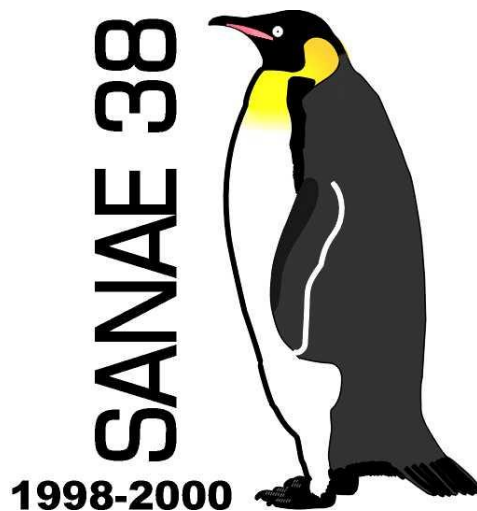


THE SASTRUGI TIMES

The newsletter of the South African National
Antarctic Expedition Team at Vesleskarvet

January and February 1999



By Duncan Cromarty

History repeats itself!

Every year there is the selection of a new team to man the SANAE base in the Antarctic for the following year. The experience usually starts around the middle of the year, so (nearly) all the members of SANAE 38 team were interviewed then. The reasons why each of the present team members was willing to come to the "last true wilderness" are varied but they all wanted to be here. For some it was a life long dream coming true for another it was to see the place as it really is or to experience the isolation while making everything happen.

Let me introduce you to the 10 members

Fanus Olivier our tall dark andenthusiastic SHARE radar engineer hails from Johannesburg and leaves a successful working wife behind. Always plotting but with a quick joke and a chuckle has decided that indoor footwear is for the weak. He insists that we install a front doorbell to encourage visitors.

Niel Malan (Einstein) has in his quiet way got everything all worked out. He is the Potchefstroom University scientist doing a number of different upper atmospheric and space observations. Being the only genius amongst us is difficult, but it sure helps normalize the group.

Conrad (sleepy) Mahlase is the first black **scientist** to over-winter at SANAE and works on the many Durban University projects as well as the Swedish Astrid satellite telemetry. He earned his nickname from his main activity in meetings - and who can blame him?

Ryan Earle is the mechanical engineer. Tall, blonde, athletic, musical but unfortunately already taken. Hails from Gauteng. He is responsible for all mechanical things including power generation, vehicles, buildings, heating and the water system from the snow outside through to the sewerage inside. It is perceived however that he prefers the black bag experiences though.

James (Bond) Kwalepe is one of our two diesel mechanics. A Bloemfontein guy with a really quick smile. With last year spent on Gough Island he is definitely the most experienced at being away from home. Other than maintaining our things mechanical, he has become our movie show man and looks after our entertainment area very well.

Andre Bothe (Scribe) is the other mechanic and specializes in Cats and baking bread. Rumor has it that it is the only way to keep his finger nails clean, but the bread tastes great. He was a Cape Townian running his own business before his dream came true.

Mike Cromhout our electrical technician (trying to get a part in the movies as a Rambo substitute) is from Pretoria where he worked for the air force. He has a thing about poles and hearts but makes sure that things electrical are in great shape. A true lasagna expert (he's not Italian, I tell you).

Karel Koster (our dedicated DJ) is the electronics wizard looking after our LAN, communications radios and is our receptionist but best of all this man can cook!!! He missed his vocation for sure. Long hair (even before we started) good looks and a sense of humor and adventure lurks near the radios.

Ernest Buitendag is the doc. Coming from the west Rand he also has a problem staying at home. He spent a year in Saudi Arabia where he got so hot that he had to come here to cool off. He looks after all our health and food related problems (we hope, if the need ever arises).

The last one is Duncan Cromarty the team leader who is expected to keep this show on the road. From Pretoria this old ballie also left a successful wife at home so that he could live out a life-long dream. He just enjoys himself around here when not wrecking things.

Then just to confuse everyone we had a temporary member, Andrew Treu. He was our chaplain during the take over, a facilitator and a man with a thing about dynamite (?) to make holes and also cats. Not together though, but he sure kept us wondering about things.....



The team!!!!

The main reason for the team being in the Antarctic is for the scientific research being done here, of such high standard that there is international co-operation on some of the projects we do. There are only three scientists but they are involved in several projects each. The focus of the research is on "space weather" and to allow South Africa to make intelligent and informed decisions about the future of this sensitive continent.

So now you know who we are and why we are here, lets give you the rest. The team met in Pretoria for a two-week team training session at the beginning of November 1998. After a rather intensive time spent attending lectures, discussions and active participation in activities like cooking, first aid, environmental issues, climbing and crevasses rescue etc we were on a weeks leave (the last leave for 15 months).

Packing enough worldly belongings for a year is a difficult decision - after all how much soap, toothpaste etc must one take for 15 months without being able to re-supply. With all our required belongings the team met in Cape Town again where we were issued with the necessary protective clothing and there were frantic last minute buying sprees for things photographic and luxurious. A sponsored farewell party at the Mitchell's brewery at the waterfront saw a couple of slight hangovers step onto the SA Agulhas on the 3rd December

1998. After a number of sponsorship photographs taken alongside the ship we waved the family and friends milling dejectedly on the quay a fond farewell.

The trip down was eventful, starting out in dead calm seas but quickly showing that Neptune calls the tune. By the end of the first day we were all seasick - some only getting over it after about 5 days. We dropped off a Norwegian led team on Bouvet Island to study the birds and seals on the most desolate place on earth. The closest land to this small island is 1200 kilometers away. Continuing on our way we saw the last sunset there was to see in 1998 on the 11th December.

A crossing the line ceremony was held where all unfortunates were initiated to latitudes south of the Antarctic Circle. It was a cold, wet, gooey event finishing off with a braai on the helideck (miles from any land - and snowing at that). Icebergs, pack-ice, Albatrosses, Terns and Petrels and finally the ice shelf of the Antarctic were all part of the daily scenes. We dropped the German over-wintering team, who had been travelling down with us, off at their Neumayer base and continued on to the Xmas Tree Bukta where we were to off load.

New experiences flooded over us. Off loading onto bay ice, digging up buried crates and containers that had to be returned to South Africa, travelling by skidoo (a snow mobile), inspecting snow caves, experiencing 24 hour sunshine a day, and bitterly cold winds. Penguins came around all the time to check up on our activities and we were rewarded with being able to get as close as a meter from them. Christmas (a genuine white Christmas for most of us) was spent at the emergency base (E-Base) close to the bukta, and orientation of what to expect on this continent for the next year began.



The "bus".

We arrived at our home (SANAE IV) for the year from e-base on Old Years Day (after a 13 hour drive in the "bus"). This is a refrigeration container converted to have windows and seats (now only beds) and mounted on a sledge. This whole contraption is pulled by a Challenger - a rubber tracked tractor/bulldozer at a maximum speed of 25 km per hour. It was the beginning of a hectic, busy and frustrating time. There are just not enough hours in one day to get everything done and on top of that everything takes at least 3 - 4 times longer to do here

than it would back home. Training of the team to get them confident to run the base on their own through thick and thin had to be completed in about 6 weeks. This included all mechanical systems, water, electrical and electronic systems, communications, waste management and handling, depots, the areas around the base, the fuel bunkers and a myriad of small things that are generally ignored when at home because there is a phone to get someone in to sort out the problems.



Home for 1999!!

Crevasse climbing or orientation and windscoop activities like bum-sliding or tobogganing on a plastic covered mattress were great attractions, limited of course to when the weather was fine. Trips to Moteplassen and Grunnehogna to lift a depot and to recover an old motorized sledge (believed to have been deserted about 1979) and to clean up the old base and remove the sastrugi build up respectively are the two inland working trips done so far. The furthest we have been from the base is about 260 km and that is a 20 hour trip with enough preparation to make Napoleon's campaigns look like Sunday outings. Both these trips brought home the reality of how harsh and unforgiving this continent can be but it is balanced with infinite beauty.

Official hand-over of the base took place on 6th of February in the form of a "formal" dinner hosted by the out-going team. It was accompanied by the usual speeches and signing of documents as these things normally go, but then there were beard growing competitions, traditional grog drinking and a huge party as well.



Hand-over dinner

With the weather calling the shots the SA Agulhas (that had made a newsworthy trip down with an encounter of the iceberg kind) arrived at the bukta to collect the summer take-over team and the departing SANAE 37 team. We received a few visitors to the base, from Germany and Australia and two local media representatives flown from the ship by chopper.

Two days after the ship should have sailed a gap in the storm allowed a few quick helicopter trips that reduced the number of people in the base to only 6 of the SANAE 38 team.



"Final departure of take-over team"

The loading of the ship was, as for most years before, delayed due to the storm, but on 24th February 1999 we got a radio message to say that the ship had departed. We were on our own! 10 guys split between two bases about 180 km apart felt a bit alone. For a while there was a feeling of "what now?" but there was work to be done and there was a birthday to celebrated so we quickly got into the swing of a new way of life.

Our next newsletter will continue the tale of the intrepid 10, so don't miss it!!!!

Greetings from the deep south,

SANAE 38

Visit our web page: <http://sanae.sanap.org.za>

The SANAE 38 Team wish to acknowledge the generous and kind support of the following sponsors:

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