

Subject: Scholes cabin 5: Blindman's buff

29 January 2010 0135 UTM -59.9997, -11.8083

Dear Stirling,

We have been in fairly poor weather for several days, as a result of a low-pressure system that is keeping pace with us as we head east. As you can see from the coordinates, we turned to port (left) when we reached the 60th parallel (degree of latitude - can you think why it is called a parallel?). We will continue due east until we reach the 5 degree west meridian, and then head due south, hopefully straight into the ice port at Neumayer base. We are taking this zigzag route partly to reach particular spots where buoys must be deployed, but also to aim for a large gap that has opened up in the pack-ice.

The visibility has been poor. Right now it is blowing and snowing, which makes the job of winding in the UCTD on the poop deck a little unpleasant. We are still travelling at just over 11 knots, which is close to top speed for us. As we go southward, so the nights become shorter, but it is also significantly later in the season than when we passed south just before Christmas, right on the summer solstice, when the nights are shortest of all. As a result, it is dark from about midnight to 4 am, which coincides with my shift.

When we sail fast at night, with visibility restricted to less than 100 m ahead, it puts a lot of stress on the officer on watch on the bridge. We know we are in the middle of iceberg territory - we saw hundreds on our way up. The big ones are not the main problem - they show up on radar kilometres away, allowing plenty of time for course adjustments. The worry is the 'growlers' - small lumps of ice, low in the water, that could nevertheless cause us great harm. If the growler is made of 'blue ice', in other words, the remnant of a glacier or ice shelf, not the mushy sea ice, it has the strength of reinforced concrete. Imagine ramming several thousand tonnes of ship at 20 km/hr into a concrete wall!

The radar picks up growlers, but only quite close by and only if the sea is not too rough. If there is a jumble of swells, the reflection from the ice hides among the backscatter from the waves. Under these conditions there are usually three people on the bridge on lookout, equipped with night-vision binoculars. The bridge kept dark except for the glow from the radar screens so that their night vision is not disturbed. After four hours of straining their eyes into the fog, they are exhausted. I drop in towards dawn, to leave my emails in the radio room and share a coffee on the bridge.

Love,

Dad