

A Day in the Life . . .

by A. C. Woods and D. W. L. Scorgie

(SANAЕ II)

FRED BLOGGS was up till 0230 this morning. He had hoped to have an early night, but the Whistler's micropulsations had showed definite signs of activity, and then the Geomag had come downstairs shouting, "Aurora! Aurora!" Knowing how quickly auroral activity can subside, Fred screamed up the ladder with a half-frozen tripod under his arm and his trusty old camera slung stranglingly around his neck. Unfortunately, in his haste he omitted to don windproofs and Onitsuka boots, essential items for anything but the briefest sojourn outside when the temperature is 40 below.

Reaching the hatch, Fred heaved himself out and collapsed onto the cold, crisp snow. Several minutes passed while he regained his breath after the exertion of hoisting his heavily laden bulk the 14 metres to the surface.

Eventually Fred was able to take an interest in his surroundings. The Met boys were launching the evening's balloon and the skivvy¹ was shovelling snow down the chute to the snow-melter. Nobody seemed aware of any aurora, and no wonder, for Fred had to search the sky intently before he found the disappointingly faint glow on the horizon to the south. "Oh well, I guess it'll come again just now. It always does." Or so thought our hopeful, but unbeknown to him, the micropulsations had pulled a fast one on him and had quietened down completely by then.

Meanwhile, there stood our hero in iced-up slippers with everything set up, waiting for the fancy pulsating lights. For two hours he jumped up and down and ran around, tripping over sastrugi in the dark, in a vain attempt to keep warm. With still no sign of anything spectacular, he decided to take a photo of the dull glow, having gone to all the trouble of setting up his camera and tripod in the first place. "Let me see now. Twenty seconds exposure should be okay," he estimated, and pressed the cable-release, counted to twenty and then released it. However, there was no encouraging "cluck" of the reflex mirror returning to position. "Dammit, stuck again!" Fred exploded. Hoping the mirror might jump back, he tried cocking the camera, but he was cold and tired and cocked too fast, with his clumsy frozen fingers. With a sickening jerk the film tore, and muttering quite unquotable profanities, Fred packed up and headed for the hatch.

Back inside the base, Fred stowed camera and tripod in an empty food crate in the snow passage, and hurried to the kitchen-cum-dining-room-cum-living-room. The room was deserted except for the Sanae and Borgia leaders, who sat poring over the chess board, and the



Aurora! Aurora!

(Photo: JARE 67-68)

duty meteorologist relaxing contentedly in a chair before the stove, his stockinged feet in the oven. Acknowledging the grunts of those present, Fred headed for the stove, where he immediately proceeded to thaw out his numbed fingers, after which he fixed himself a mug of steaming coffee and joined the pair at the chess board. This was the third and final game against the neighbouring Novolazarevskaya Station, the first game having gone to the Russians, the second to Sanae. Scenting blood the chess experts in the team were now doing their utmost to win the series. If they succeeded, it would be the first time in the history of Sanae.

To Fred's polite inquiry concerning the progress of the game, the Borgia leader, with a predatory gleam in his eyes, promptly predicted the imminent defeat of the Russians. A sceptical Fred was soon embroiled in an involved argument over the optimum reply to the Russian's latest tactic, which had to be transmitted the 500 km to Novolazarevskaya at the next radio sked.

Presently they were joined by the Beeswagter², out of phase as usual, looking disconsolate and uttering dark threats against a certain 15MHz oscillation, which was apparently ruining the digestion of his ionosonde. The conversation thereupon took such an engrossing turn, that it was past two when Fred next noticed the time. With a cry of dismay he jumped up, took his leave of the night-owls, and beat a very hasty retreat in the

Poring over the chess board.

(Photo: D. G. Torr)

direction of the sleeping quarters, resolving to sleep until 1130 and really settle down to some work the next day.

At 0230 Fred crawls into his sleeping-bag with a sigh, but he cannot sleep – he has forgotten to visit the Palace.³ Grunting and groaning, he heaves himself erect, stumbles into the snow passage and trying to remain as drowsy as possible, makes a lightning 100-metre dash to the Palace and back, hitting his head three times on protruding wooden beams on the way and getting showers of ice crystals down the back of his diesel-stained vest in the process. Completely wide awake as a result, he takes three hours to fall asleep, and is just nodding off when a voice in the darkness calls out, "Lunchtime! Lunchtime!" Fred gropes for his watch: it is 0900. "Good grief! How can they have lunch in the middle of the night like this?" he protests, and turns over. "No, I'm darn hungry," he reflects, "and after all, there was fish for lunch yesterday, so at the very worst it can only be pork luncheon roll today."⁴ Let's go!"

He drags himself out of bed and staggers around looking for the pullcord for the light, which he left out of reach by mistake last night. However, in fumbling about, he upsets the elaborate system of tins and pipes he constructed a week ago to stem the rising tide of cold water caused by the leaky roof of his room. The whole sleeping quarters echoes to the sound of falling beer cans, overturned paraffin tins, and gushing water, followed by a string of obscenities from the room next door, where the Bees has only just got to bed.

Twenty minutes later, with his room again semi-seaworthy, Fred heads down the corridor, only to be halted by a voice from the doctor's "insulting" room: "Hey, don't forget to weigh yourself!" Swearing quietly to himself, our hero turns into the bathroom, sheds his clothes and stands naked and shivering on the scale, while fresh Antarctic air, at an invigorating –30 Celsius, wafts over him from a rent in the inlet to the Wanson heater.⁵ Through bleary eyes, and with not a little dismay, he notes that he has put on yet another 5 kg.

At length Fred arrives in the kitchen, half-dressed, dishevelled and late. The boys are already tucking into a delicious meal of braised steak and spaghetti. With nostrils dilated and stomach rumbling loudly at the



sight of all this lovely nosh, Fred lunges for his fork as the skivvy obligingly deposits a huge helping in front of him. But Fred has been followed into the kitchen, and immediately the familiar phrase, "Ah! Another victim!" freezes him. "Oh ghrieeks, it's blood and spit today,"⁶ he remembers reluctantly, and curses the Bloodsucker's injunction not to eat anything before these "appointments". Not one to give up easily, Fred tries a little cunning: "Hell Doc, I've already had something to eat. What about tomorrow?" The Doc is too smart for that. "Bad luck!" is his rejoinder, and off goes another victim.

In the hospital, Fred must first chew a tasty morsel of paraffin-wax, its delicate flavour suggestive of gun-powder and sennapods, dribbling the liquid thus generated into a small bottle. He then has half his blood supply tapped off for shipment back to the Republic, and finally is ordered to preserve some less-precious liquid in a mid-stream sample. After the ordeal, face drained of all colour by the loss of such enormous amounts of fluid, Fred crawls back into the kitchen, eyes his ice-cold food for a moment, and storms out, having lost all desire for solid nutriment!

After this traumatic experience we find Fred in his office, where he works until teatime preparing data for transmission to his University. "Should I risk going to tea?" he wonders. However, by this time he has built up a tremendous appetite, and the thought of some toast and honey is irresistible. Fred trots along to the kitchen and makes straight for the "squeak-squeak" machine, a device known in much warmer climes as a breadslicer. Poor Fred! There are only a few hard crumbs left. "Damn those midnight-snackers! Well some coffee would be nice." He skates across the diesel-coated floor to the stove and grabs the kettle on the way past. Owing to the marked slope of the floor at this end of the kitchen,⁷ even the most prodigious running on the spot doesn't help him maintain his position next to the stove, and he glides down to the sink, with the coffee-pot in one hand, mug in the other, pouring all the way. After three minutes of violent exercise, he manages to overcome gravity and the coefficient of viscosity of diesel-fuel, climbs back past the stove and dives into a chair before the slope can recapture him.

At this juncture the duty baseworkers⁸ troop in, eddies of chill air swirling about them, stamping snow from their boots with shouts of "Tea! Tea!" Gloves and



Night-owls.

(Photo: D. G. Torr)



Snow passage.

(Photo: D. G. Torr)

Sanae Base.

(Photo: D. W. L. Scorgie)



balaclavas are shed, the latter only after considerable travail, due to the large amounts of ice glueing beards to the wool. Ungainly in outsize Onitsuka boots, bulky clothing and winter anoraks, the boys slump tiredly into chairs, while a solicitous cook brings on mugs of strong, hot tea, and a large tin of biscuits. While rapidly demolishing tea and biscuits, they complain bitterly of the insidious behaviour of drift snow in Antarctica. At the emergency base, about 1.5 km from the main base, they have been endeavouring to clear the two short passages, completely blocked with snow from floor to ceiling. This unfortunate situation arose as a result of several snowstorms, when the drift snow filtered in through narrow cracks between the corrugated iron walls and roof of each passage.

In one's and two's the remaining members of the team arrive for tea, except for the odd few who are out of phase and will not be roused from a sound sleep. The atmosphere in the kitchen is suddenly warm and congenial; there is much friendly banter and swapping of apocryphal anecdotes, even after the baseworkers and those with pressing duties have dispersed. Fred is just settling back with a second mug of tea, when the Doc saunters up, and, his face lighting up, enquires gently, "Doing anything after tea?" This innocent remark throws Fred into a violent fit of choking and coughing. "Oh Blimey, not again!" he complains, spluttering tea all over the place. He does not need to be told that he is required for the dark adaptation test,⁹ and admitting defeat, he is led off by the Doc.

The hospital is pitch black and Fred sits at one end of a large wooden box looking at some small hazy objects at the far side. "Just tell me which way the three E's are pointing" the Bloodsucker says. An hour later, eyes completely strained by this nightmarish work, Fred stumbles out of the hospital and feels his way down the corridor towards his room in the sleeping-quarters, all lights naturally having been carefully removed by the good physician. Before he has gone two paces, the silence

of the hospital zone is shattered by the sound of a fire-extinguisher bouncing along the floor. Fred follows in a horizontal position, his forward motion impeded by the heavy bathroom curtain, and ultimately brought to a clattering halt by several empty paraffin tins, used for carrying bath water. As he staggers to his feet, Fred is harangued for his intrusion by a pale, plump, hairy apparition sitting in five centimetres of tepid water. It is the skivvy enjoying his hard-earned, fortnightly bath. Mumbling his apologies, Fred limps off to his bedroom, flops onto his bunk and contemplates the pin-ups on the wall, in an effort to untangle his knotted nerves.

When the skivvy calls him to supper, Fred's spirits are revived somewhat by the sight of the scrumptious tucker laid on for the evening meal. "Gee, fresh meat and wine! Great!" The dinner is excellent and over coffee, replete and satisfied, Fred adds his voice to those yelling, "Sticks, sticks!" and attempting to drown out the counter-cries of, "After bridge, after bridge!" from the card fanatics. The two pastimes are mutually exclusive because of the lack of space – hence the fierce competition. Suddenly a familiar voice breaks through the general babble, "Ahum. I won't be a moment, but before you start anything, I'd just like to measure your skin thicknesses."¹⁰ All thoughts of snooker are abandoned, and our hero doffs his shirt and joins the grumbling queue. At length the Doc is finished and picks up his calipers, specially pre-chilled in the snow passage for the occasion, and departs.

The worthy medical gentleman has no sooner left when a shout of "Lights! Focus!" rings out and is met with an enthusiastic reception. "Ah, movies!" thinks Fred, and while the projector is set up, he joins in the argument over the relative merits and demerits of "Bachelor in Paradise" and "Where the Boys are". But alas! At this moment the Doc returns with a pile of Personnel Research Questionnaires.¹¹ There is a loud collective groan from everyone. "Alright, alright," says the Doc. "It won't take you a minute to fill them in."



And he's right, it takes more than a minute. By the time Fred has completed the odious task, he is ready for bed. As he hands in his papers, the Sanae leader reminds him that he is on basework detail tomorrow – shovelling snow at the emergency base. All that poor Fred can manage by way of reply is a weak croak. And to add insult to injury, the junior diesel mechanic sees his discomfiture and with a really malicious sense of humour, points out that his three-day cooking turn is due in a few days, and that he is skivvy for the day immediately following. Before any further disasters can befall him, Fred says a firm goodnight to his team-mates laughing at his bad luck, and goes to his room, via the Palace, his day completely ruined. It is fortunate, Fred reflects, that such days occur only once a month.

Explanatory Notes

1. Turns are taken in rotation by every team-member at being skivvy, or general house mouse. His duties include (amongst others) cleaning the base, laying and serving at table, pumping diesel fuel to the stove and various building heaters, and shovelling snow into the snow melter to ensure adequate provision of water for the day. In return for his labours, he may bath and wash his clothes that day, provided of course that he doesn't leave the snow-melter empty as a result!
2. The Ionosphericist at Sanae is fondly known as Beeswagter. This results from the fact that his instrument, the ionosonde, causes interference to the radio services while it is operating and hence has come to be known as the "Beast" by the radio personnel. Conversely, the Beeswagter can only service and repair the Beast when radio schedules are not being kept. Hence he usually works during the night shift and is thus "out of phase" with most of the other team-members working normal day-shift.
3. Otherwise known as the Toilet.

4. Although there is a large variety of tinned and fresh meats available and a very large number of ways of preparing them, inevitably there must be a fair amount of repetition of various types throughout the year.
5. Most buildings are heated by huge diesel-fired heaters, which draw cold air through a ventilation shaft from the snow surface 14 metres above the roof.
6. Amongst his other duties, the doctor takes monthly samples of blood, saliva and urine for analysis by medical research authorities in an attempt to ascertain the body's reaction to extremes of temperature and long periods of isolation.
7. The heat of the stove and the hot water in the sink caused the floor in that part of the room to sink slightly with respect to the rest of the building.
8. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done in an Antarctic base. Food supplies for two years and fuel drums for the power generators, vehicles and heaters (approximately 1 500 of them), spare parts and building materials – all these have to be kept reasonably accessible, and dug out regularly from under the tons of drift snow covering them after blizzards. In addition there is a great deal of maintenance work to be done, and for these purposes days are set aside, when all members of the team participate in this "basework".
9. Another of the doctor's duties. At intervals of a few months, team members have to accustom their eyes to the dark and then try to distinguish various objects as their light intensities are increased. This experiment is aimed at ascertaining whether the eyes adapt to the dark as a result of the long winter months in Antarctica.
10. Skin-fold thickness is measured at regular intervals to see whether this varies as the body adapts to the cold.
11. The doctor was also responsible for supervising the completion of "Personnel Questionnaire Forms" which were again handed out every few months in order to determine whether there are any psychological changes during long periods of isolation.



Lunch in preparation.

(Photo: D. G. Torr)