

WE CAN, it is claimed, remember precisely where we were and what we were doing on two occasions. The first was when we heard of the assassination of John F Kennedy, 26 years ago, on November 22, 1963. I was hitch-hiking from Coventry to London. The second occasion was the crash into Mt Erebus in Antarctica of Air New Zealand's DC10. That was 10 years ago, on Wednesday, November 28, 1979. I was at New Zealand's main Antarctic outpost, Scott Base on Ross Island.

The first Air New Zealand tourist flight that summer had flown over Ross Island and above Scott Base two weeks before. I had thought to myself, "Here's my chance to make my first fortune. I'll take a photograph of the DC10 sweeping low over the stunning Antarctic ice-scape and then sell it to Air New Zealand as an advertising shot to beat the best that all the other airlines put together can offer."

It was a brilliantly clear day and Air New Zealand's plane came over right on time. Unfortunately, from my selfish perspective, however, the plane stayed at regulation height — 4873 metres above sea level, well clear of the top of Mt Erebus, for example.

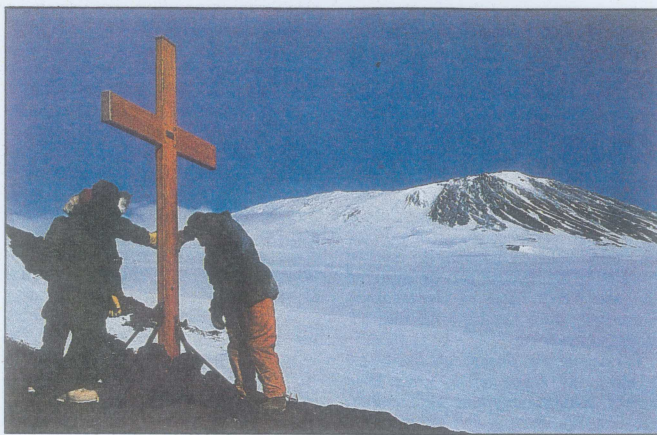
I was so discouraged that the following Wednesday lunchtime I did not even bother to carry my camera with me when the next DC10 was due to fly over. More's the pity. The second Air New Zealand tourist flight of 1979 flew low

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CROSSES ON THE ICE

by Nigel S Roberts

It is 10 years since the horror of Erebus. What was it like to be at Scott Base on November 28, 1979?



December 20, 1979 — erecting the cross to commemorate the lives of the 257 victims of the Air New Zealand Mt Erebus crash. PICTURE BY NIGEL S ROBERTS

Base knew that they had a potential tragedy on their hands.

Meal-times at Scott Base, especially dinners, are generally jovial, noisy, communal affairs. At tightly packed tables, reminiscent of the best of boarding-school days, news is traded, jokes are swapped and plans are laid for the evening and the next day.

Two abiding memories of the evening of Wednesday, November 28, 1979 are first the hush in the mess; the murmur, especially when compared with the normal hubbub, was eerie. My second strong memory of that evening is, ironically, of noise. Antarctica is usually a very quiet continent. There are few animal or bird calls, and no leaves to be rustled by the wind. After dinner on November 28, furthermore, there was nothing that most of us could do. To avert the possibility of panic or rumours in New Zealand, no one phoned home.

But for hours on end, the air was filled with sound. The whirr of helicopters and the ceaseless drone of Hercules C-130 transport planes will remain etched in my memory long after other details of the day's tragic events have faded from my mind. The search was on for the DC10.

BY MIDNIGHT it was over. The wreckage of the Air New Zealand DC10 had been found strewn over the lower slopes of the western flank of Mt Erebus, the 3794-metre live volcano that dominates the Ross Island skyline.

It has been claimed that everyone in New Zealand either knew someone on the plane, Flight 901, or that, at the very least, everyone knew someone who knew

someone. This was certainly true for those of us at Scott Base.

One of the scientists working in Antarctica at the time of the crash was Dave Hayman, a quiet, friendly zoology technician from Auckland University. His father-in-law, Peter Mulgrew, the well-known mountaineer and Antarctic explorer, was killed on Erebus. Scott Base staff were doubly devastated; the crash, so close at hand physically, was also close in a very personal sense.

The next morning, November 29, a team of three New Zealand mountaineers and survival experts was helicoptered to the crash site for an initial reconnaissance. Led by Hugh Logan, then a young history graduate from the University of Canterbury and now head of the Antarctic Division of the DSIR, the team quickly confirmed that no one had survived the plane's impact into the icy mountainside.

The three mountaineers found a suitable spot for a recovery camp, and that evening, only 18 hours after the plane was first found, I flew to the crash site on one of the helicopters taking in the first group of Scott Base staff charged with erecting the camp.

My task was to photograph the remains of the plane. Before long, I had taken 40 or so photos and was back in the Scott Base darkroom. Under the red light I watched anxiously as my first set of black-and-white contact prints came into focus in their chemical trays. As soon as I saw my photograph of the forlorn tail of the DC10, with its distinctive koru symbol, lying broken in the snow, I knew I had an exclusive "scoop". I was right; the photograph appeared in almost every

newspaper in New Zealand, as well as in many others around the world. It was my photograph, but it was *not* the picture that I had wanted...

After the recovery operation had been completed, the inhabitants of Ross Island, including staff from both Scott Base and McMurdo Station, made a large wooden cross. Two people in particular laboured long into the night to complete it: Garth Varcoe, "Mr Fixit" from the DSIR's Antarctic Division, and Ted Robinson, then a police constable from Christchurch and, at the time of the crash, deputy leader at Scott Base.

Shortly before Christmas 1979, a small group of us — Americans, New Zealanders and a Japanese scientist — were ferried by helicopter to a small rocky outcrop two kilometres or so from the crash site. As successive banks of clouds rolled off the Ross Sea and over the crash site, only to retreat again and never to engulf the hillock on which we had landed, we laboured in 50-knot winds to erect the cross as a memorial to the 257 passengers and crew who had perished in the Air New Zealand DC10 whose number, ZK-NZP, was bolted to the main staff of the cross.

Overlooking the remains of the plane, and with a glorious view across to majestic Erebus, my photographs of the cross will always remain for me the most moving of the thousands that I took in Antarctica 10 years ago.

THE EREBUS cross has become part of the history of human endeavour in Antarctica. It recalls the cross near

over the temporary sea-ice in McMurdo Sound, at a height I would estimate to have been only about 600 metres, and right above Scott Base. It would have made a dramatic, startling photograph.

DETERMINED not to be cheated out of my picture the next Wednesday, on November 28, I was ready and waiting. The day was somewhat overcast and dull, but some of the staff in Scott Base were able to follow the flight's progress by listening to radio conversations between the crew in the cockpit of the DC10 and American air traffic controllers at McMurdo Station. And so I held thumbs; maybe I would still be lucky enough to get the picture I'd envisaged for a fortnight now...

We didn't pay too much attention when the DC10 went off the air. Radio communications in the Antarctic are notoriously poor, especially in the McMurdo Sound area. On other occasions, for example, I helped relay radio schedule (or "sked") messages from research teams on Mt Erebus to Scott Base via the Dry Valleys in Victoria Land, because they could not even be sent directly from one part of Ross Island to the other.

By mid-afternoon, however, it was becoming clear to an increasingly large number of people at both Scott Base and McMurdo Station that something was seriously awry. Even in the Antarctic, planes do not simply stop communicating for several hours on end. By tea-time — well before the New Zealand public had been alerted to the possibility of a disaster — everyone in the mess at Scott

Scott's first hut, commemorating the death of Able Seaman George Vince in 1902. Atop Observation Hill stands Antarctica's best-known cross. In memory of Captain Robert Falcon Scott and his companions who died late in March 1912 on their trek back from the South Pole, it is engraved with the immortal words of Tennyson: "To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield." The view from the cross over to White Island, 30 kilometres away to the south, is breathtaking.

And on Wind Vane Hill, a small rise in the scoria near the hut at Cape Evans from which Scott departed for the Pole late in 1911, there's yet another large wooden cross. Below it, a plaque explains that a piece of paper found in the Cape Evans Hut by members of the first New Zealand Huts Restoration Party in 1960 bore the following inscription: "Sacred to the memory of Capt A L A MacKintosh, RNR, and V G Hayward, who perished on the sea-ice in a blizzard about May 8th 1916. And the Rev A P Spencer-Smith BA, who died on the Ross Barrier on March 6th 1916."

The cross thus commemorates three members of Shackleton's Trans-Antarctic Expedition. The inscription had been written by Messrs Jack and Joyce, who had made and erected the cross, but who did not have time to carve on it the words they had planned.

It, and the others like it on Ross Island, are appropriate reminders of just how harsh and forbidding an environment the frozen continent can be. At the same time, however, they affirm that Antarctica's victims will not be forgotten. ■