

Project Cornerstone

Newsletter #14:

5 April, 2009 (Sunday)

Our weather remains beautiful. We couldn't ask for nicer. It's 30 below, but it's calm and clear. This morning we started the cleanup of the AUV camp. Dan Graham and Dave Wheaton washed the ROV with fresh water and put it away in its packing box. Ron Lewis, Darrell Moulund and Chris Kaminski began buttoning up their Explorer AUV. Richard Pederson and I helped (and tried not to get in the way). By tomorrow the Explorer should be all crated up.

I received an email yesterday pointing out that I hadn't shown any pictures of the camps. That may be because on previous field trips we showed far too many pictures, and even we got bored. I guess I overcompensated this year. The picture below shows the two octagon



tents at Garry's camp. These tents were designed and built at the Defense Research Establishment Pacific (DREP) in Victoria. We called them the 'Octagon' tent because of its shape. In more recent years these tents have been made commercially by Weatherhaven under the name of 'Polar Chief'.



This picture shows the two tents at the AUV camp. There is one Octagon and one 32 x 14' Weatherhaven. The Explorer AUV is, of course, in the big tent.

Here we have another Rogue's gallery picture. This one is of Warren Connors. He is a computer scientist (CS) at DRDC. He says that he has long wanted to work in the Arctic. His father worked on ice breakers and had a great love of the place.



You will remember that Peter, Alex and Alban were stuck out at North Camp last night because their Twin Otter had a problem with its hydraulics. We have learned that another Otter will be picking them up, and we expect them back later this evening.

For some, the existence of a large hole in the ice is irresistible. They just have to go for a dip. The military here at Alert have asked whether we could leave the big tent up for a few days because they are considering a polar swim. There is nothing definite yet, but if we leave the tent it will mean that Dave Wheaton and his people will take it down after we leave.

A polar dip is good for the reputation and the ego. You can eat-out on such a feat for years. "Let me tell you about the time when I went swimming in the Arctic Ocean..."

They have done the big swim here before. In 1995 and 1996, when we were working on the Spinnaker Project, the ice



hole was 40-ft long, about twice the length of the present hole. They had a polar swim both years. The picture on the previous page shows the hole with Theseus in it. We removed the vehicle, of course, for the swim. On the big day in 1996 great numbers (about 10 or 12) of the military showed up at Jolliffe Bay for the big plunge.

The plywood flooring had been taken off the hole. The slot in the ice was wide open and clear of any floating ice. You could see the green edge of the ice going down five and a half feet, and you could see that there was nothing below that but the abyss. At the far end of the pool a full-sized furnace was running so that if and when a swimmer pulled himself out of the water he could stand in a blast of hot air and be thawed out. A medical person, the so-called maxi-doc, was present to give the swimmers aid if they needed it.

Once out at the camp the prospective heroes couldn't back out. They were military, after all, and machismo just wouldn't allow second thoughts. So, they stripped down, and, one by one, they bravely dove into that long long trough and swam to the other end, an ice wall on either side of them. Invariably they came up from the dive with a look of horror on their faces. The face said – very eloquently – “Oh my god, I knew it would be cold, but not this cold.” As you may know, the shock of very cold water stops most people's breathing. You can't take another breath. Consequently, the 40-ft swim was generally done all on one breath. I'm sure times were set that day that Olympians would envy. At the far end of the ice hole there were a couple of large fellows ready to haul out the frozen, exhausted pink body and place it in front of the furnace exhaust. Then, as warmth and breathing returned, and the body realized that it wasn't going to die, the big grin started. Honour had been satisfied, and our swimmer was now a member of the select few.

There was one exception. Environment Canada had a girl named Christy working for them, and she decided that she wanted to do the swim, too. The powers-that-be weren't so sure. There was a lot of tsk-tsking and shaking of heads. She's just a girl, don't you know, but finally she was given permission. When her turn came – I think she was last – she dove in gracefully, came up smoothly and smiled. She SMILED, for crying out loud! She swam unhurriedly to the centre of the pool, and she stopped. Then, for the benefit of all, she did a few synchronized swimming pirouettes with leg straight out of the water – that sort of thing – smiling the while. After the little routine she swam calmly to the far end, pulled herself out – no help needed, thank you very much – and towelled herself off.

The silence was deafening. Who could talk, after all, with his jaw hanging open? She was the talk of the day. I asked her about it later, and she said that she feels the cold just like anyone else, but she had done a lot of synchronized swimming, and she had been trained to smile at all times. Well, that may be true, but I don't think it's the whole story. She is still my hero.

You can download any newsletters you may have missed. Go to:
http://a76.dk/expeditions_uk/spring_2009/index.html#cornerstone

Pictures today were by Richard Pederson, Garry Heard and Ron Verrall.

Best Wishes, Ron Verrall
We'd like to hear from you. (ronverrall@gmail.com)