

Hydrographic, Meteorological & Oceanographic FEG Media Release

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HODSU TEAM CONQUER ANTARCTICA

By POHSM Rob Campbell (RAN Hydrographic School).

The Navy's Wollongong-based Hydrographic Office Deployable Survey Unit (HODSU) departed Hobart the 14 Jan 03 for a 10-day passage to Antarctica on MV POLAR BIRD (an Australian Antarctic Division resupply vessel) for their summer survey program. HODSU have been tasked with charting some of the northern and western approaches to Mawson Station in the event that ice closes the existing route through Kista Strait.

The trip down had unusually calm seas for the entire voyage. After a week the first of many icebergs were sighted. A day out of Mawson Station the ship approached the pack ice boundary; 2 to 3 metre thick ice plates quickly replaced the open sea. The POLAR BIRD made easy work of the ice. The ship arrived off Mawson Station on the 24 Jan.

This trip was somewhat historic in that she was transporting sections and parts for the Wind Turbine Project, a revolutionary engineering feat to harness the ferocious katabatic winds experienced at Mawson and turn it into electrical energy.

HODSU initially assisted with boatwork for the resupply effort. They used POLAR BIRD's workboat 'Chicken' as it was named by the team. HODSU drove around the ship breaking up the reforming pack ice and drove it out of the harbour into Kista Strait so that the barges could continue to work ferrying supplies ashore in dropping temperatures. The problem of refreezing pack ice was alleviated overnight when a large blizzard driven by 65 knot winds came through and cleared, not only the ice in the harbour, but the surrounding survey area as well.

The area being surveyed proved to be spectacular. The seabed comprised steep rock formations normally associated with glaciated landscapes, except on this occasion it was the seafloor that had U-shaped valleys, arretes and pingo's. HODSU witnessed changes in depth ranging from 600m deep to within 2m of the surface within a few boat lengths. Icebergs and 'bergy bits' littered the seas, penguins and seals observed feeding offshore. To date only one pod of killer whales have been sighted 'spyhopping' around the seals basking out on the ice. Spyhopping is the technique employed by orcas to lift their heads clear of the water to have a look above the surface ice when hunting prey.

The average temperature has been -8°C , with 30 knots of wind making it the Wind Chill Factor -26°C . When HODSU first arrived the hours of daylight lasted almost right round the clock, the sun set for a couple of hours early in the morning, making it difficult to adjust. The temperature of the water is -2°C on average, so erecting a tide pole was quite a painful experience. Fortunately, the day the tide pole was inserted it had warmed to -1°C , not though you'd notice!

With plenty to see inland from the Station HODSU managed to take a break from sounding and head up Mount Henderson in a Hagglund, a tracked snow vehicle. The trip across the desert of ice to a lookout shelter on the side Henderson, known as Hendo's Hut, was spectacular. The many colours of the ice could not be truly captured on film. The view from the top of the ice plateau was the icebound coastline and out to sea for miles. The round trip took 4 hours, an experience none of the HODSU team will ever forget. The team are scheduled to return to Hobart in MV AURORA ASTRALIS in late March, but this may slip due to the intervention of pack ice!



Photo Caption:

L to R: LSHSO Aaron Godwin, LSHSO Jaime Looten, LCDR Mick Rigby (OIC HODSU), LSMT Peter Brown (CDT4), POHSM Rob Campbell (RAN Hydro School).

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