

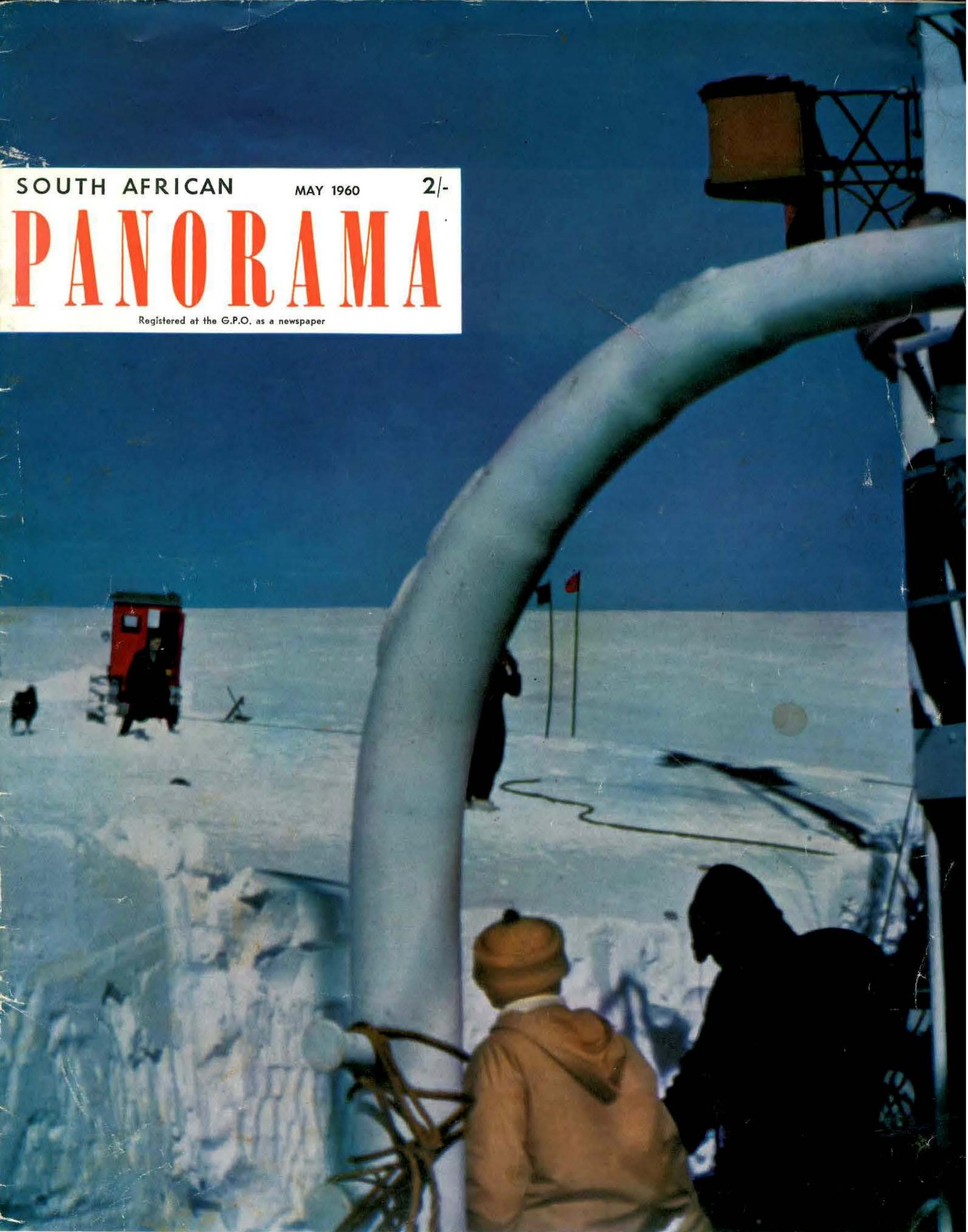
SOUTH AFRICAN

MAY 1960

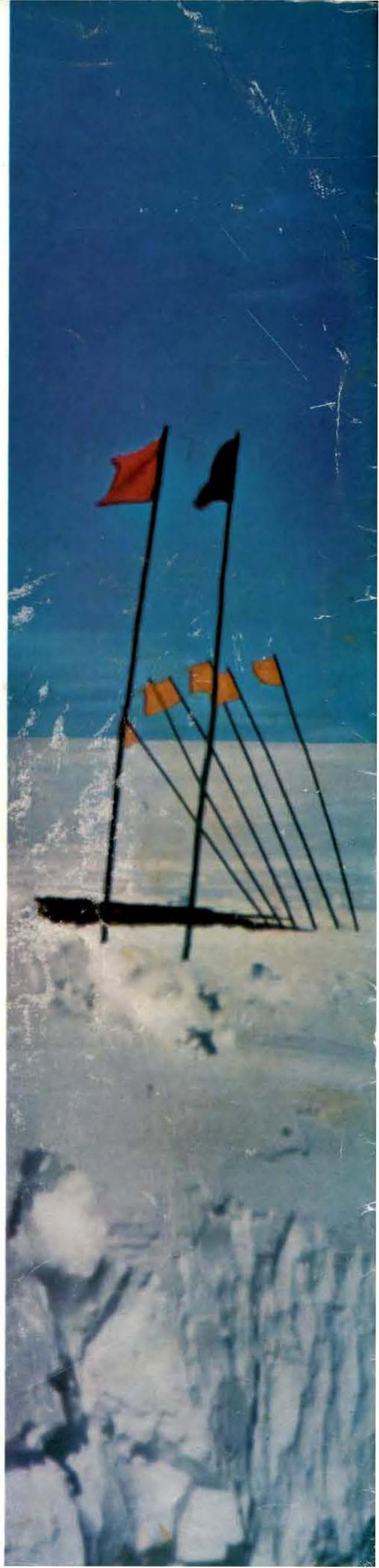
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# PANORAMA

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● THE SOUTH AFRICAN ANTARCTIC EXPEDITION



# SOUTH WITH THE ANTARCTIC



# EXPEDITION

By J. M. VENABLES

IT IS ALMOST MIDNIGHT on the edge of the Antarctic circle but the sun is still shining brightly just above the southern horizon. The nearest land is hundreds of miles away and a cold wind sweeps across the silent, white ice-floes which stretch as far as the eye can see. In this desolate wilderness lies a small, white ship, held fast by the pressure of the ice which is piled up high against her sides. Around the ship are groups of men standing in the snow armed with poles, crowbars and steel wires, heaving away at the loose blocks of ice in an effort to open a stretch of water around the hull and allow the ship room to manoeuvre.

This scene was to become a familiar one to the ten members of South Africa's first expedition to the Antarctic and to the eleven observers accompanying them on their journey south in the Norwegian motor vessel *Polarbjorn* at the end of last year. In all, the ship spent 28 days struggling through the ice, which extended further north than it had done for some years.

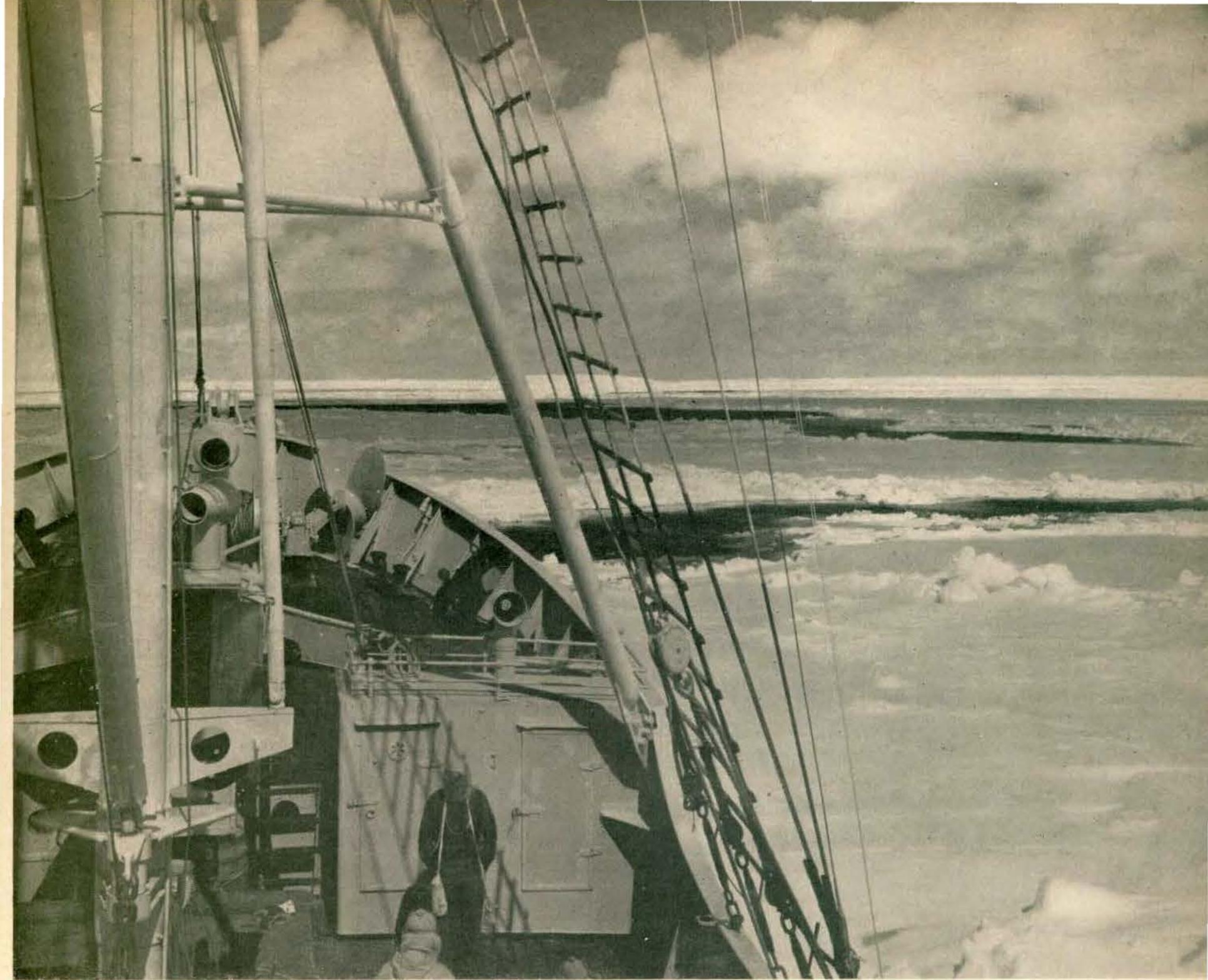
The ship left Cape Town on December 3. On the first night out the chief steward fell overboard during a heavy swell, and, despite a fourteen-hour search, was not seen again. Exactly a week later the *Polarbjorn* reached lonely, deserted Bouvet Island in the South Atlantic. Here a second tragedy occurred—the Third Officer was accidentally killed while preparing explosives for use in connection with depth-sounding apparatus. He was buried at sea two days later in a simple service conducted by Captain Hendrik Mar.

The next day the ship entered the northern limits of the sea ice—which at this point consisted of small fragments of broken ice called "brash" and larger pieces of fantastic shapes called "berg bits." The temperature began to fall rapidly and the South Africans put on their protective clothing: windproof anorak capes and balaclava helmets, thick woollen jerseys and gloves.

*The South African Antarctic Expedition sailed from Cape Town on December 3, 1959, in the tiny Norwegian ship "Polarbjorn." Forty days later—on January 12—the ten-man expedition took over the work of a Norwegian meteorological station in Queen Maud Land, Antarctica. The worst ice conditions for many years hampered the ship until even the combined efforts of crew and expedition members were not able to free the "Polarbjorn" from the grip of the pack-ice. While the ship awaited help—in the form of an ice-breaker—the crew shot seals to provide food for the huskies*



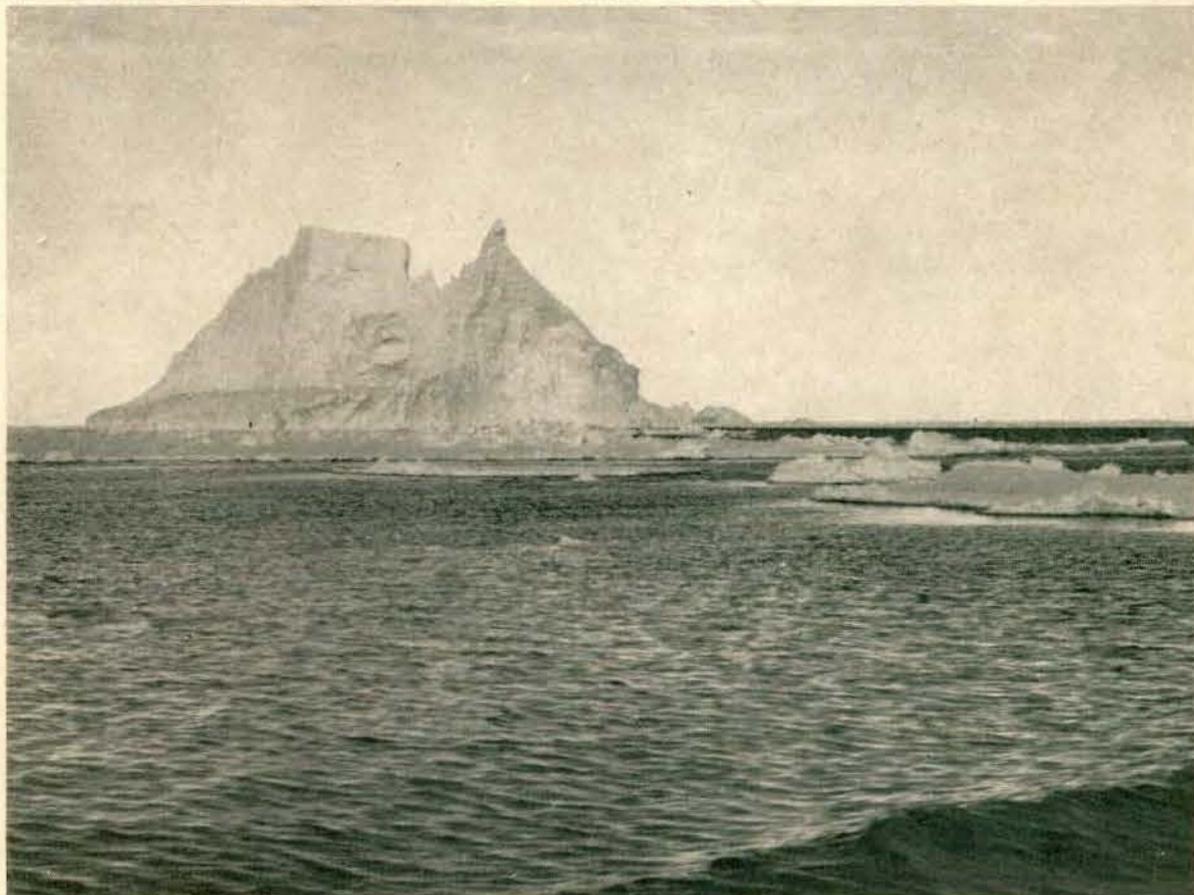




*Before the ice threw its final stranglehold around the ship, progress had been normal, if a little fitful. Some patches of ice would necessitate exhausting work on the part of nearly all on board in an effort to break up the ice gripping the "Polarbjorn." The ship would fight her way free and press onwards through the cold wastes until she was brought to another halt by the pack. Finally the ice closed in and she could no longer fight her way through—and there she stayed*

Icebergs drifted slowly by through the broken ice, sometimes with colonies of Adelle penguins sitting on the lower slopes enjoying a free ride. Overhead Cape pigeons, petrels and skua gulls glided effortlessly around the ship and skimmed across the surface of the ice. Many old crab-eater seals were seen basking on the ice floes, and whenever the ship approached near enough they were shot and the carcasses brought on board to provide meat for the husky dogs at the base in Queen Maud Land. Emperor penguins, the largest of the species, were seen standing in solitary dignity on the ice floes, gazing intently into the bleak wastes and completely uninterested in the appearance of humans in their lonely world.

Two of these birds were captured and brought aboard the ship but they escaped in some mysterious manner during the night—much to the chagrin of Rear Admiral Stevan Mandarich, who had recently retired from the United States Navy and was accompanying the expedition as an observer for the United States Government. He had intended having the birds mounted in Cape Town and taking them home as souvenirs. Eventually the Admiral did manage to capture two





And with the "Polarbjorn" frozen fast in the pack the story turns to one of human interest—how the men reacted to the helplessness of being imprisoned in cold, white nothingness under the perpetual daylight of the midnight sun. Expedition leader Le Grange (above), his men and the crew entertained one another, chatted, shaved, had meals, slept and awoke



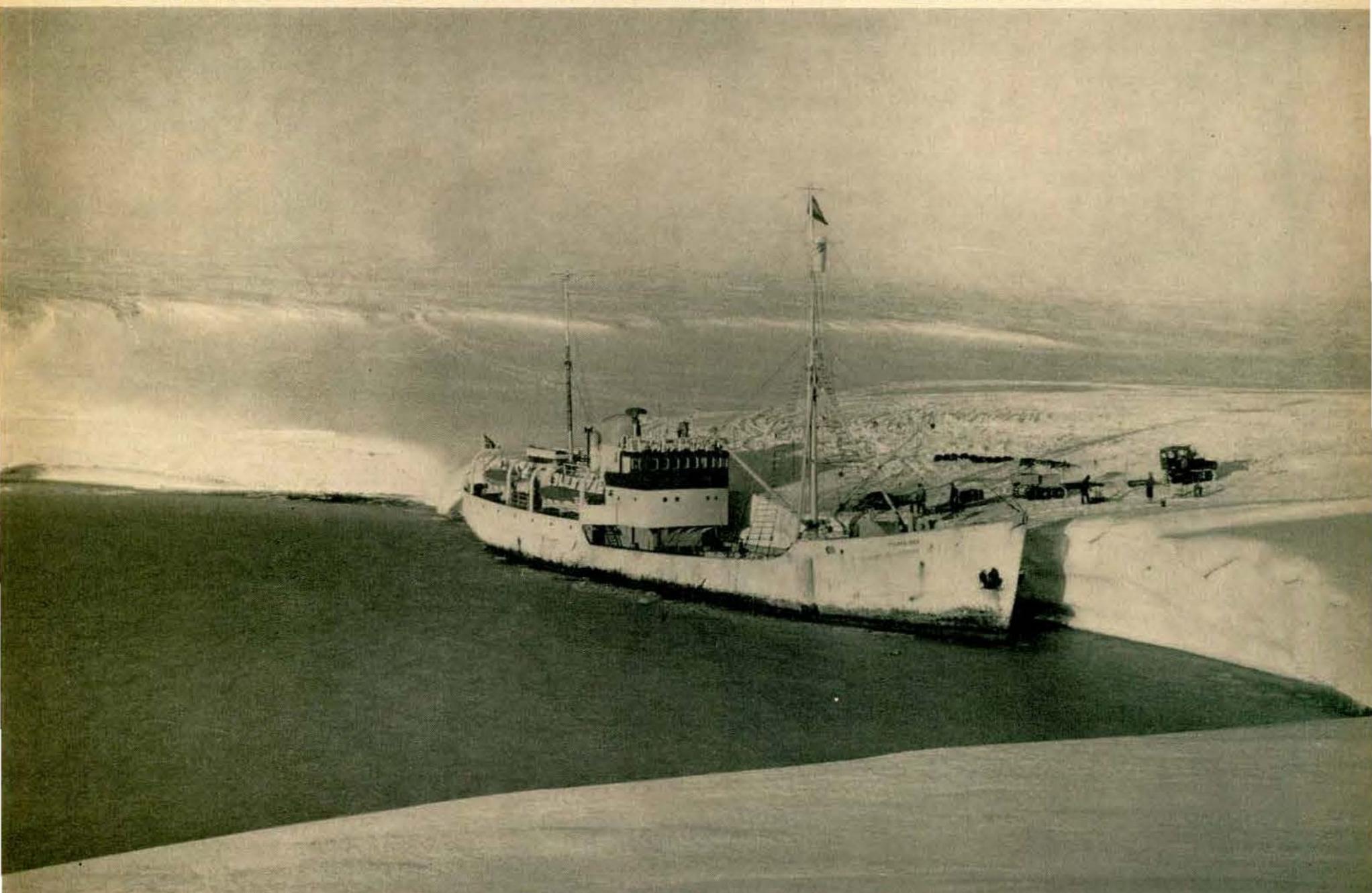
beautiful Emperor penguins, as well as a smaller Adelie penguin, which he brought back in triumph to Cape Town.

After entering the thicker pack-ice the ship frequently stopped for hours and even days at a time, but the cheerful South Africans willingly assisted the crew in their efforts to break a way out, with the Captain and the First Officer conning the ship through the ice from the crow's-nest. On New Year's Eve, after the ship had been held fast in the ice for almost five days and was drifting slowly down into the Weddell Sea, we were rescued by the Argentine ice-breaker, the *General San Martin*, which came upon us quite unexpectedly. With the ice-breaker forging through the thick ice, and the *Polarbjorn* sailing through the open water in her wake, New Year's Day dawned with the prospect of our reaching the base very soon. However, no sooner had the ice-breaker left us at the point where our courses diverged than we were stuck again. It was not until January 8 that we reached the coast of Antarctica and the landing place near the Norwegian base in Queen Maud Land which the South African expedition was to take over. After a warm welcome from the Norwegians, some of whom had been in the Antarctic for three successive years, the unloading of the South African expedition's stores began.

Working in two shifts of twelve hours each we unloaded 150 tons of stores, including two year's supply of food for ten men, heavy boxes of electrical and mechanical equipment, timber and other building materials, and hundreds of drums of diesel fuel and petrol—all within the remarkably

Christmas and Christmas dinner (below left) came and went. And still the ice held the ship in its grip. Then, quite suddenly, the long wait was over. An Argentine ice-breaker splintered the pack. Following her bobbing wake, the "Polarbjorn" became alive once more, ice grinding against her hull. A few days later the "Polarbjorn" had arrived









UNLOADING THE EXPEDITION AND ITS SUPPLIES ON TO THE ICE DID NOT TAKE LONG AND . .

short time of sixty hours. The stores were loaded from the ship directly on to sleds and hauled away by tractors to a depot one mile inland where they were off-loaded in the snow. Later they would be moved by the expedition members to the base twenty-five miles inland.

On January 12 the South Africans took over the work of the base from the Norwegians who had been manning it since it was built early in 1957. After three polar winters the base huts have been snowed under and access is by means of a hatch in the ice from which a steel ladder leads down to the floor of the building eighteen feet below. The living quarters are warm and comfortable, and consist of a large combined dining-room and lounge, and fourteen separate rooms, curtained off for privacy, each with a bed, a chair, a table, cupboards and drawers. The heart of the base is a well-equipped meteorological office and radio station. There is a power plant which supplies the base with electricity for twenty-four hours a day. Outside on the ice are various huts and other structures containing meteorological instruments, the observation tower and radio masts, and the "all-sky" camera which photographs the Aurora Australis during the winter months. There is also a magnetic hut where changes in the earth's magnetic field are recorded. Behind the observation tower the twelve husky dogs are tied up in the snow. They are used to take small field expeditions into the

interior of the continent in the summer months.

The ten-man South African expedition is under the leadership of Mr. J. J. (Hannes) Le Grange, a meteorologist who accompanied Sir Vivian Fuchs on the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic expedition during the International Geophysical Year. There are four other meteorologists, a doctor, a geologist, a radio technician, a radio operator and a diesel mechanic. The station is now sending six-hourly reports on meteorological conditions. The signals are received by wireless in Cape Town and relayed to Pretoria.

The *Polarbjorn* sailed on the return voyage in the early hours of January 15 and called first at the old coastal station at Maudheim. Here members of the returning Norwegian expedition went ashore to obtain data for the Norwegian Polar Institute. In contrast to the outward voyage very little ice was encountered on the return and thirty-six hours after leaving Maudheim we were sailing through a choppy sea almost free from ice.

It had been intended to carry out a joint Norwegian-South African survey of Bouvet Island on the return voyage to see whether a meteorological station could be built there, but a strong north-west gale prevented the ship from approaching closer than fifteen miles to this island and the project had to be abandoned. The rest of the homeward voyage as far as Cape Town was uneventful and the ship entered Table Bay on January 27.

SOON THE "POLARBJORN" SAILED, LEAVING THE TEN MEN TO THE ISOLATION OF THE CAMP

