to change. "I've got a great bunch of people who have done a fantastic job," Turley said. "They're turning the image around in this community. I'd take every one of them back (next season)."

Turning the image around means getting firefighters out and about within the community. A typical work morning finds Murray studying emergency medicine or structural firefighting. In the afternoon Murray and her team hit the town, making fire inspections or using the water truck to help clean culverts around the station.

Despite their hard work, however, the lazy firefighter image is tough to break."It's a bittersweet way to look at it," Turley said. "People hope we aren't used but they are disappointed when we're not."

It's a double-edged sword that leaves Murray frustrated but resigned to her fate. "If we have to do our job, something really bad will have to happen," she said. "Someone will get hurt, property will be

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With training finished and a night to kill, Murray and Sharon Digiacomo run through plans for future workouts. “Iwork out a lot. It’s a big part of my days off,” said Murray, who can bench press 140 pounds.

fire on ice

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damaged. It's just better if it doesn't happen."

In recent years there haven’t been fires, and the department has seen their role shift toward emergency medical services. Last year, firefighters were called upon to resuscitate the victim of a heart attack, and they succeeded. "You can build another building, you can find another plane if it burns," said Turley, "but you can rarely bring someone back from the dead as we did last year."

Not that fires never occur. In 1985, the Heavy Shop burned to the ground, in 1991, the Chapel was lost to fire and in 1997, the wood chipper was damaged by fire but saved from complete destruction.

Structural fires, however, are only half the job. McMurdo's firefighters are also responsible for watching over the ice runway which is busier than ever. With flights coming and going throughout the day, the airfield firecrew spends much of their day on alert, ready to work.

Despite their efforts, it may be the firefighter destiny to work unrecognized and uncelebrated, like so many workers in McMurdo; which may explain why Shonda Murray turns to her fellow firefighters for support.

"We look out for one another, it's a big brother/sisterhood," said Murray. "We're one big family, but it is like that all over the world -- you always look out for your fellow firefighter." ✹

Live-fire exercises are rare in Antarctica, but highly valued by the firefighters who work here. “I wish we could do more live burns,” Murray said. “But with the dry climate and the (Antarctic) Treaty, it is hard to do.”

The future looks bright for Murray, who has plans to attend smoke-jumping school. “This summer I’ll test for different fire departments around the United States and look for a full-time position,”she said. “But working down here has been a great experience. I’d like to winter-over next year. I’d really like to experience the night.”

She's Phenomenal: Polar Sea

by Ensign Sherry Hume, U.S. Coast Guard

Reaching for open water, a fresh crack is created by the ice breaker's bow. Photo by Ginny Figlar.

Greeted by two Emperor penguins on the temporary ice of the Ross Sea, I felt removed from my own existence. Never before had I imagined that I would be seeing these wonders in my lifetime nor doing the job that I do.

As an officer of the deck, I stand over 100-feet tall while driving the ship from the aloft Conn. Polar Sea is under my command. Yet, I am merely a slave to it and the ice, for they are more powerful than I.

Polar Sea glides on top of the ice floe and crushes it with her weight. She has so much power and grace. Upon meeting the ice and giving no options for pressure relief or escape. large chunks of blue ice can do nothing but turn on end and step aside, allowing Polar Sea to pass on through to her goal.

Nothing can stop this woman, Polar Sea.

As for the crew of Polar Sea, we work hard. Whether in port or underway, the crew is working shifts around the clock to ensure that the Polar Sea can meet, endure, and surpass the challenges that are presented to her.

The U.S. Coast Guard and Polar Sea have given us all this unique opportunity for travel and adventure. However, with this adventure comes loneliness, homesickness, frustration, restlessness and even seasickness. Even

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Seen through the window of a U.S. Coast Guard helicopter, a member of the Coast Guard waits for a command after preparing the helicopter for take-off. Photo by Ginny Figlar.

Despite a crowded ship on last Sunday's morale cruise, one McMurdo resident managed to find some quiet time looking out across the Ross Sea. Photo by Alexander Colhoun.

polar sea

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sleeping becomes a challenge. I for one got accustomed to the noise and vibrations of the ship. But when they decided to stop for the night, I couldn't sleep.

Since our arrival into the cold world of the Antarctic, we have seen many wonders, which neither postcards, pictures nor words can capture. But we shall never forget the loud sounds of the turbines, the vibrations of the ship, the sounds of the crackling ice from the fo'c'sle or the magical blocks of blue ice rolling by our sides.

Even now that the channel has been broken and Mother Nature has taken over; I'm in awe at what we've accomplished. I remember seeing that vast sheet of ice and wondering how we were going to break out McMurdo. But we did it.

For some, Antarctica marks the beginning of their travels and careers. For others, it marks the end. But for all, it's an adventure. ✹

A familiar scene at the ice pier for the last month, the Coast Guard ice breaker, Polar Sea, takes a break from its voyages out to sea. Photo by Alexander Colhoun.

U.S. Coast Guard members prepare to dock at the McMurdo ice pier after a four-hour cruise to the ice edge. Photo by Alexander Colhoun.

The snowy day couldn't keep the skuas away as this one glides next to the ship, with Observation Hill standing in the distance. Photo by Alexander Colhoun.

Historic Campaign Ends; VXE-6 Departs the Antarctic

Story by Maj. Ada Johnston,
N.Y. Air National Guard
•
Photos by Eddie Martens,
Naval photographer

Then, 1956

Battling high winds and plummeting temperatures, Navy fliers struggle to hold up an American flag in this historic image made at the South Pole. The plane behind them is an R-4D, which was used until the early 1960s when it was replaced by LC-47s, the Navy's hardy, ski-equipped cargo plane. Navy photo.

A historical season will come to a close this month as VXE-6, the Naval unit supporting Operation Deep Freeze, is formally disestablished.

The U.S. Navy has provided air transport for the Antarctic operation in support of scientific research and exploration for 44 consecutive years. This historical flying squadron was commissioned in January 1955.

"In this final year of the Navy to Air Force transition, VXE-6 is serving a very important role. They are providing additional airlift capacity and most important they are transferring their valuable operational knowledge and experience in Antarctic operations to the 109th," said Col. Rich Saburro, the commander of Operation Deep Freeze.

Established as Air Development Squadron Six (VX-6) at Naval Air Station, Patuxent River, Md., VX-6's mission was to conduct operations in support of the U.S. Department of Defense in connection with the U.S. Antarctic Program. Following its relocation to Naval Air Station Quonset Point, R.I., VX-6 made its first deployment, Deep Freeze 1, in 1955.

Deep Freeze 1961 marked the arrival of the ski-equipped LC-130 Hercules. In 1969 VX-6 was redesignated as Antarctic Development Squadron SIX (VXE-6). Deep Freeze 1988 was a particularly challenging season. A medical evacuation to the South African station of Sanae broke the record for time and distance in a single Antarctic flight. Another highlight of the season was the recovery of a LC-130 that had been buried in ice and snow since

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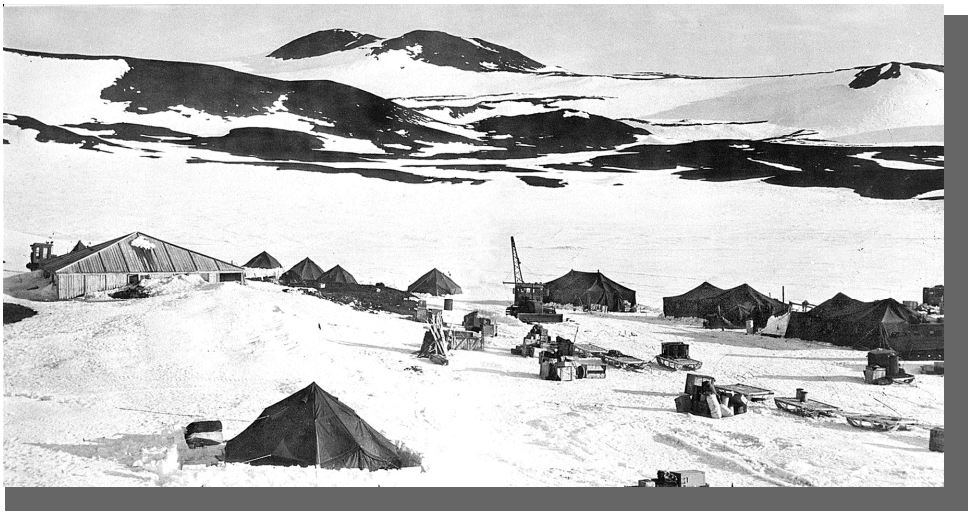
Now, 1999

Aircraft used in the Antarctic today have an array of technology that would amaze Naval fliers of the 1950s. The LC-130, ski-equipped Hercules, seen behind these Naval airmen, carries global positioning systems, among thousands of high-tech components that have made flying in the Antarctic safer than ever.



Then, 1955

A historic image of McMurdo Station in 1955 shows an extended Navy-operated field camp clustered around Scott's Discovery Hut. All personnel slept in canvas huts, enduring a rustic lifestyle most McMurdo residents will never have to experience. Navy photo.

vxe-6

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its crash in 1971 near Dumont D'Urville. That aircraft, XD-03, has been fully restored and still operates with VXE-6 to this day.

In support of Operation Deep Freeze, the squadron has operated a variety of aircraft including the UC-1 Otter, R4D and C-47 Dakotas, R5D and C-54 Sky Masters, R7D Super Constellation and LH-34 and HUS-1A helicopters.

With the U.S. Air Force assuming control of Operation Deep Freeze and providing support in Antarctica, the 109th Airlift Wing will fill VXE-6's role to provide flight operations support. The 109th's history began in 1948 as the 139th Fighter Squadron. The unit has flown P-47 Thunderbolts, F-51 Mustangs, F-94 B Starfires and F-86 Sabrejets. Taking on the cargo carrying mission in 1960, the unit was renamed the 109th Air Wing and flew C-97 Stratocruisers to provide airlift support around the world. The unit was activated in support of the Berlin Crisis in 1961.

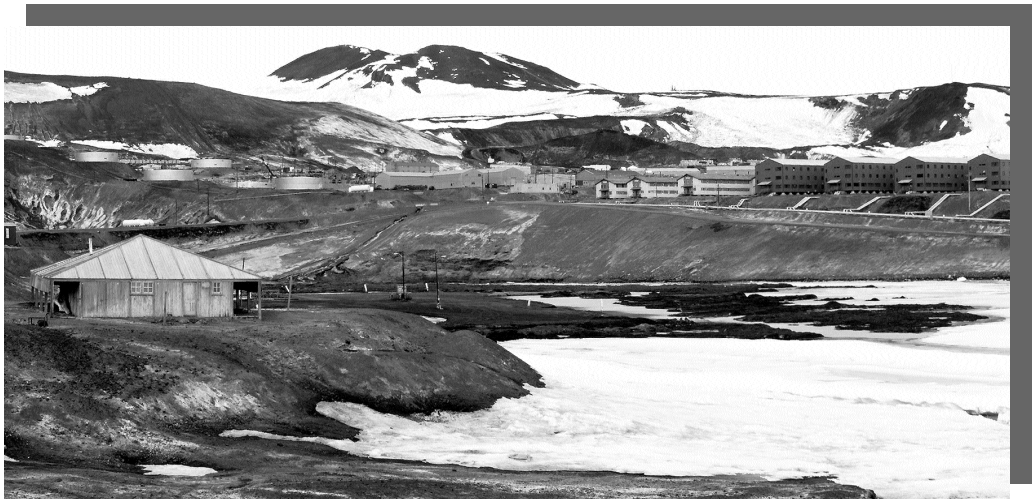
In 1971, the unit began flying C-130 A Hercules to provide tactical airdrop and airlift. In 1975, the unit changed to C-130 D ski birds and began flying polar ski missions in Greenland. In addition to Greenland, the 109th began augmenting Operation Deep Freeze annually since January 1988.

Today the 109th not only provides air transport for the Arctic/Antarctic operations in support of the National Science Foundation and National Aeronautical and Space Administration; additionally, the unit is federally tasked to provide tactical airlift and aeromedical evacuation support for combat and humanitarian relief missions worldwide. In its state role, the 109th responds to requests from the governor of New York to assist with civil disorders, natural disasters and humanitarian relief.

The 109th looks forward to carrying on the proud tradition of VXE-6. ✹

Now, 1999

Old contrasts with new in this modern photo of McMurdo Station. In the foreground is Scott's Discovery Hut, which he used as a base camp in his expedition to the South Pole in 1911-12. Since that time, this site has taken on a very different look. Today, three-story dormitories and fuel tanks cover the once barren hillside, all in an effort to support science and research in the Antarctic.



Happy Camper School participants work together to set up a Scott tent on the Ross Ice Shelf. Photo by Ginny Figlar.

Many people played a role in the success of the paper this season -- either as a writer or behind-the-scenes savior. We'd like to thank the following folks for their help in keeping our presses rolling:

Robin Abbott • Michael Baclawski • Jon Benedict • Allen Berggren • Tim Bjokne • Dave Bresnahan • Bart Bridwell • Michael Cameron • Kristy Carney • Renaldo Carrington • Ruben Cashler • Jim Chambers • Brian Connell • Randall Davis • Robert Dudley • Karl Erb • Liz Evenson • Davis Fischer • Lee Fuiman • Christine Gamble • Beth Gaston • Glenn Gordon • Guy Guthridge • Ralph Harvey • George Howard • Sherry Hume • Brenda Joyce • Maj. Ted Kobierski • Ron Koger • Steve Kottmeier • Andrew Lange • Ryan Luedtke • Molly Mayo • Ty Milford • J.P. Murad • Ron Nugent • Sarah Ohlson • Julie Palais • Marko Pekkola • Tom Quinn • Rhonda Rodriguez • Joshua Rosenthal • Mike Scheuermann • Kristin Scott • Christine Siddoway • Simon Stephenson • Alan Stone • Brian Stone • Hope Stout • Skip Sibson • Terri Watson • Steve Wheeler • Terrie Williams • Shannon Wilson

See You Next Year!

Perspectives

The Winds of Vida

Deep in the heart of the Victoria Valley, on the shore of Lake Vida, Stacy Cannon, left, and Bill Gilmore soak in the sun.

Story and photo by Alexander Colhoun

It was over in a matter of seconds. I can still feel the sand spraying my face, my back, my hands and my cameras. It was a if I was under a sandblaster's gun, the rough sediments raining down from the helicopter's rotor wash in torrents. And just as quickly, the helicopter that was hovering above me was gone, leaving a useless black package of electronics swinging around my neck.

In 30 seconds time, my camera gear, all of it, was ruined. Delicate lenses and electronics were tweaked with grains of dust and rock that flowed like water into any open crevice. It will be months before they operate again. There was nothing I could do to change the situation, so I packed my cameras and started to focus on the present moment.

It was the morning of my second day along the shore of Lake Vida in the Dry Valleys. From my spot in the sand I looked west where the valley splits in three directions. Lake Victoria and the Victoria Glacier that feeds it stemmed right. Rising in the center was a wall of unnamed peaks reminiscent of Wyoming's Tetons. To my left, two stark peaks peered over a ridge line concealing Bull Pass. The view east was blocked by folding ridge lines that stretched across the valley, blocking the line of sight with jagged, black silhouettes.

And running through it all was Lake Vida.

Frozen except for small pools of water that form moats around the edges, the lake appears shallow and casts a downy blue color skyward. But it is the complete void of snow and ice that sets Vida and the Dry Valleys apart. It is a moonlike landscape of rock, sand and wind. The valley swallows you in its own sweeping, unrestrained vista. From Vida's shore, sandy alluvial plains gradually rise, foot by foot to low hills, which grow upward to steep slopes and then to the base of ridges which meld into peaks. It is a rolling expanse that yawns with its own breadth.

Had I seen these beautiful contours before I lost my camera gear to sand? Yes. In fact I had taken many images of these same hills. But looking back today, losing my cameras opened my eyes and spirit in unexpected ways. With cameras in hand I frame the world in still images, through a lens over my eye. Without a camera, I was free to simply live the experience.

As I walked alone out onto the sand and sat amongst the wind-shaped ventifacts, I felt as if I was lost in a surreal dream. I'd come to Vida to report on the work of an environmental remediation team. Its goal was to remove contaminated soil from a scientific drilling site used in the 1970s. While I was there for a clean-up story, I found myself overwhelmed and consumed by the place itself. I had never experienced such all-consuming beauty and tranquility, all of which devined from one source: the wind.

The wind defines life at Lake Vida. It is a blanket that constantly sweeps over the land, unobstructed, and as pure as the day the Earth was born. In Alaska, native Eskimos have countless names for the variety of forms that snow and ice will take. Likewise, the winds of Lake Vida could be named for their complex personalities.

There are soft winds that rush over the land, rubbing the sand gently over the frozen lake and our tents; there are angry winds that tear and rip and snarl at anything that gets in their way, pulling and tugging at tent cords and carelessly billowing any unsecured items into the void; there are winds so breathless and tender it is as if the wind has died, replaced instead by powerful reams of sunlight that seem to singe the air and bake the soil. The only forces that interact with this environment are heat and cold. It never rains. The snow never accumulates.

The earth here is virgin, pure and untouched. Each step across the sand felt like a step further back in time, and somehow, my steps seemed like violations of the valley. Groomed by the wind, the slightest human interaction with the sand looked unnatural. It was as if I was walking through a delicate Japanese stone garden, my steps ugly and misplaced amidst the perfection of the stones.

Stones carved by wind have a sheer beauty that can only be truly understood by seeing them naked on the sand. To imagine the time it would take for wind and sand to shape just one face of a palm-sized rock was hard to conceive. And what, I imagined, of the massive rock faces with holes and arcs that seemed to have been formed by rushing water, but were in fact made by rushing wind?

Just as the wilderness rhythm began to seep into my bones it was time to break camp. Time to go home. As we awaited the helicopter, I walked alone up into the valley. Sitting on a ridge of sand my eyes ranged in every direction, mapping the site into my permanent memory. The silence stretched from peak to peak across the valley, broken only by gusts of the wind through my parka. An hour became a lifetime and my mind emptied into the expanse before me.

The thin whop of helicopter blades broke the silence from 20 miles away. It began as the slightest change in tone and ended with sand billowing skyward as the helo landed to pull me away - this time my cameras were buried deep in my bags.

When I get back to New Zealand I will ship my cameras back to Nikon for repair, and hopefully they will be ready when I start my next job in March. But even if they aren't, one thing is certain: I won't soon forget the winds of Vida. ✹

Shannon Wilson and Tom Evenson get away from town for some quiet time at the end of hut point, above a bay of brash ice. Photo by Ginny Figlar.

"First you fall in love with Antarctica, and then it breaks your heart.

Breaks it first in all the usual sorry ways of the world, sure -- as for instance when you go down to the Ice to do something unusual and exciting and romantic, only to find that your job there is in fact more tedious than anything you have ever done, janitorial in its best moments but usually much less interesting than that. Or when you discover that McMurdo, the place to which you are confined by the strictest of company regulations, resem - bles an island of service stations clustered around the off-ramp of a freeway long since abandoned...the sky gradu - ally lightens to the day's one hour of twilight, shifting in invisible stages from a star-clustered black pool to a dome of glowing indigo lying close overhead; and in that pure transparent indigo floats the thinnest new moon imaginable, a mere sliver of a crescent, which nevertheless illuminates very clearly the great ocean of ice rolling to the horizon in all directions, the moonlight glittering on the snow, gleaming on the ice, and all of it tinted the same vivid indigo of the sky...The uncanny beauty of the scene rises in you and clamps your chest tight, and your heart breaks then simply because it is squeezed so hard, because the world is so spacious and pure and beautiful, and because moments like this one are so transient -- impossible to imagine beforehand, impossible to remember afterward and never to be returned to, never ever.

That's heartbreak as well, yes -- happening at the same moment you realize you've fallen in love with the place despite all."

-- Kim Stanley Robinson, in "Antarctica"