

Speed-up of Pole Airlift

nage. It streaked upward by scores of tons every day the weather permitted flights. Ten tons, 50 tons, 100 tons, 300 tons, 400 tons, 430 tons. Then blank.

Capacity loads, coupled with excessive landings and takeoffs, abetted by unseasonably warm weather and its resulting thaws in December, had had their effect on the natural ice landing strip.

Three nose-down landings had been made in poor visibility, gouging troughs in the ice. Oil pools, gone unnoticed during the periods of minus-30 temperatures in late October and November, now reared their ugly heads. Each black drop formed a veritable magnet for the sun's rays, it seemed. Where there were gouges in the ice, now there were potholes. Where there were oil leaks, now there were potholes with water standing in them.

Yet the pole drops were not completed.

Airmen flew under almost inhuman circumstances trying to get the job done before they were forced to safety in New Zealand. The same warm weather that played havoc with McMurdo's airstrip had upped fuel consumption by the Byrd Land tractor-train and had raised a demand for 40 tons of fuel to be flown from McMurdo.

Still the Globemasters flew. On December 18 the Task Force Commander sounded out Major Ellen as to whether or not he'd better head for New Zealand with his planes.

"We'll fly one more day," he answered. This resulted in a 30-ton fuel drop at Byrd Station proper. (Ten tons had already been dropped at the 463-mile mark on the trail and gulped down by thirsty tractors.) The heavy planes left for New Zealand December 19, 1956.

Of the three nose-down landings by Globemasters, no fliers were killed. Factory technicians and Air Force maintenance men had patched up two of the planes and they had returned to New Zealand. As ironic as was the death of VX-6's survival officer on the initial McMurdo fly-in, the scrapped Globemaster had been the first Air Force plane to overfly the South Pole. It is now in daily service as a toolroom at McMurdo Sound.

With airdrops temporarily suspended until a prolonged freeze would permit resumption of landings by wheeled aircraft, the Task Force Commander conferred with the scientists. The discussion went something like this.

There were more than 400 tons of supplies landed at the pole and a fairly complete camp constructed. Four buildings had been erected at Byrd Station and more would be delivered by tractor-train.

Let's assume at the very darkest, they figured, that the airstrip at McMurdo can't be used again this season. How many men, at the very minimum, will be required to conduct the science studies at the Pole and Byrd Station?

"We can get along with twelve men at each base," said Dr. Siple.

"How much food per man do you need?"

"A ton and two-thirds per man per year."

"Alright, we'll deliver men, food and non-droppable science equipment by ski planes," said Admiral Dufek and Captain Corliss.

So the flights began. Not so glamorous as the giant four-engined Globemasters which could spew ten tons of cargo from their bowels at one sweep, but faithful nevertheless, the tired little B4Ds faced up to the challenge.

Designed to operate at a gross takeoff weight of 27,000 pounds, the old Douglas planes took off regularly, sometimes grossing out at 30,000 pounds.

Said plane captain Strider, member of the initial pole landing crew, "Them old planes are just plain tired. When you get up to 12,000 feet they groan and moan. My coffeepot just won't work."

But they flew. And they were soon joined by the bearded P2V7 Neptunes with their jet-and-piston engineering plants. The brand new Neptunes ("with two a-pushin' and two a-pullin'") could handle up to 5,000 pounds of cargo and nine passengers in a single flight.

Rushed into service direct from the factory without ski-landing tests on snow, the P2V7s suffered repeated troubles with their skis. But brave pilots made sortie after sortie, in overloaded B4D and bugged P2V, until the Pole Station was manned by a dozen scientists and housekeepers, each provided with 2,400 pounds of food.

Finally the Neptunes returned to New Zealand for permanent repairs and three of the four B4Ds shifted to Little America.



CONFERENCE in McMurdo Sound Library between Dr. Paul Siple, Lt. John Tuck, Lt. Richard A. Bowers, Lt. Col. C. J. Ellen, M/Scr James W. Smith on drop priorities.