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Norwegian Sets New Antarctic Record

by Samantha Tisdal

One would expect a hero's welcome -- some meager offering of congratulations at the very least -- if one were on the verge of completing the first solo, unsupported traverse of Antarctica.

But last Saturday, as the Norwegian adventurer Borge Ousland hauled his sledge toward Scott Base with 2,835 kilometers behind him and only 10 to go, the first human he encountered didn't even say "hello."

"As I approached Williams Field, I saw a guy making repairs on a truck," Ousland recalled. "He looked up, then just started working again!"

The poor mechanic probably didn't realize he was witnessing history in the making. Ousland's appearance belies his remarkable achievement -- in fact, he looks downright "normal" for a man who has just spent two months skiing across Antarctica. There's no sun-blackened face, no foot-long bush of chin-grizzle, no insane gleam of horror about the eyes. Just a tall, skinny 34-year-old guy with a tidy red beard, a tired smile...and confidence. A lot of confidence.

Having Norwegian forefathers the likes of Amundsen and Nansen can't hurt in the confidence department, but in the past 10 years Ousland has established a name for himself beside these heavy-weights as a polar adventurer in his own right. His impressive resume includes an unsupported traverse across Greenland, followed by two unsupported expeditions to the North Pole (one of them solo), followed last year by an attempt to traverse Antarctica, solo and unsupported.

Last year's expedition failed due to frostbite and infection, but Ousland did at make it as far as the South Pole, thus becoming the first human being to reach both poles, solo and unsupported.

Yet the stubborn Norwegian wouldn't be satisfied until he had completed his Antarctic traverse. "So I went back home and asked myself what I could do better," he said, grinning widely, "...and this year, I did better!"

"Better" is an understatement. Ousland's success this year was beyond even his own exceedingly high expectations. A traverse which was predicted to take 80 days took only 64. That's fairly phenomenal in itself, but factor in a 180-kilo sledge, eternal fields of two-meter-high sastrugi, deadly crevasses, mind-blowing distances, profound isolation, white-outs, plus the coldest temperatures and strongest winds on earth, and Ousland begins to

look like Superman.

The stupendous journey began Nov. 15, 03.00 hrs GMT, on the eastern side of Berkner Island, at approximately 78 degrees South, 45 degrees West.

On the same day, at different locations on Berkner Island, three other unsupported expeditions set out as well, creating something of a "race" atmosphere that was much-hyped in the media. But Ousland's competitors -- a solo British man, a solo Polish man, and a Korean party of six -- have all since aborted their attempts to make the crossing.

The first phase of Ousland's trek was to get from Berkner Island up onto the Polar Plateau. Instead of following the frequently-used Frost Spur route, Ousland made the 1000-meter climb to the Plateau east of Wujek Ridge, having determined through extensive research that this route had fewer crevasses and was not as steep.

Once on the plateau, with the Dufeq Mountains to his right and the Forrestal Range to his left, Ousland now headed for the South Pole. The soles of his ski boots soon cracked from the cold and had to be mended by hand with a drill and parachute cord.

Yet in spite of this setback, the Norwegian made good time, and handled the challenging terrain and intransigent weather with great finesse. He arrived at the South Pole only 35 days into the expedition -- the fastest time ever, and a full ten days ahead of schedule!

Turning down a new pair of boots which were waiting for him at the Pole (--"That would have been support!"--) Ousland now began the second part of the journey: the descent down to the Ross Ice Shelf.

His original plan was to follow the Scott's route down the Beardmore Glacier. Being so far ahead of schedule allowed him to take Amundsen's longer, but safer, route down the Axel Heiberg Glacier instead.

Walking in Amundsen's footsteps proved to be a profound experience. "For me as a Norwegian, it was just fantastic to use [Amundsen's] route and see those mountains which all had Norwegian names!" Ousland exclaimed.

But the Axel Heiberg also presented Ousland with his most difficult day -- six kilometers of progress in eight hours of struggle! The upper part of the glacier, called "The Quiet Valley" (Stillhetensdal), is perfectly protected from the wind, and accumulates deep, soft snow through which it is practically impossible to walk, let alone haul a heavy sledge.

"In the beginning, I would force myself to count to 100 before I took a rest," Ousland recalled. "Then I was down to 20. Then, I realized I would faint if I went any further, so I stopped for the night and did the same thing all over again the next day."

Once the precarious descent down the glacier was complete, the only obstacle between Ousland and his goal was the immense Ross Ice Shelf.

"When you see the shelf lying flat below, you know that the worst part is behind you, and it's a straight shot to McMurdo," he smiled. "That's the only part of the journey that I would say is more or less easy. It's so smooth, and good for gliding. And it's nice and warm after being up on the Plateau."

In one epic 16-hour day on the Ross Ice Shelf, aided by his wind-sail, Ousland covered 226 kilometers! Not many days later, he was touching ground at Scott Base, taking a glorious hot shower, and greeting his girlfriend Wenche on the phone.

What made the difference between this year's success and last year's failure?

"It was the same concept, but I came back with more experience and a different attitude," Ousland said. "After last year, I had a more humble attitude, and more respect."

Logistical adjustments made a difference, too, including better wind-sails, and an additional set of skis.

To provide extra motivation plus a "reality check," Ousland had his skis painted by his imaginative and talented eight-year-old son, Max.

"When you do something like this, it gets to be greater than life," Ousland reflected. "You want to do it, and you want to push on, no matter what happens. My painted skis reminded me to take more caution. It's more important to go home alive to my family than to cross Antarctica."

Ousland left the ice on Saturday, escorted by New Zealand Prime Minister Jim Bolger who was in Antarctica this week participating in ceremonies commemorating the establishment of Scott Base 40 years ago.

Ousland will be kept busy for the next several months with promotional tours for his sponsor, Sector Sport Watches of Italy. He has plans to write a book, and perhaps produce a documentary, about his journey. But he doesn't have any firm ideas, yet, for his next adventure.

"...I don't think it will be a polar one," he mused. Perhaps something in the tropics.

Scott Base Celebrates 40th Anniversary

The Prime Minister of New Zealand was on hand Thursday to help celebrate the 40th anniversary of The New Zealand station Scott Base. Also on hand for the ceremony was Antarctic adventurer Sir Edmund Hillary who conducted an overland traverse to the South Pole in 1957 and other members of that expedition.

Members of the U.S. Antarctic Program and American Embassy also joined in the ceremony which included raising one of the original flags flown over the base in 1957. Following the ceremony members of the official delegation boarded a LC-130 for a day-long trip to South Pole Station. Scott Base is located only 1.5 miles from the U.S.'s largest station in Antarctica -- McMurdo Station.

Happy Campers Get Their Supplies At BFC

by JO2 Trevor Poulsen

National Science Foundation grantees have a lot to accomplish during Antarctica's short summer season. So, when they need camping gear in a hurry, they visit the big, blue warehouse next to Ob Hill - the Berg Field Center (BFC).

BFC has the widest selection of outdoor supplies in McMurdo. Everything from sleeping bags and tents to backpacks, climbing rope, parkas and mess kits can be found inside the warehouse.

Nansen sleds are a popular item for scientists. BFC has 67 of these wooden sleds which are pulled behind snowmobiles.

Five people work in this two storey warehouse getting equipment and supplies ready for use in the field. Three of the employees are field coordinators who show grantees how the equipment works and transport it to the helicopter landing pad.

"When science groups arrive, they want to look at their equipment right away," said BFC Supervisor Mimi Fujino. "We urge them to set up their tents, light up their stoves and get familiar with their equipment."

BFC usually assists two or three groups at the same time while they're in McMurdo, according to Fujino. But, preparations for their arrival begin much sooner - when the equipment is "pre-staged" early in the season.

Each science group gets a cage with a lock, where they can keep their equipment safe and secure.

BFC also does repair work. All tents have to be in top condition to withstand the harsh antarctic environment. Any holes or tears must be patched.

When scientists return from the field they will find a BFC field coordinator on the landing pad lending them a hand with offloading. BFC also provides scientists and their gear with a free ride back to Cray Lab.

Thanks to the Berg Field Center, camping in Antarctica has now become a little more civilized.

AROUND USAP

by JOC(AW) Jacqueline Kiel

McMurdo Station - The M/V Samuel L. Cobb arrived at McMurdo Station last Sunday to deliver the annual fuel supply. The vessel, owned by Ocean Ships, Inc. is under contract to the Military Sealift Command.

An accident occurred during the Cobb's mooring operation when a mooring line broke, hitting a civilian worker and knocking him over the side of the vessel and into the water. He swam to the pier and was pulled out by dock workers. He was taken to the medical clinic where he was treated for minor injuries and released.

In a separate incident, a fuel line extending from the pier to the wharf leaked about 35 gallons of fuel when a pencil-sized hole formed due to the hose rubbing against the gravel road. The spill, which was discovered immediately, covered an area 20 by 30 feet.

Safety precautions used to prevent major spills include hose clamps used to isolate sections of the hose in the event of a leak. Additionally, personnel walk the fuel lines constantly during fueling operations checking for leaks.

Once the spill was detected, two Hazardous Material Spill Response Teams, of six people each, responded. They had the area completely clean in about an hour and a half.

VXE-6 completed two flights to Heimefront Fielle (which is almost 2,000 miles from McMurdo) to air-drop fuel caches and field gear near the German camp Kottas. The fuel will be used for Twin Otters conducting operations in the Queen Maudland area. The field gear is for a research party attempting to prove a geological link between East Antarctica and the South Western United States.

Last Monday VXE-6 dropped off Automatic Geophysical Observatory Six (AGO-6) project personnel so they could begin installation of the facility. The site is located grid east on the Polar Plateau between the Russian station Vostok and French station Dumont d'Urville. The project is expected to last approximately ten days.

Research at Siple Dome has been completed for the year. One research group pulled out on Monday and the second was pulled out Thursday.

VXE-6 pulled out a New Zealand research Team from Scott Glacier last Monday. The team was studying biology and geology in the area.

South Pole - Antarctic Support Associates personnel assisted researchers in moving from the Clean Air Facility to the newly completed Atmospheric Research Observatory. The move is expected to be completed by Jan. 31.

The station hosted distinguished visitors from the Coast Guard, providing a familiarization tour of the facilities.

R/V Nathaniel B. Palmer - The ship travelled east from station Minke, and stopped periodically to obtain samples. Researchers are gathering water, sediment, trace metal and animal samples.

One method of sampling is the Mochness tow, which is a series of nets that can be opened and closed one at a time by computer, so fish or plankton samples can be taken at discrete depths. In addition, instruments on the frame read depth, towing speed and water salinity, temperature and oxygen content.

R/V Polar Duke - The ship was operating in the Bellinghousen Sea, where researchers continued to gather samples of water, sediments and marine life. They also conducted bird observations.

On Jan. 18, the ship returned to Palmer Basin to conduct bioacoustic profiling to detect krill swarms and complete more bird observations.

The bird observations included tracking penguins, noting their departing paths and diving patterns.

Open Letter To USAP

Dear U. S. Antarctic Program Members:

For a week in late December and early January, my colleagues and I of the U.S. Antarctic Program External Panel, perhaps familiar to you as event V-001, had the great privilege and pleasure of visiting you at your worksites. The indelible impressions that each of us formed about America's activities in Antarctica were given human context, specificity, and warmth by the many of you who showed or explained to us how and why you are a part of the United States Antarctic presence.

Our task of finding and recommending better ways of operating the U.S. Antarctic Program is not going to be particularly easy - - we knew that when we agreed to this assignment -- but we also know that it is of great importance to the future of Antarctic science and America's role in Antarctica. On behalf of our entire panel, I want to thank each of you who was involved in making our trip so informative and successful. Your commitment to the ideals that have driven the National Science Foundation to strive to achieve our national interests in Antarctica, while responding to the very real economic pressures, was evident.

Our report to the Foundation will be completed in the next few months. While we panelists will be solely responsible for its recommendations, I want you to know that we would not have been able to do our job without the very real contributions that you made to our understanding of what you do and why you do it. Please accept the sincere appreciation of our entire panel.

Sincerely,

Norman R. Augustine

Chairman, United States Antarctic Program External Panel

SCIENCE PROJECT UPDATE

by JOC(AW) Jacqueline Kiel

Antarctic Muon And Neutrino Detector Array (AMANDA) (S-130)

The primary objective of the research is to discover sources of very-high-energy neutrinos. These particles are normally invisible, but when they pass through ice, they create a bow wave of light called cerenkov radiation. Photomultiplier tubes are used to detect this radiation.

The tubes are attached to detector strings, each string containing 36 tube modules. The strings are embedded between one and two kilometers deep in the ice near the South Pole.

This season seven detector strings are being added to compliment the four strings that are already in place. Multiple strings make triangulation possible. Time of each event is also recorded.

The Carbon Dioxide System In The Southern Ocean (S- 253)

Part of the U.S. Joint Global ocean Flux Study, this study is one of 44 projects that are tracking the flow of carbon through its organic and inorganic pathways.

This research is designed to provide data that will be needed to look at the flux of carbon across the air-sea interface and changes due to the primary productivity and the oxidation of plant material.

Field-team members have already conducted part of the research on board the R/V Nathaniel B. Palmer, which included making core carbon dioxide measurements.

Another field team will embark on March 30 to conduct further research. They will use the underway uncontaminated seawater system to measure the partial pressure of gaseous carbon dioxide and the amount of carbon dioxide in the water samples.

USAP PERSON OF THE WEEK

by JO3 Roland Ortiz

There are as many reasons for joining the Navy as there are people joining. For Naval Support Force Antarctica (NSFA) Supply Supervisor, SK2 Cezar Perez, joining the Navy was a way to start a new life.

Part of that new life meant leaving his home in Pampanga, Philippines and traveling to such places as Japan, Saudi Arabia and Cuba.

"The military gave me financial security," Perez said. "Also, throughout my travels I learned a lot about life in general."

For this husband and father of three boys, Antarctica is quite unlike anywhere else. "Antarctica is definitely the most unique place I have seen in my travels," Perez said.

This is Perez's first season in McMurdo with Naval Support Force, Antarctica (NSFA). One of his primary jobs at the end of the season is shipping both organizational gear and unaccompanied baggage back to Port Hueneme, Calif.

After he finishes his tour with NSFA in Dec. 1997 Perez is planning to stay at Port Hueneme and transfer to one of the SeaBee Battalions based there.

The Final Countdown

by Bryan Collom & T.J. Gagnon

As surely as we are counting down the days until our redeployment, there are many people out there that are looking forward to the end of the summer season. Whether you are staying for winter, heading out for travel, or returning home, the end of the season is a landmark in time.

The fire department would like to congratulate everyone on a safe season thus far, and remind everyone that the season is not yet over. Thank you for your awareness of fire prevention and safety in the workplace. Remember that as the pace picks up with new people arriving, the ship coming in, and people heading out, it is easy to allow haste to cloud your judgement. Keep safety on your mind so we can finish the summer season as smoothly as it has gone so far.

With that said, we will leave you with some helpful tips to keep fire/personal danger low in the coming weeks:

* Don't allow boxes and clutter to block hallways and walkways

- * Don't place combustibles on or near heat sources
 - * Use caution when packing your personal belongings (you might get cut by a razor)
 - * Don't burn your contract until you get back to the U.S.
 - * Unplug all electrical appliances before checking out of your
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