

Subject: Scholes Cabin 5: Atka Bukta

27 December 2009 0952 UTM 70.5308 S 7.5470 E

Dear Stirling,

During the 'night' we found our way to Atka Bukta, our proposed unloading place. The sun never set, of course, but I was asleep when we arrived. We are up against 'fast' ice now - in other words, ice attached to something solid. It is smooth, not all jumbled up and higgledy-piggledy like the pack ice. (I am told that Eskimoes have hundreds of different names for ice and snow, and I am starting to see why). Some way off we can see the low ice shelf where we plan to unload. Distances are very deceptive in this clear light, where everything is whiter than a detergent ad, or else a deep blue. The shelf is about five nautical miles away (in other words, nine kilometres). It looks as if you could reach out and touch it. Through the binoculars, I can clearly see the new Neumayer base. The 'bay ice' between the ship and the shelf may be thick enough to support the cargo and the snowcat tractors that sled it away. If it is not, we need to smash our way through to the shelf proper. The problem will be if it is in-between: too thick to push through, but too thin for safe unloading. An expert from the new German base at Neumayer will advise us on where to go.

The team that will dismantle the old Neumayer base is flying off as I write this. We will miss them. They all remind me of Uncle Ronald: rough, tough, gruff and bluff. They are each able to do just about anything, from welding to plumbing to carpentry. But behind the mask, gentle and thoughtful people. They have been a great help sorting out some of our equipment problems and hauling in the iron-sampling fish in an emergency, which is quite often and usually in the middle of the night in rough and icy seas. The open-heart surgery they did on our shattered winch gearbox was truly amazing, and seems to have worked.

I have been up on the 'monkey deck' - the lookout above the bridge - watching the flight operations and soaking up sunshine. It is stunningly bright, cloudless and still. Although the air temperature is -2 degrees C, it feels warm. We all have to remember to put on sunblock, because the ozone layer is very thin here and the sun bounces off the snowy surfaces to burn you, even under your nose and chin.

Some time later - we have now tried three places, but are not happy that the ice is safe for heavy loads. Although several meters thick, it is not solid, clear bay ice but blocky pack ice which has refrozen.

Thanks for the lovely Christmas email, which I did get, but my messages often pass yours in cyberspace.

Love,

Dad