



View from Enderby Island

## Operation Endurance – Sub Antarctic Trip 5-10 February 2011

A pre Christmas phone call from Pete McClelland had the potential to ruin my holiday season. One of my “I’ll never do that” comments had just come back to bite me in the backside! “Did I want to go on a trip to the Sub Antarctic’s in February”? I’m saying yes over the phone, but my head is shaking “no”. I know this is a trip of a lifetime I’m being offered, and I know I am not going to turn it down despite my fears. “Are you sure I can’t get a Trustee to go Pete”? No? So that’s it, I start trying to get fit, try to figure out how I am going to sneak a hair dryer on board, and what the best seasick drugs are on the market.

### Saturday 5 February

We meet early at Quarantine in Invercargill for the rigorous checking of gear to ensure we don’t take any foreign plant or pest with us. This is crucial as DOC is trying to keep the Subs as pristine as possible. It will be a lot of hurrahy up and wait on this trip according to Pete our team leader (manages the Sub Antarctic Islands for DOC). Other ‘Sea riders’ (as the Navy calls us) include Steve from Met service; Dave & Kevin from the Southland District Council; Andrea – a planner from Tasmania on an exchange; and DOC planning staff from Invercargill and Wellington: Sharon, Rebecca, Sarah & Danica.



We finally see our ship mid morning. The HMNZS Wellington has only docked earlier that day in Bluff. The Wellington is the Navy’s new Offshore Patrol Vessel, 85 metres, with a cruising speed of 15 knots, but can go 22! It is warship grey with no windows anywhere apart from the bridge. It sleeps 80 people, and with over 50 staff and 10 sea riders there is still plenty of room on the south leg of our trip. Of course for our four guys on board, they have to tough it out in two-bunk rooms with ensuite bathrooms and dine in the Ward room with the Captain and officers. The girls get the privilege of two six-bunk rooms in the junior ratings area down

below at the back of the ship. We get to share our bathroom with the junior ratings, but this is no hardship, the facilities are fantastic!

Lunch on board sets the start of being waited on hand and foot! The food caters for an average age of 23 years, plentiful and tasty. I’m grateful I don’t need to cook for a few days. Andrea, Danica, Sarah and I get to dine in the senior ratings dining room which proves to be the pick as we form good friendships with our eight or so mess mates. The WSC (wisk) or ‘whole ships coordinator’ is stationed with us and proves to be very entertaining during our trip. He is effectively ‘camp mother’ although I wouldn’t call him that. We are privileged to have a separate mess with large screen TV, couch and bar (not that we need that).

Part of Operation Endurance is to drop off provisions and board walk materials to various spots, so once loaded, we are able to begin our journey. By this stage I am incredibly anxious. Waving good bye to family who are following us out the harbour proves a bit tougher than I thought. Thank goodness it’s raining! What tears?!

We are only just out of Bluff Harbour when the first of many drills takes place. ‘Oscar’ has been lost overboard, so a man overboard drill is performed. Oscar is a bit of a dummy! The drill is impressive though. A half million dollar RIB (rigid inflatable boat) is lowered off the side and within 6 minutes is back on board with a very wet but safely secured Oscar. It’s an impressive sight for us sea riders!



With a 20 hour journey ahead it's early to bed after dinner to avoid sea sickness. A relatively calm night but still only one hours sleep!

### Sunday 6 February

Prior to mooring in Port Ross we drop off a team in a RIB to accompany the sea lion research team from Enderby on to Dundas Island. This is the first time they had made it out there from their base on Enderby in over a month due to weather and a large bank of seaweed which stopped them launching their boat. We moor in Erebus Cove, Port Ross, Auckland Island. Auckland Island is 460 km south of Bluff in the furious fifties, and is almost 51,000 ha in size. It's great to be out on deck getting fresh, if slightly cool air. Our task here is to unload board walking materials for the cemetery at Hardwick Cove. The Enderby settlement was established here in 1849 in an attempt to establish a British colony to harvest the regions resources. The population peaked at 300, but lasted less than three years. There were two infant deaths during this time.



Headstone – 3 month old

Boat Shed - Erebus Cove

Our first experience of going ashore is an interesting one. Because the RIBs are so well looked after, there is no way they will go too close to a rocky shoreline, so its Ship to RIB, RIB to zodiac, zodiac to shore. The crew are dressed in black dry suits with balaclavas and goggles – all very SAS! It is fantastic to have their assistance with off loading the board walking. Following a short period of (not very) hard labour, Pete takes us on a tour of the Enderby settlement site. There is very limited evidence left that anyone lived here other than the boat sheds (above), the cemetery, and a few piles of bricks. We managed to view the Victoria tree, which was carved in 1865 commemorating the visit of HMCS Victoria (Canadian Service), on a search for castaways.



XO (2<sup>nd</sup> in command), Junior officer and a Canadian officer (on an exchange) at the Victoria tree.

The history here is incredible, at least 8 shipwrecks with a loss of around 121 lives, and few survival

stories in the harsh conditions. The introduction of pigs to the Island, while providing food at the time, are now causing major issues for both flora and fauna, which is also not helped by the wild cats. It would cost in excess of \$20 million to clear Auckland Island of these pests. The Rata here is a treat; it is very unique, twisted and knarley.



Erebus Cove – Auckland Island

Back on board we enjoy a pleasant evening while anchored off Enderby Island in calm water, able to enjoy a luxurious shower with being hurt, and eat without feeling nauseous! By now I'm thoroughly enjoying myself and feeling a lot more confident than the day before.

### Monday 7 February

Each morning at 6.50am we are woken by the most god forsaken noise coming over the 'pipes'. It starts with 3 or 4 'musical' blasts on the whistle, followed by a song of choice (by some 12 year old it would seem!), then "Calling all hands – wakey...wakey...wakey". Fun the first time! Breakfast is 7-7.30pm which I found fine as I had been in the pit most nights prior reasonably early to avoid feeling woozy. But my townie bunk mates struggled a bit after late night movie sessions in the mess!

Today is Enderby Island, which I am really looking forward to. It is the jewel in the crown of these Islands according to many people I'd spoken to. The Sea Lion research team spend several months each summer here on Enderby. The sun is out, and the sea is calm – we couldn't ask for a better day. For the past few weeks the team have been marooned by over 20 metre wide and several metres deep seaweed which has blocked all access. It was so bad that the sea lions even had serious trouble coming and going. Luckily it is clear for us – the tourist boats had been turned away.



Enderby Beech – Sea Lion Team base

Enderby has a board walk to cater for up to 1100 tourists who visit each year. This keeps the numbers off the regenerating vegetation. Until recently Enderby was home to cattle, rabbits and

mice, which have all been cleared. When they were on the Island, it looked like a golf course in areas. Now, the mega herbs are coming back and it is starting to look as it should.



Top of Enderby Island - boardwalk

As we are with DOC, we are able to extend our walk further along the west side of the Island, and back over the top, before heading back down through the sea lions. We view a protected castaway depot, the site of the Derry Castle ship wreck, nesting area for



the Auckland Island Shag (less than 1000 pairs), and the emerging mega herb fields. We have Pete (DOC) and Louise (who runs the sea lion team) with us, so

they are grilled with questions relating to the Island. Their knowledge is fantastic and makes the visit to Enderby a real highlight.

The sea lions are brilliant to watch. They are grouped in harems with a bull controlling the group, who fiercely defends the girls from other males. It's hilarious to watch. But the sea lions have been reducing in numbers over the 10 years the monitoring has been in place, which is heartbreaking for those involved. I'm no expert so won't hazard a guess. The team obviously blame the fisheries, but they also agree that the Auckland Islands are at the limit for sea lions in terms of suitable breeding grounds. For example at Enderby their milk fat is 25% compared to 40% fat in the small new Dunedin population. They are very endangered, with adults travelling out to 150 km (based on tracking) to feed. Something needs to be done to help protect them, and hopefully those with the knowledge can identify a solution soon.



Bull defending his turf – Enderby Island

In the afternoon we up anchor and head down the coast to Adams Island, on the south end of Auckland. There are people down here monitoring various species and we need to make several drop offs of provisions including wood, a water tank, green veges and ice cream! This task is made reasonably difficult due to very strong winds through Carnley Harbour. After we spend a good hour doing

'race tracks' in the harbour, (as we can't anchor due to the weather), I discover the Captain was initially from Gore – which helps to explain the 'laps'! You can take the boy out of Gore.....!

It is a fairly exciting time for the guys on the RIB's who are coping with very difficult conditions, loading and unloading and getting completely soaked.



RIB being lifted in rough weather – Carnley Harbour

Monday night we sail from Auckland Island to Campbell Island, a 12-13 hour trip. This is heading out in to unknown territory, so the nerves start up again. Someone tries to meet with me over dinner to discuss the Trust. I only last an hour and have to head back down to my bunk to avoid sea sickness. The drugs are barely working even though the sea is not actually that bad!!

## Tuesday 8 February



Campbell Island

For me, arriving at Campbell Island is something of a dream realised. My Mother and late Father have been here 8-9 times, and for them there is "nowhere better in the world"! (Have they not been to Fiji?) I intend to make the most of it.

It is New Zealand's southernmost subantarctic territory, 660 km south of Bluff. Campbell itself is over 11,000 ha with high cliffs and fiord-like bays. In 2001 an intensive rat-poisoning programme took place (involving FCT Trustee Nick Torr), and it was declared free of rats in 2006. It is now beginning to recuperate from those years of intense pressure by the pests. I am fortunate to visit this Island almost 10 years later, and see the changes that have occurred. One of the main successes obvious to us is the recovery of the Pipit on the main Campbell Island. Until the eradication they had been on offshore Islands only. They are a neat little bird, and great to see in good numbers. Another treat was to see two Campbell Island teal in the harbour, one of the world's rarest ducks, which was rediscovered on Dent Island in 1975 and

reintroduced to Campbell in 2004 following a captive breeding programme.

Our visit here is to pick up an expedition team who have been down here for two months. After all morning organising their incredible amount of gear on to the ship, we are given the option of a 6-7 hour 'route march' lead by the (very fit) XO to Northwest Bay, or a more leisurely 2 hour walk up the Col-Lyall Saddle boardwalk. I chose the second option! This worked out to be the best decision as I had an incredible afternoon, taking time to stop and smell the albatross so to speak!



Rachel & Andrea (from Tasmania)

The walk is spectacular, mind blowing, windy with the odd hail shower and occasional bit of sun. The great thing is we can stop and soak it up as we go, and take as many photos as we want, (unlike the other route march!). The vistas are incredible; it's a rugged Island but the provision of the board walk makes it incredibly easy to view. The highlights as far as birds go on this walk are the Royal Albatross. There are many nesting as we go up, along with several groups of males as well. Along the ridges they are soaring which is an incredible sight.



The mega herb fields are a treat as you head up higher towards the cliffs. Botanists are unsure as to why they have such large leaves and bright flowers. But they provide a beautiful and unique vista and are part of the main draw card for visitors to the Islands.



Top of Col-Lyall board walk, looking out to Dent Island

We manage to enjoy a good few hours on this trip with relative peace and quiet after the last few days. This walk was the highlight of my trip, and I am incredibly grateful that I was invited to come down here. I can now understand why people are so attracted to experiencing this. The only thing missing on Campbell is an abundance of seabird

life, something that will take years to fix I imagine. It is another focus for DOC to try to improve.

We are only at Campbell Island from 9am-9pm. There is no mucking around. Due to potential bad weather the call is made to high tail it back to NZ mainland, rather than anchor over night. It is a 36 hour journey back to Otago Harbour and it makes sense to start at night time. The next 36 hours are largely spent in my bunk – I missed breakfast, slept through lunch, and had to have toast delivered by the fantastic Pete to get me through. All the sea riders had to endure a 2 hour fire drill on Wednesday down in our end of the Ship. Terribly hard for those with two bunk rooms with ensuite bathrooms. They had to stand around while I reclined in my bunk! I did make it up for my last supper with the team in the Senior Ratings Mess, and managed to have quite a nice evening for at least 50 minutes before disappearing again.

#### Thursday 10 February

This morning I am up at 5.13am as I am so sick of my bunk! I can not wait any longer to get out of it! There is only a spread hands width between my nose and the ceiling of my bunk. I'm up on the Bridge by 5.50am – the crew wondering what on earth tipped me out of bed. I had the most enjoyable morning watching the sun come up over calm seas along the Otago Coast. Our entry in to Otago Harbour was in perfect weather conditions, which was a nice treat for the Captain who was bringing the Wellington in to his home port for the first time, with his Father watching.



The Captain - Lieutenant Commander Simon Griffiths

I have a great respect for those who care for and manage the Sub Antarctic Islands. Apart from anything else, just getting there is a mammoth task, and usually not on a state-of-the-art Navy ship, with stabilisers and purpose built sick bags. It is an incredibly challenging place down there on a good day, and the people who choose to work down there are nothing short of legends in my book.

In particular I really want to thank Pete McClelland for his bl\*#dy phone call pre Christmas. Even though this was on my "never" list, I wouldn't have



missed this trip for the world. I am very grateful for the encouragement from everyone to go. It is a once in a life time trip for me and I thoroughly enjoyed the company of my fellow sea riders and the Navy crew. Thanks to the Captain and crew for putting up with us! One things for sure – my daughter Ellie is not joining the Navy! (Never say never!)

Rachel Cockburn – Fiordland Conservation Trust Manager