

CRM at East Base, Antarctica

Cathy Spude

Robert Spude

The ice-breaker slowed to the pace of a row boat as it crunched through the brackish ice of the LeMaire Straits. Disturbed crab eater seals looked briefly toward the big red boat, then slid away into the sea. Penguins, startled in disbelief at the intruder, dove off their ice blocks. We were bound for Stonington Island, site of America's and Antarctica's most recently designated historic monument. Captain Alex of Erebus ensured our safe arrival on February 21, 1991, the final destination of a journey that began six months earlier with a phone call.

Much of the environmental community is disturbed about the untidy nature of the continent, and the National Science Foundation, concerned as well, had initiated measures to clean up former research stations.

While planning their effort, they recognized the historic significance of "East Base, Stonington Island," site of an early winter-over expedition. Further research and conferences changed the NSF mission from clean-up to one of sympathetic preservation of the site while ensuring that hazardous materials were removed. After a 1990 field check, they found that East Base, the oldest remaining U.S. base in the Antarctic, had a host of artifacts. That is when they called the National Park Service for technical advice. In February, we boarded a boat bound for Antarctica.

East Base was established as part of Admiral Byrd's third expedition to the Antarctic (1939-1941). Known officially as the U.S. Antarctic Service Expedition (USASE), the full scale exploration of the continent was supported by President Roosevelt. Admiral Byrd established two bases, West Base at Little America III and East Base on Stonington Island. The base was a cluster of U.S. Army, knock-down buildings built by a crew of 23 under Richard Black. The men used a Curtiss-Wright Condor airplane and dog sleds to survey the peninsula. In 1941, as wartime pressure increased and the pack-ice in the bay prevented a planned departure by ship, Black decided to hurriedly evacuate the base by air. Crates of food, a spare plane engine, a tank and tractor and much gear were left behind. In 1947-1948, the privately funded Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition (RARE) re-occupied East Base. Finn Ronne, Richard Black's second in command, led RARE and conducted more explorations. The RARE expedition was also significant for being the first site where women (Edith "Jackie" Ronne and Jennie Darlington) wintered-over in the Antarctic.

When we arrived, on a calm, sunny (55 degrees) uncommon Antarctic day, the completeness of the site amazed us. Buildings and material culture were in surprisingly good shape. Pothunters and bottle collectors would have destroyed a similar 50-year-old site in the United States. Trash dumps contained material in incredible condition—a 1939 Reader's Digest in which one could read about sex education in public schools, a shirt from Ike Musselman, one of the USASE crew, bottles from the doctor's office, a spare 1930s Curtiss-Wright plane engine, hay piles, and three of the buildings. Everything had a history, a history pieced together by published books, records at the National Archives and interviews. Mrs. Jackie Ronne drew us a layout of her hut on a napkin at a MacDonald's restaurant in Washington, DC before we left. It helped piece together on-the-ground evidence: stacks of trail mixings, caches of coal for stoves, and on and on.

Our report, a description of resources and recommendations for management, will be used by the National Science Foundation to manage the site and, in the immediate future, remove any hazardous material: a corbel of acid from the science lab, sulfuric acid from the doctor's office and other dangers. The team will repair and make air-tight the buildings, unfortunately much altered on the interiors by a nearby British base. The former bunk house was used as a

seal-slaughter house and is befouled with the waste. Preservation crews will patch the building and lock it shut. Its fate is uncertain. The valuable artifacts in the trash dumps will not be salvaged at this time. At present a light covering of gravel from the island will serve as a cap to ensure their preservation, allowing future archeologists to excavate the site based on our field mapping and photographs, as well as improve the present unsightly appearance of the rust-colored dumps.

As the preservation and clean-up effort is underway, the National Science Foundation will prepare interpretive signs to ensure that the East Base Historic Monument is not impacted by increased visitation. The site, as a listed Antarctic national monument, may become a destination point for the few tourist boats that venture south along the scenic Antarctic Peninsula. The number of visitors to the site are few, but during our journey we met Australian, French and British tourists, the former while we were at East Base.

As the movement for a world park on Antarctica continues to be discussed and introduced in Congress, we need to continue to stress the importance of people in the Antarctic story. The East Base site is but one piece of the whole century and a half of exploration and discovery. The site deserves preservation. Cultural resource management will continue to be an important part of the management of Antarctica.

Cathy Spude is an archeologist with the Western Team at the Denver Service Center, National Park Service. Robert Spude is chief, National Preservation Programs Branch, Rocky Mountain Region, National Park Service.