

Stories of Everyday Life in McMurdo during Deep Freeze 63/64

by

Richard Marquardt
VX-6 Aviation Mechanic and Squadron Artist

Whiteout Mail Call

It was late in November. I remember because my birthday was at the end of the month, and a storm called a “whiteout” just hit McMurdo base, causing blinding snow conditions and zero visibility. An inbound C130 aircraft was about 1 hour away from Williams Field (the McMurdo landing field) and was in a holding pattern waiting for field conditions to improve. An hour passed and conditions were still too poor for the plane to land and it was running low on fuel. The decision by the aircraft pilot was to lessen the weight of the plane to conserve fuel by flying over Williams field very low and dropping the cargo out of the cargo ramp onto the field. The majority of the cargo was nonperishable parts and equipment that could handle some damage. Included in the cargo was a pallet of mail for the base. All of the cargo was dropped onto the field and into the heavy wind and snow. The plane was able to extend its flight time but still had to make a very dangerous landing 20 minutes later. The storm cleared and a “all hands” order was given to retrieve the dropped cargo. All the cargo was damaged, some still useable, but the mail pallet was scattered for miles across the Ross Ice Shelf. Men went out in skis and snow mobiles to retrieve what they could find; a letter here and envelope there. About 60 percent was found, most missing bits and pieces. A tin container had my name on it. It was a birthday cake sent from my sister-in-law. The tin was originally 6 inches tall; when it was given to me it was a little over 1 inch tall. The cake was frozen and smashed to nothing but crumbs. A plastic “Happy Birthday” was the only readable item inside. I thawed the cake on the barracks oil stove and moistened it with some melted snow and made cake balls and shared it with my barracks. I later wrote my sister-in-law and told her the story. To this day we recall the story, laugh, and with a smile I thank her for the cake.

Cold War Russian Engineers

It was early January of DF63/64 and weather conditions at a Russian polar base were below desirable landing conditions. A Russian turbojet was running low on fuel and asked to land at Williams Field. Landing was allowed and the 40-some engineers aboard were brought to McMurdo Base to have a meal and wait for conditions to improve at their base. Time went on and still conditions did not improve so we were asked to share our living quarters with the engineers. Hours passed, beer was consumed and even with a language barrier, stories were told with sign language or pantomime. Even friendships developed in a short period of time. In the chow hall a picture of John F. Kennedy was on the wall signed and dedicated to the men of McMurdo. It was over a month since he was killed and the engineers showed their respect as they passed the picture with a salute. This made me feel close to one man who shook his head side to side and lowered his head. He and I spent some time together. Sharing cigarettes (Russian cigarettes are horrible and they loved ours) and a few beers he and I swapped gifts. He gave me a Cossack skull cap and I gave him a pair of U.S.-issued sun glasses. Maybe another hour passed and the plane was able to leave and proceed to its

destination. It seems we (the base commander) gave the plane fuel to make sure it would have enough for the flight.

About six weeks later I was ordered to the base commander's office to answer an investigation about my activities with a Russian engineer. It seems the State Department and FBI were concerned about items given to the Russian engineers. I and several of my shipmates had given U.S.-issued items to them. The main investigation was to the base commander regarding the fuel for their aircraft. We were just additional persons named in the investigation. The base commander was given a reprimand and we were given warning letters about giving U.S. products to foreign powers. I laugh to this day thinking about a nice Russian engineer looking out from his base in a great pair of polarized sun glasses.

Antarctic Punishment

During DF63/64 at McMurdo Base water was considered a premium. It took a lot of snow to make a little water. Showers were restricted to 1 minute in to get wet, 1 minute out to lather and 1 minute in to rinse. Drinking water was also restricted so we were allowed to buy 1 case of canned beers (24 cans) per week at 10 cents per can at the commissary. The objective was to reduce the chance of dehydration. Also because the air was so dry we were given small containers of olive oil to rub on our skin to prevent cracking and chaffing. High protein diets were also necessary. Every meal had steak available. In each barracks was given a small case of frozen steak in case of missing meals due to storms restricting outside activities, replenished only after use. The barracks steaks were usually sirloins or top round.

After a period of several storms and **much** beer consumption, I noticed a stockpile of T-Bone steaks outside the chow hall. It came to my mind that I could trade our steaks for T-Bones during one of the small storms. As the storm progressed the streets to the chow hall were empty. I dressed in my RED hooded parka and slowly pushed my way to the stockpile of steaks carrying a half-box of sirloins. Grabbing the T-Bones and dropping the sirloins, I ran back to my barracks, laughing at the completion of my mission. It was less than 2 hours later when my chief petty officer came to my barracks with an officer escort. It seems the officer saw me making the switch and asked why. My response was not considered reasonable and was told I was to be given a "Captain's Mast" which is a punishment consideration.

At the Captain's Mast I pleaded guilty, explaining my overconsumption of beer and misconception of trading steak for steak. My commanding officer of my squadron was in charge and issued me the final punishment. I was restricted from leaving McMurdo base (confinement to base and no liberty) for 30 days. I was also responsible for daily checking the chow hall steak inventory for the next 30 days and reporting any shortage to my chief petty officer.

To this day I am not much of a steak fan and pork chops fill the need.

Boredom on Ice

Long work days, bad weather, and boring meals makes a guy dull and listless. Then, the weather clears, it is Sunday, and you have 12 hours with continuous sunlight to do something to break the

pattern. Take a hike to Scott's Hut about 30 minutes walk away.....done that.....45 minutes to New Zealand base and sled dogs.....did that. What can we do different?

Be creative, think. Got it! Let's make a ski slope down the hill onto the ice shelf, and ski down it.... maybe a ski jump. That's it, a ski jump. Three 55 gallon empty oil drums at the bottom of the hill covered with packed snow and ice. Good, now grab some cross country skis (military grade) and have a run at the slope. Well the skis were very heavy wood and very thick. Might as well ski on a wood pallet. Almost broke my legs when I hit the bottom. Gave that up.

Shipmate Terry said he had an idea. We could get a cargo parachute from the Para loft and attach it to a small personal supply sled. The wind was strong on the ice shelf; we had to wait for the right time when the wind was southeast. That would take us toward to mountain ranges when we popped open the chute.

We didn't have to wait. There was a prevailing wind and it was strong, stronger than it had been in days. We hopped into the sled pulled the rip cord and the chute opened rapidly, pulled the sled with a jerk and then we began to pick up speed. Wow, what a thrill! We had to make sure the sled didn't turn over by shifting our weight side to side. We really were going far from base. Maybe we should stop this and turn back. How do we do that? Didn't think this through. We tried to spill the wind out of the chute by twisting the shroud lines, but that just made things worse by making the chute smaller and more efficient. Then, suddenly, the wind died down and we came to a quiet stop. We looked back and we could barely see the base, maybe 2 or 3 miles away. It was colder out here than it was at base. We just had on light jackets and no gloves, and a long walk ahead. We packed up the chute and put it on the sled and pulled the sled toward the base. Well, the wind picked up again right into our face. Getting colder by the minute. It was a good hour before we made it back. We were greeted by a parachute rigger shaking his fist at us for taking the cargo parachute. An offer of a case of beer and carton of cigarettes was negotiated to make him forget the incident.

We were cold and wind burned. The boring barracks and my warm cot was all I would need for the next month. Terry had a few more ideas which we never tried and I am sure they might have needed more thought.

First Day Back From The "Ice"

It was a 9 hour flight back to Christchurch bucking headwinds all the way. Four months at McMurdo and I was anxious to see green again. We landed at about noon and the plane taxied slowly to the far end of the airport where VX6 had its hangar. The aircraft door opened and the smell of fresh air coated with the perfume of grass and flowers surrounding the airport filled the plane. I took a deep inhale and then another and another like it was water to a thirsty man.

I stepped out of the plane onto the airfield and scanned the greens and browns of the real world in front of me. It was like I was painting a picture with my eyes, as I walked to the hangar office door. Carrying a heavy sea bag of Antarctic clothing (some in dire need of washing) and heavy boots. I needed to return everything I had and get my navy uniforms and civilian clothing. I was joined by 25 of my shipmates (also off the plane) in the locker room to change. But a shave and shower was first before we did anything. Only 6 showers were at the hangar so several of us went to the barracks to clean up wearing just pants and socks. Running to get to the showers carrying my navy uniform sea

bag I lost a sock enroute. Grabbing a bar of soap and a towel I was fifth to get into MY shower. Yes, my shower. I was going to stay in there until my skin got wrinkled. Hot water. Gallons and gallons of hot water poured over my body. I must have been in the shower for 15 minutes. My body was so relaxed I almost sat down. If I could get a chair in the shower I would have.

Drying off and opening my navy uniform bag I pulled out a short sleeve shirt and a pair of Levi pants, underwear, and socks. Wow, just one layer of clothing, and a pair of shoes that didn't seem like weights on my feet. Now to get some lunch.

Entering the chow hall the smell of fresh fruit caught my attention. I had not seen a fresh piece of fruit for 4 months. Well not true, one flight crew member had some bananas he bought in "Chi Chi" stashed away in a plane locker that we found during a cabin cleaning. We being a group of six enlisted and one officer. The officer took the bananas to the chow hall (so he said). We never saw them again.

I grabbed a food tray and plate and went down the chow line. I ignored the BBQ beef and mashed potatoes and filled my plate with fresh salad and fruit. A big glass of fresh milk and another glass of fresh orange juice. Sat down to a meal that I dreamed about several days before I left McMurdo. It was good to get back to a world I was familiar with. Back to hot showers, fresh food, and fresh air that had more than cold in it. I remember it rained that night and I sat at a window in the barracks, opened it and took a deep inhale.

Good to be back. Memories made in McMurdo I will always have, reasons to cherish what was missing there that I enjoy to this day.