

# ICE STATIONS

THE UNQUENCHABLE SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE AND HUMAN ENDEAVOUR COME TOGETHER IN THIS REMARKABLE TALE OF A FATHER AND HIS SONS ON THEIR VOYAGE TO ANTARCTICA

**S**now Petrel is a finely illustrated account of the yacht of the same name and her incredible journey to Mawson's Huts on Cape Denison in eastern Antarctica, the windiest place on earth. Passages to the southernmost continent in non-sponsored yachts, especially one this small, are rare, but one where a father goes along as crew for two of his children is exceptional.

The father is Jon Tucker, an ex-teacher turned author, whose self-built gaff ketch, *New Zealand Maid*, was home for him and his wife Barbara as they raised their five sons at sea. One son, Ben Tucker, became a professional seaman, and is the skipper of the 34ft *Snow Petrel*, while another, Matt, his youngest brother, who was cook and crew, showed a bent for film and photography, which you can see in this preview of the Tuckers' adventure: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-EkZ8KPoJw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8-EkZ8KPoJw)

The extract here, narrated by Jon, is as good a description of transiting pack ice as I have read. It is an essential read for all who love our planet's wild places.



17 January  
2230

“On the horizon ahead I see a low wall of white and gold. To the south-west the sun hangs poised on the horizon emitting a golden light which reflects off the bergs around us. To the north-east a nearly full moon glows in a pale blue sky.

We've reshuffled the watches today so I've got the evening watch. Ben is asleep and I delay calling him up until I'm sure the white horizon is not a mere trick of light. Twenty minutes later there's no doubt left. We're motoring on a flat calm sea towards a seemingly impenetrable barrier, a jumble of white and golden shapes, angular and random quite unlike the flat rafts of pancake ice I had envisaged.

Ben emerges from his bunk, suddenly awake and focused. This is a moment we have been expecting for some hours, and he scans the approaching ice edge with binoculars, searching for an opening to lead us in. Hearing our excited talk Matt surfaces too, camera in hand as always, and stifling a yawn. The photographer in him registers the colours, the sheer beauty of this setting, an artist's delight as he considers shutter speeds and lens selection. I marvel at how two people can focus on such different aspects when placed in an identical situation: Ben, the navigator/skipper, ever the practical one, and Matt, the artist, both from the same gene pool, yet such unique and distinct individuals.

We have reached 65° 45' S and are 77 miles from the ice cliffs of Antarctica. As the sun's lower limb dips below the



Ben Tucker, the skipper of *Snow Petrel*, guided his 34ft yacht through the Southern Ocean with father Jon and brother Matt

southwestern horizon we reach the ice. The air has a bite which numbs the lips and we find ourselves struggling to talk coherently. From aloft, Ben has identified a passage in, and standing with the tiller between my legs I steer us into this uncharted minefield.

Don MacIntyre had briefed us at some length on the pack ice experience. He spoke of its extreme beauty and its extreme danger. He was accurate on both counts.

"Whatever you do," he had warned, "never enter the pack without seeing where the lead will take you. And always watch behind to check your entry lead stays open."

A further interesting point was that there was almost always an inland sea, free of ice, just off the coast near Cape Denison.

2245

Our entry into this icy realm seems unexpectedly familiar. We even have a few spectators waving. Miniature tuxedo-clad figures are staring at us in bewilderment from their icy viewpoints, flapping their arms excitedly before hopping to the water's edge on their comical little legs and launching themselves clumsily into the freezing waters.

Steering as I am with the tiller between my thighs, I can cradle my mug between both hands and absorb the heat. Aloft, Ben has no such luxury, but is gesticulating excitedly at something. I follow his gaze. A pair of white winged shapes is sweeping effortlessly astern of us, much more swiftly than the albatrosses and petrels we have become used to over the Southern Ocean rollers. Their agility and energy is breathtaking and briefly they slide across the face of the moon.

"Snow petrels," shouts Ben. Meanwhile we're fast approaching a solid line of east-west ice. Ben signals for me to turn to port. From down here at deck level the starboard lead looks pretty clear too. Going west has strategic benefits and I query his call. Mistake! It's the



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Careful as she goes: *Snow Petrel* negotiates a channel through the potentially dangerous brash as well as the larger icebergs

first time Ben has seriously pulled rank on me and he leaves no doubt who's captain of this ship. Chastened and mindful of my promises, I turn to port.

### 18 January 0100

For over two hours we've been tracking eastward through an ice channel, which stretches as far as the eye can see to the east. Ben is back in the cockpit now and I take the opportunity to climb the spreaders and survey the pack to our south. It is different from my earlier expectations. Rather than a solid mass of flat ice, this pack is a mixture of old and new sea ice, many shapes betraying a lengthy period afloat, as the upturned roots of decaying bergy bits wallow drunkenly among angular corners of newer ice.

The southern sky is a radiant pink, lit by a sun which is tracking eastwards barely out of sight below the horizon. Dusk and dawn have fused into a single transitional light-filled phase, and only one star is visible, more likely a planet, glowing in a pale blue sky.

Back on deck, I can see that Ben is worried. A light northerly has picked up and the whole field is beginning to move. At this stage everything is in synch and our channel is not squeezing up, but we wonder about the status of our entry lead a dozen or more miles astern. Ever mindful of Don MacIntyre's warnings, we begin to backtrack, noting how much our inbound GPS track has already been displaced sideways. Someone needs to go below for an off watch. Reluctantly I volunteer. This is the experience of a lifetime and I'm lapping it up, but we are going to have to discipline ourselves over the coming hours to husband our sleep despite the temptation to stay on deck.

### 0400

I awake from a deep sleep to find Matt climbing down the companionway ladder and I know my cosy time is done. I signal to him, and he returns to the helm while I boil the kettle and pull on layers of clothing. The GPS shows our track as 170 true – nearly due south and puzzled, I carry my cuppa into the cockpit for an explanation. Outside, the

sun is well established and Matt explains that once they had motored out through our initial entry lead, Ben had gone below leaving him to follow the ice-edge westward until another clear lead opened up. He had found himself curving more to the south into a wide opening like a big bay and was now ready to hand over and let me ascertain whether it was a blind bay or a break between two huge separate masses of pack.

Alone in the cockpit with the engine ticking over at low revs, I enjoy the unimaginable colours of the icescape. Some of the decaying bergy bits glow turquoise and emerald, and others are layered in browns and yellows, occasionally horizontal, but usually at various angles betraying repeated capsizes during the process of decay.

After two hours moving steadily southwards it becomes clear *Snow Petrel* is running out of clear water. It's not that this wide lead is narrowing but rather that it's becoming too choked with random chunks of loose pack for us to continue safely. I take her out of gear and wait for us to lose way. Ben shows up almost immediately, looking rather the worse for wear. He takes in the situation immediately and waits for me to run aloft. He doesn't seem surprised with my disappointing conclusion that there's no open sea in sight. There is no other option than to backtrack once more, this time to the north, and he disappears below again to grab a little more sleep.

The pack ice in this part of the world is the product of a multitude of phenomena. Three months earlier the sea here would have been solid ten-tenths, and the poor emperor penguins would have been trudging across it en route to their feathered spouses and fluffy offspring. The flatter, thinner slabs are the sea ice, survivors from the previous winter. The crazy angular stuff is probably multi-year sea ice, slabs which have been jammed together. The larger chunks are likely to be fragments of ancient icebergs, calved off the cliff-like walls and sculpted by waves, wind and sun. Many are inverted or on their sides, their original orientation indicated by striations that owe their origins to horizontal layers of precipitation and dust or moraine particles at some location far inland.



Conning a path from on high



The babies of the pack are the bits of brash, ranging in size from pots and pans to kitchen tables. Even these pose a risk for *Snow Petrel* at any speed. We had to keep reminding ourselves that only ten per cent of anything floating here was visible. The invisible 90 per cent lurking beneath the surface contained a mass akin to a sizable chunk of rock.

### 0730

I've been motoring nor-nor'west for an hour now, and have managed to feed myself some cereal in the process. But there now appears to be an open lead to the west, and once again I call Ben up. It's Ben's boat and Ben's voyage. After decades of sailing as skipper myself, I know how important it is to acknowledge his ultimate responsibility.

This time he joins me in full gear, and understandably opts for the western lead. At least now we aren't motoring away from Antarctica. An hour later there is the distinct feel of movement, the heaving restlessness of an ocean swell accompanied by the rumbling and grinding of ice moving around us. With it is the growing sensation of wind and with little other warning we re-emerge into an open sea of whitecaps generated by a stiff westerly breeze.

It's strange to be pitching and heeling again after the deceptive calmness of the pack. Ben soon has us sailing under double-reefed main and full headsail (rather to my concern as this is potentially the most dangerous phase of our trip yet). I stand in the biting cold wind next to the windward shrouds, searching the water ahead for growlers and brash. There's plenty around us, disguised as innocent whitecaps as we pitch and heel. Matt emerges and with all three of us now on deck we can share the lookout and helming duties. The tension eases and we take turns to grab a substantial lunch while enjoying each other's company.

### 1230

Once again we've reached the pack, but the breeze has eased to about 10 knots and the ice has killed the seas. The pack is

a confusing labyrinth of leads. We're still under sail, and surprisingly I'm enjoying the challenge. At our mere 3 or 4 knots of boat speed, and without the seaway, the danger seems diminished.

Ben is spending a lot of time aloft and directs me into a tiny 4-metre wide gulch where I let go all sheets to reduce our way. As we ghost through the gap, I watch the pale green of a shallow shelf directly beneath our starboard side. Thankfully Ben doesn't need prompting. Sails are doused and the intrusive noise of our engine spoils the solitude. No one complains.

According to Ben's judgement we are now negotiating five-tenths ice surrounded with nine-tenths pack. Its saving grace is its layout. And the fact that there is unmistakably open sea only 200 metres to our south. The ice here is big multi-year stuff and without our mast to view it from, we'd be in trouble.

Ben's strategy is to zigzag our way through the tiny leads and if necessary nudge up to an obstacle and use the engine to shove it out of our way. Thankfully we don't need that option.

At five o'clock in the afternoon we emerge from a high wall of ice to blue open sea, with barely a speck of brash in sight ahead. We are at 66° 30'S. Antarctica is a mere 30 miles away across open waters. But where? We scan the horizon in perplexity but below the distant line of light grey cloud is nothing but a horizon of blue sea.

Then the revelation hits me. Ben and Matt are at work raising full main and spinnaker. I shout to them in glee.

Cloud line — phoey! That's the grey-white skyline of the great continent itself.

It's probably been visible all day.

**Freeze-frame:**  
a picture that encapsulates how cold it can get down south

**The brilliant blue**  
is a sign of almost open ocean and a possible clearer passage ahead

