

AVIATION IN ANTARCTICA REACHES NEW HEIGHTS

Australia's new jet aircraft, which will provide an air link between Australia and Antarctica, made its first overflight of Wilkins runway, near Casey, in February.

Carrying a small, excited group of Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) staff, the Airbus A319 took nine hours to make the return flight from Hobart, which included a single pass over the four kilometre snow-capped ice runway and Casey station.

In the 2007-08 season the aircraft will make its first touch down on the Wilkins runway. Regular passenger service will commence in 2008-09, with flights carrying up to 19 passengers and cargo. The A319 is leased and operated by Skytraders Pty Ltd of Sydney, with an initial lease period of five years.

Aircraft will play an important role in Australia's aviation capability in Antarctica, particularly during the International Polar Year. Airlink flights and other Antarctic operations will be supported by AS 350BA helicopters, which have been operating in Antarctica since 1986, two C212 fixed wing aircraft, introduced in late 2004, and the Aircraft Ground Support Officers.

The 2006-07 summer flying season saw a mix of solid aviation support.

Helicopters

Operated by Helicopter Resources, the helicopters provide flexible ship and land-based support. In 2006-07, ship-based activities included:

- Multiple ice reconnaissance flights for the first voyage of the season, in October/November, which identified a path through thick, early season sea ice to Casey, and enabled 42 expeditioners and 16 tonnes of cargo to be deployed in one day. Long distance fly offs of passengers and cargo would have jeopardised the chances of getting all priority project cargo ashore, and delayed progress on Wilkins Runway.
- Deployment of a team to Béchervaise Island; deployment of 39 Chinese expeditioners and 15 tonnes of cargo to Zhong Shan in one day; and delivery of 250 drums of aviation fuel to the Larsemann Hills in four and a half hours, in support of the German Antarctic programme.

Land-based activities included:

- Support of a number of glaciology projects on the Amery Ice Shelf, biological projects in the Vestfold Hills, and geological projects requiring camp moves and resupply in the Larsemann Hills, Brattstrand Bluffs, Rauer Islands and other locations on the Ingrid Christensen Coast.
- Search and rescue and field support to the Film Australia re-enactment of the 1912-13 Mawson sledge journey.
- Operational support for expeditioner field training, hut maintenance, fixed wing support, and goodwill visits to the Russian, Chinese and Romanian bases.

C212

Between November 2006 and February 2007 the two C212 aircraft, 'Ginger' and 'Gadget' completed about 300 hours of flying. Season highlights included the transfer of Mawson expeditioners and cargo to Davis and the recovery of camp and equipment from the Amery ice Shelf. Operations were also conducted over approximately 5000 km of Australian Antarctic Territory coastline in support of deep field biological and geophysical programmes. This included ski and wheeled operations to unprepared sea ice, blue ice and frozen lakes at various locations.

Aviation ground support

Aircraft Ground Support Officers are an invaluable addition to aircraft operations and our stations. Their tasks are varied and include assisting expeditioners, refuelling, documentation – such as cargo manifests – skiway preparation, inspection and reporting, helicopter sling loading, and the provision of meteorological information to pilots.

Last season at Casey, aircraft ground support staff also contributed to maintenance of the Wilkins-Casey road, delivery of fuel and equipment to and from Wilkins, and the general operation and maintenance of plant.

Next season

As we head into the next Antarctic season, the International Polar Year, and the start of Airlink flights, our challenge will be how to best utilise our aviation personnel and equipment in a rapidly changing operating environment.

Compiled by AAD Shipping and Air Operations and the Air Transport Project



MEREDITH NATION

An Aircraft Ground Support Officer attaches a sling load to a helicopter, while a C212 waits in the background.



TANIA ASHWORTH

The A319, seen here being inspected by AAD staff in Hobart, is shorter than the A320 (used by Jetstar), and its under-floor cargo space has been commandeered to carry fuel, rather than baggage.



TANIA ASHWORTH

Passengers on the A319's first overflight of Wilkins runway. The aircraft can fly to Wilkins and return to Hobart without refuelling, providing significant safety advantages and reducing the environmental footprint at Wilkins.