

Dramatic escape from ice by RSA

From Our Correspondent

Cape Town, Friday.

IN HER NARROWEST ESCAPE in six years of Antarctic voyaging, the South African supply ship RSA, which docked in Cape Town today, was nudged by a 40,000-ton shelf of ice which peeled dramatically off a frozen cliff and smashed into the bay where she was.

The ship returned today with the 1966 team which spent a year at South Africa's weather base on Queen Maud Land.

Chief Officer Ernst Funk was taking the 1,573-ton ship out of the bay when the huge block — nearly 40 times the size of the

vessel — began its cascade into the narrow bay.

If it had split off two minutes earlier, when the RSA was closer and at a lesser speed, she would have been seriously damaged, and perhaps even capsized.

The Chief Officer, who was on the bridge, had been using the

ship's bow to carve away two ice points on a cliff in the U-shaped bay, which was to have become a landing point for the ship.

At 10.15 a.m. on February 2, the site — called a bukta — was ready for use. The ship's log for the day reads: "10.20 a.m. bukta starts carving."

The Chief Officer turned the ship to port, heading out of the bay to another to put ashore the team.

"I was going half speed ahead when I saw bubbles on the starboard side, at the corner of the cliff. I knew this was trouble and I rang for full speed.

POPPED UP

"A huge chunk of ice which must have risen from the bottom of the ice cliff 120ft. down popped up suddenly. Then another piece broke away about 250ft. away.

"The in-between section, which was 250ft. long, about 80ft. wide and 160ft. high, broke off and slid down into the water, turning over.

"We were going full speed and we must have been 100ft. away when a section of the break-away piece touched us on the starboard stern. In a few moments the whole bay was filled with crumbled ice."

IF . . .

If the R.S.A. had gone alongside the Bukta and put men ashore to begin discharging they would have been engulfed by the plunging tons of ice.

"What I thought was our greatest danger was that first piece of ice popping up. If that had come up under us from the depth it would not have been so good," said Mr. Funk.

A member of the returning weather team described the spectacle as "stupendous but frightening."

Mr. Funk was phlegmatic about the incident today, but an onlooker with him at the time said his description of it was unprintable.