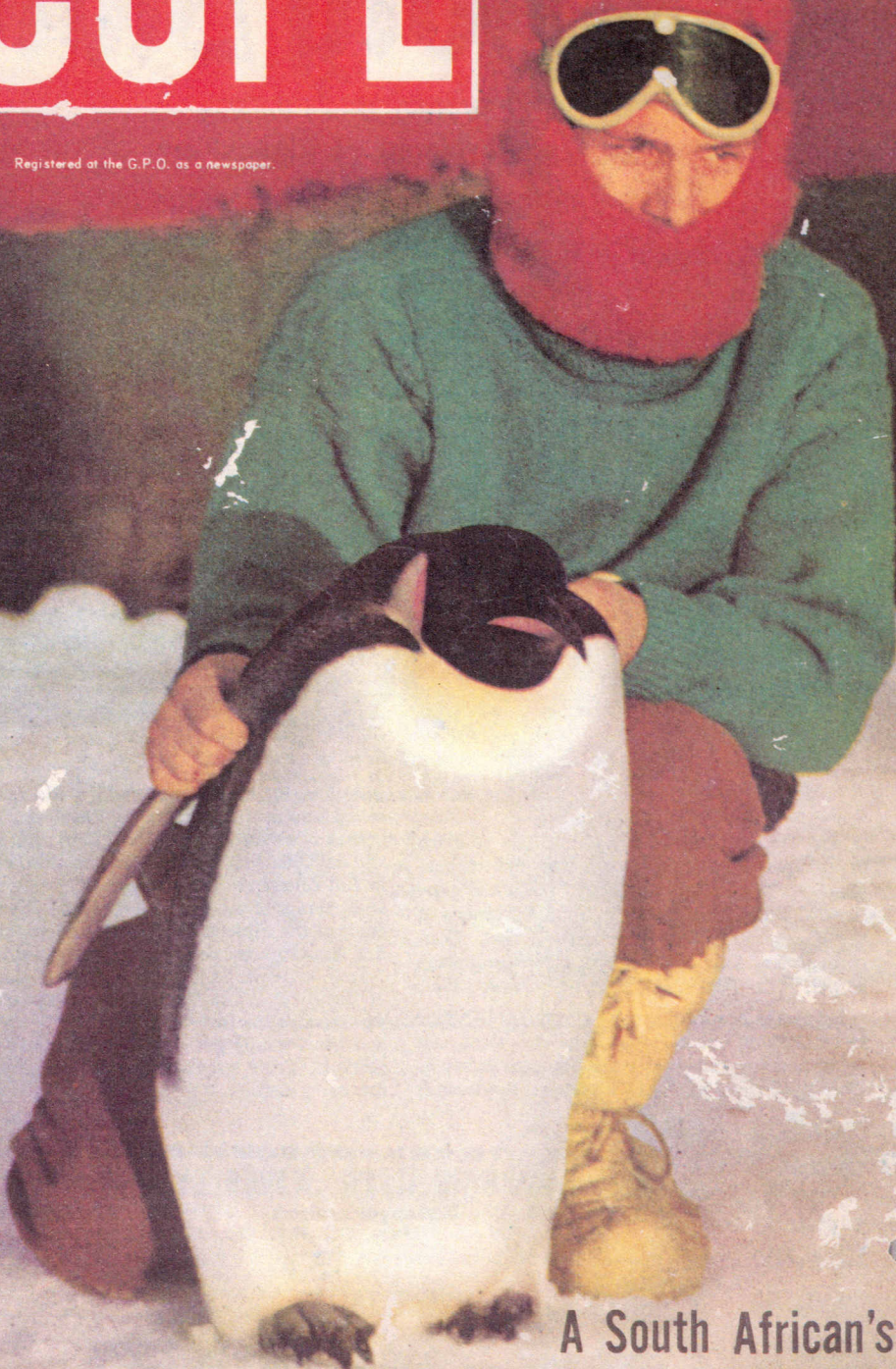


No. 4 SEPTEMBER 9, 1966

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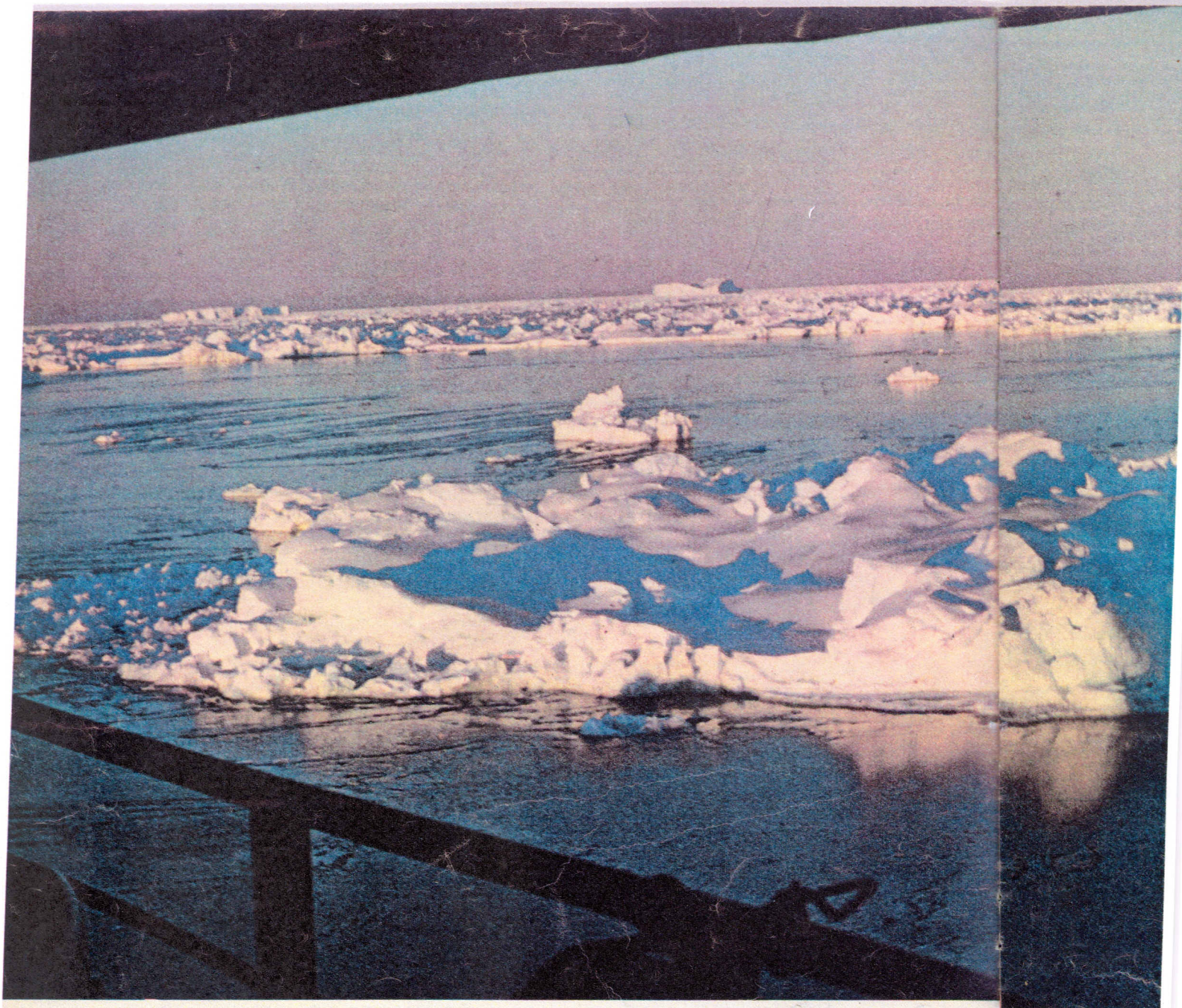
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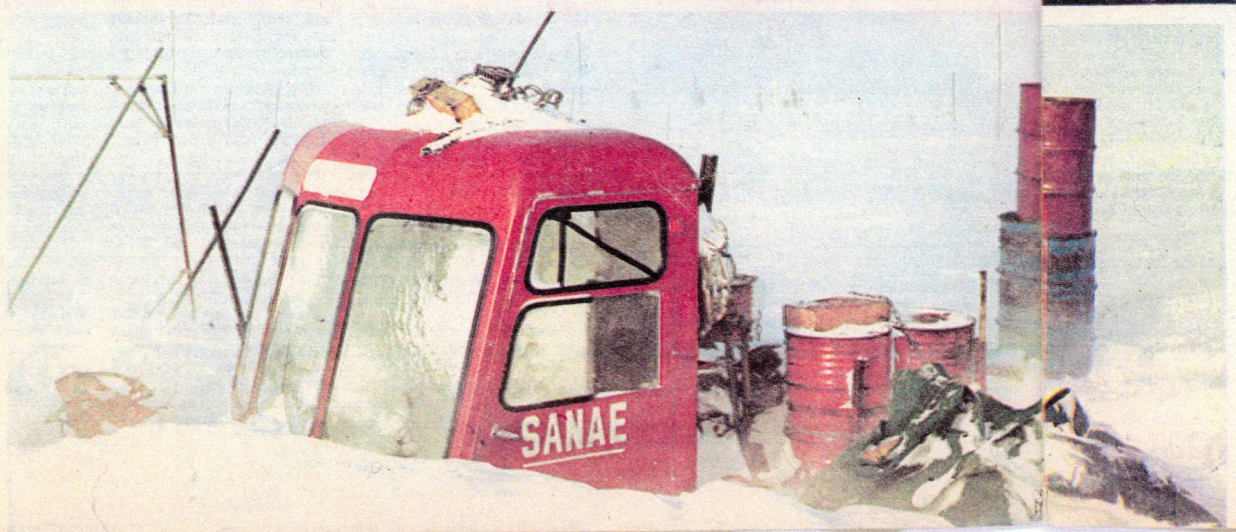


A South African's Diary

**MY GREAT ADVENTURE IN THE ANTARCTIC**

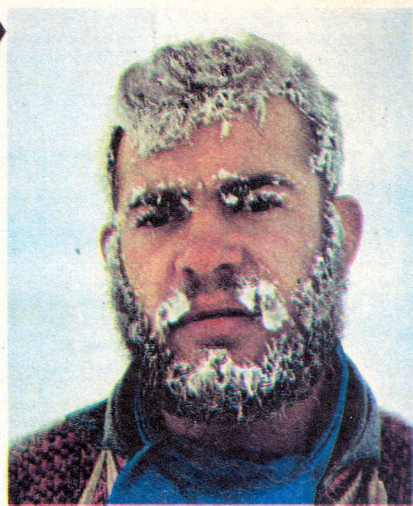


A caterpillar tractor after a snow storm. Paul describes such storms as "frightful". Some of them lasted for weeks, mainly in the winter, but sometimes in the summer, with 50 to 70 m.p.h. winds as a howling accompaniment. Paul spent his first Antarctic Christmas with one colleague in a small tent during a raging snowstorm, and it was in an atmosphere of almost fantastic irony that they listened to Christmas goodwill messages over the radio from South Africa basking in sunshine.



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Paul van As, aged 21, of Pretoria, applied for a job as a radio technician with a South African expedition going to the South Pole — as a joke. When he clambered through a trap-door and let himself down an icy shaft into a room, seven feet by four, in the Antarctic, his new home for 16 months, he realised it was no more of a joke than the stalagmites he saw next morning and which his breath had formed on the low ceiling above him while he slept. But when he landed in Cape Town again he knew that it had been a wonderful adventure and an experience he would recommend anyone not to miss if opportunity offered.



# SOUTH AFRICANS IN: MAN'S LAST GREAT ADVENTURE

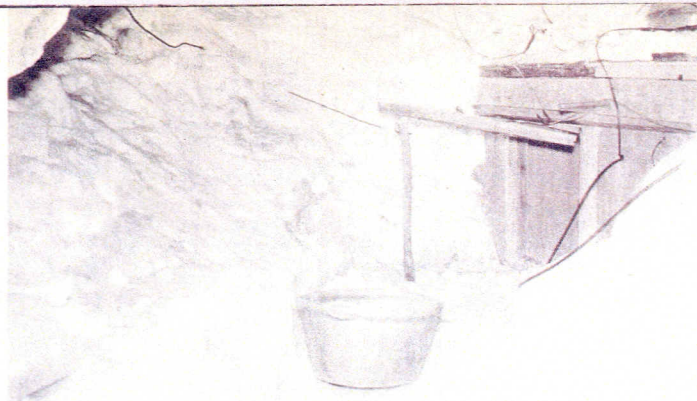
by WIM BALJU

"Go south to the ice if you want a great adventure and a great experience," says Paul van As. He spent 16 months there with a small group of men at South Africa's Antarctic base. He became the friend of Huskies and a student of penguins. He learned to make good bread by taking the dough into bed with him. He saw the same films so often he could recite the dialogue, but he still enjoyed them. He played Patience and other card games for days on end. "But I would not have missed it for anything," he says

A midnight photograph of the Antarctic coastline taken from the ship, Republic South Africa, which took the expedition from Cape Town to the ice. Paul called unloading the ship not day-and-night work but day-and-day work, because the Summer sun never set and the stores for the base camp, 20 miles away, were carted off non-stop until the task was completed by caterpillar tractors and dog sledges. One item of stores was 2,000 drums of diesel fuel.



# WE COULD BATH EVERY 22<sup>ND</sup> DAY



Home, sweet, icy home. Picture shows the window of the base camp dining room which was 20 feet under the surface of ice. During the summer the sun was so strong that the under-ice room was always well lighted. The zinc bath in the foreground was used for collecting ice for water supplies.

**F**EEL like a trip to the South Pole? No, I'm not joking. In case you haven't noticed, advertisements for the trip have already been placed in the newspapers by the Department of Transport. If you're lucky you'll leave Cape Town for the Antarctic in January next year.

Lucky? Yes, you'll come back a year later with experiences behind you that you'll never regret and never forget. That's the way I feel about my stint down South five years ago.

I didn't really mean to go. Some friends of mine filled in forms and said to me: "What about you, Paul — are you scared?" Well, I put my name down — and promptly forgot all about it. Some time later, the telephone rang early one morning. An uncle of mine was on the line. He said: "It was announced on the radio last night that you're one of the team going to Antarctica — is that right?"

It had to be — I couldn't back out now. And in due course I found myself boarding the Norwegian seal-catcher *Polarhav* with ten other members of the expedition.

The men who are selected for the Department of Transport's eighth expedition next year will travel in the research and supply ship *R.S.A.* — by comparison with our craft, a luxury liner. We were supposed to take 10 days from Cape Town to the edge of the ice cap. Instead, the trip took three full weeks. There was a ten-day spell when we didn't move at all. The ship was locked fast in the grip of an icefield that stretched as far as the eye could see. There was nothing to do but play soccer with a ball made of a tightly rolled bundle of rags.

Then someone had the idea of staging a performance of *Cinderella on Ice*. Where, after all, would one get a better stage? Everyone was given a part and we put on a show that no albatross, penguin or seal in the audience will lightly forget!

**W**HEN we finally landed on the featureless, trackless coast of Antarctica, our first job was to offload supplies of food, equipment and fuel, including 2,000 drums of diesel oil. I was a farm boy and knew how to swing a bag of mealies on to my shoulder, but that seemed

like kid stuff when it came to handling those drums.

The next job was to transport all our supplies 20 miles across the ice to our base. What a shock I had when I saw the place that was to be our home for the next twelve months! I found myself standing in the middle of nowhere, looking for a place to sleep and eat. All I could see were poles sticking up in the air, rolls of wire and a stack of supplies. There was nothing else in sight except snow.

I thought then of the folk back home in sunny South Africa, and of my pals who were responsible for getting me here. This was their idea of a joke. Nevertheless, I contented myself with the reminder that I was one of a very exclusive group of South African pioneers — the men who keep the Republic's flag flying over the Antarctic weather base.

We used tractors and dog-sleds to get our supplies to base, and we worked a 24-hour day. This was because we were in a land where the sun never goes down in summer, and never rises in winter!

The Norwegians from whom South Africa took over the weather base had erected the living and working quarters on the surface of the ice. I found that the wood and fibreglass buildings were now buried more than 20 feet deep, and that I had to climb down a ladder fixed to the wall of a vertical shaft to get to the front door.

Every winter, the wind piles up another three feet or so of snow, raising the level of the iron-hard surface of ice up above.

I have never felt so lonely as I did that first night, buried in the bowels of the Antarctic ice cap. My "bedroom" measured seven feet by four feet. I remembered the saying: "Snug as a bug in a rug" as I settled into the specially-made sleeping bag.

But I spent a restless night. This was to be my home for a whole year, I kept thinking. I wondered if they were thinking about me at home. I had not even told my parents that I had applied to come on the expedition. They too, like my uncle, had first heard of it in the radio announcement.

I had one nightmare after the other. And when I woke next morning, my cheek brushed against two chilly sticks of ice — stalactites, formed during the night as the

warm breath from my nostrils rose to the low ceiling above my bunk. In the 40 degrees below zero temperature, drops of moisture froze and formed hanging pillars of ice that came down on to my pillow.

**E**VERYONE was given a job to do as the team settled down to turn the base into a home-from-home. I, a radio technician, was given the first turn at playing cook. Four days at a time, and then the next man took over.

We had plenty to eat. The choice varied from powdered potatoes to the most delicious, tender reindeer steak from Norway. Everything was canned, of course. But the bread had to be baked.

This was my speciality. They said my bread was the best and they couldn't get enough of it. The secret was to get the dough to rise. I remembered that my mother used to leave it overnight under a warm blanket. The warmest place I could think of in that sub-zero climate was my sleeping bag. I thought it best not to mention this to the others, but every time it was my turn to bake the bread, the dough went into the bag with me the previous night!

Apart from the domestic chores assigned to every member of the team, there were routine tasks to be done by the medical officer, the land surveyor, the radio technician, the radio operator, the tractor mechanics and the meteorologists.

Every day at two o'clock the weather balloon was sent up. It carried an apparatus to send signals giving temperature, pressure and humidity to the receiving set at the base. This information was then transmitted to Cape Town, to be used in the compilation of weather forecasts for the Republic.

From the start, the dogs that drew our sleds fascinated me. They are a breed apart, these Huskies. Savage, quarrelsome, completely without fellow-feeling for one another, they are at the same time fanatically fond of human beings. Rank jealousy sets them fighting each other when one of them suspects that the other is getting too much attention from the man who is handling the team. At times the whole group will tear into the poor miscreant who has received perhaps one pat on the head too many.

The Huskies vary in colour from brown to grey and some have black and white colouring. Their hides are covered with two kinds of hair: long and bushy, and, underneath, a kind of short fur. They also grow hair under the pads of their paws.

The Huskies' feeding habits are different from those of other dogs. They might naturally be expected to be voracious eaters but, on the contrary, they limit themselves to a strict diet: so much, and no more. Left-over food is buried under the snow for the next meal. This frugality is in strange contrast to the size of the Husky — some of them weigh as much as 120lb.

The Huskies all have Afrikaans names — Jonas, Flap, Knol, Bamse are some — and they are given commands in Afrikaans. You have to hang on hard when the team of 10 to 14 dogs are hitched to a sled and they hear the command "Brakkies trek!" You can't see them for snow-dust for the first few hundred yards, and then they settle down to a lope that they can keep up for miles.

The leader of the team plays a very special and responsible role. He does not merely occupy the lead position, but is selected for the quality of leadership which not every dog, nor, for that matter, every human being, possesses. The leader develops an uncanny instinct for danger ahead; the invisible perils of the crevasse covered over with loose snow. Some of these fissures in the ice cap are hundreds of feet deep. Without timely warning from the leader of the Husky team, men, dogs and sled may well vanish without leaving a trace in the silent Antarctic wastes.

When we returned to Cape Town, we took back with us one of the dogs, old Jonas, who was due to retire on "pension." After his long outer covering of hair had been shaved off, he became acclimatised to South Africa and presumably lived happily ever after.

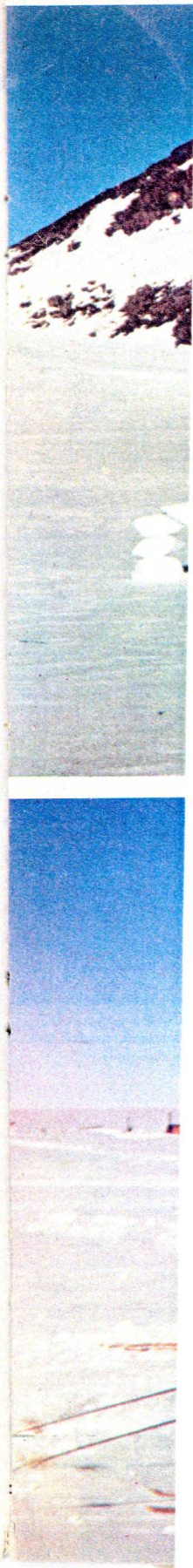
A special "dog dormitory" was dug out of the ice to house the team during the long Antarctic winter — forty feet long, twenty feet wide and six feet deep, with a separate cubicle for each animal.

**I**T wasn't easy to organise a bath in those pioneering days in 1960. Since then, I

Continued on page 37



The highway from ship to base camp. This signpost marks the route first taken by the Norwegian sealers, whose Antarctic homes the South Africans have taken over. The South Africans who passed this way in 1960 included a surveyor, a doctor, a radio operator and technician, mechanics for the tractors, and weather experts who provided daily meteorological information to the Republic.



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Continued on page 37



A camping site at Leeu-  
 kop, about 75 to 80 miles  
 from the main headquarters.  
 Paul and a companion had  
 to stay in a tent like this  
 for weeks while storms  
 raged. They took turns at  
 creeping out to get ice for  
 water. They had one cook-  
 ing pot in which they made  
 coffee first, then cooked  
 porridge and then eggs at  
 breakfast time. When not  
 cooking and cleaning the  
 pot they played cards and  
 listened to the radio.

On a gentle slope near the  
 base camp, members of the  
 expedition learned to ski  
 in fine weather. In bad  
 weather, or in the hours of  
 darkness, they played a  
 whole variety of card  
 games, but they all became  
 real experts at darts. They  
 say that no man in the  
 civilised parts of the world  
 could beat a "South Pole  
 Darts Specialist".



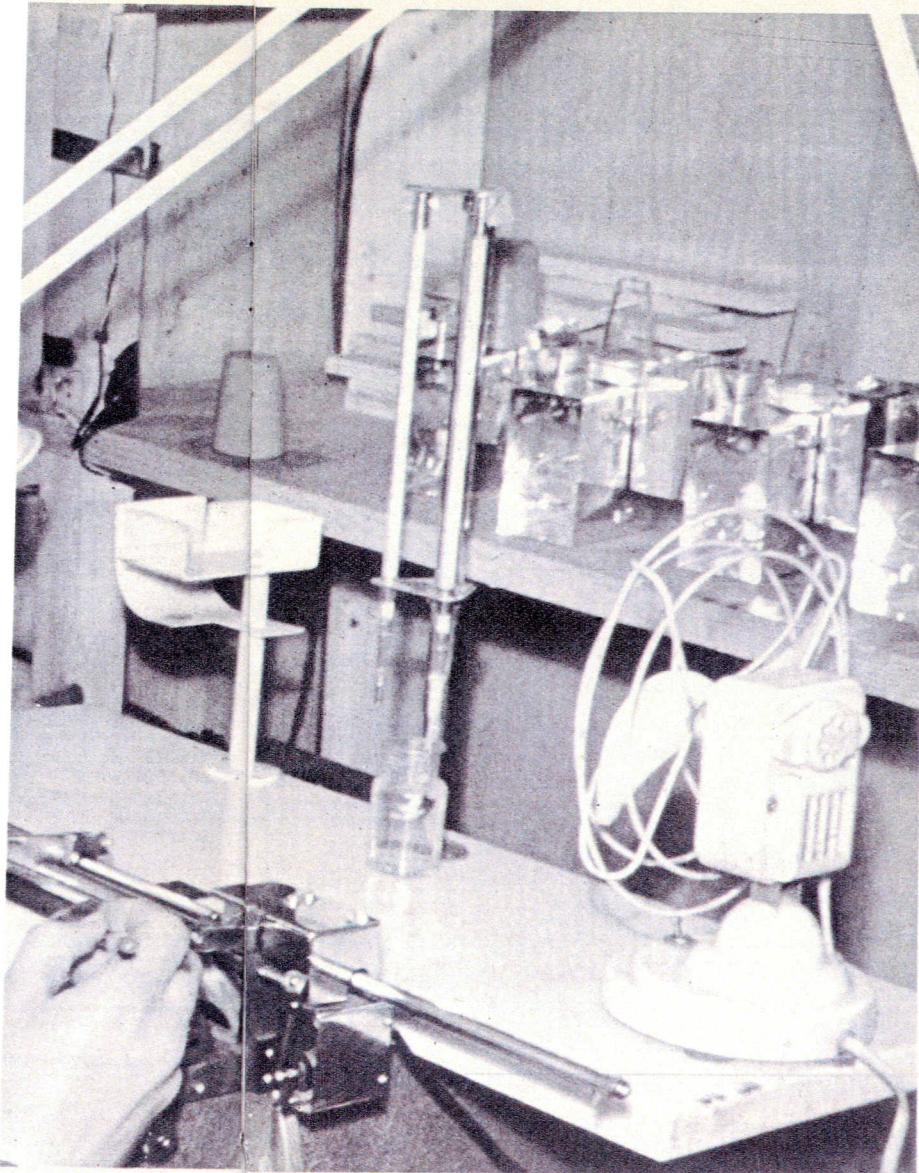
The radio operator watches the recording of signals from the weather balloon. The radio has been one of the great conquerors of Antarctic isolation. Parties away from the base camp keep contact via two-way

radio, and even programmes from South Africa can be heard early in the morning and about four in the afternoon. There is a supreme comfort in knowing that help can be summoned by radio if disaster threatens.

## A HOME TWENTY FEET UNDER THE SNOW

Kaiser penguins with their "chickens". A penguin lays one egg a year and rolls it into her feet with her beak. Then she leans over so that the loose warm flesh of the belly keeps the egg warm. When she has to eat, her man takes over from her, protecting the egg in the same fashion. In a snowstorm the adult penguins put their backs to the wind while the chickens crouch at their feet to shelter from the blast.





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Continued from page 34

believe, oil-burning stoves have been installed, and the problem of melting down ice and keeping the water warm long enough has been solved. But it was quite a ritual in the old days. In turn, each of the members of the expedition was given two days in which to bath and to wash his clothes. Every twenty-second day then, was bath day for me.

This involved, first of all, chopping out enough ice to fill eight baths to get enough water to fill one. The ice had to be melted on spirit stoves. This took time. Then there was no margin for relaxation or a nice long soak. It was in, soap, rinse and out before the temperature of the water took a dive back into the low thirties.

A "church service" was held every Sunday. Although several denominations were represented by members of the team, everyone joined in the Sunday devotions. All that these consisted of was the reading of a passage from the Bible, and prayer.

There was plenty of time to practise and perfect the lesser recreational arts such as darts and chess. Dart-throwing, in particular, was developed to a point of astonishing accuracy, and a team of "South Pole specialists" wiped the floor with all-comers when they returned to Cape Town.

Saturday night, of course, was "bioscope" night, with 16-millimetre films of rather ancient vintage. After a year I knew the dialogue in some of them off by heart. And there was one film, featuring a belly dancer, that virtually wore out with repeated screenings!

An unforgettable experience befell a colleague and me on the eve of our first Christmas in the Antarctic. At the foot

of a hill christened Leeukop, about 80 miles from the base, we were encamped after a sweep through the inland area to collect information for a detailed map of the region. A summer snowstorm blew up and kept us imprisoned in a tiny two-man tent for two weeks. The wind howled continuously at between 50 and 70 miles an hour.

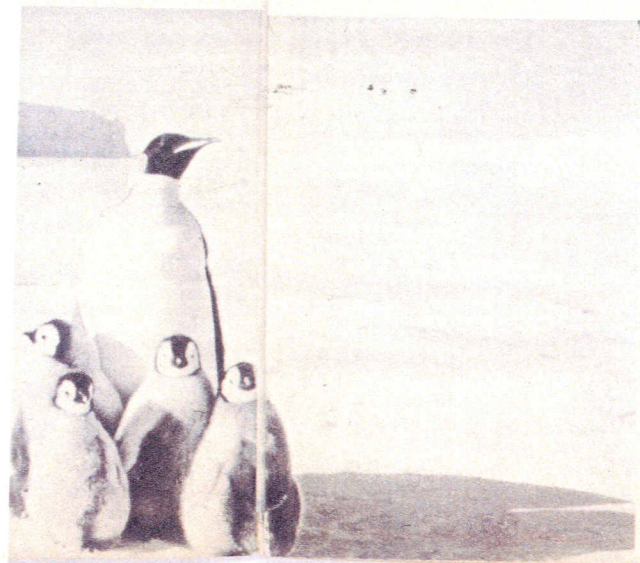
We passed the time sleeping, playing patience, keeping in touch with the base via our two-way radio set, and tuning in to programmes from South Africa. Reception was good early in the morning and about four o'clock in the afternoon.


The exchanges of Christmas greetings to which we listened seemed, more than anything else, to emphasise our utter isolation from our own kind. It was a sobering experience, but we kept our spirits up by making ourselves a Christmas tree with a piece of wire festooned with blobs of cotton wool from the medicine chest. Mercurchrome and iodine were used to colour the cotton wool. We had our white Christmas, with trimmings!

The most tiresome chore was cleaning the solitary cooking pot. We used to make coffee, followed by porridge, then boiled eggs, then stewed meat. The pot had to be cleaned and scoured every time round. By the time the pot was finally cleaned after the last course of a meal, we were almost ready to start preparing the next meal!

Time has blurred the sharp edges of the memories I brought back from Antarctica. I certainly did not know what to expect when I went there. But I have no regrets. These trips provide an adventure that I wish every young man could share. There are not many untamed frontiers left in this fast-shrinking little world of ours!

The members of the expedition. Their work in the Antarctic greatly helps the accuracy of weather forecasting in the Republic. Every day they sent up a balloon at 2 p.m. with apparatus to measure temperature, air pressure and humidity, and this information was relayed by radio to Cape Town immediately. In contrast with this scientific aspect of their work, each member of the expedition took a turn as cook for four days; Paul says the food was very good.





A Husky dog team hauling a sled across the icy wastes. Usually there are between 10 and 14 dogs in a team; the most important dog is the one with enough intelligence to be trained as the leader and be swift in obeying orders. The lead dog of this team soon learned to understand commands in Afrikaans.

ONLY THE HARDIEST  
OF MEN CAN  
SURVIVE FOR LONG  
IN THIS ICY WASTELAND  
OF SOMETIMES  
TERRIFYING BEAUTY



Huskies preparing "out" a storm. S down with their b the wind. Although these dogs weigh they are not big. They ration themselves a certain amount of and, if given to meat, for instance bury some of it for meal later on.

Some of the strange formations that result of pressure and winds above cracks also split a ice cap and, when with a thin crust of and ice, spell grave to the Antarctic. A good Husky will stop in its tracks "smells" one. If it the whole dog team and man, can vanish second or two.





Huskies preparing to "sit out" a storm. Some lie down with their backs to the wind. Although many of these dogs weigh 120lb they are not big eaters. They ration themselves to a certain amount each day and, if given too much meat, for instance, will bury some of it for another meal later on.

Some of the strange ice formations that rear up as a result of pressures below and winds above. Huge cracks also split open the ice cap and, when covered with a thin crust of snow and ice, spell grave danger to the Antarctic traveller. A good Husky lead dog stops in its tracks when it "smells" one. If it doesn't, the whole dog team, sled and man, can vanish in a second or two.

