

Two Soviet Antarctic Bases and an Ice-Bound Supply Ship – in 3 Days. November 1991.

One of the potential pluses of being a meteorologist is the opportunity to visit unusual places. I have had the good fortune to visit various islands around our coast – Jutten, Dassen, Seal, Dyer. And some rather outlandish places well beyond our borders : Reykjavik, Moroni, Havana...

But the most memorable trip of all was to a place called Molodezhnaja.

“Why don’t you come with us this time”, asked Vasily. They had first visited Cape Town the previous August. I had arrived at work to find a very large, unusual-looking cargo plane on the apron. On the tail a red flag with yellow hammer, sickle and star - quite an unusual sight for Cape Town in those times! The polar relief vessel designated to swap teams at the Soviet Antarctic base of Molodezhnaja (longitude 46°E) had had a fire on board and the *Mikhail Somov* had been sent in – in *June* ! (the pack ice is already expanding rapidly by April). By July she was completely beset, some 60 km to the north of the base. The new team were ferried across by helicopter, but now the base had two teams and was overloaded. The old team would have to be *flown* out – no mean feat in the middle of an Antarctic winter. And the flight crew were looking for forecasts...

The rescue mission began on 21 August 1991 and a week later they arrived back in Cape Town with almost 200 people packed like sardines into the cargo bay. Fortunately the ECMWF global NWP model had done a sterling job of identifying the weather windows.

Now the people from the Soviet Department of Arctic and Antarctic Affairs were back in Cape Town. It was November, they wanted to take cargo down to two bases and do a parachute drop on a third (Vostok – 3 500m asl). As in August, guidance products were limited : relatively coarse versions of the UKMO model and ECMWF, with only a limited set of parameters and levels for the latter. One of the biggest challenges is the prediction of the katabatic wind component, which may reach over 150 km/ hr where there is a steep slope down to the coast - and topographical channeling.

The 1st weather window came and went – it seems our visitors were enjoying themselves too much in the Fairest Cape. Eventually on 5 November we took off, only to find ourselves soon flying in big circles over False Bay. It took 3 hours to burn up sufficient fuel to make the ‘emergency’ landing. Back on the ground one of the technicians tinkered with something on the outer starboard engine and we were off again. After 6 hours we are nearing the Antarctic coast, the few portholes crowded out with eager eyes. Have to make another plan. Hurrah ! The navigator has fallen asleep at his post (below the cockpit – see photo). The perfect place to witness the landing. Ground not at all clear but the pilot puts us down like a baby, applying the brakes very gently on a long runway of compacted snow.



We had landed at 3am, sun well above the horizon. The base is 30km away, a bumpy ride in a tracked military troop carrier. A hearty breakfast - no frills. When you've finished your porridge you lick your spoon and dunk it in the jam to spread on your bread. No milk. No butter. Just a fine bunch of cheerful fellows who might as well be speaking Martian.

I am ferried back to the landing strip and we take off for Novolazarevskaja, some 1 500 km to the west. There we meet West German, Russian and Indian scientists from other nearby bases. The Indians were all in army uniform but they quickly lost their military composure when I informed them that South Africa and India were playing a test match at that very moment. One went off and got a plank of wood and we compacted balls of snow. And played cricket under the Aeroflot Ilyushin 76MD.

The following day back at 'Molo' I did the rounds of the meteorological personnel (most of whom could fortunately speak a little English). The base was made up of many separate units, each erected on stilts fixed into the bedrock. The forecast office, instrumentation section and aerology were all in separate offices. PC's were conspicuous by their absence, the only computer being a modest Russian-made mainframe. Every week a rocket was launched to make measurements of the upper atmosphere. In stark contrast, all GTS data was supplied by a rather unreliable HF link from Moscow - satcomms were regarded as being too expensive.

After over a day on base I decided it was high time I found out where the showers were located. As I was approaching the building pointed out to me, the door was suddenly thrown open and a naked figure came running down the stairs. Jumped into the snow and rolled around for several minutes. Then rushed back up the stairs, slamming the door behind him. What a strange ritual awaited me behind that door !

Sit in the sauna wacking yourself with some 'special' bush until it becomes unbearable (the heat not the beating). Then out into the snow. Well, not quite naked - you have to have something on your feet or they'll stick to the metal stairs. What a relief to roll in the snow! But then it's back up the stairs and into the sauna.

AT LAST the cycle ends. Then the vodka comes out, with endless unintelligible toasts. Fortunately for me the vodka looks like water, of which there is also a good supply..

Mikhail Somov - beset in the pack ice - 65 km N of Molodezhnaja
- November 1991



The *Mikhail Somov* is trapped some 65 km from the base. In the past 3 months she has drifted NNW with the pack ice. I am taken out in a Soviet MEE 1420 helicopter, to meet the meteorological personnel. Two helicopters stowed on the deck are almost totally covered in snow. When the pilot announces that its time to go back he gets an angry response, one of the meteorologists eventually making me aware of plans for a party. They proudly produce several bottles of KWV brandy (presumably acquired when they passed through Cape Town). I'm pretty much a teetotaler, to me it tasted like engine oil (not that I've tasted engine oil). It was all very interesting but I was pleased to get away.

Eventually after 3 days we take off for Cape Town. In an area which can accommodate a 40 ton T-72 tank there are relatively few of us on the return flight. A Russian chap is bringing a dog with him. The latter, having been born on the base, was very reluctant to place his paws on the grass when we landed in Cape Town.

The one scene associated with this whole saga, which I'm sure will still be clearly embedded in the minds of the staff of the erstwhile Maritime Weather Office :

Following the initial rescue flight in August, two ships left Cape Town on the 26th to take the old team back to friends and family (they had been away from home for well over 18 mths). The one vessel was the *Professor Viese* which had been used for the weather briefings, the other the recently-arrived, much larger *Akademik Federov*. They slipped their moorings well after midnight on a quiet winter's night in Table Bay. Then the crews lined the railings and started to sing.

Strong sonorous voices rising out of the stillness - The Song of the Volga Boatmen.

Then further off, exiting Duncan Dock : "Do svidanya, Cape Town !" (Goodbye/ God be with you)

Ian Hunter – 18-9-09