

# FIRST TOURISTS CROSS THE SOUTH POLE

By TRACEY SIMPSON

I count myself very privileged indeed that as Chairman of the Richard E. Byrd Fellowship of New Zealand I was invited to accompany the founding trustees of the Richard E. Byrd Polar Centre on their history-making first tourist flight across the Antarctic Continent from New Zealand to South America.

The flight was made in the "Polar Byrd", a Convair 990 with 75 on board, which took only 4 hours 35 minutes to reach Williams Field from Christchurch Airport. This set a new record for a fast flight from New Zealand to Antarctica.

Command Pilot was Captain Hal Neff, formerly pilot of "Air Force One", the United States Presidential Aircraft. Admiral "Bud" Abbot, Deep Freeze Commander, flew with the party as co-pilot.

Those in the plane had a busy time writing letters to be post-marked at Scott Base and McMurdo.

All members of the group wore thermal boots and full Antarctic clothing which was beautifully made, mostly from synthetic materials. However, as it was warm summer weather for most of the five hours spent on the ice, the heat generated by such perfection became an embarrassment even to the heat-loving Americans.

Throughout the flight approaching and over the continent the pilot flew as low as possible to enable close-up views. The Transpolar Flight party seemed very impressed at really setting foot in the Antarctic, after having seen so much of the ice floes and the coastline from the air.

Parties were made up for escorted tours over McMurdo and Scott Base. Before setting out a brief ceremony was held at the Richard E. Byrd Memorial alongside the Chapel of

the Snows at McMurdo. At its conclusion the wife of the flight leader, Commander Fred G. Dustin, who was in the party as doctor's nurse, laid a bunch of roses (sent to her in Christchurch by the writer's daughter) at the foot of the Memorial.

All these men, who were trustees for the Byrd Polar Centre in Boston, must have realised something of the immensity of the task this pioneer they remembered had undertaken over thirty years before.

The parties were escorted around McMurdo base area (including Scott's hut). In USARP Headquarters a lecture was given by Ken Moulton on the scientific programme under way this season. Seals were basking close in on the Bay ice, which of course had the cameras clicking. The day was perfect for photography and there was no risk of lenses fogging. A breeze came up suddenly causing a drastic body temperature drop. Immediately everyone was glad of their warm clothing and recognised the dramatic weather changes that can so quickly occur.

The sled dogs and pressure ice and the New Zealand accent at Scott Base were the main features of the visit there.

I had a sense of nostalgia at revisiting familiar places five years after my previous visit as a guest of the U.S. Government. A great thrill was had from getting a slap on the shoulder and hearing one's Christian name, to turn around and be greeted by Ken Moulton, who is in charge of USARP operations this season.

A perfect take-off from Williams Field had the party on its way to the flight over the Pole. The low flying height combined with perfect sunshine, made the flight almost a scenic tour. At the moment of the Pole fly over, a toast was drunk by all in

What a contrast this plane was from the first flight over the Pole undertaken by Byrd whose memory they honoured.

On to Rio Gallegos at the southern tip of South America, the landfall there making history, in that this was the first plane to approach the American continent from the south. This was recognised by the townspeople who were waiting at the airfield in great numbers to give an excited welcome. Shops and schools were closed for the occasion.

The actual flying time from Christchurch to Rio Gallegos, 5,173 miles — was 11 hours 59 minutes. For twenty-four hours the flight was in sunshine and it was not until reaching Rio de Janiero that a sunset was seen.

## SOCIETY NEWS

### THE NEW PRESIDENT

Harold Griffith's interest in the Antarctic started when he was a primary school boy in Dunedin, when the "School Journal" in 1917 featured articles on Captain Scott and Sir Ernest Shackleton.

When at high school he went down to Port Chalmers and boarded the Norwegian whalers and talked with the crew. Meanwhile, within his limited means he was building up a library of books about the Antarctic.

In 1928 the first Byrd Expedition arrived in Dunedin, and Harold spent a great deal of time on board the "City of New York" and the "Eleanor Bolling", where he met Admiral Byrd, Bernt Balchen, Paul Siple and many others. It was forty years ago, on December 2, 1928, that the ships sailed south.

Again in 1933 he met Byrd, and in 1934 Sir Hubert Wilkins and Lincoln Ellsworth. Since 1930 he has been considering the idea of starting a Polar Society but lacked the necessary contacts. The formation of the New Zealand Antarctic Society in 1933 made him realise there was no

need for two societies with parallel interests, so after much correspondence with Mr C. E. Collins, the Society's Secretary, it was eventually decided to allow the formation of Branches, of which Dunedin would be the first. The inaugural meeting was held in May 1936, and the Branch made a good start. In 1940 the exigencies of war forced it to go into recess, and by 1945 most of the old members were dead, scattered to other centres, or had lost interest.

It was the arrival of Dr. N. E. Odell in Dunedin to take up the chair of Geology, plus Harold's interest, that reinvigorated the Branch. When Harold was transferred to Christchurch in 1954 he handed over the reins to Colin Grey.

There was no Branch in Christchurch, but Harold did the spade-work all over again with such good results that in April 1955 a Christchurch (subsequently Canterbury) Branch was formed.

Late in 1957 the Deepfreeze executives invited him to go south with a party of VIP's for eight days, then in 1961 he joined the ice-breaker Glacier for a cruise to McMurdo, during which he visited Scott's and Shackleton's huts and flew back to Christchurch.

### THE RETIRING PRESIDENT

Mr. Eric Gibbs, the retiring President of the New Zealand Antarctic Society, lives at Taihape, about as far from the sea as it is possible to get in the North Island.

Eric's interest in the Antarctic stemmed originally from his school-boy hobby of stamp collecting. When Admiral Richard E. Byrd was going south on his second (1933-35) expedition, Eric wrote to the Admiral with a request to return an envelope from Little America. This was duly done. Then in 1939-41 during the U.S. Antarctic Service Expedition, he wrote to Captain Lystad of the U.S.S. "North Star", who also sent him envelopes from the Antarctic. From this beginning grew his Antarctic