

Blazing ICE

FLC Alumni

John Wright Pens Memoir About Pioneering Trans-Antarctic Journey

by Shan Wells



JOHN H. WRIGHT served as the U.S. Antarctic Program explosives engineer for five years, executed the South Pole Tunnel project over the course of four years, and later headed the South Pole Traverse Proof-of-Concept project. He has published authoritative engineering articles and presented papers at numerous scientific conferences. He lives in Silverton, Colorado.

In 1956, the United States set up a permanent base in the South Pole called the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station in order to have a strategic presence in one of the most remote and extreme places on the planet. Supplying that station was a logistical challenge of the highest order. Aircraft could only fly in clear weather, something in short supply over Antarctica. By 1962, it was recognized that an overland supply train of snow tractors made more sense than expensive aircraft flights, but there were many issues that needed solving. Deadly crevasses, often completely disguised by snow, had on more than one occasion eaten unwary land vehicles whole, and navigation during white-out conditions was almost impossible.

When the US set up a third base in the southern continent in 1998, the amount of flight time devoted to supplying Amundsen-Scott diminished substantially. Remote field science, long the great strength of the United States Antarctic Program, was slipping, due to lack of funds and resources simply to get supplies to the South Pole.

Unwilling to abandon their polar base, the US National Science Foundation revived the decades-old dream of establishing an overland supply convoy, and hired John Wright, (Class of 1974), to do it. Wright had made a name for himself as a solid engineer with successful Antarctic projects in his portfolio and “an impeccable record of safety.”

New technological innovations, namely GPS navigation, iridium phones, satellite imaging and ground-penetrating radar made it possible to attempt a ground journey without risking life and equipment. Further, the huge LC-130 airplanes used for supplying the remote base burned prodigious amounts of fuel. A ground convoy not only burned half the fuel planes needed, but burned it more cleanly. Carbon emissions from the snow tractors amounted to hundredths of what the big turbo props belched on every journey.

Yet, even with all the environmental, scientific,

logistical and economic rationales in place, the trip remained an unproven concept. Could it actually be accomplished?

By 2006, the time was right, and Wright set off from McMurdo Station on the coast of Antarctica with a long train of tractors, sleds, and a fierce determination to establish a repeatable surface route to the South Pole. In January of 2006, he and his team returned to McMurdo, having successfully and safely delivered more than 11 LC-130 loads of cargo to the Amundsen-Scott Station with no loss of life, machines, and “little more damage to the environment than the tracks they had left.”

The concept was proven, and Wright had made history as the leader of the first team to accomplish a trans-Antarctic trek via snow tractor. As the program matured, over 90 flights a year were saved, preventing damage to the fragile polar region, and ensuring scientific research at the South Pole will continue into this century and beyond.

Wright’s memoir of the feat was published in September of 2012 by Potomac Books. The FLC Alum, now a resident of Silverton, gifted a signed copy of his book, (dedicated to the class of 1974), to the Reed Library in December. He hopes to give presentations on the subject matter of the book to students and/or to gatherings of parents and alumni.

For ordering information or to read more about Wright’s historic journey, please visit <http://www.potomacbooksinc.com/Books/BookDetail.aspx?productID=297032>.



Heavy equipment operator Dale Hill readies a traverse tractor for leaving the South Pole on Jan. 13. The logistics traverse made a 3,200-kilometer round trip between the Pole and McMurdo during the 2007-08 austral summer season.

Courtesy of The Antarctic Sun Photo: Peter Rejcek