

BLIZZARD

By *Richard Spatz*

Did I ever tell you about the time I was lost in a blizzard? I thought I had not. Well, have you ever been to the part of the world, where you count the days that you are not experiencing a BLIZZARD? You know; about every fourth day or so. Well, anyway it was 1967, and I was living at a very remote part of this planet, called Antarctica.



Richard Spatz

And not just Antarctica, I was living towards the middle of the continent, I was at the loneliest US scientific base in the world. Called Longwire, this was to be a two-man station during the winter. (Remember I said LONELIEST) My job for the Antarctica summer was to run this station. That means every thing to do with the station, from the generators, heating system, water system, you name it. Along with a Tucker Sno-Cat and Trackmaster, it was my job to fix it.



Tucker Sno-Cat

Let me tell you a little more about Longwire, it sets at around 5,000 feet and is located in Marie Byrd Land, the nearest help, (if you needed help) would come from McMurdo Station, some 885 miles away. The first thing you would do, is see if you could make any communication with McMurdo, You just can't call 911, 911 had not been invented in 1967. You might say, you are shit out of luck. A lot of the time or should I say most of the time you will find it difficult to radio McMurdo, much less any other part of the world. Antarctica has what is called a blackout, this is what you can expect living in the ICE AGE. Don't expect a C-130 from

McMurdo to be able to fly to you. If the weather is bad, (which most of the time it is), it just might take a couple of days or more before they could reach you. And by then, you might as well kiss your ass goodbye. But anyway Longwire is located on/in Byrd Glacier, which is 85 miles long and 15 miles wide; it flows between two mountain ranges and ends up forming the Ross Ice Shelf. Which means that you are moving, glaciers are always moving. Some parts of Byrd Glacier, measurements have shown up to 7 1/2 feet a day of movement. Did I tell you? Byrd Glacier is about five thousand feet thick? That's a lot of ice. One big ice cube moving with tremendous force. Sculpturing the land around it, as it moves forward.

So anyway I am driving a Tucker Sno-Cat, Tucker Sno-Cat is manufactured in Medford Oregon, this one that I am driving is left over from the previous years trans Antarctica exploration, this is one of the snow cats that was made to fit inside a C-130 airplane thus landing out in the middle of nowhere and driving this snow cat out the rear of the plane, where this giant door opens down to the surface of the glacier.

I am starting to realize that at this point in time that I have flown to where there is still an ice age. It is interesting to know that a long time ago (like millions of years ago) Antarctica was a tropical continent. While I wintered at McMurdo, I remember Boris Lopatin a USSR exchange scientist, (he was a geologist) showing me a rock he had found, which shows that ferns had grown here in Antarctica. You can see today where we live, how the glaciers of millions of years ago came through and carved out the mountains and rivers and hills. It is all so very beautiful. You can really see the glacier work from a hill near my house.

I got side tracked: I will get back to what I wanted to tell you, I was driving the Sno-cat from Longwire to Byrd Station, about 15 miles away. The road/trail is in a straight line; I do not really like using the word road when in this part of the world. The reason it is a straight line is the fact that there would not be any other reason than to make it straight. I will use the word road and you can decide for yourself. This straight road of about 15 miles is marked with bamboo poles, driven into the snow and are five feet tall with a cloth flag at the top, (these flags at the top of the poles, is really a joke, the winds tears them apart in no time at all). These poles were originally spaced about 30 feet apart. Well its been a year since this was done, now you see some poles still at five feet and then you see some that are a foot above the snow and then there are areas along this 15 mile straight road that you will not see any poles, (they are either under the snow or the wind has blown them to smithereens), then you stop seeing the poles, you hold your breath until you once again see a pole, (thank God). When you encounter such a thing while living in Antarctica, it makes you realize, that you really are

living in the ice age. It is almost like being taken back in time.

I forgot to tell you! There is no radio in the Sno-Cat, and I am not talking about AM/FM radio. Things were a lot different forty-nine years ago, hard to believe sometimes. No cell phones, no computers, but I will say that part of the research at Longwire included a computer, but our computer took up a space the size of most bedrooms. I am at the most windiest, coldest, driest, isolated place on the face of this earth. What the hell am I doing here? Don't get me wrong, I loved it, I loved every part of it, the twenty-four hours of daylight, seven days a week, for about six months and I even enjoyed the dark Antarctica night which last six months of twenty-four seven of darkness, and it gets real dark when the sky is covered in clouds, there is no stars no moon to light the sky, I should say that it is not dark, but rather say it is black. In other words, you can't see anything.

And all I can say is it is like being on another planet and that planet is in what we call the ice age.

So I am driving along and the next thing I know is that I'm driving in a big blizzard. I forgot to tell you about the lack of light in the sky this time of the year. Its like, just before the sun is totally gone from the sky, while you can still see a little bit, oh yes, this is twenty-four seven (24-7). Well, I am at the point of no return, (about 8 miles out) and I know I must drive in a straight line and I know my speed and how many miles away Byrd Station is. You might think that if I had a compass, (like flying an airplane) I would be able to keep on course. Well, that would be just fine and great, except for one thing, compasses do not work when you are in the area of the South Pole, and compasses just go crazy. You know, something to do with the magnetic poles of the earth. About now I am wishing to myself that those bamboo poles with those targeted flags, that were mostly blown away by the constant winds of Antarctica had been replaced, but they have not. I also start thinking that perhaps I am not playing with a full deck. And then I think, I'm probably not playing with a full deck, why else would I be here?

Perhaps by now you are wondering what on earth got me going to write this true story. A man by the name of Peter Otway, who lives in New Zealand, wrote a book about his adventures while he lived in Antarctica in 1960-1962. I am in the process of reading his book that he wrote in 2015. Peter and I have a lot in common. I will tell you more about Peter later.

So I am driving this monster Tucker Sno-Cat! You most likely have never seen a Sno-Cat like this. It is basically a very stripped down RV. The part that you drive and live in is a rectangle about 20 feet long and about 8 feet or so wide with a height of 5 feet and it is painted flat black, and has written on both sides in big letters: United States Antarctic Research Program. The reason it is painted flat black, is to attract any kind of heat you can get, to help heat your living quarters. So here you have this rather large rectangle box that is setting on top of four very large pontoons with these steel tracks going around these pontoons. Now to get inside this

Sno-Cat you have to climb up on top of the pontoon to get to the door. By the time you get seated, you find that you are up pretty high off the surface of the glacier. You will have to remember that this is 1967 and nothing like this had ever been built. And it was built to be put in an airplane. So what do we have inside the snow cat RV? Four seats, one for the driver/mechanic, and three other seats for the scientists. There are four very small bunk beds; there is a two-burner stove, which runs off the diesel fuel that the snow cat runs on. And there is a heater that you run when the engine is off, and it also runs off diesel. And there is a desk/table built into one of the walls. And a couple of storage compartments with latched doors. The reason for the doors on the cabinets is the fact that when this thing is moving, how should I say it, not the best ride. But please remember this; this snow cat needs a baseball field to turn around. And remember that the Tucker Sno-Cat will go where other snow cats are not capable.



Byrd VLF Longwire

Back to the blizzard, I had been driving for about an hour and half, and I knew that I should have arrived at Byrd Station by now, (note Byrd Station is below the surface of the glacier just like Longwire was) (so there is not much to see, when trying to find the station even on a clear day) but with no visibility and not being able to see if those bamboo poles are there or not, some words came to my mind and perhaps I even said them aloud, even though I was alone, yes very much alone, I might as well be on another planet. Alone, alone. Being I could not see anything and did not know where I was, I decided to get out of the Sno-Cat and see what, if any thing, I might see. This turned out to be a good thing. I walked to the back of the Sno-Cat and looked from where the Sno-Cat had been, and realized that my tracks were disappearing before my very eyes, this was not a good thing. I thought to myself, I better get turned around before my tracks are blown away by the very high winds of this blizzard. Remember I told you it takes a baseball field to turn this damned Sno-Cat around. I think even though it was very cold and with a wind chill factor that made it even colder, I believe that there was moisture under my arms. Which was not normal for people who live in Antarctica. In fact we did not shower more than once a week, and no one stank. Ever

wonder why we showered just once a week, when there is all this snow, its simple, you need heat to melt all that ice and snow to get water, and that becomes a major under taking. I will tell you about making water in Antarctica at a later date.

So I was able to find some tracks and finally some of those bamboo poles with what was left of a flag on top, and drove and drove and finally found myself back where I had started at Longwire. Where I climbed down the shaft into the arch that was below the surface of the glacier that contained the station. I believe at this point I had a couple of beers and then perhaps another couple of beers and a few cigarettes, I smoked back then and drank, I no longer drink or smoke.

I never was really scared, perhaps because of my age, and thinking that I was a "hacker", and I do not use the word hacker as to hacking into a computer. We were young, strong, had that Can Do attitude, and wanted to be part of a very unusual adventure back to the ICE AGE. I felt that I could survive anything along with the fact that I was probably full of shit half the time. Or at least half full of beer.

I figured that if worse came to worse I would just stay put, (quite moving the Sno-Cat) sit there in the comfort of the vehicle, perhaps for a couple of days and just be fine, at least I had a half tank of diesel fuel, and I could wait until the blizzard stopped and hopping that by then, a search party from Byrd Station would be out looking for me. Well if things turned out different, I might still be in Antarctica buried in the Byrd Glacier for the next million years or so.

I meant to say more about not "sweating" why living on the ice, you do not sweat in Antarctica, you more than likely wonder why; Antarctica is a desert, why? There is no water to be found. No humidity, all is frozen, you can put raw steel outside, and it will not rust.

I will have to tell you about other adventures I had while living on the great white continent of Antarctica, at a later time.

(to be continued)

Editor's note: Things could have been worse. On 8 May 1965 Carl Disch disappeared from Byrd Station. The below account of his disappearance is from John Stewart's *Antarctic An Encyclopedia*. Second Edition.

Carl Robert Disch. Ionosphere physicist with the National Bureau of Standards, who wintered-over at Byrd Station in 1965.

At 9.15 A.M., on May 8 of that year, during a severe storm and temperatures of minus 44° F, he left the radio noise building to return to the main base, a walk he had already made 25 times that season. A hand-line ran from the meteorology building at the main station to the ladder at the foot of the radio noise building. He had not arrived back at base by 10 o'clock, so a vehicle search party went out looking for him in the area of the hand-line. Indications were that he had not even touched the hand-line. By 11.30 his trail had been picked up, leading west out of the main station and heading for the SW corner of the skiway, about 4 miles away.

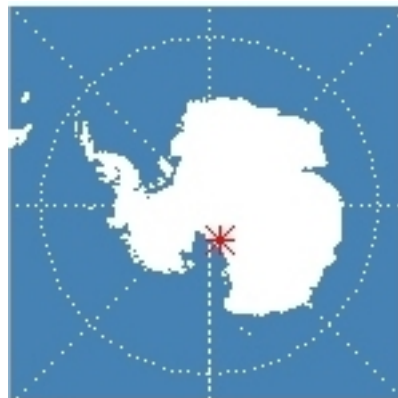
The search Nodwell returned to base to re-fuel, and then spent three hours trying to find his trail, to no avail. The wind and snowdrifts were so strong that the tracks of the search vehicle had become obscured, and placed the searchers in danger of not returning safely. At 6.15 P.M. they got back to base, without Disch. At 7 P.M. another search party went out, exploring the area around the hand-line again, the emergency Jamesway hut, and the dump. At 7.50 P.M. all able hands made a chain and searched from the end of the dump to the skiway. Flares were fired every half hour from the aurora tower until weather conditions made them impractical, and floodlights were lit from the station.

At 6 P.M. the next day another vehicle search party went out, covering a mile-wide by 9-mile-long area running south of the skiway. They found occasional tracks, with no shortening of stride, and followed them to about four miles south of the station, where they disappeared. At 7.40 in the morning of 10 May an 8-man search party, equipped with two vehicles, an emergency Jamesway hut, and enough fuel and provisions for a week, set out heading south. It searched for about 12 miles south, found no tracks, but left flags along the way. On 12 May they searched the NE and SE sectors of old Byrd Station, six miles away. The next few days' search was impossible due to conditions, and Disch was declared dead.

Disch Promontory. 83°34' S, 162°52' E. A high, ice-covered promontory, extending for 10 km from the E side of Prince Andrew Plateau, in the Queen Elizabeth Range. Named by USACAN in 1966, for Carl Disch.



Carl Disch



Disch Promontory