Dispatch from a cold and distant land

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Submitted by Timothy Dwyer

Antarctica is an entire continent set aside for the peaceful pursuit of science by way of an international treaty that is currently signed by over fifty countries. It belongs to no ; it's wildlife and resources are preserved in the name of future generations of all nations. While treaty signatory nations operate dozens of separate research stations on the continent, no one lives there permanently and no one is actually "from" the Antarctica. So how do people actually get to Antarctica? For the team of researchers I'm accompanying to "The Ice," it's a lot more complicated than simply buying a plane ticket.

The US base at McMurdo Station where I'm spending the next nine weeks, is one of three stations operated by the US Antarctic Program (USAP, pronounced You-sap). They are a government organization funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF), the division of the federal government that funds much of the basic science that goes on in university laboratories around the US. They pay for the researchers' equipment, transportation, and labor in Antarctica, and also organize all of the people, materials, and gear that allows the scientists to work safely in such a harsh environment. NSF is responsible for the supply lines running back to the US, which includes transporting personnel.

To get to The Ice, my expedition is taking me from my home in the San Juan Islands in Washington State, to Seattle, Los Angeles, Sydney (Australia), and finally Christchurch (New Zealand), where NSF has a supply base. My trip to Christchurch takes about forty hours on commercial airlines and in airports. If I wasn't already an approved participant in the USAP, I couldn't go any further because there are no commercial airlines that fly to Antarctica. To ensure the safety of all of it's participants in such a harsh environment, the USAP organizes a lot of training and provides a full kit of specialized Extreme Cold Weather (ECW) gear before organizing transportation for the final five hour flight to Antarctica. Via military airlift.

Hitching a ride on a C-17 Globemaster III is unlike any plane flight I've ever taken. While it doesn't look much larger than a conventional airliner from the outside, the interior is positively cavernous. Rows and rows of seats fill the forward portion of the cargo hold while our baggage and supplies have been "palletized" and placed in huge crates at the rear of the plane. The second detail that strikes me are all the cables, wires, and pipes lining the interior of the fuselage. This plane wasn't designed with many human comforts in mind (though there is, of course, a lavatory). Except for a tiny porthole in each of the exterior doors, there

aren't even any windows to look out of. Finally, it's really loud; everyone is issued earplugs before boarding because the C-17 isn't soundproofed the same way commercial aircraft are.

After an hour or so of excited anticipation (it's the first time to Antarctica for many of us aboard), people settle into books, music, or naps and I take the crew up on the offer to visit the flight deck. Climbing the ladder up to the cockpit, I'm almost blinded by the light reflecting off of the solid cloud cover as we cruise at 30,000 feet. I immediately start snapping pictures and soon, one of the four-person cockpit crew takes off his headset and starts up a conversation. Colin Keen is an Air Force reservist serving a three week deployment aboard this C-17. Even though he's a qualified 737 pilot for American Airlines, he's flying as a navigator with this mixed crew of reservists and active duty personnel based at McChord Field in Washington State.

Operation Deep Freeze is the name given to the Antarctic supply runs operated by the 62nd and 446th airwings of the US Air Force. The C-17 can carry enough fuel to transport 500 tons of equipment or people all the way from Christchurch to McMurdo without refueling. Because we're only carrying 300 tons today, Keen assures me that we can make several passes at the ice runway and still make it back to Christchurch should the weather deteriorate. This is his third deployment with Operation Deep Freeze and he's only been on one flight that "boomeranged" or couldn't land and had to return to base. The weather at Pegasus Field – the runway on the sea ice where the plane will land – is looking good.

The C-17's passengers listen intently for every hint of the giant plane touching down on the ice. With no windows to look out from, senses other than sight feed our imaginations during the thirty minute descent. With a shudder followed by the roar of its thrust reversers, the behemoth rapidly decelerates and I lean left,

held in place by the seatbelt of my sideways-facing jumpseat. “Welcome to Antarctica,” the loadmaster announces over the PA system. Minutes later, ice-reflected sunlight floods through the open door and we begin to disembark onto the prepared runway that serves McMurdo Station and New Zealand’s nearby Scott Base.

The low angle light at 3pm, and not the -10F temperatures, is what makes the largest impression on me once I step out of the plane. The snow covered sea ice is sugar-white and the moisture-less air and sky transmit light unimpeded. Even with sunglasses on, my eyes struggle to adjust. And once they do, I can see forever. Mount Erebus’ smoking volcanic peak doesn’t look very imposing from a dozen miles away, even with it’s status as the planet’s southernmost active volcano. In the distance, perhaps 80 miles off to the west, the peaks of the Royal Society Range stand out against the afternoon sun and look as though I could hike there in an hour or two. Light is very different at the bottom of the world.

The recent arrivals are kept clear of the jet’s spinning turbines and directed towards waiting ground transport by air force crew members. The jet noise and low temperatures don’t stop us from posing for plenty of photos along the way. Ours is only the second flight of “Main Body,” the beginning of the Antarctic summer research migration when the population of McMurdo Station explodes from less than 200 “winter-overs” to more than 1,000. Boarding one of the gargantuan red transports for the trip to the station, I have some idea of what’s ahead of me in the coming weeks, and, more conventionally, I’m really just thrilled to finally be here.

Timothy Dwyer teaches science and math at Spring Street International School. He was selected to participate in PolarTREC, a program that embeds teachers with research teams in the polar regions. To follow the research team’s

expedition at McMurdo Station this fall, visit https://www.polartrec.com/expeditions/polar-gigantism-in-antarctica

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