

News and notes

Early flights open 1974-1975 season

After circling Ross Island's Observation Hill in early dawn twilight September 2, 1974, the first of three late-winter LC-130 Hercules flights landed on schedule at nearby Williams Field, McMurdo Station.

Moments later, at about 8 a.m., a second National Science Foundation Hercules, flown by U.S. Navy Antarctic Development Squadron Six (VXE-6), landed on the snow runway after an 8-hour journey from Christchurch, New Zealand.

The flights, plus a third on September 4, were the first to the station since February 22, 1974, when 129 McMurdo winter residents began their antarctic night's isolation.

After delivering 58 passengers, 5,222 kilograms of cargo, 2,423 kilograms of mail, and 1,572 kilograms of fresh food, the two airplanes that made the three flights returned to New Zealand and on to VXE-6's home at Point Mugu, California, Naval Air Station.

The late-winter passengers—scientists and support personnel—were getting a head start on the 1974-1975 austral summer of U.S. research and exploration in Antarctica. The season's official kickoff came October 8 when a U.S. Air Force C-141, flown by the 60th Military Airlift Wing, Travis, California, Air Force Base, began a series of flights to deliver passengers and cargo to McMurdo Station's annual ice runway.

VXE-6 UH-1N helicopter operations began on October 13, permitting access to outlying areas of the McMurdo Sound region. In late October and early November four

of the U.S. antarctic program's five LC-130s returned to McMurdo for the austral summer.

The September 4 roundtrip flight to McMurdo was not without its anxious moments. About 30 minutes into the return flight to Christchurch an engine on LC-130 number 159130 failed. With 3,300 kilometers to go, the airplane's commander—U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander John Paulus, VXE-6—decided to continue the flight rather than return to McMurdo where pre-season aircraft maintenance facilities were unavailable.

With crash crews standing by at Christchurch's Harewood International Airport, the Hercules landed safely. The airplane, carrying a crew of 10, had only 3 hours of fuel to spare.

Winter storms batter McMurdo region

Two unusually intense winter storms slammed into the McMurdo area in July and August 1974, scattering McMurdo Sound's annual sea ice and downing Scott's cross atop Observation Hill on Ross Island.

The cross had stood, although with a slight list during recent years, on Observation Hill since it was erected there in 1913 to the memory of Royal Navy Captain Robert F. Scott and members of his fatal polar expedition. On September 24 several persons from nearby Scott Base (New Zealand) uprighted the cross in its original foundation.

Although the storms—the first on July 23 and the second on August 18 to 20—inflicted minor damages to several McMurdo Station buildings and demolished the station's new amateur radio facility, perhaps the most far-reaching consequence was the extensive departure of ice from McMurdo Sound.

Normally this annual ice—so called because it forms and dissipates annually—breaks up and goes to sea late in the austral summer. Such was the case at the close of the 1973-1974 austral summer, and new ice had formed presumably for the year.

But a trail flagging party charged with plotting a safe route from McMurdo Station across the McMurdo Sound ice to Marble Point, adjacent to the dry valleys, on August 20 sighted what first appeared to be a shimmering mirage along the western side of the sound. As the party moved closer, the red morning twilight revealed an extensive bay of open water that blocked all possible surface travel to Marble Point. Strong winds and unusually high tides had dislodged the sea ice.

Passage across McMurdo Sound was deemed essential to early season activities of the Dry Valley Drilling Project (DVDP), a cooperative deep-earth sampling program of Japan, New Zealand, and the United States. At the close of the 1973-1974 austral summer the DVDP drill rig had been left at New Harbor, site of last austral summer's final drill hole, and associated equipment had been stored at Marble Point. Plans called for transit across the sound to pick up drilling supplies at Marble Point and to resume drilling at New Harbor. Then the drill rig would be moved across the sound ice to drill at two sites in the sound,