

6000 kilometres to Nowhere - The Antarctic tour of duty 2006/2007

By Warren Marnell.



Well it all started in the summer of 2005. After hearing numerous stories about the deep south (Antarctica) I thought as a joke I would apply for a plumber's role. So my partner Samantha put together my application and we both thought that would be the last we'd hear of it.

To my surprise I was called up for a phone interview in February 2006.

After passing the initial stages of the application process I then had to participate in a two-day selection criteria workshop in April. Here they can observe an individual's ability to problem solve and see how he or she works in a group environment. It's probably the hardest stage of the application process because you're really put under the microscope, analysed like rats in a lab with eight members of the selection party writing down every word you say.

The next stage of the application (if you pass the initial stages) is the Psychology and Medical examinations. This is a draining process where you can be forgiven for thinking you're in the Cole Royal Commission because of the level of questioning. In contrast the medical examination was fairly straight forward (although shit house if you hate needles). I've even heard on the grapevine that some of our hardest tradespeople have fallen faint because of the amount of blood drawn.

After going through all this I received a letter of offer and was asked to start my tour of duty with two months of training in Hobart. It was a hectic time, after receiving the offer, I had to get my affairs in order and say goodbye to my work mates, family and friends.

My pre-departure training was surreal. I experienced things that I've only dreamed of or seen on television. For two weeks I trained in operating theatres of the Hobart Hospital. Here I was, a plumber from Geelong, standing beside esteemed anaesthetists and surgeons who had trained for many years in how to fix bodies and me, I was trained in fixing pipes. I had to help the anaesthetists stabilise the patients and got to see plumbing from the inside out.

It was out of the fat and into the fire, literally. After the hospital training I went into a week of intense fire training with Tasfire. As the program continued I had the opportunity to increase my number of tickets through some additional training using front-end loaders, forklifts and Manitous. To top it all off, the training ended in search and rescue practices.

We departed Hobart October 12, 2006 bound for Antarctica on the "Aurora Australis" arriving at Mawson Station on November 14. The month long journey was interesting, a bit like being a turd in a cement mixer – getting thrown around as the ship pitched and rolled.

As a plumber my main role was to carry out the capital works programs in the summer. So we built new buildings and installed new services (waste, heating, associated ventilation and LPG etc). In winter ceased all new building works and saw to maintaining the building services at the station because of the extreme conditions.

All stations have different capital works programs. Plumbers are responsible for HVAC, waste water, LPG, potable water supply, waste management and recycling, medical gases and fire protection (deluge). In temperatures up to minus 25 degrees the station is kept temperate by reclaiming heat off the generators, then maintaining the levels using electric or oil fired boilers.

The electric boilers are only used at Mawson because it is the only Australian station that has wind turbines to generate electricity. Turbines can be used at Mawson because of the high wind run (the amount of total wind per month). Amazingly the wind turbines have cut fuel consumption in half which means Mawson only has to be re-supplied with diesel every 2 years instead of every year making it more environmentally friendly.

Getting out and about on the station was easy. We could head out into the field on 4wd quad bikes. If you're lucky enough to have helicopters on station, you could use these as taxis in the gentle summer months to get to a field hut as long as there was a pilot around. We also cruised in Hagglunds, an all terrain vehicle for when the weather looked compromising.

The average summer temperature was around +1 degree Celsius during the day and -4 at night. An Antarctic summer lasts for about six months and the sun doesn't go below the horizon for about four of those weeks with complete day light from early November till the start of February.

In contrast the winter presents average temperatures of about -25 degrees Celsius and if you factor in the wind chill you're looking at temperatures of -50 and lower. During the peak winter season the sun does not rise above the horizon for at least three weeks and there is only about three hours of twilight a day.

The food at our station was great and there was always plenty to graze on – having a chef we were spoiled with meals that I hadn't even had at home. There are good times and not so good times associated with an Antarctic tour of duty but overall the learning curves are invaluable and it is something that only a few hundred people have taken part in.

Besides the experience I have a few thousand photos documenting my time down South. I will leave you with a few images to give you a glimpse of the amazing Antarctic expedition.