



Success!

South Pole Traverse arrives Dec. 23

By Peter Rejcek
Sun staff

The mission is nearly over, but the journey is only half done.

On Dec. 23 at 2:56 p.m., John Wright parked the last tractor of the South Pole Traverse on a hard-packed snow area near the South Pole Station.

He wearily climbed out of his Caterpillar 95 Challenger, exchanged a few hugs and kisses with a Polie greeting party, and told his crew to form camp and ensure all the vehicles were plugged into electric outlets to keep them warm in the freezing temperatures. "Let's plug 'em in and shut 'em down," he said.

After 43 days and some 1,600 kilometers, the South Pole Traverse had done its job — proving that an overland snow route between McMurdo Station and South Pole

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ON THE RUN: Marathon no mere walk on the beach

By Peter Rejcek
Sun staff

Eric Pohlman spent two hours and forty minutes one recent Sunday on the treadmill at the gym preparing for the McMurdo Marathon. Doing a steady 10-minute mile, it was a relatively easy 16 miles. But he knows race day conditions outdoors won't be a walk on the beach.

Then again, maybe that's exactly what it is.

"I'm preparing myself for a 26.2 [mile] run on the beach, because it's like running in sand, except it's freezing cold," said Pohlman, a hazardous waste management technician at

McMurdo Station.

Pohlman will test his theory on Jan. 8 during the annual marathon.

Last year, a dozen runners attempted the marathon or half-marathon. The race is nearly as popular with cross-country skiers, with seven people opting to glide their way across the Ross Ice Shelf in 2005.

One of the skiers was Mary Holozubiec, the only one to finish the 42-kilometer route, in a time of three hours and 39 minutes. This will be the third time the McMurdo retail materials worker will ski the race. She also ran the full marathon in 2001 on

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A new look



This year's winners of the annual Antarctic Photo Contest offer a fresh perspective on some favorite themes, starting on page 7.

Quote of the Week

"I'm a self."
— Person explaining combination of Santa and elf costumes.

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Photos by Peter Rejcek / The Antarctic Sun

The South Pole Traverse makes its final approach to the South Pole between cargo snow berms. In the lead is a PistenBully using a six-

meter-long boom outfitted with ground-penetrating radar for profiling the ground ahead in order to spot crevasses.

Traverse encounters ‘swamp’ en route to Pole

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Station is feasible. The arrival of Wright and his seven-member crew is the culmination of a four-year field project. The team had safely avoided innumerable crevasses and plowed through soft snow to accomplish a feat not seen since Sir Edmund Hillary crossed the continent to the Pole in 1958.

National Geographic cinematographer Michael Single, who is at the South Pole working on a documentary on the station, asked Wright his feelings only moments after reaching the bottom of the world.

Wright, staring into the camera and breathing heavily from relief and effort, told him, “I have no great words to say

to you, no great emotions to share.

“It is a good day to be alive,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “It’s great to be here.”

The moment of success was brief as the traverse team went about the mundane task of making its camp. The seven men and one woman, their Carhartt overalls and jackets blackened with oil and grease, then went through the rigmarole that all new U.S. Antarctic Program visitors must: They gathered in a Jamesway building lounge, to watch an orientation video that discusses safety and other unique issues that face those living at the station.

Liesl Scherthanner, the South Pole winter site manager, noted that not all the video information would apply to the crew. “You arrived a little differently than everybody else,” she said.

The swamp

A few members of the traverse team visited the outskirts of the station the previous day to stage some of its 100,000 kilograms of cargo. The team had encountered deep, soft snow along the polar plateau, requiring it to shuttle cargo as tractors continuously bogged down along the dwindling kilometers.

“We call it a swamp,” said Greg Feleppa, a member of

the field team, of the barren landscape leading to the Pole. He and Tom Lyman, a mountaineer who works in the McMurdo field safety training program and is part of the expedition, led the traverse in a PistenBully. The tracked vehicle is outfitted with about a six-meter-long boom sporting ground-penetrating radar to snoop out crevasses.

“To us, it’s been a hell of an adventure,” said Feleppa, referring to himself and John VanVlack, the freshman members of the crew. The average age of the field team members is 51.5 years, according to Wright.

VanVlack, a mechanic with **See SCIENCE on page 13**



Hugs all around for the South Pole Traverse field team from representatives at South Pole, including Jerry Marty with the National Science Foundation, center, and South Pole Area Director BK Grant, third from right.



John Wright, leader of the South Pole Traverse field team, steps down from his Caterpillar 95 Challenger moments after reaching the end of a 43-day, 1,600-kilometer trip from McMurdo Station, proving a snow route is possible between the stations.

Science cargo one option for a future traverse

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the McMurdo vehicle maintenance facility, said parts of the polar plateau — the final 450 unmapped kilometers of the snow route — were covered in soft snow and uneven sastrugi more than two meters high. He said at one point along the route he stuck a three-meter-long flagged stick in the snow only to watch it sink all the way down.

The going could be excruciatingly slow, he added. “We had some three-mile days.”

The last week was especially difficult, according to Wright, as the traverse tractors were constantly getting stuck in the soft snow. Eventually, the pace required shuttling cargo and equipment back and forth for several kilometers to move one kilometer forward. But the effort of repeated traffic helped compact the snow route over the last 20 kilometers or so, Wright explained.

“That’s how you get through the snow swamp — a lot of grind. It’s not fun,” he said. “It’ll be better the next time we go over it because we’ve compressed it and made it stronger.”

The future

It wasn’t long before the traverse field team tested that stretch of ground. After taking a couple of days rest at the Pole (though still using the two berthing modules they towed there), the team left South Pole on Dec. 28 shortly after 8 a.m. for the return trip to McMurdo. It will follow its flagged route all the way back to Ross Island with three tractors, a PistenBully, its support modules and fuel tanks.

NSF officials stateside said they were pleased with the results of the four-year field project.

“This historic achievement sets the stage for fuller realization of the scientific potential of the new South Pole Station,” said NSF Office of Polar Programs Director Karl Erb.

Dave Bresnahan, NSF systems manager, said the history of the project really dates back to the austral summer of 1994,



Photos by Peter Rejcek / The Antarctic Sun

The South Pole Traverse is finally at rest at the South Pole. A flag from Silverton American Legion Post #14, from John Wright’s Colorado home town, flies from one of two red modules used for berthing and cooking.

when work began on devising the initial route.

“Reaching South Pole safely, and returning to McMurdo over the same track, represents an outstanding accomplishment,” Bresnahan said. “Delivering cargo to Pole on this initial traverse is beyond the goals of the Proof of Concept Traverse. The members of the team and all those that supported them are to be congratulated for this accomplishment.”

The appeal of moving cargo and fuel on the ground instead of through the air on an LC-130 is obvious, Marty said. The traverse would give the NSF the capability of moving large cargo that can’t easily fit into the belly of a cargo plane without first being disassembled.

“The key is to provide options for supporting science like IceCube, the 10-Meter Telescope,” he said, referring to the large science construction projects currently under way at the Pole. “You can assemble a lot of that [equipment] and tow it here. That reduces the labor on this end.”

The traverse also affords the NSF with the ability to allocate LC-130 missions for scientific research in locations other than South Pole, he added.

By reducing the workload at the South Pole, the NSF can meet its goal of keeping the future station population at 150 people, the full capacity of the new elevated station when completed next year. There were 250 people at the Pole when the traverse train arrived, living in a variety of housing.

BK Grant, the South Pole area director for Raytheon Polar Services Co., said the cargo the traverse field team brought is the equivalent of 11 LC-130 flights. The cargo consisted of several pieces of heavy equipment, including a Caterpillar D-8 tractor and a snow hauler trailer.

“I’m glad to see them,” said Jason Medley, the South Pole operations manager, referring to the safe arrival of the traverse team and their much-needed cargo, as he watched them approach Pole.

The past

Over the three previous seasons, the traverse field team has crossed the Ross Ice Shelf, climbed the Leverett Glacier through the Transantarctic Mountains, and made it to the polar plateau just past 86 degrees south. Each excursion from McMurdo Station went farther than the previous year,

with the traverse returning to Ross Island at the end of each foray.

The first field season for the traverse was the 2002-03 austral summer. It covered the least amount of real estate over the four seasons, about 200 kilometers, but successfully crossed a 5.5-kilometer area called the shear zone. This stretch of the route, not far from McMurdo Station on the Ross Ice Shelf, was Swiss-cheesed with 32 crevasses, Wright said.

Much of that season was
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Jason Medley, left, the South Pole operations manager, converses with John Wright, South Pole Traverse leader, on the outskirts of the station, seen in the distance.

Support for marathon includes water, transport

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contestants small — just the two of them running between Scott Base and Williams Field Skiway. Joyce recalled the conditions that day were extremely windy.

“My God, it was an awful day,” said Joyce, the IT manager at Crary.

Today’s McMurdo Marathon begins at Pegasus White Ice Runway, runs to Williams Field Skiway, then to the Scott Base transition. But it’s not over yet. Runners and skiers must turn around and return to Williams Field, finishing back at the transition area. If you’re doing the half-marathon, you forego the roundtrip back to Williams and start the race about five kilometers short of Pegasus.

Joyce said she doesn’t like the current route because it’s “devastatingly” hard to reach Scott Base only to turn back again to Willy field when there’s the refuge of a warm van beckoning. The 50-year-old runner says she’ll stick with the 16-mile option, running the full distance from Pegasus airfield to the transition area.

“I don’t know how anybody has the iron will to [do the full marathon], with the course being set up as it is these days,” said Joyce,

who’s run upwards of 20 marathons.

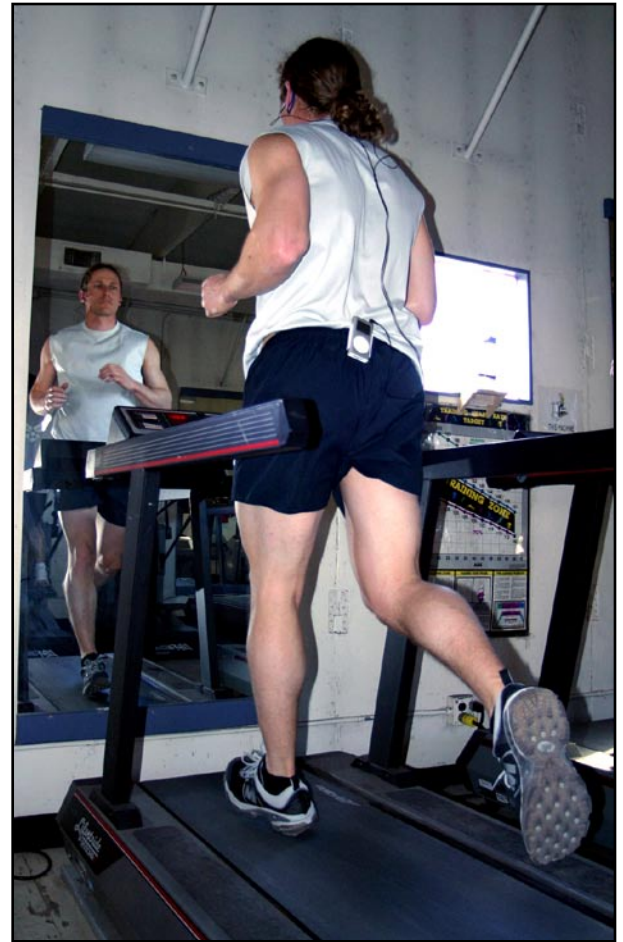
The marathon is not only tough for the participants. It’s one of the most logistically challenging events put on by the McMurdo recreation department, according to Rachel Murray, the rec supervisor.

“Supporting the marathon takes a lot,” she said.

This includes monitoring five water stations to make sure supplies aren’t blowing away in the wind or that the water hasn’t frozen. A van continuously patrols the route, carrying warm beverages, ensuring the participants are OK, and helping with gear as runners heat up and shed layers. Back in the days before iPods, Murray said the support van would carry extra batteries for the runners’ Walkmans as they lost power in the cold.

“We have to be driving constantly,” she said, “but it is a favorite to support just to see the racers at the end.”

Eric Pohlman trains on a treadmill in the aerobics gym Dec. 29. The McMurdo Marathon will be his first marathon. He said he decided to do it as a way to keep busy.



Peter Rejcek / The Antarctic Sun

NSF South Pole rep: Traverse makes history

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spent identifying crevasses in the shear zone and plugging them up with snow — a job much harder than it sounds.

“Finding snow in Antarctica is not a difficult proposition,” Wright noted, “but finding snow in a crevasse field that you can maneuver to the brink of the crevasse you want to fill, is.”

The next season, soft snow and flaws in sled design slowed the traverse, though it blazed an additional 475 kilometers despite less-than-ideal conditions. Last season, the traverse did a blitzkrieg past its farthest south point and then up the Leverett Glacier, even while encountering another major crevasse field. After gaining a foothold on the polar plateau, about 1,180 kilometers from McMurdo, and farther than its original goal for that field season, the team safely returned to McMurdo.

Wright said the route is now safe and repeatable, a criteria of proving the route. Only a few months ago, that was still in doubt.

“It was a question back in October,” he said. “It is a question no more. We are here.”

The last words

While the future of an overland traverse is still up for debate, the significance of last week’s accomplishment is without question.

Of watching Wright climb down from his tractor at Pole, Marty said proudly, “This was historic.”

Judy Goldsberry, a McMurdo fleet operations heavy equipment

operator who is a member of the traverse, said, “This wasn’t for us. This was for the world.”

Finally, Wright, speaking of the adventure to a roomful of Polies the night he and his crew arrived, said of the venture, “It was never easy. You never know what you’re going to get into.”



Peter Rejcek / The Antarctic Sun

National Geographic videographer Michael Single visits with John Wright on the outskirts of South Pole Station.