

Sydney Midwinter 2011

For the second year, the NSW Branch of the ANARE club gathered in the salubrious surroundings of the Epping club to celebrate Midwinter. Some 60 expeditioners and partners were on hand on 25 June to enjoy a packed evening of fellowship and information-swapping. We were very pleased to note the presence of both very recent expeditioners and some whose service in the South goes back 50 or 60 years.

As usual, the evening began with homers, quickly followed by the Annual General Meeting. Under the firm hand of David Ellyard this was opened and closed in almost record time. The main task was the election of a new committee, with an opportunity to farewell those who were stepping down. The result was an appropriate mix of "old lags" and "new blood". In the course of the evening, heartfelt thanks (and an engraved ANARE Club plaque) were given to retiring branch president Phil Silvestro and his wife Donna, whose many years of service, particularly in running the sale of Club goods, have been much appreciated.

When the meal began, we celebrated the two traditional toasts. The *Toast to ANARE* was proposed by MC David Ellyard, and responded to by John Seaton, one of our branch luminaries who saw service with the RAAF Antarctic flight to Mawson in the 1950s. Following a long established tradition, the *Toast to the Expeditioners* was proposed by our most recently returned expeditioner, the very seasoned Graham "Meggsie" Mills, in service on Macquarie Island in the season just past and whose list of bases and years approaches the fabled length of that of Graham "Chompers" Currie. The response was delivered by another of our luminaries, Dick Thompson, back in our midst after several years' absence. Dick's service began with the Division in 1950, and included visits south every summer for the next decade. We are indeed glad to have such icons of ANARE amongst us.

Retiring National ANARE club president Ingrid McGaughey spoke briefly, particularly to alert the company to our new "oral history" project. Recording equipment has been purchased and is in use, currently in Tasmania, to record the reminiscences of former expeditioners. Over coming months and years the equipment will do the rounds of the country to ensure that the experiences of as many old lags as possible are preserved. Perhaps future historians will be able to judge how reliable those reminiscences are.

Heading the line-up of guest speakers was Nisha Harris from the Division. Her presentation covered both recent events and future plans. There had been plenty of excitement, including events which reflected the camaraderie of Antarctica. In the season past the Division was called upon to assist following a fatal helicopter crash involving French expeditioners, as well as being involved in the rescue of a Chinese expeditioner from Dome A who was suffering from altitude sickness. This was a lengthy rescue but it resulted in the saving of a life.

On Macquarie Island, board walks have been erected to cater for the many tourists (there were ten ship visits that season). Regarding the MI pest eradication: the previous season left only 5% of the task completed. This season, two sweeps were done resulting in completion of 99.9% of the job (only a couple of high peaks remaining).

Nisha also updated us on events planned for the 100th Anniversary of the Australian Antarctic Expedition (AAE), the first wholly Australian expedition to Antarctica, dominated by scientific research and geographical discovery, to Commonwealth Bay and East Antarctica. She directed members to a special website set up to advertise activities: <http://centenary.antarctic.gov.au/>. Coming events include the AAE flotilla re-enactment leaving Hobart on 2 December, and between 31 December and 12 January 2012, a special voyage to Commonwealth Bay.

The theme of our evening was to begin celebration of the centenary of the AAE, with a particular emphasis on communications. So we were entertained by a "triumvirate" of guest speakers on Radio in Antarctica. First up was John Hooke, CBE, whose father, Australian radio pioneer and founder of AWA Sir Lionel Hooke, was part of Shackleton's fateful Imperial Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1914-17. John read fascinating extracts from his father's diary, written while Lionel was on board the *Aurora* in the "forgotten" (Ross Sea) segment of Shackleton's expedition (where despite Shackleton's claim to the contrary, three men did perish)..

Owen Holmwood recounted the difficulties encountered by Mawson's mainland party in setting up radio communications at Commonwealth Bay in 1911-13, as well as the experiences of the party on Macquarie Island left to establish a relay station to ensure that messages from Commonwealth Bay could reach the Australian mainland.

David Ellyard asked whether having radio communications in Adelie Land was worth the trouble (of which there was plenty). In 1913 the departing *Aurora* did indeed receive a radio signal from the shore party to say that Mawson had returned. The ship was able to pick up the Western Party but sea conditions made it impossible to pick up Mawson and the shore party had to stay another year. However, they were in touch with the world. Indeed, the enduring message from the presentation was that the AAE was the first Antarctic expedition to make use of the new wonder of radio.

As usual we had a range of contests and prizes. On every table a fluffy toy penguin or a cube with two penguin floating inside (both from the Taronga zoo shop and part of our ongoing sponsorship of the seal breeding program at the Zoo) was won by the lucky person with a smiley sticker stuck beneath their chair. Prizes in the all-important raffle included one of Mrs Rob's famous etchings and a large fluffy seal, together with the usual Zoo passes. As a result of our raffles over the last couple of decades, the NSW branch has been able to sustain sponsorship of the seal breeding program to the extent of some \$10,000. It is, we are told, the longest continuous sponsorship of any of the Zoo's programs.

The climax of the evening was, as usual, the *Call of the Years*. This is done by decade, starting with the most recent. Some of our number have such extensive service records that they appeared to be hopping up and down for acknowledgement every few minutes. The statistics were interesting; we applauded as 15 expeditioners stood up to represent the decade 2001 to 2010 (the “noughties”), eight stood for the 90s (of the 20th century), nine for the 80s, ten for the 70s, five for the 60s, four for the 50s, and two whose experience down south stretched back to the late 1940s. It was a smorgasbord of service. Long may it endure.

David Ellyard