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**ITEM REQUESTED:**

**Article or Chapter Citation:** Yelverton, D.E. (1997). The Riddle of the Antarctic Peninsula. Pioneers of the Antarctic Night: The Story of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition 1897-99: Part III Antarctic 15(2): 44-45

**CATALOG RECORD FOR REQUESTED ITEM:** Title: Antarctic : A News Bulletin Publ. Quarterly By The New Zealand Antarctic Society Notes: ( Wegener ) 1.1956 -

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## THE RIDDLE OF THE ANTARCTIC PENINSULA

by David E Yelverton FRGS.

*The Story of the Belgian Antarctic Expedition 1897-99: Part III*

The fate that awaited the Belgian explorers was beyond their imagining. Through two epidemics their will to survive would come near to extinction in a world of ice stretching to every horizon.

Three days after Leconte thrust the *Belgica* into the leads that beckoned De Gerlache and his men southward, they were stuck fast in 71°20S 85°30W. They had got further south than James Cook had in 1774, and were about 400kms farther east.

From late May, as the ship was carried this way and that in the ice, the scene was lit dimly at midday as the northern horizon glowed, varied occasionally by a day of bright moonlight, until the growing return of daylight in mid-July. But their long imprisonment, destined to last far into the summer, was to show that the darkness and the weather were not their main enemies.

Nor would the pack be the menace many feared. Only once, the morning after Midwinter's Day, did its pressure make them prepare to abandon ship. Far more silently, the threat to their survival gradually appeared.

As in the Arctic, whenever men had been denied fresh food for more than about two months, the dreaded scurvy made its appearance, but in this case complicated by acute anaemia and circulation ailments in many of the party. The little band of men on the beleaguered ship faced that ordeal twice before their escape. It first struck after two and a half months locked in the ice, but initially the symptoms were not the usual ones. De Gerlache developed constant headaches, and two weeks later Danco suffered from serious heart trouble. His condition rapidly worsened and by 5 June he was dead.

That didn't really suggest diet deficiency because De Gerlache had taken Danco on knowing he had a history of chest weakness. But Cook was already worried on 20 May about the general decline in health, and by early July Leconte had developed the classic symptoms of the disease: swollen gums and stiff joints. A few days later Cook insisted that Leconte, who was now sinking fast, should force himself to eat penguin steaks. It was almost too late.(5)

The fresh beef appeared to have run out late in March, more than three months previously. In the meantime they had lived largely on a Norwegian version of tinned pemmican recommended by Nansen — "made of minced cats" Amundsen told them according to Leconte. (6) If Amundsen wasn't joking, it hardly sounds like the pemmican taken on the Fram expedition. It was called kjoedbollers and kjoedpolsers (meat balls and sausages). The Belgians also had fiskebollers, similar but made from fish, and some tinned Australian rabbit, which does sound like the "Australian pemmican" Nansen had used.(7)

De Gerlache had found it all quite palatable when freshly prepared in Norway. Now it all tasted repulsive, the tinned rabbit being worst of all. The experience of tinned food going bad aboard *Discovery* four years later suggests that this also may have happened in the *Belgica*.

The little-varied diet was endured, despite the fact that on

26 March they had set about hunting seals and penguins in an energetic campaign which Leconte described as "days of carnage". Five weeks later, faced with growing discontent among the crew over the diet, Leconte confronted De Gerlache, pointing out that he had never been told how much fresh meat they had amassed, and demanding to know why it was not on the menu. To his amazement, the commandant's explosive response was that of course there was plenty, but what would the press say later when it got out that they had eaten seals!!

After a long argument, De Gerlache produced a list of varied menus the next day. The trouble was that Michotte had been unable to make the meat palatable, and no one could bring themselves to eat the seal or penguin dishes he prepared.(8) Of the two, the penguin was evidently the less nauseating.

While Leconte, who had been unconscious for some hours at his worst, made his dramatic recovery in the second half of July, Michotte at last found out how to remove the oily taste from the seal meat. It was too late to prevent Johansen joining the ranks of stiff-limbed sufferers while, disturbingly, another sailor became hysterical.

Even then De Gerlache, Mélaerts and two others refused to eat seal meat. Amundsen and Cook recovered well like Leconte, and joined others in hunting seal daily, which Leconte (9) implies most of them ate in large quantities, though Cook says Leconte only ate penguin from then on.(g)

Despite that all the deck crew, except the teenager Koren, were afflicted with acute anaemia by mid-September and De Gerlache started having headaches again. Although fresh meat was almost their staple diet that month, the table being "liberally supplied with fresh steaks" he, Mélaerts and Michotte all developed the usual scurvy symptoms. Finally Leconte, who claimed he continued eating seal, developed the symptoms in November and became too weak to carry on the magnetic observations.

He had recovered by the end of the month after eating as much extra seal and penguin as he could manage, but De Gerlache continued to worsen, and on 4 December he and Leconte drew up a document appointing Mélaerts and Somers to succeed them if they should die, it having been agreed with the Brussels geographical society, their principal sponsors, that command should remain in Belgian hands. With some justification, Leconte must have feared the scourge would return despite a diet of fresh meat.

Happily it did not, for by mid-January 1899 all but two men were fit enough to join in operations to cut the ship out, including the unhappy bosun who had developed persecution mania at the height of the first epidemic, and became permanently deranged in December on return from a ski-trek to an iceberg nine miles from the ship — the longest journey made from the ship. (10)

Not surprisingly during their long ordeal, little beyond valiant scientific observations had been accomplished. Back in May, before the first symptoms appeared, Cook had tried out his idea for a sail-driven sledge, but its centre of gravity was too high and it constantly overturned even with him riding on it and Leconte steering. He tried in vain to modify

it. Then came De Gerlache's headaches and Danco's death and on the last day of June, little knowing that Lecointe would be at death's door and he himself seriously ill within three weeks, the commandant had proposed Lecointe lead a 15-day sledge journey to the south when daylight returned, taking Amundsen and Cook with him. Arctowski had obtained soundings of 420 metres through the ice where they were trapped and he believed (correctly as today's maps show) that meant land was not far to the south.

The trio's health being restored, they had set off on 30 July to make the first ever sledge journey on Antarctic ice, using a small tent designed by Cook. The next day they were fog-bound and built themselves an igloo in which they spent the second night. The third day they advanced by moonlight, stopping every 20 metres to take a compass reading. After spending the night in the tent with the ice breaking around them, a mirage made them think the ship was in open water and they started back, fearing De Gerlache couldn't see them. However, he had seen them and sent sailors out to meet them. They abandoned all their gear and hurried in, deciding that De Gerlache's plan was far too risky.

Lecointe had found the experimental tent too cramped by half. Cook later modified it, but the Belgian, while finding no major fault, still thought it too small. Curiously Amundsen, a taller man than Lecointe, made no complaint about it. It only weighed 12lbs, but it was anything but streamlined should the wind shift to the entry side after it was pitched. They never slept in it again, for the ice remained resolutely solid around the ship until Christmas, by which time all possibility of reaching the Ross Sea had disappeared.

By the middle of January, after being thwarted in an attempt to blast a way out to one piece of open water, they located a long belt of ice a metre thick leading in little over a mile to another open pool where they began to cut triangular pieces out of it from the water's edge inwards towards the ship. After four weeks the ship was free and they made 20 km progress northwards only to have the ice close around them once more. While the men aboard the *Belgica* woke the next day, Borchgrevink's party aboard the *Southern Cross* on the other side of Antarctica first sighted Cape Adare after a long struggle to get through the pack.

When Borchgrevink and his shore party were installed in their hut early in March, the *Belgica* was being carried WSW again and the survivors were wondering once more if they would ever emerge into the Ross Sea as De Gerlache and Lecointe had believed, when they had taken the fateful decision to push into the ice a year before.

Fortunately after six more days they were free. Two weeks later they dropped anchor in Punta Arenas on 28 March 1899, evoking widespread consternation, for they had long since been given up for lost.

The ship needed to be overhauled before she sailed for home, but there was not enough money left for that. So the two scientists and their assistant were sent back by steamer with part of the collections to start work classifying them and to study the physical records. Cook was released and, after further study of the aboriginal Indians, returned to the States. The unfortunate bosun, once ashore, could not be persuaded to reboard the ship. Amundsen, who had handed De Gerlache a formal written resignation when he learned that Mélaerts, and not he, would be promoted if either De Gerlache or Lecointe died, escorted him back to Norway. (h)

The remaining stock of the detested tinned food was sold and enabled the repair bills to be paid. De Gerlache then took the ship round to Santa Cruz, and put Lecointe ashore with a party to make magnetic observations on a month's journey into the mountains. Johansen and Koren were in the party, which had to return after Johansen was taken gravely ill. Johansen was left at Santa Cruz. Lecointe himself got back too late, and, as arranged, took himself back to Belgium, while De Gerlache and Mélaerts, who could not afford to buy coal, left Buenos Aires on 4 August with the engineers, Michotte and just four deck hands (l) to sail labouriously across the Atlantic.

Forced near to the Newfoundland banks by contrary winds, it took them more than 21 months to reach Boulogne, where they were joined by Lecointe and the scientists. Sailing into Antwerp on 7 November 1899 the first men ever to brave a true Antarctic winter received an ecstatic welcome.

They had established the first year-round scientific record south of the Antarctic Circle, interrupted only briefly at the height of the second scurvy crisis. But the price of their achievement had been very high, and for the men planning expeditions in London and Berlin their story served as a double warning. Neither the British nor the Germans would opt for the route they had followed.

Almost a year later, as Scott read Cook's book in the train from Copenhagen to Berlin, the lesson of their terrifying experience was taken to heart despite the fact that nowhere does Cook actually use the word scurvy. A further year later saw the Discovery at anchor opposite the whalers' huts on Macquarie Island and there Scott first put the lesson into practice. As he wrote in his report (No.3) mailed from Christchurch:

"The opportunity was taken of serving out the flesh of the penguins for food. I had anticipated considerable prejudice on the part of the men to this form of diet which it will so often be essential to *enforce* [author's italics] and was agreeably surprised to find that they were by no means averse to it. Many pronounced it excellent, and all seemed to appreciate the necessity of cultivating a taste for it. I found no prejudice more difficult to conquer than my own."

In Stockholm, when Otto Nordenskjöld heard the Belgians' story he believed that De Gerlache had found the real Bismarck Strait, the key to the riddle as he and others saw it. And from that moment on the Swedish Antarctic Expedition he was campaigning for numbered among its goals the discovery of an eastern entry on the western shore of the Weddell Sea.

To reach it Nordenskjöld would head south, to the east of Hughes Bay, for De Gerlache had not been able to establish that it was anything other than the channel Larsen believed to separate Trinity Land from d'Urville's Louis Philippe Land.

#### Notes

(g) (Cook: *Through the First Antarctic Night* p333). Writing over 25 years later (*My Life as an Explorer* p27) Amundsen also claimed that De Gerlache "forbade any of the ship's company to indulge in" eating seal or penguin. When the commandant and Lecointe were bedridden Amundsen took command and "put everyone on seal." Even De Gerlache ate his share and "all improved greatly within a week."

(h) The letter quoted by Huntford (*The Last Place on Earth* p73) reveals he also took it as a personal insult.

(l) Van Mirlo, Dufour, Knudsen and Koren.

#### Source refs:

(5) Cook: pp331 &3; (6) *ibid* p219; (7) Nansen *Farthest North* 1/p478; (8) Lecointe p255; (9) *ibid* p282; (10) *ibid* p385