

Leading the charge to Antarctica

Voyage leaders are critical to the success of scientific and/or re-supply voyages to Antarctica; ensuring complex logistical operations proceed safely and on time and developing contingency plans when conditions change. Together with a team of logistical experts both on and off the ship, sea ice physicist Vicki Lytle helped steer the Aurora Australis through a tight six-week schedule of equipment deployment, krill fishing, sea-ice studies and the delivery and retrieval of people to and from Antarctica, during the AAD's first voyage south for the 2004–05 season.



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Everyone was aboard. The bosun looked my way and asked if they could pull up the gangway. I glanced behind me before I realized he was talking to the voyage leader...me! After a quick confirmation from the logistics manager, I nodded and the crew went to work. My first trip as voyage leader and so far things were going well.

As the ritual of pulling up the gangway proceeded, I wracked my brain for something we had forgotten, or some snippet of information I needed. Nothing critical came to mind. I studied the expeditioners along the rail, trying to put names to faces. About 50:50. Not bad for me. Then I spotted one of my colleagues rushing through the crowd to get an envelope on board. This was routine, just like every other voyage I'd been on. Time to relax.

When I was deputy voyage leader last season, I wasn't sure what the voyage leader did. Today, I still struggle to create an exact list of the voyage leader duties. Before departure I had been briefed, given manuals, briefed, attended meetings, and briefed. I had asked a myriad of questions, studied manuals, reviewed manifests, created lists, revised lists and lost lists. In hindsight, I think a voyage leader is best described as a data resource. People would tell me things which I would file, filter and collate. Then I would pass the information on to other people who would in turn tell me more things. Like a big white board; and yes, things occasionally were erased before their time.

The biggest challenge of the voyage was organising the two visits to Casey Station. People and cargo were going both ways via three Squirrel helicopters on each visit, 10 days apart. The new CASA 212–400 aircraft were also flying from Hobart to Casey and we were delivering the aircraft spares and tools, as well as an engineer and pilot. Some people needed to go to Casey on the first visit and return to the ship on the second. We also needed to drop off people intending to stay at Casey, or flying on to Mawson and Davis in the new aircraft.

Everyone going into Casey had important work to do, but I needed to decide which order to fly people and cargo. Discussions with the project scientists, station leaders, operations manager and others started before we left Hobart, but priorities changed as the CASA aircraft schedules were modified. Everyone was hoping the sea ice conditions would allow us to sail close to Casey Station, but the ship ground to a halt some 100 miles distant.

This put us near the limit of permissible helicopter range, severely restricting loads in the helicopters. The first group off the ship – scientists destined for Law Dome – needed to get

into the field in order to catch the return trip home. People and cargo departed the ship over the next six days during breaks in the weather, as the sea ice continued to push the ship west. As the weather closed in, however, the ship approached maximum flying range and I decided to stop the fly-off operations and start the sea ice work, hoping we would be able to get closer in 10 days. Unfortunately, this meant that several people who wanted to go to Casey had to wait on the ship for another two weeks.

Compared to the fly-off operations at Casey, the marine science work seemed straightforward; probably because I had been closely involved in similar operations from a science perspective several times in the past. The trials before the voyage had gone well and the people working from the trawl deck did a great job, especially with the new and heavier trawl gear. The sea ice biological programmes were also relatively straightforward. There were less than a dozen people getting on and off ice floes from the ship and using short helicopter flights; rather than the 80-plus people and tonnes of cargo flying to and from Casey.

You could say we had some good luck on the voyage. The sea ice conditions were just loose enough to allow us within flying range of Casey on both visits. The sea calmed down just when we wanted to trawl or work on the moorings. The krill arrived just when we were ready to give up. And the sea ice type was just right for the sea ice biology work. But it wasn't all luck. It was the really good people on board the ship, in Hobart, and from other institutions, who made the voyage a success. I will not try to thank everyone involved as I would surely forget someone, but they all helped make my first trip as voyage leader memorable.

—VICKI LYTLE

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Taking advantage of a chance to let their hair down are cargo supervisor Barbara Smith, voyage leader Vicki Lytle and deputy voyage leader Karin Beaumont.

VICKI LYTLE



Background image: Squirrel helicopters played a crucial role in delivering people and cargo to Casey Station after thick sea ice forced the *Aurora Australis* to remain some 100 miles distant.