

Alf Howard: last living link with the heroic era



Alf's skills as a gymnast stood him in good stead to balance on the *Discovery's* outboard platform, making oceanographic measurements with his Nansen-Pettersen waterbottles.

SOURCE: TRIAL BY ICE: THE ANTARCTIC JOURNALS OF JOHN KING DAVIS. EDITOR, LOUISE CROSSLEY. HUNTINGDON AND NORWICH: BLUNTISHAM BOOKS AND ERSKINE PRESS, 1997.

At 23 Alf Howard was the youngest member of the scientific team to accompany Sir Douglas Mawson on his 1929–31 British, Australian and New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition (BANZARE). Today he is not only the last surviving member of that good company of men which included Sir Douglas, Captain John King Davis and Frank Hurley, but is also the last person to have served aboard the coal-fired sailing ship *Discovery* which was built in Dundee for Captain Robert Falcon Scott's 1901–04 voyage to Antarctica.

Born and raised in Camberwell, Alf later completed a Master of Science at the University of Melbourne. He was doing postgraduate work on organic chemistry when he was approached by Sir David Orme Masson for the

BANZARE. Within 48 hours Alf took the train across to Perth and sailed to England on Orient Steam Navigation's *Orvieto*. After an intensive three-months training in hydrology at marine institutes in Plymouth and Hull, Alf joined the *Discovery* in Capetown as the expedition's chemist and hydrologist. In Volume III, Part 2, of the BANZARE Reports Sir Douglas wrote:

A. Howard, hydrologist and chemist of the Expedition's staff, was responsible for the taking of sea-water temperatures and the collection and chemical examination of sea-water samples. This was a never-ending task. He worked very long hours daily, mainly occupied with the chemical examination of the very numerous sea-water samples obtained. Except in calm weather, the rolling of the vessel rendered difficult the delicate operation involved in the chemical examination of those waters. Howard is therefore to be congratulated upon the extensive series of determinations he ultimately achieved and the unabated enthusiasm and great care with which he prosecuted the task.

Much of Alf's work necessitated standing precariously on the edge of a narrow steel mesh outboard platform on the

port side of the ship, with only a couple of chains separating him from the cold, turbulent waters below. His oceanographic observations involved determining temperatures with Nansen-Pettersen and Ekman water bottles and thermometers, and salinities estimated by the Knudsen method, using international sea water as a standard. Chemical determinations of pH, phosphate, silicate, and nitrite, and dissolved oxygen were also made.

Though *Discovery* was designed to travel under both sail and steam, the voyage down and back was made mostly under sail. Only a limited amount of coal could be carried, so the engines were reserved for when the ship was travelling through ice. Officers, scientific staff and crew all worked like trojans taking coal on board *Discovery* when she was moored alongside a whaling factory ship like *Sir James Clark Ross*. The expedition's main interest was in oceanographic research, and in particular seawater and plankton analysis. Politics also played a role in launching the expedition. Uneasy about Norway's increasing interest in east Antarctica, the British Government prevailed on Mawson to claim land for the Crown from Enderby Land to the Ross Sea, excluding Adélie Land. All land claims made by the BANZARE were ceded to Australia in 1933.

Alf still likes to reminisce about his days with Mawson. Up until joining Mawson's team his recreational time was divided between the gym and Melbourne's main skating rink – the Glaciarium – near Flinder's Street Station. Alf admits he never reached Christopher Dean's perfection.

'I took my skates down to Antarctica with me, though I never mentioned it to the rest of the team', he says.

'The point is the ice down there was not flat and there were all sorts of holes in it'.

The crow's nest of the *Discovery* afforded every opportunity for Alf's interest in gymnastics.

'Oh I'd be up there every day. It was the best place to have a good look around and see the big whales: blues and southern rights and humpbacks. The younger members of the scientific staff all went up the crow's nest when they felt like it. You would report if you saw land or if we were well off land and with ice between us. In this situation any open sea would also be reported and they would decide whether the ship should force its way through. The *Discovery* had ten feet of solid timber in the bow, so we could barge the ice, but with only six knots she didn't have much power. We had provisions for two years but we were very conscious of what happened to Shackleton before us when on his second last trip, his ship, the *Endurance*, was trapped in the ice and crushed.'

The expedition proved a great success.



Alf Howard (back row, third from left) and the BANZARE scientific team, including Douglas Mawson (back row, far left) on board the RRS *Discovery*, circa 1929.

SOURCE: ALF HOWARD PRIVATE COLLECTION

UQ awarded him an Honorary Doctor of Science. In 1998 Alf became a Member of the Order of Australia. Until late 2003 and for more than 20 years, Alf helped students of human movement by developing computer programs for statistical analysis, a skill largely self-taught. Up until a few months ago Alf was still visiting Brisbane schools, recounting his BANZARE experiences and answering numerous questions from students keen to know more about Antarctica.

Alf has made four return visits to Antarctica during the 1990s, including a visit to Mawson's Hut on the *Frontier Spirit* when he joined the 1991 Australian Geographic Society trip led by Dick Smith. He also took part in the first passenger circumnavigation of Antarctica on board the Russian icebreaker *Kapitan Khlebnikov* in 1996. Alf has travelled extensively throughout the world, including visits to the Arctic, Galapagos Islands, Easter Island and Madagascar. In 2001 he received a 'Lifetime of Adventure Award' from the Australian Geographic Society.

Dr Alf Howard AM is a sprightly 'living legend'. He is the last link with those heroic, early 20th century expeditions which continue to excite the public imagination.

Just before his 100th birthday on 30 April, Alf, through pre-recorded film, opened the new Discovery's Ocean Odyssey wing at the Discovery Point museum in Dundee, which stands beside his old restored ship Discovery. Alf Howard will be profiled in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's new exhibition Islands to Ice: the Great Southern Ocean and Antarctica later this year.

—ANNA BEMROSE
University of Queensland

Alf Howard in the hydrological lab on board RRS *Discovery* during the BANZARE voyage (1929-31). Alf's work involved making oceanographic observations including its chemical composition and temperature.

SOURCE: BANZARE REPORTS, SERIES A, VOL III, PART 2, SECTION 1. BANZAR EXPEDITION COMMITTEE, HASSELL PRESS, JAN 1940.



Alf revisited Mawson's Hut in 1990 when he took part in *Australian Geographic's* 'In the footsteps of Mawson' expedition.

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