

# Sydney Midwinter 2012

## SYDNEY MIDWINTER DINNER

Report by David Ellyard

The Epping Club was once again the venue for the Sydney MWD, held on 30 June. Numbers were a bit down on recent years but there were many familiar faces and some new ones, and no lack of midwinter spirit. By tradition we started with homers, pushed through the Annual General Meeting (some new committee members, some retirements and discussion of possible alternative arrangement for future events), then to the stairs for the group photo before settling down to eat, drink, chat and reminisce.

In welcoming the gathering, NSW President Owen Holmwood reminded us that for all its increasing familiarity, Antarctica remains a very challenging environment. He made reference to the risks that expeditioners have run and continue to run in southern ventures. This theme was reinforced by John Seaton (Mawson 56 where he was a RAAF pilot) responding to the Toast to ANARE. He reported that he contacted current Mawson station leader Bob Jones on Midwinters Day, asking about the old huts he helped to build. On one occasion there had been a near miss in Ross Hut from CO poisoning. He congratulated all ANARE expeditioners for overcoming the odds and the hazards (like fire) that persist to this day.

ANARE Club National President David Ellyard and NSW Branch grey-beard was the guest speaker for the evening, passing over his usual MC duties to Les Miller, who carried them out in exemplary fashion. David popped in some presidential remarks before moving on to his address, noting that the Sydney MWD was the best dressed/organised of the four he had attending in 2012, and announcing the awardees of the 2012 Phillip Law Medal; the well-known film makers David Parer and Elizabeth Parer-Cook, for their outstanding contribution to the Antarctic community in the field of documentaries, which has done so much to raise public awareness of Antarctica.

David entitled his address *Commonwealth Bay and Back*. He had been selected by the Division to be aboard the *Aurora Australis* when it went south in January intending to visit Commonwealth Bay 100 years to the day after the men of the *Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE)*, led by Douglas Mawson, went ashore. For much of the way, the centenary voyage followed in the wake of the original *Aurora*, first to Commonwealth Bay and then westward along the coast toward the AAE Western Base. The not-to-be underestimated *Antarctic Factor* messed up plans a bit. The huge B9B iceberg offshore had prevented the breakout of 25km of fast ice so helicopters had to be utilised to get the party ashore.

David shared with the group his profound feelings on being, for a few moments, alone with his thoughts in the icy stillness of Mawson's Hut. He sensed a day, 100 years ago, frozen in time, with small, every-day mementos of a normal day in the life of an AAE expeditioner scattered about him.

The men of the AAE are long gone, indeed long dead, but their spirits remain. That sensation is enough to stop the breath. David recalled the honour of helping raise the national flag at a ceremony held hard by the huts. As the flag rose into a blue sky, it hung motionless beside the pole, a rare occurrence in the “home of the blizzard”.

We were honoured to have with us Dr Martin Riddle, a leading scientist with the Division (and winner of the 2011 Law Medal). He drew parallels between the achievements of the AAE and current AAD activities. It was appropriate that in this centenary year the *Aurora Australis*, having left Commonwealth Bay, became a floating laboratory undertaking marine science research during the slow trip to Perth. Mawson would have approved. David commented that media interest in the centenary had been high, with corresponding attention world-wide, including through the ABC's Karen Barlow, *60 Minutes* and Channel 7's *Sunrise*. He recommended interested persons to read both Karen Barlow's and David Ellyard's blogs of the voyage.

Martin informed the group of other centenary activities: *Descendants Day*, attended by some 65 descendants of AAE men; a *Centenary Flotilla* on the Derwent, with a 19-gun salute and the presence of the Governor of Tasmania; and the opening of the travelling exhibition *Traversing Antarctica: the Australian Experience*. Other matters Martin reported were field work in the Prince Charles Mountains, new building programs at Davis and elsewhere, additional infrastructure constructed at Wilkins airfield, and early success with the pest eradication program at Macquarie Island: no mice, rats or rabbits have been found since December 2011.

The evening wrapped up in traditional style with the announcement of raffle prize winners; for 20 years the money raised by our raffle has supported seal research at Taronga Zoo. The prizes included a copy of the Peter Fitzsimmons *Mawson* biography, a Mrs Rob etching, a painting by John Seaton's wife Barbara, ANARE Club Diamond Jubilee engraved wine glasses, and T shirts produced to mark the AAE centenary voyage.

Then we paused to recall some departed expeditioners, before concluding with the *Call of the Years*. This year ANARE icon Bill Storer (MI51, M54) was the last man standing. The *Call* is another reminder of the special bond we share as current and former ANARE men and women, and that our Club is the guardian of a tradition and legacy that we can trace back a century to the AAE. May that never be forgotten.