

I had never thought about Antarctica while at secondary school or while studying at University. At school my careers teacher had frequently asked me “what do you want to do when you leave school?” I had no idea! My marks in English and maths were average at best. However I did love science and got good grades so before I knew it I had drifted into a University degree doing Oceanography. It was there I first started dreaming of Antarctica, inspired by my University lecturer who travelled there to do ocean research in the 1960s. However by the time I left University in 1999 the only way to go to Antarctica was to carry on and do a PhD in ocean science and get a position on board a research vessel. I knew I wasn't cut out for another 4 years of study but equally I had little or no idea how my degree translated into a job! I spent the first 9 months after graduating temping – like many graduates I had simply thought I would walk into a job, that somehow employers would ‘find’ me amongst the sea of other graduates, I would be discovered and my career would all fall into place. That however was far from reality. I was simply one of thousands of graduates competing for a job and I quickly realized I needed to distinguish my CV and myself. One of my close friends had done the Mountbatten programme a year before me so I started to look into it. Before I knew it I had applied, had an interview and it was January 2000 and I was boarding a plane to New York City for what (although I didn't know it back then) was the start of my career in IT, which would end up taking me to some fantastic places around the world. My internship was with a company called Marenzana Group who specialised in conference centre designs and delivery of online training content. Back in 2000 this was a very new concept of utilising the internet for delivery of corporate training programmes and I was involved in helping do some of the web design for these training packages. While I had always enjoyed working with computers during my degree the Mountbatten internship was my first real exposure to how IT could be both integrated to improve the business environment and how technology was radically changing the way business was conducted.

For the first time I finally found something I was not only good at, but had a passion for. My year's placement with Mountbatten was one of the best of my life, not only did it help me discover what it was I wanted to do, but it gave me exposure to the business world, how to act, what to say, managing deadlines, as well as making me life long friends. It also gave me the one thing I needed most for my CV, a way to differentiate myself from the crowd. And it worked. When I returned to the UK in 2001 I got a job as a project manager for a small company selling telecommunications and IT packages to large corporate organisations. From there I then found myself working for Mott MacDonald, a global construction and engineering firm, where I worked for 8 years deploying 3G networks around the world. I got to travel to some wonderful countries and my rollout projects took me across Europe, South Africa, Nigeria, Iran, UAE and Oman. I loved it, but after a while I started to feel I wanted a greater challenge. For 10 years I had worked in a consultancy role and I strongly felt I wanted to return to a more ‘doing’ role, like the position I'd had at Marenzana in New York. It was a friend of mine who showed me the job article for the British Antarctic Survey who were advertising for a Communications and IT Manager for a 2 year position at one of their research stations. Seeing this article immediately rekindled my passion for travelling to Antarctica I'd had while at University. I had always thought it was only scientists who got to travel South to the continent. It never occurred to me non-scientist would also be required to support the base and each year the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) employed a whole host of chefs, plumbers, electricians, generator mechanics, field assistants and communications managers to support the scientists and keep the bases running.

I applied in Easter of 2010 and had an interview within a month. I remember being so nervous as I entered the British Antarctic Survey's headquarters in Cambridge; I had never

wanted anything so much and as the job was described to me in more detail, it only cemented my determination and ambition. It was explained to me in great detail that living in the Antarctic is not for the faint hearted. There would be few people based on the base during the winter months; the accommodation would be cramped; there were few medical resources should you fall ill; no fresh produce such as milk, eggs or fruit; 105 days would be spent living in total darkness; water had to be melted by snow blocks which had to be dug twice a day; and, travel off the frozen continent during winter was all but impossible. Oh yes, and the obvious – 60 °C temperatures and 40 knot winds.

I got the call from BAS HR 3 weeks after my interview asking, “would you like to be the Communications Manager at Halley?” “Sure”, I replied! Five references were found attesting to my ability to live at an isolated Antarctic base, though until I was there it would be difficult to prove. Then the raft of BAS medical checks were done. In previous times other Antarctica organisations made sure their employees had their appendixes removed. This was something thankfully BAS did not insist on although I did have to beg the BAS dentist to keep my wisdom teeth.

My job as Communications Manager would be a full time position, based at Halley V Research Station 75°S 26°W on the Brunt Ice shelf just off the Weddell sea. I would be there for a total of 14 months but I would have 6 months of intense training before being deployed to learn everything I needed to know about living and working on an ice shelf. While at Halley, my role would include fiddling with radars, bouncing HF signals, fixing antennas, building towers, looking at clouds, being amazed by atmospheric phenomena, whale watching and pestering penguins. In addition to my primary role as Communications Manager, a large part of my job would also involve supporting our one scientist on the base taking meteorological observations and ozone measurements.

My pre-deployment training period with BAS was an amazing time for me. From June to November I learnt more new skills than I ever thought possible in preparation for my time down South. The one part that struck me most about the training was I hadn't quite realised just how physical the training would be, and I ended up covered in cuts, bruises and even a couple of scars from it all. I did courses ranging from First Aid and got to ride around with paramedics from Plymouth Hospital, to fire fighting, air traffic control, tower construction, tower rescue, field courses, mountaineering and rope techniques, and I loved every minute. I also had to undertake numerous meteorological courses to learn the subtle differences in cloud types and the proper format of recording weather and other met info, that was to be fed into forecasting models and used by the Met Office back in the UK, as well as helping to track the ozone hole and the effects of climate change in Antarctica. During the 6 months training with BAS, I also attended quite a few talks by various BAS scientists and engineers and it quickly became apparent a) how little I knew, and b) how lucky I was to have access to the knowledge of these people.

I left for Halley in early November. After months of training and then what felt like months deciding what on earth to pack when going somewhere as desolate as Halley for 14 months, it was finally time to get going. My journey South was to be as varied as it was long. Firstly, I travelled down to London and from there I caught a flight to Cape Town where I met up with all the other men and women who would also be going to Halley. We were mostly young, late twenties to early thirties, all on edge and all keen to be away from the UK and experience an adventure. Ideally BAS would prefer to recruit and send a more mature group, but they were generally otherwise engaged raising families or had more sense than

us and simply signed up for the shorter 3 to 4 month summer season. So BAS had us impressionable young recruits to make do with.

After spending a week in Cape Town enjoying all the 'heat' and sun I could possibly absorb, it was time to make the final leg of the journey with the rest of my fellow team members. To get to Antarctica we would fly on the Ilyushin TD76 which was a converted military transporter used to move freight and people to and from the Russian base at Novo, in the east of Antarctica. Six hours after boarding the plane in a sunny Cape Town I found myself finally in Antarctica. It was a brilliant bright blue day when I finally arrived in Antarctica and we all took our first tentative steps on to the blue ice runway at Novo. Naturally the one item I forgot to pack was a pair of sunglasses, but luckily one of my more experienced colleagues had a spare pair at hand. You have to wear sunglasses constantly in the summer months in Antarctica, the constant 24 hour daylight combined with the sun's glare off the snow is unbearable at times, and needless to say, without proper sunshades you would be blinded.

We spent 2 days at Novo with the Russian's eating cabbage soup and generally keeping ourselves entertained with walks, swapping stories and getting to know the other 'Fids' who I would be wintering with at Halley. The general name for British Antarctic personnel is a Fid. Before 1962 BAS had been called the Falkland Island Dependencies Survey, shortened to "Fids", and, although the name of the organisation had now changed, the word 'Fid' in reference to personnel had remained. We were luckier than most travelling south, as it was normal to spend weeks at a time stranded at Novo waiting for a weather window to open up so you can carry on your journey. We had a relatively short layover at Novo before I found myself boarding a McDonnell Douglas DC3 (Indiana Jones' preferred choice of plane), for what was to be my final flight to get to Halley.

Flying over the Antarctic continent itself was truly mesmerising. Up high at 12 thousand feet the views of Antarctica are stunning. The air was so clean and pristine that it afforded views of amazing clarity. We all sat in silence for those four hours flying across the mountain ranges, ice crevasses and gazing down at Antarctic Nunataks below, each one poking their tops just above the blue ice fields with their true heights being kept a secret by the hundreds and maybe thousands of meters of ice that they are entombed in. It was one of the most beautiful landscapes I had ever seen and no photo can truly do it justice. It was so pristine and so untouched.

After so long preparing myself to see my new home, I was somewhat underwhelmed when it did finally appear. It looked so small and so completely isolated sitting out in the middle of a flat, white ice shelf. It was then I realized there was no turning back, and like it or not, I was here to stay, 12,000 miles from home living on a floating ice shelf 110 meters thick, which moved 1.5 meters every day.

After landing we were greeted by the old wintering team who all seemed a friendly bunch, in fact maybe a bit too friendly as they talked constantly, asking us questions about things back in the UK like "Who had won the X-Factor?" and, "Have you seen the last Harry Potter movie?" as well as "Have you got any Haribo on you?". After the initial greetings we were taken up to the main Halley V base courtesy of a John Deere tractor and sledge. The base itself was built in the 90s and is raised above the snow on steel legs, which was a culmination of all the lessons learned from Halley's I, II, III and IV. However the base itself was also coming to the end of its working life and would be replaced by Halley VI, a multi

million pound state of the art research facility which I would help install and commission radio and IT equipment in preparation for its opening in 2011.

It probably took me the best part of five months to get used to living at Halley. The language for a start was very different and is unique to living and working south; like 'gash' which basically means cleaning and taking out the daily rubbish. There were a lot of gash duties to be done while at Halley, and I hadn't quite realised that in addition to doing my day job, I would also be expected to cook, clean, dig snow and dig snow and yes, dig more snow. Snow management, as it was called, was a never-ending task as you might expect when living in Antarctica. Not only did we have to dig snow twice a day for our water supply (it was melted down in a large melt tank but meant our showers had to be limited to only 1 per day for 2 minutes), we also had to dig snow to clear walk ways and steps, move snow (or frost) off delicate outside equipment like antennas, get snow out of the insides of vehicle engines and clear snow from building vents. It was a never-ending, thankless task.

At Halley there was no nonsense about being a new Fid. The first few months on the base we were all treated with the same polite disdain until we settled in and became useful to the base and its operations. In order to learn the ropes quickly I spent much of my time working alongside the out-going communications manager, Ian. BAS design it so each year there is an overlap between the old and the new, so everything I would really need to know about my job would be passed on to me by the old Fid. Things like how the base operated, when to get up, when to eat, what to eat (and what to avoid!) what to touch, what not to touch, what was my responsibility should it break, how certain vehicles started, emergency procedures etc. In fact as there was so much to learn in such a short timescale, I never left Ian's side apart from when it was time to go to bed! I became his shadow, like it or not, he was stuck with me, and as time went on and it got nearer to him and the other old wintering team departing, I got more and more panicked.

I remember the day in February when after 4 months of being on base I suddenly became the 'old Fid' and my wintering team were officially handed the keys to the Halley base. We stood on the coast waving the old wintering team goodbye as they boarded the RSS Ernest Shackleton logistics ship and sailed off back to the UK. Now it was just me and the ten other individuals who had foolishly signed up to this adventure. As I looked at the Ernest Shackleton weave her way through ice bergs until she was finally out of sight, I remember feeling a sudden sense of dread, wishing all the previous Fids were back here, as really, I didn't know anything! I remember feeling as clueless as I did the day I first signed my employment contract back in June, and yet here we all were – standing on the sea ice, thousands of miles from home with no means of escape, no way of help arriving if one of us got sick or hurt, no way anything could be sent in if it broke. We'd have to make do with what we had and be totally reliant on each other for the next nine months living on what was (and still is) the highest, driest, windiest and coldest continent on the planet.

For most of us winter life in Antarctica did not involve long treks across the frozen wastes, nor did we camp out in blizzards for months on end. We carried out scientific work or supported that work by maintaining the base and its various buildings and equipment. Much of the time at Halley in those long dark winter months was spent clearing snowdrifts, digging snow for water, repairing equipment damaged by the harsh environment or cooking meals. We kept ourselves entertained with photography, skiing, making an array of wooden items such as pictures frames and boxes, while Saturday nights were a time for special meals cooked by our chef, drinking, singing, talking and fancy dress parties. During my winter at Halley I climbed ice cliffs, visited the Emperor penguin colony numerous times, camped out

on winter trips in -35 and 40 knot winds, flew the Canadian De Havilland single propeller Otter, dug snow caves and slept out under the stars with nothing but a sleeping bag, gazing up at satellites and watching the greatest light show on earth; the aurora borealis

Eleven of us arrived at Halley to winter in November 2010 and before we knew it, it was November 2011 and the first planeloads of new staff were arriving back at Halley for us to train. In March 2012 it was finally time for me to leave the seclusion of Antarctica and return home and back to the outside world.

I look back at my time spent at Halley with the fondest of memories. I also look back at my time there with an immense sense of pride that I managed to get through the experience, as did my other ten winterers. While living in Antarctica is not as harsh as it was forty years ago when the first winter team spent 2 years at Halley Bay in 1956, it still has its constraints, and it is still a great psychological and physical hardship. That said, I will probably never live and work in another more 'me' place ever again.

So what had I accomplished while down south? Well, I kept all my winterers and summer staff happy with a constant supply of downloaded movies and the ability to still keep in touch with their friends and family via Facebook!! More importantly, I have added to the meteorological knowledge of the world's fifth largest continent, which strongly impacts the world's global weather. But, probably most importantly for me, I have grown during my time at Halley. I am much more resilient, much more appreciative of modern day conveniences and I am firmer in my decisions, and I now have goals to work towards. Finally, 22 years after being asked at school I can now answer my career teacher about what I want to do in life. And that in part is also due to the Mountbatten programme and taking those first tentative steps 13 years ago to work overseas and discover what skills I actually had, that ultimately took me to Antarctica.

Both Antarctica, as well as my internship in New York, have exerted a lifetime influence over me. All who are lucky enough to visit Antarctica are however only a visitor. Unlike New York, which I have visited many times since leaving in 2001, I know Halley was most likely be a once in a lifetime opportunity. All fuel and food must be brought in, no one can live off land. It is a continent on which humans have made the least impact. But Antarctica leaves an impression on those who visit it. Some use the Antarctic to reflect on their own philosophical or metaphysical thoughts and feelings. Each person brings away his or her own reactions to this frozen white continent. To paraphrase Wilfred Thesiger on the deserts in *Arabian Sands*, the harsh Antarctic casts a spell, which milder climes cannot compete with. Antarctica is unique. Humans can only take this uniqueness away in their minds. Finally, if any of you reading this have got something like this in mind, or anything for that matter, go do it; you'll be just fine.



Photo 1: My wintering team from 2010 to 2012



Photo 2: Halley V and the Laws Platform which housed the living accommodation, kitchen, gym, library, workshops and dining area. Halley V was actually built on steel legs, which were jacked each year to keep the platform above snow level. However with Halley VI being built to replace Halley V the decision was made not to jack the building and so for 3 years the snow slowly built up around the base

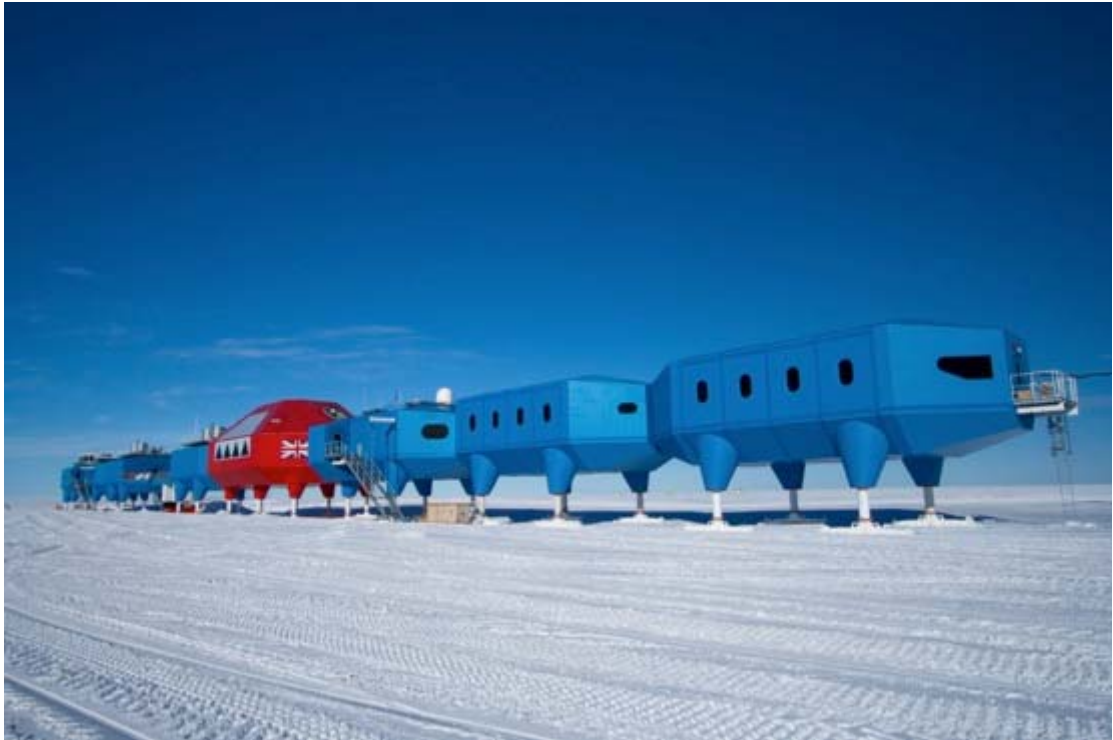


Photo 3: Halley VI was completed just before I left in 2012. The new state of the art building design means not only are the hydraulic legs extendable but the design means each module can be separated and towed on its skis to a new location if required.



Photo 4: Me doing part of my daily maintenance tasks. Fixing the North-South HF antenna which snapped due to the extreme cold



Photo 5: Carrying out the daily weather balloon launch



Photo 6: My wintering team sending off the final relief ship the RSS Ernest Shackleton and marking the start of our 9 month isolation at Halley



Photo 7: Adult Emperor penguins down at Windy bay, about 20km from Halley base



Photo 8: Emperor penguin with chick

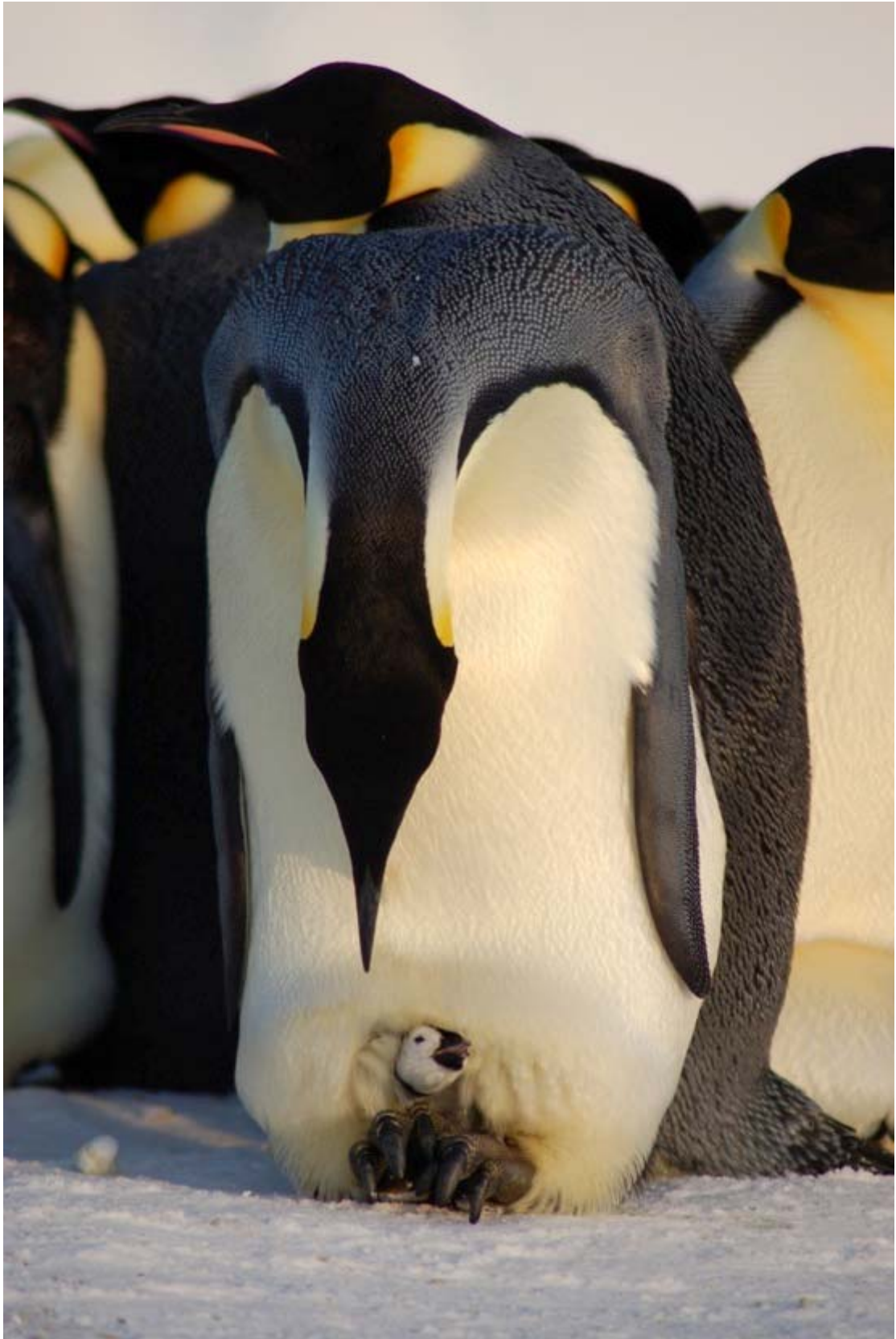


Photo 9: Emperor penguin with chick



Photo 10: Emperor penguin with chick



Photo 11: me up close and personal with the penguin colony at Windy bay



Photo 12: While visiting the Emperor penguin colony down on the sea ice at Windy bay was always good fun the 35 metre ice climb back out onto the ice shelf above was less than ideal in sub zero temperatures



Photo 13: All iced up



Photo 14: Pyramid tent used for winter trips. Most winterers went on 2 winter trips for 1 to 2 weeks while at Halley. During these trips each group travelled 30 to 40km from base to experience 'extreme camping'



Photo 15: Night sky with milky way



Photo 16: Aurora over Halley VI



Photo 17: Aurora Borealis



Photo 18: Sun halo over Halley V



Photo 19: The state the vehicles were in each day following the extreme cold weather. It would often take days to 'de-frost' vehicles when they were in this condition before they could be used again



Photo 20: Outside in a 'whiteout'; 50 knot wind and -32