

THIS ONE HAS TO DO WITH MY EXPERIENCES IN ANTARCTICA BETWEEN 1954-1965 AND ASKED FOR BY CDR GROENEWALD OF SA NAVY.

I have no diary but diaries do exist as do drawings of the buildings and films which I took and left with Jan Kotze or Jan Myburgh of PWD Cape town. There were several albums, too.

The following recalled experiences may not be in date order:

Chapter ONE

It began in 1954 when Jannie Smuts thought that the Russians might move on to the Prince Edwards Islands which lie about 1200 miles south of the Cape and half way to the Antarctic mainland. The main island is Marion Island which is about 5 miles long and is a volcanic tip jutting above the water with no trees or verdure, inhabited by penguins, seals, sea elephants, sea leopards, killer whales etc. The surface is covered with a bog about 4 to 10' in depth. It is a bleak place. The island has been used by whalers and is thus overrun with mice. Some cats got ashore, ran wild and propagated. They are now wild cats. One day I found a cache of tinned foods some 50 to 100 years old, in a cave. It tasted delicious.

In 1954 then, a small group was put on the island, in a primitive hut quickly knocked together, to serve as meteorologists. This was done with the assistance of the SA navy.

In 1955 I went down in a naval ship to see the place and decided I'd like to play some part in this project.

That was an eventful trip. It was in the minesweeper Bloemfontein. The captain was Lt Cdr Bierman (Later Admiral) I went as a naval reservist and bridge watchkeeper. One night on the way south in high seas I was on watch. We were travelling UP these huge swells and DOWN the other side. Then I saw a huge white object looking like an iceberg coming at us at speed heading for our starboard bow. It was diagonal to the swells and probably 20 or 30' high. I shouted a warning but too late. That ship was taken like a cork and thrown, slammed bodily to port with the ship in a second or two facing 90 degrees off course. I was thrown across the bridge. I got up and shouted down the voice pipe to the helmsman. After some second a quavering voice wanted to know whether we were sinking. I got him back on course. But as I looked up there stood Cdr Beerman in his shirt. "OK, Mac, where is that iceberg we just hit?" It took a while to satisfy Capt and crew that it was a wildcat swell running across the other swells. It was decided not ever to send little Bloemfontein on the Antarctic run again.

End of chapter one

This came soon when one day the Chief Engineer of PWD came from Pretoria and asked whether there was any brave soul who would lead an expedition to Marion Island to erect a new base there. I stuck out my neck and was given the task. It meant taking drawings prepared by the Dept of Transport, who controlled weather stations, prefabricating a large building capable of housing a dozen men each with his own bedroom, forming a group of artisans, finding a ship, sailing south, getting those building parts

up a cliff face by primitive crane, living in a small hut with no heating or insulation for months, driving piles into the bog, erecting the building and back to South Africa.

To do this red tape had to be cut. At the expense of popularity I insisted this be reduced to reality. At the time to get a box of screws meant a form with 10 copies. After some heated argument I was given latitude and began calling contracts. I formed a group of workers, found an empty hangar at Wingfield and began prefabrication. The building was of wooden framework covered with Masonite per Transport's drawings. It was to be heated by oil. Water was to come from a stream a mile away by heavy plastic pipe that served also as a fire hose. The building however had adequate fire extinguishers inside it.

Meanwhile I searched for a ship. Lying in Capetown Dock was the old coal-burner "Gamtoos" a ship of some 900 tons. I saw the Govt official in charge of her and secured her, together with a retired port captain to command her.

The day came to sail. We had stowed most of the parts below decks and some above, on the hatches. The crew was mainly coloured with a fine mate and a tough little Bos'n. We bid adieu's and sailed. All was well for a couple of days but then the weather began to deteriorate. As we went south into the "forties" they began to "roar" and we were in huge swells of 50 or 60'. The deck was stacked high with spare coal in sacks well lashed to the bulkheads. But she performed bravely. My crew were battened down and seasick. Suddenly the ship yawed and the helm spun loosely in the quartermaster's gnarled fists. The ship broached. She went over on her side heeling at up to 45 degrees. The rudder quadrant slammed to and fro frighteningly down aft. The mate wasted no time. He, the Bos'n and I lashed ourselves together and went aft into green icy seas. The rudder slammed and slammed and we knew it would soon tear off and then we would broach and sink. There was no hope of assistance. Either we made it rapidly or we would founder with all aboard. Time after time we were crushed back under the welter of icy seas breaking over the poop. We each took a turn with the tackle we had in hand to get the hook on to the quadrant to hold it and the rudder. Finally the hook caught. We pulled the rope taught, belayed it and dashed for cover. The green seas washed us down the decks but we stayed inboard. Then came the search for the break in the chain from wheelhouse to rudder. We began pitching sacks of coal overboard working against time, as we were still broached. Halfway along the deck we found the break. At last we coupled up the links and hollered to the helmsman. He spun the helm and once again we were under steerage. The three of us lay down spent, cold, wet.

Not for long. A messenger came to me from below. The Chief Engineer had had an accident and the medico engaged for the voyage was violently seasick and could not handle. I went below decks. The ship was still pounding, rolling, screwing heavily. Lashed to a chair was this engineer. Blood was coming from under his black beret. The medico was spewing into a bucket. He made signs to lift the beret carefully. I did, and his scalp came with it, held at the back edge like a hinge. It was not pleasant to be seasick while confronting the inside of someone's head. The medico made motions and I got the idea. He was unable to sew up the head so WE would

have to. I'd never done this before but it was no time to quibble. The engineer had banged his head against a sharp steel hatch and it was still numb from the shock. So I fed the sutures and somehow between us we did a Frankenstein-looking patch job. Then the artisans began to appear. They had lost hope and had been waiting for the vessel to turn over. The vessel went over to 47 degrees at one point, past her safety point, but luckily another swell pushed us back up again.

We decided to go on south and made our way to the island. We arrived in more moderate weather and anchored well off from the shore. Between us and the shore lay a forrest of kelp. It came up from the bottom in 10 to 20 fathoms with tree trunklike boles carrying huge masses of fronds with large leaves. It was a barrier thro which no boat could go. The leaves were air filled and when punctured they would sink. Knowing this I had brought a load of explosives in the form of 7 lb depth charges with 7 second fuses. To each was tied a 10' length of cord with a cork float at the other end. A stinkwood boat was lowered and three coloured men took me to the edge of the kelp. There I would light a fuse, swing the charge like a sling shot heave it into the kelp where it would be supported at 10' depth, explode and shatter the kelp. Slowly we made a boat path. Then came the fun. I was swinging one of these charges and somehow it all wrapped itself around my body. I was tied to a charge with 5 seconds left to live. The coloured men had the choice of diving overboard or dropping to the bottom of the boat. They went white while I went black. Being a Scout I had a razor sharp hatchet at my belt. I tore it loose lened over the gunwale and chopped. One second to go. The stinkwood boat heaved out of the water and fell back. I went on with a quiet audience until the passage was cleared.

The little group who had been isolated on this bleak land were overjoyed to see us.

We began the offload of the buiding parts up the cliff face, using the ship's boats, for there is no beach at this place. But the weather would turn foul and the boatmen would halt. Days passed and

on the 13 th day it was all ashore. Gamtoos waived goodbye and over the horizon. Later I learned that thro lack of coal she had to break up ship's woodwork to feed the furnace and changed course to Port Elizabeth where she limped in as the boiler gave up.

We settled into the little hut, twelve of my crew and I think five of the Met crew.

I had a little room to myself about 7'x7'. I'd go to "bed" at night by crawling int an icy cold sleeping bag. The first night was horrendous. As the body warmed up the sleeping bag I felt a movement and a little something brushed across my face and dived into the foot of the bag. It was furry and cold. It was dark and I couldn't see and I was in mood to argue. But then came another and another and soon there was a colony of furry animals or creatures nestled around my crotch. Now there are parts of my body that I did not want bitten but they seemed not to be in the mood to bite. So we all slept-until I turned. Then al hell was let loose. They were being squashed. So I had to not turn all night. Next morning I looked at two frozen pipes called trousers and didn't

like the idea... But I scrambled out of the bag. A chorus of complaints came up. So I turned the bag over and some 20 to 30 mice scattered in all directions. I distinctly recall one looking back regretfully at losing his warm place. This became a nightly routine and we got to know each other. "Hey Sam, stop tickling my you know what". Mutual respect grew.

We began driving piles into the bog on which to put the building. In mud up to one's knees in cold driving stinging sleet that was no sinecure. Then the floor went down and we had something to walk on—a huge relief. Up went walls and suddenly came the strike. I had taken a giant of a man as foreman. The giantness, I found, was confined to his body. Nevertheless he persuaded half the crew to lay down tools and then dictate terms. I was to send for a ship to take them home. Of course I did not. I collected the other half of my crew, two apprentices, a dour scot plumber, a loyal English electrician and two others. We simply carried on working and cut communication with the mutineers. There is no law or police on such an island. It's up to the I/C. He had better be a sane person. Days went by and incidents began to occur. One day I got wind that two of these dissidents were going to get drunk and beat up and possibly kill the youngest apprentice. I locked him in my room and sure enough two of them began to tear down the walls to get to him to carve him up. My patience ran out and I threw one of them out of a window and it went quiet. Then one of the Met people who had once been a priest and then lost his faith began a campaign of evil. He would sit opposite each member in turn at a meal and glare at him evilly until the person unable to stand it, left the table. Finally my turn came. For the next half hour his glare was met with a benign smile of one who enjoyed his meal more and more. There was a sudden scream of rage and he went berserk and ran off slobbering. He quit his game at that point. Then one young fellow went to the kitchen and brought back a mug of tea. A big German stood up and slammed him with his fist: reason was the he should have brought TWO cups of tea. These silly games went on for days and then one day one of the dissidents asked for his job back. I told him he had gone into the enemy camp and that he would be expected to clean up his doubts, handle his liability to the loyal group and the SA Govt then try again. He did so and was allowed to work, but under watch. Then another and finally the big foreman tried to make terms. There were no terms. One day he called the two remaining mutineers and went to work. The project was set back two weeks because of this. Eventually the building was done, hot showers, clean warm rooms etc and everybody feeling wonderful. But our troubles were not yet over. I had radioed for the naval frigate (Transvaal I think) to come and fetch us. They arrive and anchored about half a mile offshore. In command was a naval friend, George Green. He sent half his crew ashore to help get the stores up the cliff. Then the weather beefed up. The cutter came to the shore but got a rope in its screw. A huge wave turned it over and threw the crew into the icy water. The "beach" was a mass of huge slippery boulders filled with sea elephants. Each time a man was washed on to one of these boulders the undertow would tear him back. They screamed for help. I grabbed a long rope, got two volunteers, put them 50' apart on the

water's edge and we "skipped" the rope and hauled them on to the boulders. We rushed them to the new building and thawed them out. It was hours before they recovered.

Meanwhile the frigate's whaler had been lowered; she made for the shore and met the same fate. We fished that crew out, too. One had been killed, a cox'n.

So now we had ashore all our people, half the frigate's crew, two boat crews and almost no food supplies. The cutter was in pieces. The whaler had one side gone but gunwale and keel remained. On the other side two holes two or three feet diameter. She was thrown high on the shore rocks.

George wanted to go back to South Africa and start again from there. I grabbed an Aldis and asked for 24 hours grace. He agreed eventually. The frigate's carpenter was ashore. I asked how long to fix the whaler. 3 weeks with two carpenters, all the correct materials and dockyard facilities. That was OUT. Somebody made a canvas canoe which sank and we had to fish him out. Killer whales appeared and circled a few yards offshore. Somebody built a raft and we had to rescue him, too.

I called my own team and said I could fix it so we could all get off this island within 24 hours if I had four volunteers who would accept orders and not query or flinch but just DO it. The two apprentices, plumber and electrician stepped forward. One I sent to cut masonite sheets into 3" strips, another for blankets, another for paint oils, grease or any form of fat. The other went for nails. It was now dark. I began nailing the strips diagonally keel to gunwale and there was a sudden commotion. The radioman was coming at me with fists flailing slobbering hollering how f... mad I was to try to leave this island this way - it could not be done. I went for him with the hammer (he was temporarily nuts) but some others dragged him away. One layer of curved masonite now covered the bare side. On went blankets soaked in fats oils etc. Then strips the other way. Then the two holes on the other side were patched and dawn broke. We built a way down to the sea over the rocks took the bow rope out to the edge of the promontory and bodily carried this wobbling apology of a boat to the water. Sea elephants belched their halitosisical protests but we barged thro them, too. When a boulder moved you knew it was not a boulder. We launched it in a now calm sea. It floated. I called for volunteers to see whether it would make it to the ship. Five jumped aboard. The killer whales smiled knowingly and away we went. They rowed like mad for the boat was leaking quickly. As we got alongside a big pipe came down from a wonderful engineer officer and out went the water, sucked out by pump. I asked for a new crew and got them. Back to the shore killer whales smirking alongside. A fast bail out and a crew and passengers aboard and back to the ship bailing like crazy. We made it! And then thro the day all came off the shore. The whaler was hoisted aboard and we bid Marion Island goodbye. I am told the whaler was put in a museum to show how to handle such a situation.

The whales lost their smirk.

The Met office got their building.

The Transvaal got its crew.

The mutineers were paid off with cold shoulder.

The country got its weather reports.

End of chapter two

The next chapters cover Antarctica (Queen Maud Land)
Prince Edward Island
Gough Island
Bouvet Island
Tristan da Cunha.