

# Medevac patient home and well

By Kristan Hutchison  
*Sun staff*

If Barry McCue hadn't gotten sick, he'd be waiting with the rest of the South Pole winter crew for flights to carry them to New Zealand.

Instead, his flight came a month early. It was the third winter medevac from the Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station in four years.

"You can tell they're getting better at the planning of it," McCue said. "For me it was just take the plan off the shelf, blow the dust off and then just figure out what the people should do."

McCue, 51, had to be medevaced after a gallbladder problem in late August spread to his kidneys. South Pole Dr. Will Silva diagnosed the problem, and after several telemedicine consultations with doctors in Galveston, Tex., Denver, Boston and Baltimore, it was agreed that McCue needed to be flown back to the United States for surgery.

He had an infection in his gallbladder that was probably caused by blockage with a gallstone, said Dr. Ron Shemanski, medical director for Raytheon Polar Services. If the infection from the gallbladder had gotten into the liver, it would probably have been fatal.

As Environmental Health and Safety officer for the Pole, McCue is quick to point out he didn't ruin the station's perfect safety record for the season. Like the previous two winter medevacs, McCue was suffering from a medical condition rather than the result of an accident. The 57-person community went eight months without a reportable injury, setting a record.

"They embraced the idea that you wanted to come out the way you went in and I'm the one they had to bail out," McCue said.

The Twin Otter plane that flew McCue was back at the South Pole last weekend on its



Photo by Iain Airth/Rothera Station

*A Kenn Borek Twin Otter heads to the South Pole from Rothera Station on Sept. 21 to pick up Barry McCue.*

way to McMurdo for the summer. Sean Loutitt, the chief pilot for Kenn Borek Air, said he thought the workers at the Pole were happier to see them last month, perhaps because the medevac flight brought down 45 kg of tomatoes, avocados and oranges. For the winter crew, the fresh fruit was their first since running out in mid-April.

This time the flight was easier, partly because in the summer there are more aircraft in Antarctica to respond if something goes wrong.

For the winter flight, a second Twin Otter was flown to Britain's Rothera Station on the Antarctic Peninsula as backup and the McMurdo runway was prepared in case a C-141 had to fly in from Christchurch.

"You plan around those possible scenarios. You check for everything," Loutitt said. "In the end, I think it's a pretty safe operation."

Loutitt and the other two pilots, Brian Crocker and Rob Forbes, waited six days for the window of good weather they needed to fly to the Pole and back to Rothera.

"I was packed, boxed and ready to go," McCue said. "Whenever it looked good I

would shower so I would smell good."

On Sept. 21 one of the Twin Otters took off, while the second stayed at Rothera as a backup.

The temperature was almost  $-60\text{ C}$  when they landed and the sun was edging its way to the horizon for the first time since March.

"It wasn't dark, but because it was cloudy you couldn't really see the sun," Loutitt said.

The pilots parked the plane on bamboo to prevent the skis from freezing to the ice, then turned on heaters in the engines and blanketed them with insulated covers. They brought the battery inside during the 10-hour crew rest. Before refueling, the pilots ran the plane around on the runway to warm the skis again so they wouldn't stick to the snow. The extra caution worked well and the pilots only needed half the runway, about 900 meters, for take off.

Coming straight from the South Pole winter, McCue felt some culture shock as soon as he reached Rothera, on the Antarctic peninsula.

"Walking in Rothera it got to me, feeling a breeze in my face and it didn't hurt," McCue



Photo by Kristan Hutchison/The Antarctic Sun

*Barry McCue waits to board the air ambulance in Punta Arenas.*

said. "It's the first time I didn't have to put my long johns on."

From Punta Arenas he was ambulated in a Lear jet to Galveston, Texas, where his gall bladder was removed.

"I was sicker than I thought. By the time I got to Galveston I was pretty wiped out," McCue said.

When he arrived home in Chicago his daughters didn't recognize him. He was 22 kg thinner and had grown a graying beard. He still needs frequent naps and hasn't gained the weight back yet, but he has had enough energy to visit family on his motorcycle and give some interviews.

McCue plans to apply for a job in Antarctica again for the 2005 season.

As he said a day after leaving the South Pole, "I miss it."