SUN SETS ON NAVY'S ANTARCTIC MISSION

By Noel Gillespie

"In the bottom of the planet lies an enchanted continent . . . like a pale, sleeping princess. Sinister and beautiful, she lies in her frozen slumber, her billowy white robes of snow weirdly luminous with amethysts and emeralds of ice, her dreams iridescent ice halos around the sun and moon, her horizons painted with pastel shades of pink, gold, green and blue. Such is Antarctica, luring land of ever-lasting mystery."

When Rear Admiral Richard E. Byrd wrote those words for an article in *National Geographic,* he must have known that his description could not bring to life the "essence" of Antarctica. It would be similar to Neil Armstrong trying to share his experience of walking on the moon.

Top, remembered as an explorer, Byrd was first a naval officer and Naval Aviator. Left, Navy personnel explore ice caverns while "wintering over."

For millions of years, the Antarctic remained unconquered. In the 18th century, expeditions slowly made their way about the continent on foot or with dog sleds. In 1928 the airplane opened the frozen wasteland to further exploration led by Australian Sir Hubert Wilkins. On 29 November 1929, RAdm. Byrd became the first man to fly over the South Pole.

Still, the Antarctic remained largely unexplored until Air Development Squadron (VX, later VXE) 6 was

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Left, rotor wash and frozen snow whip at the Sailors of VX-6 as an LH-34 *Seahorse* approaches for landing. For over four decades Air Development Squadron 6 supported scientists, like Paul Williams, below, in their studies of the icy continent. Bottom, a *Super Constellation* lands at McMurdo Station in 1959 and is greeted by the base's dog sled team.

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Top, jet-assisted takeoff bottles help move this ski-equipped LC-130 *Hercules* along the icy runway for launch. Right, a New York Air National Guard LC-130 parked near its VXE-6 counterpart in Christchurch symbolizes the changing of the guard.
Below, a memorial plaque honors the 50 Americans who died in Antarctica during Operation Deep Freeze.

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established at NAS Patuxent River, Md., on 17 January 1955. In December, the squadron flew into Antarctica as part of Operation Deep Freeze to support studies of the earth's geophysical phenomena. For over four decades, VXE-6 carried passengers and supplies to the icy region, but earlier this year the squadron's long participation in operations there was overtaken by modern events.

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During a 20 February ceremony in Christchurch, New Zealand, the Navy disestablished the Naval Antarctic Support Unit and formally turned over to the Air Force the responsibility for logistical support of the U.S. Antarctic Program directed by the National Science Foundation (NSF). In March, Naval Support Force, Antarctica was disestablished in Port Hueneme, Calif. Citing the decision to remove the Navy's presence due to "new global priorities relating to the end of the Cold War," NSF selected the New York National Guard's 109th Airlift Wing to assume Deep Freeze responsibilities.VXE-6 crews will participate in the transition until 1999 when the squadron will be disestablished and its ski-equipped LC-130 *Hercules* aircraft turned over to the Air Force.

Antarctic operations are not new to the Air Force. The 109th has flown supplies to polar stations for over 20 years, and the New York National Guard has 24 ice-trained crews who deploy to these regions. Lieutenant Colonel Richard M. Saburro, Commander Operation Deep Freeze, Detachment 13 in Christchurch, emphasized the distinctive role of Navy crews over the years: "They blazed the trails, opening up the continent to exploration. The Navy's operation reminds me of the westward movement—covered wagons, trails turning to dirt roads, then to paved highways with gas stations and fast food outlets. Without the Navy, we wouldn't be there now."

The Navy may leave Antarctica, but the white continent will remain a part of naval history. Byrd's historic flight over the South Pole, the first VXE-6 planes to arrive there, the scientific research accomplished, and a memorial in Christchurch honoring the 50 Americans who lost their lives to the severe climate all stand as testament to the bond between Naval Aviation and this winter wonderland.

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