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Narrative of Survey Journey on Wiencke Island

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Narrative of Survey Journey on Wiencke Island

Monday, 18th September.

Final details of preparation being completed, the survey party, consisting of Taylor, Davies, Lamb and myself, set out after lunch with two 12-foot Nansen sledges, Davies and I pulling one sledge, Taylor and Lamb the other. The latter was the survey sledge with the sledge meter Ashton made out of an ordinary bicycle wheel and an old Cherub log I got from Number One of the 'Scoresby'. Davies, Taylor and Lamb were wearing bare skis with ordinary leather ski boots and Bernina bindings. I had seal skin boots and my skis were equipped with Weddell skins and canvas rope soled winter bindings adapted to take the ordinary Bernina binding for more rigidity.

The crossing of the quarter mile or so of flat sea ice separating our small islet from Wiencke Island was easy in spite of the loads we were dragging—nearly 700 pounds a sledge. The ascent of the steep ground of the large Gentoo rookery which occupies the southern horn of the harbour was a very different matter. Both sledges stuck immediately we attempted the gradient and the party had to double up and relay the loads. It was heavy and exhausting work. The bare skins were useless and had to be discarded for truger.

Leading from the summit of the rookery, about a hundred feet up, and connecting it with the glacier above, is a steep knife-edged snow ridge, 40 feet high on the harbour side and dropping sheer away for a 150 feet or so into the Peltier Channel on the other. The condition of its surface varies greatly. Sometimes, especially after a heavy fall of snow, it can be climbed on a zig-zag traverse on skis. At other times steps have to be kicked or cut.

At the bottom of the ridge the sledges were off-loaded and the gear carried piecemeal up the slope and along the knife-edge to the glacier above. The empty sledges were then hauled up, reloaded, and left in shallow trenches for the night. We returned to the Base in time for dinner.

Tuesday, 19th September.

Inclined to be foggy with a stiff northerly breeze nevertheless we set out for the sledges hoping the weather would clear. By the time we got to them however dense fog had come down blotting out the land and a rising wind was whipping up the survace of the glacier and driving before it thick drifting snow. It was useless to attempt surveying under those conditions so we again returned to the Base.

Wednesday, 20th September.

Fine calm and clear. Bright sunshine. With Ashton, Back and Farrington shoving astern we succeeded after a gruelling day in relaying both loads up over the steep seaward slope of the glacier to a point some 500 feet up and about two miles from the Base. Here the ice gradient began to level out and the going was easier. But it was now clear that the loads were going to prove too much for us, for in this sort of country we could expect to find many such gradients as that which we had just come up. Accordingly we decided to travel to the east side of Wiencke Island, where our first survey camp was to be established, with one week's fuel and rations instead of two as originally planned, and at the same time to jettison everything that could reasonably be spared in the shape of repair material, spare parts, tools and so on. Our rations, 35 ounces per man per day, were comparable, in bulk though not in quality,

with those of the manhauling days of 30 and 40 years ago. It was an ample ration and I considered it could readily be spun out to last double the period for which it was intended should the need arise.

We were able to get our loads down to about 450 pounds per sledge. At least 200 pounds of this consisted of survey equipment, rangefinder, theodolite, plane table, survey camera, wireless time signal receiving set and sundry other smaller apparatus.

The sledges being reloaded, a depot was madeof the unwanted material and when all had been secured we skied rapidly down the glacier towards the Base. The evening was fine and we had a glorious run arriving in time for dinner tired out after our heavy day.

Thursday, 21st September.

The morning broke with dense fog lying over the glacier where we had left the sledges. Observations would have been impossible and we remained quietly at the Base, the fog getting worse later in the day.

Friday, 22nd September.

Calm and sunny. Accompanied by Ashton we set off up the glacier on skis arriving at the sledges about noon. We got under way at once, Ashton giving a hand with the survey sledge, the Doctor, who shortly overtook us, helping with the other. We were now following a contour on a gentle gradient and making for the entrance of a narrow ice-filled valley which led over a 1000-foot pass to the other side of the island. The going was easy. We halted for lunch under the massive face of the Wall mountain which forms the north side of the valley. While lunch was in progress Taylor and Lamb got to work with rangefinder and plane table and I took a round of photographs of the surrounding country.

We were looking at what is beyond doubt some of the finest scenery in the world. To the south lay the narrow passage of the Peltier Channel with its 200-foot ice-walls and flanked by the superb range of the Sierra du Fief to the east. The channel was open except for some thin and apparently navigable ice at its northern end. To the west lay Lockroy harbour with the icy peaks of Anvers beyond. To the north the broad snow field of the harbour glacier leading northwards to the dog-leg corner of the Neumayer Channel; and to the east the sheer sides of Wall Mountain and Luigi de Savoia with the narrow ice-filled valley up which we were to travel in between.

This valley, running due east and west, is one of at least two which cut clean across Wiencke Island linking up the glaciers of the east with those of the west coast. The coastal glaciers of Wiencke Island belong to a type which, while occurring widely throughout the islands and island groups of the Falkland Dependencies, reaches its maximum development in west Grahamland and the Palmer Archipelago. They occur typically as low fringing platforms or coastal bands of ice fronting the high land and running for mile after mile along the coasts unbroken by any rock or transverse ridge. They have been variously called Foreland, Ice-foot, or Strandflat glaciers, the last being the term nowadays most commonly used to describe them. They terminate on the coast in in vertical ice cliffs often exceeding 200 feet in height. At first sight the terminal cliffs appear to rise directly out of the sea but on closer inspection one catches a glimpse here and there of the solid rock on which they rest. It is these icy walls which present such an obstacle to landing operations in this part of the Dependencies, and as far

as the great islands of the Palmer Archipelago are concerned, it is probable that landing places giving access to the interior such as that offered at Port Lockroy are few and far between. In any case the exploration and charting of the interior of these islands is bound to be a difficult and hazardous business owing to the steepness of the gradients to be encountered, the confused crevassing and the frequency of the avalanches which sweep across the narrower ice platforms from the rock walls behind.

Lamb and Davies on reconnaisance with one-man sledges had already made the ascent of this valley, which we have been calling Luigi Glacier, and had penetrated about a mile down its eastern side. At both its eastern and western approaches where it merges with the coastal ice-platforms it is about a mile and a half wide but narrows rapidly towards the centre of the island where at a height of 1000 feet it passes through a col or saddle in the mountains scarcely 500 yards across. The gradient is steeper on the west side than on the east. There is a level surface for a hundred yards or so in the col. Strictly speaking it is a glacier or ice-cover of the Spitzbergen or Highland type masking a low saddle-backed valley or mountain pass to whose underlying shape it strictly conforms. On both sides it is hemmed in by great rock walls rising sheer in places to a height of 2000 feet above the level of the glacier. Danger from avalanches has always to be reckoned with, for the rock walls are crowned by vertical ice cliffs and liberally plastered with steeply inclined hanging glaciers and a jumble of great ice slabs. Earlier on in the year at least one avalanche from the south or Luigi de Savoia side had been seen to sweep half-way across the valley.

Shortly after the mid-day halt we entered the mouth of Luigi Glacier. My sledge was astern and slightly to the right of the other and while negotiating a traverse on a steep snow and ice slope below wall mountain it suddenly broke through a snow bridge and tilting sharply over stuck in the mouth of a deep and narrow crevasse. The Doctor who was shoving behind narrowly escaped going down. This was an unpleasant surprise especially as the surface over which we were travelling appeared to be perfectly sound and without the faintest trace of crevassing. On closer inspection the crevasse was seen to run far ahead directly in the line of the path that Davies and I had been travelling. Had the snow bridge broken away farther than it did both sledge and sledge party must have gone down.

An attempt to haul the sledge obliquely out of the crevasse with the Alpine rope attached to the main trace ended in our carrying away the cow catcher. Whereupon I off-loaded the sledge on a bowline at the end of the rope, passing the gear back to Taylor and Lamb while Davies, Ashton and the Doctor anchored the other end of the rope paying out slack as required. The empty sledge was easily lifted out of the mouth of the crevasse.

It was now about four o'clock in the afternoon and the Doctor and Ashton left us and skied back to the Base. I repaired the broken cow catcher as best I could while Davies reloaded the sledge. Both sledges now began the stiff ascent of the glacier, a slow and arduous business which got slower and slower as the gradient began to tell. We had travelled little more than 300 yards with many halts to rest when it became clear that we should get nowhere that night unless we again doubled up and relayed the loads. Davies and I accordingly abandoned our sledge, which had most of the camping gear including our two tents, joined Taylor and Lamb and together set off up the glacier, at first at a somewhat better pace. It

was still however exhausting work and in our anxiety to find the easiest route and at the same time to avoid a sharp dip in the glacier which was probably a wide filled-in crevasse we approached rather more closely to the sheer north or Wall Mountain side than I cared for. This was very nearly our undoing. Suddenly, as we were edging out into the middle of the glacier again, we heard to our left and directly above us a deafening roar like the crackling of continuous thunder and glancing up saw hundreds of feet above a great mass of ice break away and come hurtling down on us. We stopped in our tracks, I for one momentarily struck useless with terror and a sense of complete helplessness. Even as we hesitated the avalanche had reached the glacier and was now churning up before it a dense white cloud of powdered snow which rolled towards us with the speed of an express train. With one accord we turned and ran obliquely down the slope away from the approaching danger to be brought up instantly by our harness when we threw ourselves flat on our stomachs hands over heads (instinctively I think) in a forlorn effort to protect them. We had scarcely got into this position when we were assailed by a tremendous wind and immediately afterwards were enveloped in the whirling snow cloud so dense that it blotted out the light. I remember clearly that in that instant my fear went away and the only thought that passed through my mind was that in a second or two I should receive a crack on the head that would finish me. I think I wondered vaguely if it would hurt. It was all over in a second or two. The rush of air ceased, the roaring died away, light returned through the thinning snow cloud and we got to our feet very shaken but undamaged. The avalanche had evidently just failed to reach us. How close it had got we did not know. There was still a good deal of whirling snow about and in any case we did not stop to look but dashed back to the sledge and started off up the slope as hard as we could go.

We were still more than a mile from the top and were now tackling the steepest part of the gradient. In our anxiety to reach the col we must have covered that distance in record time, stopping only twice to rest when utterly played out. There was at least comparative safety from avalanches in the col, narrow as it was, for there the precipices on either side were considerably lower than those we had passed and on the north side not so sheer. We reached the level surface of the summit at half-past six and halted to rest as nearly as we could judge in the middle of the col. We were very tired and in spite of our exertions soon began to feel cold from the shock of the avalanche. None of us felt equal to the task of bringing up the second sledge that night. It lay a mile and a half away down the glacier and besides the tents carried Davies' and my sleeping bags. In spite of the lateness of the hour I decided to make a dash for the Base leaving the sledges where they were. We accordingly secured everything for the night and started rapidly down the slope on skis stopping at the other sledge on the way to see that all was secure and eat a bar of chocolate. Lamb and Taylor went on ahead and reached the knife-edge above the rookery without incident. Davies and I had a job or two to do on the sledge and followed some distance behind. The light failed long before we reached the knife-edge and in the gathering darkness both of us lost the ski tracks we had been following and while gliding freely though warily down the last steep slope towards what we thought was the knife-edge narrowly escaped going over the 200-foot ice-cliff into Lockroy harbour. But for the fact that I was breaking heavily with my ski sticks and a lucky fall into a snow drift which I blundered into in the poor light I think that I at least, because I was leading, must have gone over. Searching about for the tracks again I caught sight some 200 feet below us of a dim figure which I took to be a man. Approaching it warily we soon found it was Taylor who was standing on the knife-edge to mark its position. We reached the Base shortly before nine o'clock thoroughly tired out.

Saturday, 23rd September.

We spent the day resting and fitting quick-release gear to our sledge harnesses so that we could throw them off instantaneously in the event of an avalanche.

Sunday, 24th September.

Started off for the sledges again in fine clear weather with bright sunshine. We reached the first sledge shortly after noon and pulled it out into the middle of the glacier where we stoped and had a meal. We gained the summit after another stiff pull. On the way up, near the position of Friday's avalanche, we had to alter course to round some large blocks of ice which had evidently come down the day before and swept half-way across the glacier. The col was shrouded in fog which lay even more thickly over the eastern side of the island. Nevertheless Taylor decided to wait here with Lamb and the survey sledge in the hope that the fog would lift sufficiently to allow him to get on with his work. Davies and I went on down the eastern slope to look for a suitable camping site. The fog got thicker as we advanced and soon the visibility was only 50 yards. The rock walls on either side were completely blotted out and we steered a course as nearly as we could judge in the middle of the glacier by compass alone, stopping every hundred yards or so to check our direction. It was an erie sensation groping our way down thus in the gloom. The slope was a gentle one and we did not have to use the breaks, one man finding it easy to drag the sledge on skis, while the other, also on skis and with his harness trace attached to the rear of the sledge, was pulled along behind. We had travelled in this fashion for about an hour when the gradient gave out altogether and we found ourselves, at a height of about 500 feet, on a level expanse of ice which I thought must be the beginning of the strandflat on the eastern part of the island. We had probably now gone beyond the eastern entrance to the glacier and were in consequence reasonably safe from avalanches. We could still see nothing however, the fog being thicker than ever. After proceeding for another quarter of an hour over the level surface I decided to pitch camp. This had scarcely been done when Taylor and Lamb arrived having followed our tracks. The persistent fog had prevented them getting any observations.

Monday, 25th September.

Fine, clear and sunny, and the camp comfortably sited well clear of danger. Taylor and Lamb left for the col after breakfast to get the observations missed through yesterday's fog. Davies and I remained in camp, I to fit a new cow catcher to our damaged sledge while Davies made certain adjustments to our sledge harness. Lamb and Taylor returned early in the afternoon and for the rest of the day carried on the survey from the camp from which a long stretch of the Danco Coast was in view.

Tuesday, 26th September.

Another fine day. Taylor and Lamb left with the survey sledge with the intention of surveying the southern part of the east coast and inland features of the island as far as Cape Errera, its southern tip. Davies and I went off on skis to recconnoitre the country to the north. Travelling along the coastal ice-platform we reached a point about halfway up the east coast where another low ice-filled valley cuts across the island from coast to coast coming out at the dog-leg in Neumayer Channel. Beyond this valley lay the mountainous region of north Wiencke Island dominated by the conspicuous Nemo Peak. The coastal ice-platform on which we stood was continuous across the valley with a similar platform, broad and gently undulating, which stretched unbroken along the east coast as far as the northernmost tip of the island. It looked as if it would provide easy going for the sledges but the approach to it once the valley had been crossed lay up a steep ice slope which having recently been swept by a large

avalanche did not appear very inviting. Having seen all we wanted for the present we turned back towards the camp travelling by a more inland route over a 900-foot pass giving on to a steep tributary glacier which came out on the Luigi ice-cover about a mile north of the camp. We reached the tents about five o'clock in the afternoon and shortly afterwards caught sight of Taylor and Lamb approaching about a mile away along the ice-platform to the south. I skied off to meet them and give them a hand with their sledge. As I approached they stopped and went off to a neighbouring buttress to collect some rock. Taylor had been able to map the greater part of what he set out to do but had been prevented from reaching the southern point of the island by impassable crevasses a little to the north of Cape Errera.

Wednesday to Friday, 27th to 29th September.

Westerly gales, blizzard and fog. Confined most of the time to our sleeping bags. During the night of Friday the gale reached a pitch of violence that made me wonder if the tents would hold. We had not bargained for such weather. Food lasting out as foreseen but paraffin getting low. Will have to go back to the depot for more as soon as weather permits.

Saturday, 30th September.

After breakfast, the westerly gale, having continued violently throughout the night, began to die down and the persistent fog of the last three days cleared slowly away. By noon although a stiff and very cold breeze was still blowing from the west the col at the head of Luigi glacier was clear and I decided to set out for the depot on the harbour glacier without delay. I left camp with Davies at a quarter to one and began the long pull up to the col. We travelled on skis both of us feeling at first weak and shakey after the enforced confinement of the last three days. We reached the summit of the pass in about an hour and a half and were soon gliding rapidly down the steep western slope. We reached the depot at half past three in the afternoon and had a meal of Army biscuit, chocolate, cocoa and margarine which we carried with us. One of Davies' one-man toboggans had been left at the depot and this we loaded up with four gallons of paraffin, two Primus stoves (one of ours had been damaged at the camp) and as much food as we could cram on—about a 100 pounds in all. While thus engaged we heard voices and shortly afterwards Farrington, Back and Blyth appeared over the brow of the glacier. Farrington had some official signals for me and to our further delight we were presented with two tins of bacon, two tins of boiled beef and carrots as well as other oddments.

It had now gone four o'clock and Luigi glacier was beginning to fill up with the inevitable fog. The difficulty of following through fog a middle course up the glacier to avoid the avalanches was apparent, nevertheless as the wind had dropped since we left the col I judged that our own ski tracks would still be visible and that we should be able to follow them, however dense the fog, back over the course we had come. We accordingly set out for the camp, Farrington and Blyth pulling the toboggan for the first mile in order to leave Davies and me fresh for the ascent ahead. They left us about a mile from the western end of the glacier and we went on alone, racing as hard as we could go against the onset of darkness and thicker fog. Following our tracks, with difficulty on the glacier where the fog lay thick and the surface was hard, we reached the level surface of the col at half-past six. We had travelled blind without catching so much as a glimpse of the rock walls on either side, stopping seldom and then only momentarily to rest. The pace we maintained told on me severely and I felt tired when we reached the col. Davies with his magnificent physique made light of it.

Setting a course for the camp on a bearing we had taken in the morning we skied rapidly down the slope picking up the tents dead ahead shortly after seven. Lamb greeted us with a pannikin of water which we drank down eagerly. It is astonishing how thirsty one gets when manhauling. In view of the fog which had set in our companions had not expected to see us back that night.

Sunday, 1st October.

Taylor and Lamb left with the survey sledge after breakfast to continue the mapping to the north. Davies and I went off to a buttress about a mile away to collect some rocks. There was a northerly wind and before the surveyors had gone a mile thick fog came down and they were compelled to return to camp. Later the fog got worse and kept us to our tents for the rest of the day.

Monday, 2nd October.

Calm with dense fog and visibility of less than two hundred yards. During the forenoon the fog began to lift sporadically and later the whole of the Graham Land coast opposite to us came into view with De Gerlache Strait completely open except for a few old tabular bergs lying between. Soon however the fog came down again thicker than ever and worsening as the day wore on. By four o'clock in the afternoon the visibility was scarcely thirty yards and small objects such as empty cocoa tins, sugar cartons and the like loomed monstrous out of the murk at a distance of only ten or twenty feet. No work today.

Tuesday, 3rd October.

A heavy northerly gale sprang up in the night accompanied by wet driving snow which battered the tents continuously. The gale continued throughout the day increasing in violence, the blizzard blotting out everything within a few yards of the camp. By nightfall the weather if anything was worse and the tent was constantly being shaken by tremendous gusts. I slept fitfully through the night owing to the violent buffeting of the tent. I wondered at its endurance.

Wednesday, 4th October.

After a poor night I awoke at seven o'clock in the morning to discover that the wind had died completely away. The sky was densely overcast and low cloud hung thickly over the mountains of the Danco coast obscuring all but a few hundred feet of the coastal slopes. We had breakfast thinking a spell of better weather was at hand but shortly afterwards to our disgust the north wind sprang up again and was soon piping away as hard as ever driving the blizzard before it. We had again to spend the day in our sleeping bags.

Thursday, 5th October.

Lamb in the other tent upset a pot of boiling water over his feet last night and burnt them rather badly. His condition may be serious and if so we shall have to abandon the survey temporarily and get him home over the glacier by sledge. Davies took him over some aspirin, flavine, morphia and bandages and Taylor who is sharing Lamb's tent patched him up. He refused the morphia however so perhaps he is not so bad as I had at first imagined. This morning when I went over to see him he said he had had a fairly good night and was comfortable enough. Weather as bad as ever with a bitterly cold northeast gale and fine blizzard. Low cloud everywhere with dense fog over the glacier and conditions generally too bad to attempt the passage of Luigi with Lamb today, even if that were necessary.

Friday, 6th October.

Blew hard in the night and the weather now worse than ever. Wind still in the north and the blizzard very thick. This wretched weather and the enforced inactivity which it brings is very trying. Since we began relaying the first loads up on to the harbour glacier nearly three weeks ago we have had only five good working days. Of the twelve days spent in this camp all but three have been spent largely in our sleeping bags.

Saturday, 7th October.

Fine and clear with a stiff northeasterly breeze. Taylor, Davies and I left with the survey sledge after breakfast to continue the survey to the north. We occupied a station about a mile to the north of the camp on an ice-slope more than half-way up a 1200-foot peak crowned by a great cornice shaped like a gigantic parrot's beak. The day was spent here, Taylor busy with theodolite, rangefinder, plane table and survey camera. Davies and I recorded or worked the rangefinder for him— cold and trying work in the bitter wind. Lamb remained quietly in camp. He has blisters on his feet but is able to get about in duffel slippers and sealskin boots.

Sunday, 8th October.

Fine and clear with the bitter northeaster still whipping up a fine ground blizzard before it. Davies and I spent the day chaining and check-chaining a base from the camp observation station to the northern station occupied yesterday— a distance of some 1400 metres. In the biting wind the operation took us nearly seven hours to complete. Meanwhile Taylor and Lamb climbed the landward side of the corniced peak, which has been called Snow Comb Hill, and got some useful survey shots and many rock specimens and lichens from an outcrop near the summit.

Monday, 9th October.

Calm with low cloud obscuring the col. Although we still had more than a week's fuel and pemmican left the rest of our food was now nearly exhausted. As Taylor had now obtained all the observations he wanted on the east side of the island we decided to break camp and return over Luigi, making for a position at the northern end of the harbour glacier overlooking Neumayer Channel picking up our depot on the way. Relaying the loads we got the first sledge, loaded chiefly with the survey gear and scientific specimens, up to the col about noon, and leaving it there in the fog, returned to the camp and ate a meal of chocolate and biscuit— the last of the latter. Striking camp was a slow business. Owing to the long period of blizzard we had experienced a great weight of ice had accumulated on the snow flaps and it took us nearly two hours to break them out. The second sledge loaded with the tents, remaining food, cooking gear and sleeping bags reached the col at about five in the afternoon. Losing no time in hitching up to our respective sledges we skied off as rapidly as we could down the steep western slope of the glacier. The fog had now lifted and we had a clear view to the west. Owing to the steepness of the gradient and the hard sastrugied surface over which we were travelling the sledges for safety had to be over-braked and as a result we found them harder to pull downhill than up. We were very tired when we reached the bottom of the glacier. The survey sledge was left there and we went on up the harbour glacier with the other for about a mile, a very stiff pull, camping as night was falling near the edge of a wide snow-filled crevasse which we were too tired to find a way round. We were at a height of about 700 feet, about a mile and a half away from the depot.

Tuesday, 10th October.

Calm and heavily overcast.

After breakfast Davies and I with the toboggan skied over to the depot where I found a long signal from the Governor containing among other matters the welcome news that a suitable ship had at last been found for the expedition. She was the sealer 'Eagle' of 550 tons, now in Newfoundland and expected in Stanley with her own crew in late December. As the signal was now a week old and requested an urgent reply it was clear that I should have to get back to the Base without delay. We loaded the toboggan with the remaining sledging rations plus a lot of extra miscellaneous provisions I had asked Farrington to bring up and hurried back to the camp. After lunch we brought up the survey sledge and at half-past three in the afternoon I began to ski back to the Base. I had a good run down arriving at six in time for dinner. Farrington and the others had spring-cleaned the house in our absence and it was looking very well with floors, tables and benches scrubbed and everything stowed away shipshape. It is a very pleasant house.

James W. Nash.