

AWI–VIP visit to Dronning Maud Land

24 November – 4 December 2004

An informal report by the SCAR Team

Preamble

Professor Dr Jörn Thiede, in his roles as President of SCAR and Director of the Alfred-Wegener-Institut (AWI), invited Dr Colin Summerhayes, new Executive Director of SCAR, Dr Peter Clarkson, Executive Secretary of SCAR, and Mr Henry Valentine, Manager of the South African National Antarctic Programme, to visit Dronning Maud Land as a VIP party under the leadership of Dr Hartwig Gernandt of AWI. The purpose of the exercise for the SCAR team was to provide the Executive Director with first hand experience of the breadth and complexities of Antarctic scientific research and the essential support for it provided by the Members of COMNAP. Peter was present to provide the historical context essential to enable the Executive Director to fit his experiences into SCAR's present and possible future developments, including its relations with COMNAP and the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting.

Wednesday 24 November 2004

After a few days in Cape Town for briefings at the Antarctic Logistics Centre International (ALCI) and a 24-hour delay for weather conditions, we boarded the Ilyushin 76TD transport aircraft for the 6-hour overnight flight to Novo Air Base in Dronning Maud Land. There were almost 50 passengers in the aeroplane and a considerable quantity of cargo.

Thursday 25 November 2004

After a smooth flight we landed on the ice runway at Novo. As soon as the aircraft was unloaded we boarded an Antonov 2 aeroplane for the two and a half hour flight to the South African SANAE IV Station at Velsleskarvet in Ahlmannryggen. During the flight we had good views of the magnificent mountains flanking the southern side of our route.

We were welcomed by Beneke de Wet, the Base Commander, and the other seven men of the wintering team. We spent two nights here and were shown all the workings of the station and the science programmes. We also visited a nearby nunatak, travelling by Challenger tractor and skidoo. Perhaps the highlight of the visit was a descent into a crevasse and then climbing back up to the surface using jumar clamps.

Colin gave a PowerPoint lecture on the Renewal of SCAR, Peter gave a slide lecture on life on an Antarctic base (Halley Bay) in the late 1960s and Hartwig gave a PowerPoint presentation on the plans for Neumayer III.

Saturday 27 November 2004

After lunch the Dornier 228 Polar 2 aeroplane arrived to take us to the German Neumayer II Station. First we flew south for an hour and twenty minutes to land at the German Kohnen Station on the polar plateau at almost 3000 m above sea level. As we walked across to the station, not yet re-opened after the winter, we experienced our coldest temperatures, below -20°C with a slight breeze, but felt quite comfortable in the sunshine. The building and the various surface stores were neatly laid out, awaiting the arrival of the summer tractor train.

The aircraft was still heavy with fuel but, at the seventh attempt, we were airborne again, heading north-west for Neumayer. Just under 2 hours later we landed on Ekströmisen beside the station. Here we were welcomed by Dr Anna Müller, the Base Commander, and the four other ladies and four men who comprised the wintering team. The seven other men at the station were the DROMLAN weather forecaster and the four pilots and two engineer/technicians of the air unit. We enjoyed a tour of the station facilities and the various scientific programmes being conducted. As the station buildings are in steel tubes now completely buried under about 12 metres of snow (from floor to surface) it formed a distinct contrast to the airy station at SANAE on stilts some 3 metres above the surface.

We were taken to see the Emperor penguin rookery, together with some Adélie penguins and a few Weddell seals with their pups. We also made an evening tour of the coastline in Atkabukta and a visit to the proposed site for the new Neumayer III station that, like SANAE and the new Halley IV Station will also be on stilts. An unexpected bonus was the arrival of *Kapitan Khlebnikov* with a party of tourists. While they came ashore to visit the station we were able to visit the ship.

Colin, Peter and Hartwig repeated the presentations they had given at SANAE.

Thursday 2 December 2004

Our five nights at Neumayer passed all too quickly and we left in Polar 2 to fly to Troll Station. We flew first around the coast of Atkabukta before heading towards Troll, circling around SANAE Station *en route* where it was interesting to note how much snow had melted from the top of the nunatak since we had left. We were met on the ice runway at Troll by John Guldahl, the Station Manager, who was saying goodbye to a departing Antonov. He drove us to the station where we could see some of the building work in progress to extend the station in preparation for the first wintering party in 2005. After a brief tour of the station we returned to Polar 2 to continue our flight to Novo Air Base.

We were welcomed by Vasily Kaliazin of ALCI and travelled in a tracked personnel carrier to the Russian Novolazarevskaya Station in the Schirmacheroasen. The Station Leader, Viktor Venderovich, showed us to our accommodation for the night.

Friday 3 December 2004

In the morning, Viktor Venderovich took us on a tour of the station and then down to the original huts of the station where one is being refurbished by ALCI for temporary accommodation of DROMLAN transit personnel. We also saw the plaque commemorating the former Georg Forster Station that was completely removed from the Antarctic in 1996.

After lunch we travelled back over the ice field to the Indian Maitri Station where we were met by Dr S Jayaram, the Base Commander. After a short introduction he led us on a tour of the main building and then to the various scientific huts located around the site. Then we returned to Novo Air Base to spend our final night in Dronning Maud Land. Here we were privileged to stay in the newest of the accommodation containers where we spent a very comfortable night.

Saturday 4 December 2004

This morning we were given an extra flight in an Antonov to visit the Untersee valley in the northern Wohlthatmassivet. We landed on the frozen lake and were able to walk across to the scree slopes for a closer look at the geology. After an hour of scrambling over the rocks

we returned to the Antonov and flew back to Novo Air Base. We completed our packing and then boarded the Ilyushin for the flight back to Cape Town, arriving just after midnight.

Conclusion

The visit proved to be extremely valuable for all concerned. It was a unique opportunity to see the operation of several Antarctic stations and to experience at first hand actually living on a modern Antarctic research station. We also saw several research programmes in action and were able to speak with the personnel running them, discussing any current problems and future developments. We were also able to experience the DROMLAN operation and see its potential for supporting more research and logistic activities in this relatively remote region of Antarctica. Finally, the visit will enable the SCAR Executive Director and Secretary to see how SCAR can interact and integrate more closely and efficiently with national programmes in general and, in particular, with the new programmes that will be implemented for the coming International Polar Year.

We should like to thank Professor Thiede and the Alfred-Wegener-Institut for making our trip possible. Our fellow VIPs were excellent company and Hartwig Gernandt was a most helpful and obliging leader. We are grateful to all the station leaders and their staffs who made us so very welcome at their stations and freely answered our interminable questions. Finally, our thanks are due to all the aircrew who ferried us safely around Dronning Maud Land. We both enjoyed our visit enormously and shall always have fond memories of the place and the people.

Colin Summerhayes
SCAR Executive Director

Peter Clarkson
SCAR Executive Secretary