

Rothera is a very pleasant location & our main point of entry into Antarctica, but the areas of interest to geologists & glaciologists (our main customers) have moved south in recent years. So Twin Otter crews can now expect to spend a good deal of time working out of Sky-Blu. Some 440 nautical miles to the south of Rothera.



On 24th January I was shipped out to Sky-Blu. So named because of it's proximity to the Sky-Hi nunataks, & the presence of a blue ice surface. Nunataks are mountains of which only the very tops are visible, their lower portions being buried within the ice cap.





Myself stood on Lanzarotte Nunatak, near Sky Blu runway.

Strong winds blowing over the this nunatak during the winter generate "rotors" or swirling effects, which can keep an area of the surface below swept clear of loose snow. Leaving hard & relatively smooth ice, known as "blue ice".



It's this blue ice that makes the location so useful to us. For it can be used as a runway for wheeled (no skis) aircraft.



The wheeled aircraft most often seen here is our DASH-7. This can carry $4\frac{1}{2}$ times the payload of a twin otter from Rothera to Sky Blu, & return without the need for any en-route refueling. Which offers considerable cost & time savings over multiple twin otter flights.



After a DASH-7 rotation Sky Blu becomes a bit of a logistics & sorting centre. The newly arrived "clatch" is divided into smaller Twin Otter loads for sending onto more remote locations.

Twin Otter aircraft & crews tend to work 10-14 day stints based here, whilst shuttling these loads on.

Besides flight crews. The Sky Blu staff normally consists of a mountaineer/guide (known as general assistant or GA), a vehicle mechanic, & at least one other. These people will be from Rothera, & generally spend 2 to 4 weeks here before being rotated back to Rothera.



The only building is the "melon hut". A fibre glass structure with thick foam insulation. It sits on a large wooden sledge. So that when it get's too buried in snow, a ramp can be dug, & the whole hut winched back up onto the surface. This needs to be done every couple of years. Unfortunately the blue ice area is only a narrow strip, just sufficient for the runway & aircraft parking apron.



Myself, Mark (mountaineer/guide), Alasdair (doctor), Matt (vehicle mechanic).

This hut serves as the cooking & messing area, & also as radio room, but is too small for everyone to sleep in.



For which there are varying numbers of tents.

Facilities also include a small underground garage,



where the vehicles, tools, & tents are stored overwinter.

This being a summer only base. All staff are normally withdrawn back to Rothera at the end of February.

The science supported from here is quite varied.



First task was to install 5 GPS sites on the Evans Ice Stream. These will remain in place for a year, & be retrieved January 2010. The GPS electronics were boxed up & buried just below the surface. In the picture the mast just behind Jack (dressed in orange & green) is for the GPS antenna, the masts on the right are for the wind turbines & solar panels that provide the electrical power.

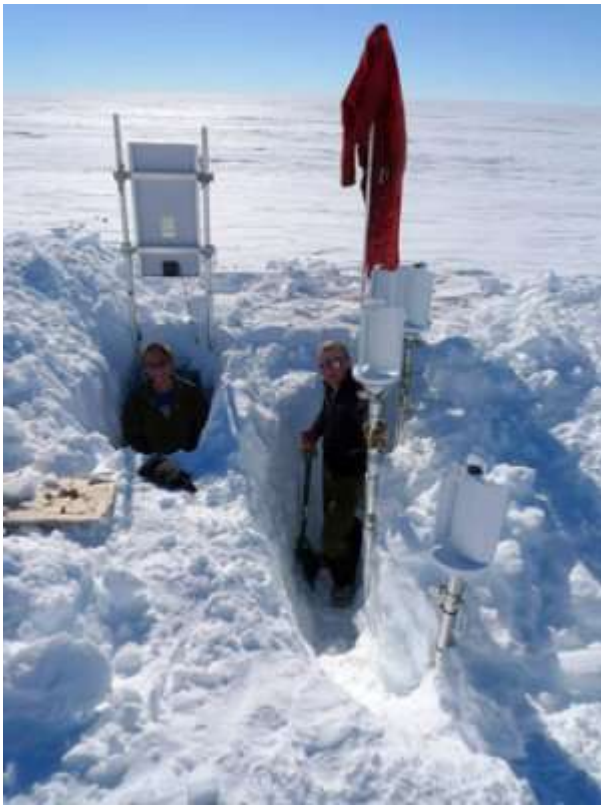
Previous techniques for measuring glacier or ice stream flow were to put in a marker pole, & return to survey it's position once a year. These could tell us the annual flow of the ice, but were no help in telling if the rate of flow varied with season, temperature, weather etc. The new GPS systems can accurately record the changing position by the minute if required.

By the time the last of the 5 sites were in we could install & test each in just under 2 hour. Rather more time consuming was retrieving one put in last year that had completed it's time on the Pine Island Glacier.



This is a location noted for high snow accumulation. Finding the wind turbines at knee level, was an indication of the work to come.





6 hours of digging for three people.

Other work from Sky Blu was to bring 3 field parties (each consisting of a scientist & their guide) back from the Ellsworth Mountains. The first of these parties were a biology team. Which is interesting because not so long ago polar biologists hung around the coast & periphery of the continent but did not venture into the interior. Now mosses & lichens are proving to be much hardier than previously thought possible, & are being found at several mountain locations in Antarctica.

The second team brought home had were glaciologists who had been surveying on the Rutford Ice Stream with a sledge towed radar & seismometers. They are intending to do some thing similar on the nearby Paton Glacier in 2 years time, & part of our task was to fly them on a reconnaissance of their planned route.



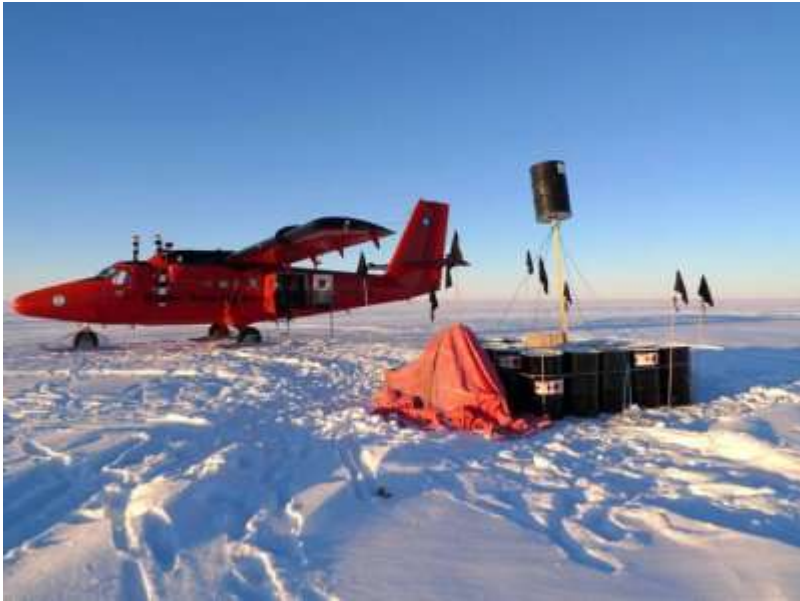
The last field team home were geologists who had been working around Polar Star peak at the north end of the range.





A team such as this with 2 people, their equipment, & 2 skidoos requires at least 3 twin otter flights to retrieve everything.

With the science parties all home we did what we normally do in "quiet times" & restocked our fuel depots. Some of the last work of this season was delivering full avtur drums to depots on Berkner Island, & retrieving empties that had been used & stored there. These depots will be our refueling stops en-route to the Pensacola Mountains next summer.



The sun in this picture did n't quite set. It just dipped low enough to touch the horizon before rising again. A sure sign though that the end of our summer season was very near.

By the 22nd February the summer bases at Sky Blu & Fossil Bluff were closed down for this season. Aircraft & crews were all back at Rothera. The skis were taken off the Twin Otters, & the first of them had started it's migration north to their maintenance base at Calgary.



A ten day trip through South & North America. The BAS Air Unit has slightly more pilots than aircraft, & it was my turn to miss out on this particular jolly. So I flew out to Punta Arenas in Chile as a passenger on the DASH-7, & there after by scheduled airline to UK. Getting home (my UK home) in early March.