

VIKING

THE TRAGIC HUSKY SOUTH AFRICANS SAVED FROM AN ICY GRAVE

(Reprinted by courtesy of
the Sunday Times)

THE MEN of South Africa's twelfth Antarctic expedition returned after 14 months in the paralyzing cold of the South Pole continent. They brought back 1917 lb of rocks for the scientists, memories for a lifetime, and the team member who suffered most – Viking the male sledge dog.

To the men he had been court jester, an inspiration in adversity, and a spark of affection in the world's cruellest and most overtly hostile region.

"I don't think we'll ever forget him," said Andy Paterson, 23, a geologist. "Not after all he meant to us and all he went through."

Andy and Jan Bredell, 25, a fellow geologist, were describing their adventures during a few minutes away from the fascinating litter of maps and notes that they are building into a cold, logical report in Pretoria. Nowhere does the report mention the dangers they faced, the comradeship that sprang up and sustained the team members – or the sufferings of Viking. "That's kind of personal," said Jan.

Andy said: "There was always an aura of tragedy about Viking – even when he was just a puppy. All our dogs at Sanae Base (the main South African establishment in Antarctica) were taught to pull a sledge when they were young. They were teamed up with older dogs.

"On his first time out Viking got a trace wrapped around his leg and with the first jerk of the team the limb snapped like a twig. There was nothing the men could do. Dr. Alfie Grobler, the team's medical man, was away from the base and by the time he came back Viking's leg had mended – unevenly. The dog was badly handicapped and useless for the sledge.

"Well, the men decided they'd fix him up."

Andy picked up his pen and added a small detail to a map.

“Dr. Grobler cut away all the newly formed, uneven bone and mended the leg with metal plates.

“Viking moved normally after that but the leg was still suspect. Even so, he was more than a cut above the other dogs who were loud-mouthed and wolfish, and he had terrific dignity. He was still the odd man out when Sanae 12 – our team – arrived.”

Andy and Jan described the main purpose of their expedition in which three other men took part – Trevor Schaefer, 25, radio operator and “sparks,” Peter Bennett, 25, the mechanic, and Frik Ludik, 29, the male nurse and only married member of the team. The men were to trek from the base at Sanae across the 150 kilometres of ice that skirt the Antarctic continent. Then they penetrated to the mountainous region that lies about 150 kilometres inside the boundaries of the land mass. Three hundred kilometres in all – or from Johannesburg nearly to Pietersburg. It took them two months, and Viking was with them.

“We especially asked to have him with us,” said Jan. “We’d grown so attached to him. We pulled about 30 tons of equipment – mainly fuel and food – on sledges behind three track-vehicles, two of them petrol-driven and the other diesel-powered. We averaged three kilometres an hour and the machines just drank the fuel. It took 100 litres of diesel fuel to make 20 kilometres and 200 litres of petrol to make 35 kilometres. If I had all the fuel we used I’d never buy petrol again. Ever.

“Sometimes the terrain was so bloody awful that we had to relay the stuff. Unhitch half of it, pull the rest a couple of kilometres and then go back for the other stuff. When we parked the vehicles for the night we had to bang about six pints of petrol into the engine oil to stop it freezing solid.

“On the way we did all sorts of experiments – geo-magnetic readings to determine the change in the earth’s magnetic field as we moved towards the South Pole, gravity readings, and radio-echo soundings to establish the depth of the ice around the Antarctic mainland. As we got nearer the ‘hinge’ where the ice is anchored to the rock mass we had to be extra careful of crevasses. It was one of these that gave Viking his biggest fright. In fact, it nearly killed him.”

Andy took up the story, still sorting a daunting pile of papers into neat rows. “It nearly killed him all right,” he said. “We were testing the ice in a three-man team for some distance around the camp. One man would walk in front with a ski-stick and probe the ice while two would walk behind him, linked to him by rope. Sometimes the fissures in the ice have a hard coat of ice over them and will support a lot of weight. But at other times a man may step on a snow-bridge and go straight through.

“That’s what Viking did. He was walking beside us, and we didn’t miss him for a little while. When we noticed he had gone we back-tracked and saw where his trail stopped – at the edge of a hole.

“We peered over the edge. Far below us we could see him. It must have been 45 metres – that’s 150 feet or so. He wasn’t moving and I heard one of the chaps say: ‘Cripes! I hope he hasn’t broken his hindquarters!’ It looked like it, you know, the way he was splayed out. Well, we weren’t equipped to pull him out, so we went back to the camp to work out a strategy. Of course, in a predicament like that he needed to be cheered up, so we took back some food to toss down to him – but Viking had gone.

“Now what! We called for him, dropped food down, and whistled. There was no answer, and gradually it came to us that he had fallen through another snow bridge and killed himself. We were all down in the mouth when we got back to the camp and spent a long time that night talking about what a great dog he’d been.”

Andy picked up an overspill of maps from the floor and rearranged them on his table.

“I suppose it was about 24 hours later that we passed the hole again,” he said. “We didn’t really want to look into Viking’s grave again, but we did it anyway. Imagine how we felt when we saw Viking at the bottom of the hole, just waiting for us to get him out. It was like a miracle. We had our diesel vehicle with us this time and I was winched down the hole on the end of a hawser. Viking was all over me and almost uncontrollably happy. But I calmed him down eventually and got the rescue line around him. From the bottom of the crevasse I could see the tunnels that ran away on both sides. He’d obviously been exploring in there while we were going daft with worry about him.”

Jan looked up from his work: “After that we pushed on over rather more trustworthy terrain,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “We finally made our working base at a place called Grunehogna. Here we followed up the work of Sanae 11, the team who went before us and who had already had a close look at the volcanic and sedimentary rocks there. We also went another 100 kilometres further south than they did and had a look at some other nunataks (Eskimo word for rock outcrops).

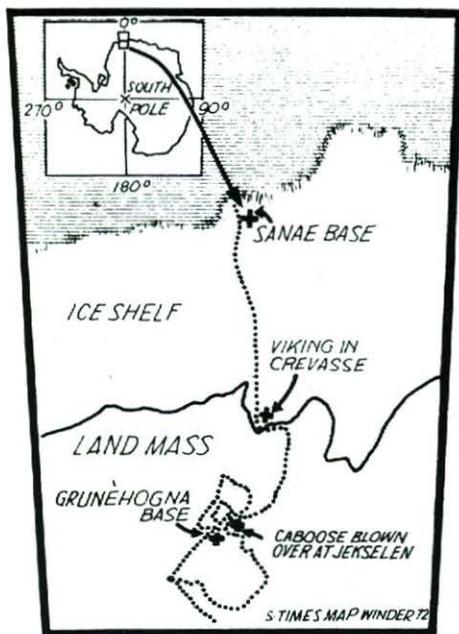
“We picked up a lot of good samples which we brought back for dating by the rubidium-strontium method. This measures the presence of radioactive materials in the rocks which decay at a constant and known rate. The Russian expeditions said they found some rifenites – the oldest known fossils – and we think we found some, too. They are like small colonies of algae which would have lived on the seabed a few hundred million years ago. We didn’t have a lot of time to work before the winter hit us. The temperature plunged to minus 52°C and minus 45°C was pretty average.

“Andy and Trevor slept in a caboose like a medium-sized caravan, while the rest of us slept in a small prefabricated tent about 16 feet by 20 feet. We weren’t too bad, but Andy measured the temperature inside his sleeping bag before he got into it one night and found 25 degrees below!

“Where the bolts went through from the inside of the caboose to the outside skin a big blob of ice would form on the inside. Pillows and mattresses which got slightly warm with body heat would subsequently freeze to the wall and ice would form all round the little breathing hole a man left in his sleeping bag.

“Viking was outside in all this weather. Don’t forget he was a husky and bred for it. He was a source of great entertainment. Every so often he would call at the ventilation shaft of the tent and greet us . . .” Here Andy broke in: “Yes, and scoff most of our cheese. He couldn’t get enough of the stuff. For our part we had fresh meat for about six months after we arrived in the Antarctic and we made our own bread. That’s perhaps a rather pretentious name for it, but it was quite edible with hamburgers and beer. We all had our special dishes, and nobody was ever detailed off to do chores.

“If a chap felt like cooking or washing up he did it, and I don’t remember missing a meal or an undue number of dirty dishes in the tent. The comradeship that



grew up round the primus stoves on those winter days was something tangible and we never let each other down.

"We had our lighter moments too and we used almost any event in the day to lift the tedium. For example, when a chap *had* to go outside the tent he was timed by a stopwatch from the moment he opened the door to the moment he got back. The winner made it in 23 seconds, which is not extraordinary when one takes the cold into account."

Andy picked up a slide of Viking and held it up to the window. "The poor old chap got another terrible fright some time later when the weather was warmer and we went on another trip with the caboose and one of the petrol-driven tractors. There were three of us – Jan, Frik and myself – and Viking and we were sited near a nunatak called Jekselen. Our caboose was mounted on a 1 500 lb sledge and we thought it was indestructible. Until the snow storm hit us.

"From inside the caboose one could hear the wind coming. Something like the approach of a fast train. We had our head into the storm, but we caught a few side-winders which hurled the caboose across the ice. We sank poles into the ice on either side of the caboose as stops but they were useless.

"We rode the storm for perhaps another two or three hours. It was like riding a funfair waltzer gone mad. Gusts of up to 100 knots were knocking us around – and we wondered from time to time how Viking was faring out in the storm. We had been unable to entice him into the caboose.

"Outside the wind was howling like a banshee and we couldn't see more than about five feet. The snow being driven across our radio antenna loaded it with so much static that we couldn't contact our base at Grunehogna and we had no idea how Peter Bennett and Trevor Schaefer were. We had our own problems though. Frik Ludik had badly cut his leg while we were being banged about, and the wound needed stitching. Jan held the forceps and Frik was about to put the stitches in his own leg when a huge gust hit us and the whole world was tilted upside down. The caboose was on its side. There was jam, tomato sauce, forceps and books all over the place.

"Our first concern was Frik. His boot was off and we were worried that if the windows popped out of the caboose he would get frostbite. He managed to insert three stitches of the required nine before we made him put on his boot and run for the tractor. We followed, with our essentials – sleeping bags, food and suchlike – but as we were climbing into the cabin the storm wrenched the door from our hands and smashed it against the tractor. The window shattered at once. All our efforts to stuff up the hole with our sleeping bags were useless. We were unbearably cold.

"It was obvious to us by now that Viking had been blown away and we really felt that we had seen the last of him. Another huge wind then caught the caboose and blew it onto its feet again. This gave us our chance, and as the wind abated, as suddenly as it had come up, we acted quickly. We drove steel spikes into the ground on both sides of the caboose and at an angle away from it. To these we anchored steel hawsers which were also attached to the huge carrying sledge. Then we clambered into the caboose – as the wind began to rise again with new fury. The brief respite also gave us a chance to make contact with our base and we told Peter and Trevor about our troubles.

"They were also having a hard time because the wind was flattening the tent and lifting it clear of the ground on one side. But they set out willingly to help us. It took them two days to reach us – two days in which we sat huddled around a portable heater, ready at any time to extinguish it and bale out if anything should happen to the caboose.

"But there was one moment of extreme joy in all of this – a loud, jubilant greeting from Viking outside the caboose. We'll never know, of course, how far away he was blown or how he got back, but no animal ever got a more effusive welcome home. In the event, the storm lasted for more than two weeks. We could never have lasted out in the caboose, and apart from that one lull in the storm, there was no other time when we could have contacted our base."

The journey back to Sanae Base took the team only ten days – carrying just enough fuel for the journey and hardly any extra weight.

And so came the time to say goodbye to the Antarctic – and Viking. However, the bonds of shared experience were a little too tough to break and Andy Paterson was given special permission to bring Viking back to South Africa.

The big husky made the journey back to the Cape in the expedition ship *RSA* and soon joined the train for Johannesburg.

No one can say exactly what illness hit Viking on the journey, but after the antiseptic conditions of the Antarctic he must have been prey to many viruses – despite the efforts of a vet before he made his journey to the Transvaal.

When he arrived in Johannesburg he was in a pitiful state and couldn't even recognise Andy Paterson.

Andy lifted him into his car and set out for his home. A quarter of an hour away from the house where he was to start a new life the husky shivered, and lay still.

Viking was dead.

For this bravery in saving Viking, Andy Paterson received the Silver Federation Medal ("VC") from the S.P.C.A. (See also the President's Annual Report, 1972-73, page 131).