

## Antarctica—On the Ice, at last

Title 194

At last, on 1 December 1969, I left Christchurch for ‘the ice’, as the Antarctic Continent is colloquially called by all lucky enough to get there. I flew with many other scientists and technicians in a Hercules, a four engined turbo-prop aircraft of the US Navy Air Command. the 3680 km which took 10 hours and 30 minutes. We landed on Williams Field, a smooth ice surface. The Hercules was fitted with both wheels and skis for this journey. At our landing, a number of small brightly coloured orange buses, with wheels, awaited us and took us for a half hour ride to McMurdo itself.

I was by then wearing half of my bright orange coloured polar survival kit, issued at Christchurch from the large Navy Stores. The other half, including typewriter and other small personal belongings were stowed in a big kit-bag, the carrying of which later produced a hernia, operated on after my return to London.

McMurdo is a small town of huts, of larger laboratories and administration buildings, a Church ‘Our Holy Lady on the Snow’, a small atomic power station (later dismantled and returned to the USA, see Title 199) and a large flag of the Stars and Stripes. The temperature was around zero degrees centigrade, the average at Mid-summer, as it then was. I was quartered in the ‘Press Hut’, largish, well heated with its own oil stove and very comfortable with four beds. Only one other bed was occupied by a colleague from an American Mid-Western newspaper. Spartan of course, but when inevitably compared in my mind with the quarters of previous explorers of the Antarctic, decades ago, the Press Hut was luxurious.

The date of my arrival, 1 December 1969, coincided with the 10th Anniversary of signing the Antarctic Treaty in Washington in 1959 and hence a special day for celebrations. I had filed in advance from Christchurch a lengthy feature article about the history of Antarctic exploration, the national rivalries of territorial claims and acquisitions, as well as the significance of the Treaty, declaring the Antarctic a ‘Land of Science’, forbidding all military activities there, and resting all territorial claims for 30 years. (It was renewed in 1989 for another 30 years up to 2119). In 1959 it was signed and ratified by 16 nations. My essay was published on 1 December in the *Daily Telegraph*.

The McMurdo Sound, a bay 184 km long and 74 km wide, lies west of Ross Island and east of Victoria Land. It was discovered in 1841 by Sir James Clark Ross and has since then served in the summer, when it is practically ice-free, as the main access route for most Antarctic explorers. It was used by Scott and Shackleton, whose hut still today forms a well-preserved historical relic of the heroic past. During the International Geophysical Year of 1957-1959, America established its main base at the McMurdo Sound, near the historic hut, and near New Zealand’s main Station, Scott Base, just across a small hill from the American McMurdo Base. The two are joined by a good road, which in the summer is easily travelled by Jeep. The relatively mild climate makes these two bases suitable for year-round occupation, although of course, the number of scientists and technicians is far greater in the Summer.