

A YEAR AT WILKES

When Don Butling applied to be a plumber in Antarctica, he never expected to have his teeth removed. Almost 50 years on, he recalls the trip of a lifetime.

Butling was 34 years old when he left Australia for Wilkes station in January 1960, on the *Magga Dan*.

'I had to have my top teeth taken out first,' he recalls. 'I had a tooth knocked out playing football so I had a plate with one tooth on it and wires around it. They told me I wouldn't get the job because there was no dentist in Antarctica and the wire could wear my teeth out and give me toothache. Would I be prepared to have my teeth extracted?'

During the six-week journey to Wilkes (via Dumont D'Urville and Mawson) all the expeditioners were seasick except Butling and one other. Wilkes station was home to 13 Australians and five Americans, including several scientists. Butling says one American biologist always walked around with a pistol in a holster on his hip 'just in case he came across a leopard seal inside the mess hut'.

Butling's job was to maintain all of the plumbing on the station, repairing the occasional breakages

and blockages as well as some carpentry work. But his first day at work came as a shock.

'They hadn't told me there had been a fire through the plumber's shop and they had done nothing about it. I wasn't too happy,' he says.

The charred structure of the pre-fabricated building was still there so he set to work and cleaned it up.

Although the toilets were primitive, Butling says there was never any smell as it was too cold, there were no flies, and everything froze.

For entertainment, the men enjoyed weekly nights at the movies. *Gun Fight at the O.K. Corral* was a particular favourite, which they could recite word for word. Fishing, however, proved more challenging.

'Once you put on all your heavy clothes and went out carrying a pick, shovel and crow bar, and dug a hole through two-foot thick ice, you didn't feel like fishing,' Butling says.

The inhabitants of Wilkes were rarely sick, but when a box of new trousers and overalls was opened, everyone came down with colds from germs in the material.

Conditions at Wilkes were harsh. When Butling arrived in February the weather was beautiful, but cold. 'When we first went down there it was shocking. We'd say we were going to die, but after a while we gradually took off layers of clothing as we acclimatized,' he recalls.

The wind was a different matter. 'Every time you got a strong wind blowing there was a howling



noise with the wind blowing through the posts and wires. When it was really blowing – about 70 or 80 miles an hour (130 kph) – it was like screaming; you never got used to it,' he says.

The regular routine was often broken up with week-long field trips to S2, a camp 80 km inland, on Law Dome. It consisted of a hut, generator, storage and snow laboratory dug into the snow, joined with a roofed trench – which was then covered over with snow – and a shaft dug 36 m down into the ice.

Butling remembers a three-month, 400 mile (640 km) return trip inland, towards the Russian base at Vostok. A caravan was required and it was his job to make one from ply wood, heavy cardboard and Oregon planks. (The caravan, called 'ANEATA' after his wife, later became a field hut used by the Australian Antarctic Division until the mid-1990s.)

Travelling in a sno-cat and two weasels in single file, with about half a mile between each vehicle,



Don (centre) during an inland traverse in 1960.

Wilkes station was established on the 29th of January 1957 by the United States of America as part of the International Geophysical Year programme in Antarctica. It was taken over by Australia on 7 February 1959 and closed in 1969 when Casey station was built. Wilkes station is now almost permanently frozen in ice and is only occasionally revealed during a big thaw.



the men kept in contact to ensure they maintained their direction. Every mile, large poles of Oregon, which Butling had sawn and painted himself, were placed into the ground as reference points.

Danger was ever-present in Antarctica and this trip was not without its heart-stopping moments. Once, while using a manual post-hole digger, the men found that the ice was only 15 cm thick. 'When we broke through and looked down all we could see was the blue expanse of a huge crevasse underneath us, and we had three vehicles sitting on top,' he says. 'We had to quietly pack everything up and leave very gently, one vehicle at a time, hoping we got across the area.'

Snow storms were another hazard. When a snow storm blew up during the trip, the five men made camp as fast as they could. 'We just sat it out for seven days, sitting in the caravan playing cards,' Butling says with a smile. 'I think I won about 50 million dollars playing poker!'

HELEN BISHOP
Freelance writer



Don with the caravan he built and named 'ANEATA' after his wife, during the traverse towards Vostok. Inset: Don with the caravan in 2005.



DAVID MCCORMACK

HARRY BLACK