



## Perspectives Perspectives

# The mystery of the moving juice machine

## Getting used to changes at the Pole during the last 29 years

By Bill Spindler

*Special to The Antarctic Sun*

My first time at Pole was for 12 months in 1976-77. As I left the domed station at the end of that year, I had no expectation that I'd ever be back again.

I did return nine years later, and the place looked little changed. A bit more snow perhaps, some newer equipment, and some different people. But the Dome and the surrounding buildings looked pretty much the same. In fact, the most significant modification I struggled with was that the juice machine had been moved at some point since I'd last looked for it.

I worked at Pole for four summers between 1986 and 1990, working as an engineer on various major projects, such as jacking up the (old) clean air facility, repairing the cracked Dome foundation, and replacing the generators in the arch power plant.

Fifteen years later, in 2005, things were quite different. The last wing of the new elevated station had been enclosed earlier in the summer, and a new complex of science buildings had been constructed across the skiway. The population of 240-plus was more than three times that of our normal summer crowd in 1976. The old galley building in the Dome was still there, but it wouldn't be for long. And that juice machine had been moved again.

The most important thing about a winter at the Pole is the people you're with. Before my first winter I was a bit apprehensive about the urban legends of what had happened (or had been rumored to happen) during the long, isolated night. But we were a good, close group who could sit around and joke about these tales, smiling and thankful that they were only ghost stories as far as the 21 of us were concerned. And we're still all in touch. In 2000, we had a reunion with 100 percent attendance – something we believe to be unique among Polie winter groups. And we "Pole Souls" of 1977 are starting to think about the next get-together.

Before I came down this time I was apprehensive about the sheer size of the place. I'd been following the program, the station and the changes rather closely from a distance, but how would I react in the midst of it? A friend who visited the station a few years ago once described his feelings about being "the old guy" at the dining table. Would that be me?

The most significant change here after 28 years has been the communications with the rest of the world. In 1977 we were truly isolated. We didn't have an Internet to surf, but we did have a roomful of books and other amenities to keep us occupied. There was no precedent for a Twin Otter visit in midwinter should someone need urgent medical attention. The science suffered from our lack of communication. Most of the data was shipped out on paper or tape at the end of the winter. At one point we experienced what we thought to be a rare solar cosmic ray event, but before we could send the critical data out, our radios were blacked out by the solar storm. As for management, without satellite phones and e-mail, we were rather more independent.



Above, photo by Kirk Roberts; left, courtesy of Bill Spindler / Special to The Antarctic Sun

*Above, Bill Spindler at his desk this winter at the South Pole. Left, Spindler strikes a similar pose in 1977. He spent the past winter at Pole, his first trip there in 15 years.*

The changes have been inevitable. Science now requires good communications and lots of it. The scientific facilities require a larger crew to put them together and keep them running. Still, some things haven't changed — the cold, the blowing snow, the spectacular sky displays, and that distinctive LC-130 roar that still chills my spine each time I hear it, or even think about it.

At the end of the 1977 winter, as I stood in the middle of the taxiway waiting for the first aircraft to park, I looked over at the other 20 people and realized that our little world was about to come to an end. Suddenly I had an irresistible urge to run away. If I could make it around behind Skylab where I couldn't see the plane, maybe it would disappear and our lives could go on.

As I'm writing this I have yet to stand with the rest of the 2005 Polies and watch the first flight land. I'm not sure how I'll react when I hear that prop wash blow. But I know I'll also be looking off in the distance and seeing another, smaller group of folks that share my memories of this very special place.

*—Bill Spindler was the Title II inspector for South Pole Station construction during the 2005 winter, employed by RSA Engineering, Inc., of Anchorage, Alaska.*