

## CHAPTER 10

### Return From The Ice

With the return of the sun, winter was over. We celebrated with an outdoor barbecue. Jerry Damschroder and others collected burnable trash and garbage for a bonfire. Bill Lulow specially made small breads for huge grilled steak sandwiches and we all took out to the bonfire what bottles of alcohol we still had left. Outside the temperature was -119 ° F so a cold beer for this “summer” picnic simply would not do. Beer too readily freezes. As the bonfire party continued, each of our bottles of spirits froze shut at the bottle’s neck. The fire melted the snow underneath it and the fire slowly sank deeper and deeper. To barbecue our steaks we had to lean over farther and farther to reach the fire until Bob Geissel fell into the blaze. His pants caught on fire and as we pulled him out of the fire’s hole, he fought us rather fiercely. We had to knock him down and roll him in the snow to put out the flames that were consuming his pants. He was angry with us because it was the first time he had felt comfortably warm all year.



The breads baked by Lulow froze rock hard and could not be eaten outside. The grilled steaks, though hot as they were when removed from the intense fire, quickly froze before they could be eaten. Each of us wore our “bear claws” to handle the steaks in and out of the fire and exchanged one steak that was frozen for the newly fired steak. As quickly as possible, each of us would scrape the burnt char off the frozen steak and toss it back in the fire while eating the char off another steak. It was goood! In this manner Ed Horton accidentally mistook a piece of wood for his steak, ate the slightly warm burnt ash and even seemed to enjoy it.

We knew winter was over!

With the entire Antarctic continent opened by the emergency flight to Byrd Station, the thought of an early flight to Plateau Station became a possibility. Ed Horton’s radio traffic increased and thus work for him suddenly exploded into nearly twenty-four hour days of urgency. My work switched from pure research to operational weather support for the Navy and attempts to forecast for a station for which there were no records. Jerry Damschroder assisted by Bill Lulow desperately tried to thaw out several barrels of antifreeze to begin the activation of the station’s traxcavator. And the Doctor woke up.

After many false starts, Jerry started the engine of the traxcavator and immediately began work on the ski way. During the winter the ski way drifted over and the exposed snow surface not drifted over seemed to become softer. Jerry spent most of the sunlight hours on the traxcavator driving up and down the ski way to pound down the snow and harden it for the cargo flights and the new resupply season.

The sun still set every day the first half of October and with it the temperature dropped easily to -100 ° F. One night the traxcavator ran out of gas and stopped. As it cooled Jerry could not get the engine started again. All the fuel lines and all the heating lines and all the antifreeze fluid lines were at risk since most of these fluids froze at our nighttime temperatures. The traxcavator stood silent and dead in the middle of the ski way more than a mile from the main camp.

Flint and Damschroder worked out a plan whereby we might be able to start the traxcavator out at its stalled site since we had absolutely no way of towing it back to the camp. We had in storage a machine called a Herman-Nelson. It was a huge heating engine weighing more than a ton. It was on skids for towing it over the snow. Its great feature was that it had an internal engine part weighing about a hundred pounds that could be kept warm in the main camp, hustled out to the Herman-Nelson at the last minute in its warm state, and be effective in starting the full size cold Herman-Nelson. This machine then could produce enough heat to warm anything else.

The plan was to cover the traxcavator with a tent made of parachute shrouds from one of the first supply drops at the start of Plateau Station a year ago. Bob Geissel, a former Peace Corps worker in the fields of India and Nepal knew how to fashion a harness for seven men out of rope and we could man-haul in British style the one ton Herman-Nelson out to the traxcavator. Then, at the last minute, by a running relay we would run the hot engine parts out to the Herman-Nelson and heat would be available for the traxcavator.

Jimmy Gowan forbid us to overexert ourselves! I couldn't believe it. I exploded and chewed at him in a way no military person could. Overexerting ourselves for a mile? Afraid to overexert ourselves when two flight crews and a paratrooper were planning to fly these newly charted regions at temperatures never attempted before and risk their lives for our lives?

Overexerting ourselves when five Englishmen pulled on foot a one ton sled more than a thousand miles to be second to the South Pole? When these five Englishmen would not give up carrying many heavy rocks for study back in warm London even when it meant the cost of their own lives, was it overexertion? Did Jimmy know anything of this Antarctica where traditions of human courage and devotion and personal sacrifice for each other were melded in the spirit of the polar explorer? Were we explorers or not? Jimmy was proud to stand holding the American flag in front of flashing cameras on the first flight last December. How dare he hold back now when we might have to exert ourselves? Besides, Geissel only had seven stanchions in his harness. Jimmy could watch and give orders. He did.

Once we could assure McMurdo that our ski way was ready for them, the excitement of the reality of an airdrop filled us all. The sun still set a couple of hours centered around midnight. Over and over for many days when I would send weather info to McMurdo that our maximum at mid day was approaching -65 ° F the flight was go but the flight did not leave McMurdo until my night observations when the temperature was -100 ° F again so the flights were canceled.

These days I observed considerable ice fog but a visibility reading could not be accurate until I resurrected the visibility marker blown down during the winter. Rob and I took a long march out to our five mile marker after one of the flight cancellations at -105 ° F. It took us about six hours to walk in the soft cold snow and after a ten mile round trip hike we coughed up blood when there were no germs for coughs. Evidently we both had frosted our lungs. Our condition cleared up after several days and accurate visibility measurements did give me a grasp of the moisture in the air and a better probability for forecasting for our Navy friends in the airplane business.

The first aircraft of the current season landed at Plateau on 13 October at 1050 hours. The temperature was -73 ° F. The aircraft spent only 15 minutes on the ground without turning its engines off. Very unceremoniously Ed Seitz, a paratrooper and Navy seal, walked off the aircraft with emergency generator parts, we received mail and some fresh fruit and the aircraft roared down the runway with a massive self generated storm in its wake with fire blasting out of JATO bottles mounted on each side of the aircraft.

Bill Lulow received a year's supply of his wife's small town newspaper. He began to read them immediately. ~~I received twenty-four issues of the~~ *Northwestern Lutheran*, my church's newspaper. I did not read them immediately.

I did read immediately eleven wonderful letters from Wendy Fischer, who was a lovely girl and a shirttail cousin. She started writing to me just before I went down to the Ice and, in spite of my isolation and my inability to write to her, she never stopped writing. Her female humor gave all of us at Plateau Station joy and encouragement with our task. Wendy, if you ever read this, we all loved your letters. I hope my letters were a little bit interesting to you.

Once Ed Seitz arrived each of us Plateau veterans knew the time to leave was at hand. My balloon project had been over with the rising sun. Now, after 22 October, the sun no longer set and it was time to microfilm all data. Morale collapsed. It seemed to me that the presence of Ed Seitz was the cause of it all. Now I believe we suddenly knew we were free and didn't need each other anymore. Although resupply would not be regular for several weeks, each of us knew we would be going home. Ed Seitz did cause a sudden rift in the delicate Navy-USARP camaraderie held together mostly by the efforts of Flint and Damschroder. Now "shit-kickin" music dominated the sound system of Plateau with the many additions brought by Ed Seitz. USARPs were ridiculed for how their share of the camp chores were done as though we failed military inspection. Ed had brought needed emergency spare parts for our generators and provided additional expertise for Jerry Damschroder for the repair of our generators, but now it seemed repair deliberately occurred during important measurement times for the several projects still in operation. With my freshly received orders to wait until relieved by two men, Bob Dingle and Mike Kuhn, I suddenly began to hate the place. The new rift between Navy and USARP opened all the old wounds.

Violent verbal exchanges occurred between Geissel and Gowan and although a few of us would have enjoyed Gowan getting his due, when it became physical we reluctantly broke up the fight. Hostilities also broke out several times in the Navy ranks when the new men started arriving. The inability of Gowan to show leadership was becoming a blinding light. Yet with his high military rank given him because of his legitimate medical knowledge and skill, he was wrongly put in authority. I don't remember if the court martial he ordered was against the new cook or Jerry Damschroder, but the farce did occur. When witnesses needed to swear to their truthful testimony no Bible was found until I offered mine.

Gambling with real money became a regular addition to the nightly drinking binges. I watched a sailor roll the dice and lose an entire paycheck. Hell had frozen over and I was there. I could understand Robert Falcon Scott's words as he reached the South Pole and saw by Amundsen's tracks that the English were second, "Great God! This is an awful place . . ." (Robert Falcon Scott, *Scott's Last Expedition: His Journals*, Smith, Elder & Co., London, 1913) When the only adventure you have left is to return, excitement and the bonding of men disappear. It was time to go home.

"An unusual incident occurred on October 29 at 0719, when the entire camp was shaken by a severe subsidence, or snowquake. The tremor, which sounded like an explosion, lasted for approximately four or five seconds. The vibration was sufficient to settle the back door of the camp approximately half an inch. The station sustained no other damage, and no further settling of the foundation was observed. The center of the quake could not be located, but the tremor was picked up by magnetic detectors 700 feet north and 500 feet west of the station. It was also felt by a Traxcavator operator a few hundred feet to the southeast, and it dislodged a can from a shelf in the summer camp, 1000 feet to the west. The tremor seemed to

pass from the southeast to the northwest through the camp. No surface cracks attributable to the quake were located. While a similar, but not so strong, subsidence that occurred last year was known to have been triggered by a landing plane, the agent that set off this one was not so obvious.” (*Antarctic Journal of the United States*, Vol. II, No. 1, January-February, 1967, page 3.)

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2. LTR FOLLOWS.

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“Summer tourists” added to the confusion of my last days at Plateau Station. An airlift of the traverse vehicles to McMurdo Station for major overhaul started. Olav Orheim, exchange scientist from Norway Norsk Polarinstitut, Oslo, Norway and now a professor at Oslo came to Plateau Station for snow surface studies. I exchanged data with him giving him data I measured from the Red Field and Black Field. He became a good friend for several years while I lived on the East coast and he seemed to commute back and forth to Norway.

We were the first Plateau men to winter-over. Hazing was in store for the second team. Each new man was met at the plane as he landed at Plateau Station. We were hardened by the past winter and in the summer temperatures now met the planes in Bermuda shorts. Then came the trick: “May I carry your bags, sir?” No self respecting polar hero would permit another man to carry his bags. It was about two city blocks to the main camp and of course 1000 feet farther to the emergency camp where most new men would bunk until us old timers were taken out. Unaccustomed to the sudden cold and more devastating, the high altitude, he either would pass out or gladly let you help him when he had to confess that he could not make it. He then was invited for a welcome drink and at our altitude he instantly became stoned. Enough said.

My first replacement one simply did not dare try to haze. Bob Dingle was a polar rat from Australia. He was a “Crocodile Dundee” before any American ever dreamed of such a movie, bouncing between the outback and Antarctica much of his life. I believe it was to be his eleventh winter on the Ice. After my tour and my complaint about the problems we were having with the balloon shelter, he immediately cut a hole into the floor and dug a shaft down to the needed length of the bottom half of the balloon. The balloons could then be inflated in warm air with the roof closed. This was an obvious demonstration of those immense problems with very simple solutions. Why didn’t I think of that? Because I didn’t.

Leander Stroschein returned with Mike Kuhn and I was free to depart. There was one hangup. The scientific data was more valuable than a scientist's life. Two microfilm copies of all data had to leave Plateau on different flights. Only when one of them arrived safely in Washington D. C. was I free to depart. After about eight boilermakers in toasts to all the suckers left behind, I was poured onto an LC-130F and emerged at the Harewood International Airport in Christchurch the next day.

There were several airplane changes, but I remember very little of them. Our ski-equipped airplane rolled out on a freshly cut grass field taxiing to a USARP hangar. The several of us emerging from different stations on the Ice after a year of featureless dead white snow drew in the incredible smell and while the airplane was still moving but with its tail gate down, we jumped out, rolled in the grass, ate some of it, shoved grass down each other's shirts and leapfrogged over every hedge in Christchurch on the way to the Zetland Hotel. Green was and is still the most fabulous color in all of God's Creation. It was 7 December 1966. It was New Zealand.

The excitement of heading home was tempered with a desire to see the world between Antarctica and home. In particular the lure of New Zealand pulled on the hearts of every polar explorer that passed under her flag of the Southern Cross. I spent several weeks visiting old friends, meeting many new ones, and exploring both islands before a military flight to the states fit my schedule.

A day or two was spent in the District, then I was on to Milwaukee for the bear hugs of my brother Ray and his wife Trudy and their children Scott, Debbie, Craig, and Brad. I met Wendy Fischer. Her father, a chemist at Schlitz, had moved from California to Milwaukee. And many friends gathered the many nights I was at home.

It was the oddest time of my life. I longed to be with my friends and loved ones. They were so different and I was so different. The bonding that had occurred among the eight of us struggling to keep alive, tipping beer after beer or wine bottle after wine bottle in one binge with Geissel in sheer loneliness, arguing with the Doc or pondering one predicament after another with Flint waiting for his solution were the only things in my mind. Yet no one was interested in hearing about them.

This of course was not true. Years later I had friends and relatives tell me that when I came home I was so quiet, like my Uncle Ray when he returned from war. So most backed off. Yet I was exploding inside with stories to tell. All the stories were too personal. Everything was an inside joke. People from northern states were arrogant about temperatures. "Well once you've felt twenty below it's all the same." "Nothing can be colder than the wind off Lake Michigan." How could you explain that twenty below zero was a warm summer temperature. What did you tell a person who never left Milwaukee in her life about traveling eighteen thousand miles? What did you say to a person who only wants to visit shops and go to the mall?

Even the well-traveled friends could talk about little except airports and passing through customs. They all wanted to talk and I wanted to talk but what they seemed to want me to say and what I wanted to say didn't ever emerge. It seemed that the only ones who understood were Kirby Hanson in Madison and Bill Weyant back at Polar Met. I understood the importance of wearing a penguin tie clasp. I quickly developed the defense mechanism of a pat answer to the question, "How was Antarctica?" I would answer, "Cold!" That usually satisfied most people who did not want to hear your answer anyway. Those who had more interest pursued me for greater detail.

Long after this expedition, people still introduce me as a person having gone to Antarctica. Indeed it was a privilege few have had. But no one seems to care about the five years of polar work connected with such a trip. No one takes measure of the risks and losses involved with such a trip

except those who have been there. From those who went before me I heard the comforting question, "How was your winter?" With such a person and with some beer or wine and a lot of time I could answer and of course would be willing to hear and understand his winter as well.

By the end of January I was ready to report for Polar Met duty and take up my responsibilities of research on the data so painfully obtained. Back in Milwaukee, just before returning to Washington D. C. I fulfilled the American dream of a young man and bought a new car, my first car ever. Two years previously I had paid a driving school \$7.00 per hour to learn how to drive and fearfully passed a road test in Madison and never drove again until my two brothers Ray and Dick helped spend my money on a brand new 1967 Pontiac Custom Tempest for \$2800. In our celebration as brothers I'm sure we drank too much and certainly stayed out too late. Some time after 3:00 A. M. it was a very big deal for me to drive my brothers home. They had provided for me most of my life and now I, at the age of twenty-six, had a car and could drive. It was almost bigger than my accomplishment in the polar region.

I drove along the angled streets of Teutonia Avenue, to Atkinson Street, to Green Bay Avenue, and straightened out on Third Street to Tanna's house on Second and Wright Street. All the streets were deserted at that hour. All the lights were flashing yellow. It was a straight shot home with my brand new car. No one told me about a four way stop sign at the intersection of Atkinson and Teutonia and I rolled right through it to be stopped by Milwaukee's finest. I tried to tell the officer I lived in D. C. but I had Wisconsin license plates. I gave him Tanna's address. Foolishly I tried to explain why I carelessly missed the stop sign. I tried to explain that there were very few roads at the South Pole when it suddenly dawned on me that he might interpret my story as a measure of inebriation. He only laughed as he gave me a ten dollar ticket shaking his head claiming that it was the first new story he'd heard in a long time.

Returning from the very cold South had its strange effects on me. I recall not needing much sleep and feeling like a human dynamo ready to run all day and night with little or no rest. Coming down to sea level had its enjoyable moments. I am sure I greatly confused Tanna whose life style was unalterable for more than sixty years when I was found still awake from the night before as she had breakfast.

Being hardened to the cold, as I was, permitted me to visit friends in Milwaukee with little or no winter clothing. I remember standing on the corner of Third and North Avenue wearing Bermuda shorts and a silk Hawaiian shirt while the temperature was -22 ° F and not noticing the cold. A neighbor lady scolded me and tried to tell me that I was either sick in the head or on drugs and she insisted that I go home and get a coat. I didn't so she took a different bus.

Moving back to Washington D. C. was more exciting than the first time. I had none of the uncertainties. I knew I was a research meteorologist. And I loved it. It also didn't hurt to be sitting on the world's most sought-after weather data. It was time to study, develop mathematical models for my inversions and publish. I couldn't wait to get started. Gertrude Sohns was assigned to my study and I settled down at Polar Met for the data reduction process.

I lived for a while with a good friend from college days, Don Holz, first in a high rise apartment complex in Alexandria, Virginia, and then in a basement apartment near 18th and "S" Street Northwest; but the crush of people in a city was more than I, fresh from Plateau Station, could handle. I drove to the end of a commuter train line and ended up in Brunswick, Maryland. I followed the train track to one more town farther from D. C. which was Harper's Ferry, West Virginia, and rented a delightful apartment in a mansion called Laurel Lodge, owned by Mrs. Frank Shugart which overlooked the Potomac River.

Between reworking scientific journal articles and writing new computer programs, I rode the train to my Polar Met office where the inspirations of the evenings and late and later nights in Harper's Ferry could be tested by colleagues and main frame computers. The rapids in the river, the forgotten and dilapidated canal left from pre Civil War days, and the nearly unintruded scenery on the other side of the river made Laurel Lodge a green respite of comfort and inspiration. It was a place where I would become a science writer, a working mathematician, a computer programmer, a canoeist, a husband, and a father.





**Top: Lieutenant Jimmy Gowan, MD, USN;  
Officer in Charge and medical doctor (Slide by Rob Flint)**

**Bottom: Chief Jerry Damschroder, USN;  
Mechanic and heavy equipment operator (Slide by Rob Flint)**



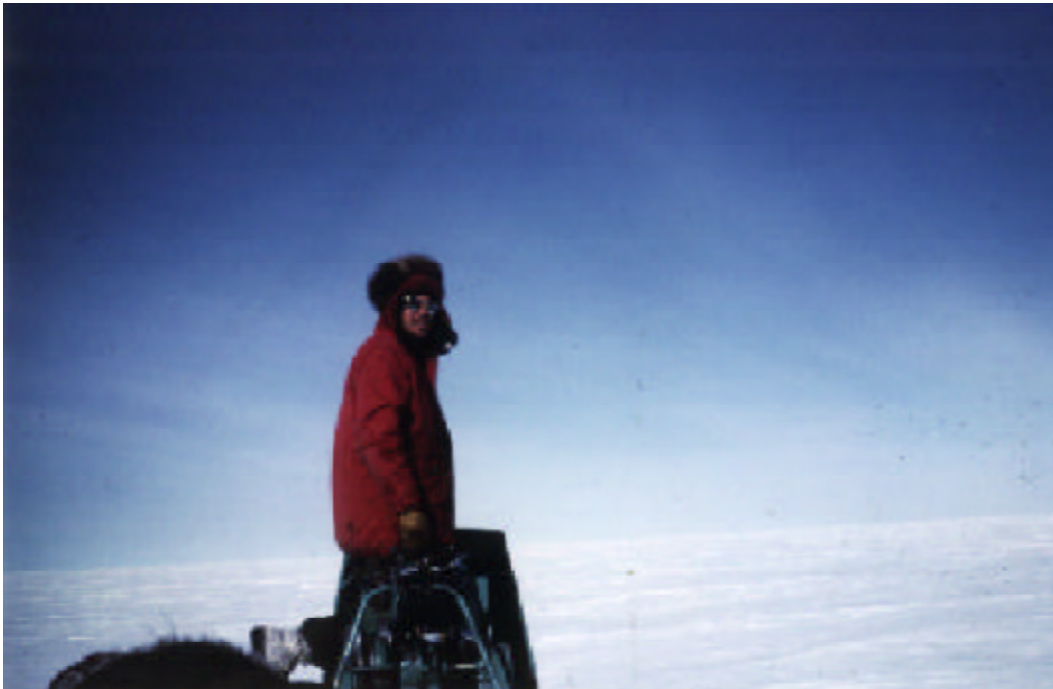




**Top: Bill Lulow, USN, Cook**

**Bottom: Ed Horton, USN, radio operator**

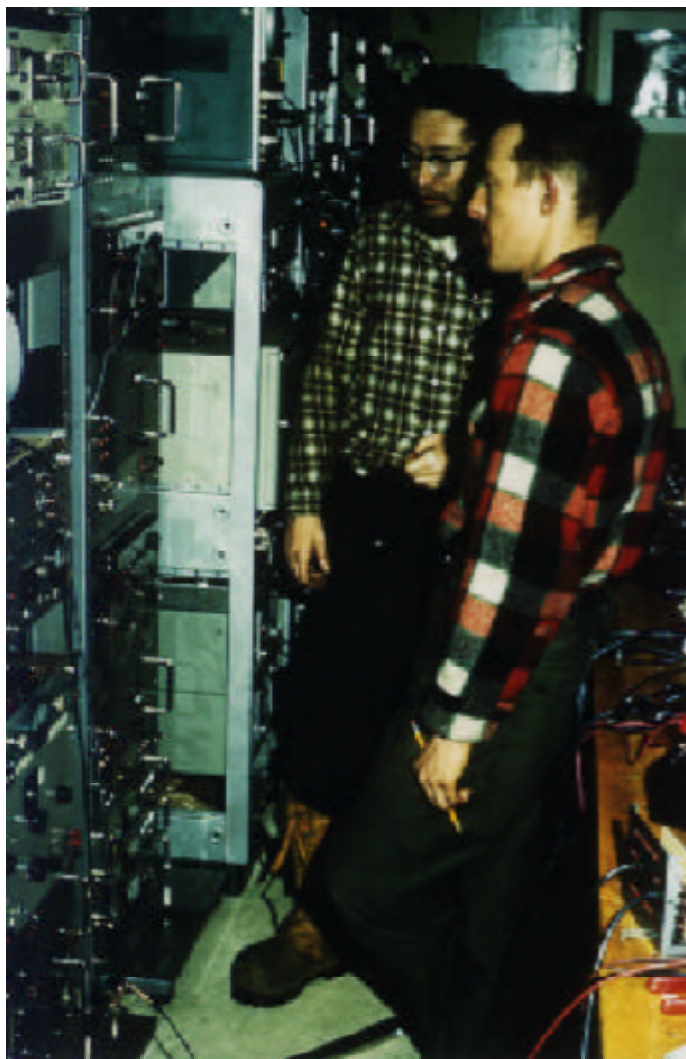




**Top: Rob Flint, Station Scientific Leader,  
VLF studies, electrical engineer, Stanford University**

**Bottom: Bob Geissel, Earth magnetic field studies,  
geophysicist, US Coast and Geodetic Survey**





**Hugh Muir, Aurora studies, exchange scientist from the United Kingdom,  
Arctic Institute of North America (Marty in the background)  
(Slide by Rob Flint)**



**Marty Sponholz, Inversion studies, research meteorologist,  
Office of Meteorological Research, US Weather Bureau  
(Slide by Rob Flint)**