

Abstract for Interview of Harris-Clichy Peterson by Brian Shoemaker

Col. Peterson was a participant in the expedition to Antarctica, 1946-47, led by Finn Ronne. Born in Boston to a mother from Uzbekistan and a father from Sweden, he was privileged to enjoy an outstanding education at prestigious Boston Latin School, and briefly attended Harvard before joining the Marine Corps at age seventeen during WWII. He saw combat duty, won a Silver Star, and, as a radar officer, developed impressive technological skills. He was a Second Lieutenant at the time of his discharge. After WWII, Peterson returned to Harvard. As an undergraduate student he found part-time employment with Roche Metallurgical Laboratory making high temperature thermocouples, and he perfected certain technical skills that would be beneficial in his later career. He graduated from Harvard with a B.S. in Physics.

After his trip to Antarctica, Peterson graduated from Harvard Business School in 1950. Still a Reserve Officer in the Marine Corps, he was called back to active duty for the Korean War. He served for two and one-half years in Korea, and saw a lot of combat. Once that war ended he worked as an investment banker with Kidder-Peabody. This led to a position for many years in Peru with the W.R. Grace Company. His wife is Peruvian and their children were raised there. He spoke favorably of the former President of Peru, Alberto Fujimora, and candidly about economic problems facing Peru today, especially those of the Indian population. At the time of the interview Peterson had left Peru, although he still maintained a house there, and he was working for an unnamed company in Boston. He has also done consulting work in Saudi Arabia.

In late 1945 Peterson joined the Ronne expedition. He was personally interviewed by Ronne, whom he remembers as a remarkably physically fit man, a good entrepreneur, and one who knew how to conceive, organize, staff, and get funded innovative new projects. Peterson concedes that Ronne wasn't perfect but he was able to get things done that Ph.D.'s and M.D.'s could likely not accomplish. Departure was delayed briefly when a Beechcraft C-46 aircraft, outfitted with expensive trimetrigon photography equipment, crashed and was destroyed when the hoisting apparatus for the ship failed. Fortunately General Curtis LeMay moved quickly to find a new, acceptable, similarly equipped aircraft, and had it flown to the expedition enroute. There were also two other aircraft, both single-engine.

Before departure for Antarctica in early 1946, Peterson obtained contracts for his own scientific research, one from the Franklin Institute for cosmic radiation research, and another from General Electric to seed clouds with iodine to make precipitation. The City of Beaumont, an ocean-going tugboat of about 1500 tons, was lent by the Navy. Once underway, Peterson was called on to fix the electrical rudder control system of the ship, as well as the steering, radar, and other equipment. While passing through the Panama Canal the ship crashed into shore because of a failure in the steering system. It was Peterson who figured out how to fix it. A sad problem was that enroute many of the sled dogs died of dysentery; new dogs had to be obtained in Chile. The ship stopped in Peru and Chile. In Valparaiso two women, Jenny Darlington and Edith Ronne (wife of Finn) joined the expedition. There was some grumbling, and a few strong complaints, from some of the men about women participants. Several sailors got into minor trouble with the police on shore. The Chilean, Jorge Georges de Giorgio, joined the expedition in Valparaiso. The last stop in South America was Punta Arenas, Chile, on the Strait of Magellan. The Drake Passage was "horrendous" with 40 to 45 crest waves. Winds howled at 60 to 70

miles per hour. But once they approached the Antarctic Peninsula the weather calmed, but then they had to watch out for icebergs.

Their destination was East Base and Stonington Island in Marguerite Bay. The base was quickly set up, which was fortunate since winter came upon them quickly. Unfortunately, parts of the base had been ransacked earlier by Argentines, and so many repairs were necessary. The British had a base nearby, a fact which Ronne resented since he thought their presence threatened the prestige or uniqueness of his own expedition. There was little cooperation or contact with the British. The British stayed close to their base, did little research, and seemed most interested in planting their flag in case a territorial claim might later be made. One well known member of the British party was Bernie Stonehouse, a meteorologist, and an authority on penguins, and known today as the "grand old man of the Antarctic."

Once in Antarctica, Peterson set about to discharge his scientific duties. He measured solar and cosmic radiation, and atmospheric refraction. He used a heliometer to measure the heat of the sun. His chief responsibility was meteorology. He was not directly involved with the photography, specifically the trimetrigon camera work, but reported that it was handled well, and that the Air Force obtained excellent photographs. Other men got the three planes up and running, and all were well settled in their quarters before the full force of winter hit. Coal, and also kerosene, was used for heating. CITCO, the Venezuelan owned petroleum company, provided much of the fuel needed.

The sled dogs were always kept outside unless they were sick. They were all chained to a line, and as the dogs slept the snow would drift up around them. They would stick their noses up through the snow, and this provided the dogs a kind of insulation. When put on a sled the dogs seemed to enjoy the experience. Peterson said that dogs were superior to tractors since if you hit a crevasse you could take the dog team apart and carry them one by one over the crevasse. Dog teams would be flown into advance areas. If this were along the coast a seal might be killed to feed the dogs.

Once, Peterson and Bob Dodson spent several weeks alone some 6,000 to 7,000 feet up on the Plateau. They went to make meteorological observations, and carried an anemometer and other equipment. The weather was terrible, and so they could not be resupplied by airplane. When conditions became untenable, and supplies ran low, the two men started to walk back to East Base some 20 to 40 miles away. They walked in total darkness since it was in the middle of the Antarctic winter night. "No problem," or so they thought. "We had good compasses." The men decided – contrary to the usual practice -- not to rope themselves together since they feared that if one fell into a crevasse he would pull the other down with him. Their decision would soon be severely tested. Peterson fell into a deep crevasse, possibly 130 feet down. He was knocked out and wedged solidly in the ice. Dodson marked the site carefully with trail flags, took exact compass readings, and returned to base to organize a rescue operation. After two days he was found and rescued. Dr. Butson, a British surgeon, the smallest man on either base, was lowered into the crevasse and miraculously freed Peterson. Peterson suffered severe frostbite, but had no broken bones, and after several months of bed rest he finally recovered.

Once Peterson recovered, he participated in spring fieldwork. The New York Times had given the expedition an early version of a facsimile, or fax, machine. By use of a rhombic antenna Peterson used the machine to send weather maps and personal messages every day to New Orleans. He was also deeply involved in map making and trimetrigon photography. Typically this work involved the Weddell Sea, the Antarctic Peninsula, and the Ronne Ice Shelf. Much, if not most, of the exploration of these sites was done by air. By using air drops of fuel tanks planes could venture as much as 1000 miles from East

Base. Sometimes geologists, such as Nichols, would be dropped off by plane to make observations on land, at times with a dog team. Peterson said it was possible, but not certain, that this was the first time in Antarctica that dog teams had ever been dropped off by air. This would have been an historic event. (In later years snowmobiles were used to pull the dog sleds.)

In the summer Peterson was involved in measuring solar radiation, which didn't exist in the winter. Usually this could be done at the base. He lacked any equipment to measure ultraviolet radiation. All measurements had to be manually recorded by pencil on paper. He never wrote a verbal text of his scientific work, nor did he keep a diary. He reports that he may have been the first person to make cosmic radiation measurements in Antarctica. There was never any attempt made to take ionospheric measurements. Weather balloons were launched four times a day, every six hours. Hydrogen was made from tanks. Regular reports were sent to the New York Times, one of the sponsors of the expedition. Edith "Jackie" Ronne usually wrote these up, and Kelsey, the radioman, would send them out by Morse code. Occasionally radio contact could be made with a family member back home with the cooperation of a radio amateur. Peterson was unmarried at the time.

The pilots for the expedition were Darlington, Lassiter, and Adams. The two-engine aircraft was a Beechcraft C-46. There was also a single-engine plane. Darlington's wife, Jenny, assisted in generating publicity for the expedition. Peterson remembers her fondly as a cheerful, pleasant, and helpful person. The members of the Ronne Expedition finished their duties by the end of the summer of 1947. The base was boarded up, a key given (presumably) to the British Expedition nearby, and with the help of the icebreakers Edisto and Burton Island, the men (and two women) boarded the ship to leave. Their year's work had been completed. Once the ship reached Punta Arenas Jenny Darlington, who was pregnant, left the party so that her child could be safely delivered. The ship continued on to New York. After writing their reports the men were free to go their separate ways. In later years the only member of the expedition Peterson continued to see was Bob Dodson.

Looking back on his trip to Antarctica Peterson considered it a "wonderful experience." He was very loyal to Finn Ronne although he acknowledged some of his foibles. He saw Ronne as a strong leader, as a man who could get things done. Ike Schlossback was Ronne's second in command. Peterson remembers him as fair-minded, and of sound intellect and judgment, but also as one who was reluctant to exert authority. Consequently Ronne didn't really have anyone to assist him who could function as an Executive Officer. Peterson's experience with the Ronne expedition proved invaluable in later life. It helped him to see that in any group there would likely be some troublemakers who would defy authority, and Peterson learned how to conduct himself effectively in such a situation. On balance Finn Ronne did things right. The mission was accomplished, everybody got home safe. There was no loss of life, no permanent injury, and no equipment lost.

Major Topics

Peterson's experiences as a Marine Corps officer in WWII and Korea

Favorable reflections on Finn Ronne as leader of the expedition

Scientific work, especially in meteorology, in Antarctica in 1946-47

Peterson's dramatic rescue from a fall down a deep crevasse in Antarctica

Peterson's post-Antarctic career in investment banking in Peru and elsewhere