

# Sydney Midwinter 2001

30 June 2001

Bill Burch and Lucinda Coates

A quick recce of possible venues led to the choice of the “North Sydney Club”. They offered a full buffet service with a wide choice of menu and this was felt to be a good way to allow Explorers and their partners/friends to mix more easily. Some 79 expeditioners and friends began the evening with “Homers” at the Bar before the traditional AGM to select a new committee. At this “election”, Lucinda Coates was unanimously voted in as the NSW Branch President for 2001/2002 and she will be ably assisted by Kit Scally, Catherine King, Phil Sylvestro, Hilton Swan, David Ellyard and Paul Lytwyn. It was farewell to many stalwarts on the NSW Council who have put in the hard yards over the years, notably Bill Burch and Steve Symonds. Col Christiansen will still be our web master extraordinaire, but has declined a position on the committee, and Kit Scally, although still a council member, has stepped down as Treasurer. A special vote of thanks to you all (from Lucinda, on behalf of all Club members) for your untiring work.

Also at the AGM was discussed the possibility of holding Midwinter Dinner 2002 at Orange, for something completely different. Peter Lawson spoke to the motion, promoting the RSL Club as a good venue. The new Council will decide in the next month or two, but we would be more than happy for feedback from all Club members.

The 1951 Heard Island crew decided to make the Dinner their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration and five of the original team with several family members joined us. Notably this included all those intimately involved in the famous appendix operation - see below. Present were Hugh Doyle (Geophysicist), Otaker Rec (Medical Officer), John Starr (Cook), Arthur Giese (Weather Observer) and Peter Lawson (Engineer). The Heard Island table was presented with a special bottle of ANARE Club Jubilee port, for consumption during the evening.

We were also honoured to have Peter Blaxland, John Lavett, and David Eastman from the pre-ANARE days of the LST3501 *Labuan* and Heard Island 1947/48. David Ellyard, following custom, performed the MC duties to his usual high standard. The Toast to ANARE was proposed by Arthur Giese (Foundation Member of the Club, on Heard Island), and responded by Graham Budd. Graham took us through life in the early and later years, commenting that, even if the old salts did it tough, they were probably under less stress because they couldn't be contacted by phone! And that, in one series of measurements, blood pressure (which, contrary to expectations, dropped during the winter) returned to 'normal' when civilisation was imminent once again. Graham ended with the thought that, in a good party, it's a jolly good way to spend a year! The toast “To the Expeditioners” was given by the newest expeditioner present, Catherine King. Among the several first timers at the dinner it was good to meet Ross McCallum who had served on the crew of the *Aurora Australis* for 5 years.

Our Guest Speaker, Lincoln Hall OAM, delighted us with a narrative of great intrepidity coupled with stunning photos of the Mt. Minto Expedition of 1988 – and all this with a dodgy

microphone and a projector that jammed on the last few slides! The yacht *Allan & VI Thistlethwayte* anchored at Halley Bay, and the party trekked 125km around to the back of Admiralty Range, over the pass and eventually to the summit (4163m). Lincoln made comparisons with earlier expeditions; especially those Mawson was involved with. His concluding statement embraced the philosophy that it doesn't matter whether you go for the adventure of the knowledge – it's where you go in yourself that's important.

Following the “call of the Years”, we listened to a sequel to the famous Heard Island appendix operation told by John Starr Jnr. John is the son of the Heard Island Chef who had his appendix removed on the kitchen table at Heard by Dr. Otto Rec, assisted by Peter Lawson and others. This story was featured in *Aurora* in 1987. ([The great Heard Island appendix operation - A gutsy story](#))

The two companions had gone their separate ways, as happens after an ANARE winter. Otaker had to do another year of study, and was financing himself through various means while he “retrained” in Medicine. John, in the meantime, had returned to become Head Chef at the Mater Misericordia Hospital in North Sydney. John rode the tram to work on a regular basis and one morning, a year or so after the appendix operation, he was asked for his fare by a familiar voice. He looked up and the conductor shouted out, to the astonishment of the passengers, in a thick accent, “Starr! How's your gut?” Yes, it was Otaker, supporting his studies as a tram conductor! I've heard of coincidences, but... Seems these Heard Island boys don't do anything by halves.

John Lavett told the sad tale of “Potter's Duck”, the nickname given to the last surviving ex WW2 amphibian “Walrus” aircraft, specially fitted, that was shipped aboard the *Labuan* to Heard Island in 1947. It made one flight, circling Big Ben and landed close to shore. It was duly decided that to save all the hassle of loading it back on the ship before another flight the following day, it could be beached and secured with ropes to local rocks and boulders at Atlas Cove. This was done and one wag found an ‘egg-like’ stone under the plane, collected it, painted it orange to match the plane's colours and presented it to the *Labuan* skipper George Dixon, in the Wardroom that night with “There you are – the duck has laid an egg!”. To perpetuate the joke the signalman was instructed to telegraph to the Naval Board “The duck has laid an egg – is this unique?”. This apparently caused some puzzlement back at HQ.

That night a force 8 hurricane blew in (winds were clocked at over 120mph – the highest the instruments on board could measure – and the poor Walrus was wrecked in spectacular fashion where it sat. How to break the news to the Naval Board that, after just one flight, the Walrus (specially fitted) was kaput? Once more the signalman was summonsed and this time the cable read “To ACNB from HMAS LST3501, ref my previous signal: If egg is not fertile, species is now extinct”.

Peter Blaxland recalled the LST3501, a quite unsuitable flat-bottomed craft, hovering to 1800 miles south of Fremantle in a gale for three days at three knots, where the waves were higher than the bridge with 20' of broken water on top and half a mile between crests. Peter went on to tell tales of the *Totten*, the ship that (eventually) picked the '51 crew up from Heard Island.

After dessert, our MC David Ellyard led us through the time-honoured Call of the Years. We had representatives from the early years (1947/48) through each decade right up to the present.

Towards the end of the evening, the raffle was drawn. The lucky winners were:

**Jill Giese Prize:** A Mrs Rob Print – *Huskies Out Of Mawson*

**Pat Lavett Prize:** a night's accommodation at the Wentworth Hotel

**Ian Kavanagh Prize:** a bottle of ANARE Club Jubilee Port

**Jill Giese Prize:** four Zoo passes

Funds raised from our raffles always go to worthy causes – even the ANARE Club has been a beneficiary in past years! This year we concentrated solely on our Taronga Zoological Park sponsorship of the seals. We donated a total of \$600 to assist in the upkeep of the leopard seals that are taken in when found injured on the shores of Sydney Harbour, rehabilitated and then set free.

Incidentally, all members and guests are cordially invited to our annual Picnic Day at the Zoo, on Sunday 23 September. Free entry is offered to members. Please call Lucinda (02 9888 5686) to register your interest.

Announcements occurred throughout the evening, including a list of goods on sale 'up the back'. Our most popular items were the ANARE Club Jubilee port and Lincoln Hall's pictorial biography on Sir Douglas Mawson. As well as the Heard Island Jubilee, Bill Storer represented Macca '51 (and was also in the first Mawson party, 1954). Other anniversaries were the 40th Bill Burch (Wilkes) and Kevin Miller and John Watts (Mawson) and 30th Kit Scally (Mawson).

We of the NSW Council hope to see you all at the next Midwinter's Dinner, wherever that may be!