

The South Pole Station

Title 196

One look from Commander Church (and myself) sufficed to show that the Station was in urgent need of rebuilding, if any further safe human occupation was to continue at that site. We went on to the main room, serving for meals and for relaxation, where I met a sight I would never have expected. Its walls were covered—at that time—with life-size naked pin-up girls, some with specially lit up breasts from light bulbs hidden behind them. But then, to spend 6 months below the ice during the winter service, when on the surface there is perpetual night, one can understand anything, even these super-pornographic pictures.

I took ample notes during my visit on 2 December 1969 and my report was published two days later in the *Daily Telegraph*. It was headlined “South Pole shifts half-a-mile since 1957” and carried the by-line ‘Dr Anthony Michaelis at the American Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station’. This was the correct formal name given in honour of the first two explorers to reach 90° South. It was the furthest point I could ever hope to reach on Planet Earth—I never got to the North Pole, although fairly near in the Canadian North. [See Title 252]

The main research that was going on at the South Pole Station was, at that time, concerned with earthquakes, of which this site is absolutely free, and with the ionosphere. (The now gradually increasing ozone hole was not discovered until the mid-1980s). The propagation of electromagnetic waves, including radio, as well as the parameters of the atmosphere, were all constantly and automatically measured and recorded. I was told that future research would include the study of human behaviour in isolation, in view of space flights to Mars, and the adaptation of humans to high altitudes, living at the 3 km height of the South Pole Station. [See also Title 51 for similar Australian research]

After an excellent lunch, we went back up to the surface again, where a tractor-drawn sledge took us to both the old and the new South Pole. The old one was marked with a simple wooden pole, whereas the new one had a ring of the 15 flags of the signatories of the Antarctic Treaty, flying in an eight-knot wind. In the centre of the ring stood a large pole with the Star and Stripes, the 16th signatory, with a wreath of red flowers at its foot, commemorating the 40th anniversary of Admiral Byrd's flight over the South Pole.

It is now generally recognised that his flights into the Antarctic, and particularly this polar flight, mark the dividing line of polar activities, moving from the heroic to the technological exploration. But why the South Pole had moved, whether in a straight line or on a circular path, nobody could tell me.

The return flight to McMurdo was routine, remarkable as an achievement and as exciting as the whole day had been for me. As there was sufficient time at the Station, I was able to make a few sketches, and I wondered how Dr Wilson would have envied me for the comfort of it all.