



## ANTARCTICA NEW ZEALAND INFORMATION SHEET

# MAWSON

### **Historical Overview of Australasian Antarctic Expedition**

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“The object of the Australasian Antarctic Expedition was to investigate the Antarctic continent to the southward of Australia”. Its leader, Douglas Mawson, was an experienced Antarctic explorer and led the expedition with sound judgement and respect from his comrades.

### **Preparations**

For the Australasian Antarctic Expedition to become a reality, fund-raising of massive proportions was necessary. On January 7 1911, Mawson spoke at a meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science, (AAAS). Here, he attempted to convince those attending that the expedition was worthwhile and in fact of great value to the advancement of science. He was granted 1000 pounds, which was a small amount relative to the total required. Mawson then began writing to wealthy men around Australia. The first of which was Barr-Smith. A pledge of 1000 pounds was granted, along with enthusiastic encouragement for the expedition. Mawson then turned to State Government for funds. After much debate, South Australia and Victoria States gave 5000 pounds each whilst New South Wales gave 7000 pounds.

Mawson spent a long time meticulously selecting suitable members for the expedition. Most were recent university graduates from Australia. One exception was Captain John King Davis, <sup>1</sup> in command of the Aurora, (the expedition’s ship). Davis, an Englishman, was left to organise the transportation of his ship and a team of Greenland dogs from England to Hobart. With this task completed on November 4 1911, the Aurora was fitted and packed with all the requirements for an expedition to the ice. On December 2 1911, Davis navigated his ship out of Hobart and southward bound towards Macquarie Island.

### **Adaptations to the Expedition**

Not every situation could be dealt with during preparations for the expedition. On January 8 1912, the Aurora anchored in a bay named after the Commonwealth by Mawson. It was here that the expedition’s main base station (known as “The Hut”) was erected. Little did Mawson know that he and his men had chosen one of the single most violently windy corridors of land on Earth. This fact was soon discovered and changes were made accordingly. Mawson wrote, “To our great disappointment, therefore, we had to abandon any idea of sledging... until November 7 [1912].” Sledging equipment for the summer months had to be modified to cope with the tempestuous weather. The tents brought by the expedition proved inadequate in the wind. Major reinforcing had to be carried out to make these shelters habitable. Use of the Vickers Aeroplane was severely hampered due to a breakage during transportation. Thus, the plane was rendered unflyable and its role changed to transporting goods over ground. Sastrugi,

(hard ice formations) made life very difficult for the air tractor and it was quickly dumped. Perhaps the most important change was how the men adapted to the weather. It became common practice when going outside to wear crampons all the time. The combination of glass like ice and strong winds made returning without wearing them almost impossible. The expedition members also learnt, that there was little point in waiting for a fine day to get work done.

### **The Far-Eastern Sledging Journey**

On November 17 1912, Douglas Mawson, Dr X Mertz and Lt B.E.S. Ninnis left Commonwealth Bay led by 18 Greenland dogs in a south-eastward direction. By the end of November, the Mertz Glacier had been navigated and the Ninnis Glacier lay directly ahead. Progress across the glaciers soft snow became slow. On December 14, Mertz, ahead on skis, signalled to the other two men that there was a crevasse ahead. Mawson crossed without difficulty. When Ninnis crossed however, the crevasse bridge collapsed, engulfing the dogs, the sledge and Ninnis himself. Mawson and Mertz rushed to the edge of the yawning abyss. Every strand of rope that they had would not even reach a whining dog that was stranded on a snow bridge 50m down. 506km from "The Hut", Mawson and Mertz began their return. With few supplies remaining, the pair was in dire straits. Ten days of food remained for the men and nothing for the dogs. Once every scrap of nutritious material had been eaten, the dogs began to be slaughtered one by one for their meat. On December 30 1912, Mertz started showing signs of illness. By the morning of January 7, Mertz was delirious and by that afternoon, he was dead. Mawson used the runners of his sledge that he had cut in half to erect a crude cross in memory of his companion. Over the next 22 days, Mawson struggled on despite his own appalling condition. Twice he fell into a crevasse and twice he had to muster up all his will power to get himself out. But on January 29, a snow cairn was spotted. Beside it was a depot of food and a note giving directions to Aladdins Cave (a snow shelter erected previous to the sledging journey). On February 8, Mawson reached "The Hut" just in time to see the Aurora departing. Six men had remained to search for the missing trio, and so, in total, 7 men stayed in the Antarctic for a second winter.

### **Achievements**

Douglas Mawson's Australasian Antarctic Expedition achieved a great deal in its two-year stay in the Antarctic. King George V Land and Queen Mary Land were discovered, explored and claimed for the British Crown. Shore parties in the Antarctic wintered at Cape Denison and on the Shackleton Ice Shelf. The former explored Terre Adelie and one of its sledging parties reached the south magnetic pole. Extensive scientific investigations and experiments were carried out at both shore bases as well as at Macquarie Island and on the Aurora. The Macquarie Island party spent 23 months on this little known Commonwealth possession introducing sheep and manning the radio relay station. A radio transmission and receiving station was also installed at Commonwealth Bay. Mawson was the first to use such communication methods in Antarctica. The expedition was also the first to take an aeroplane to the Antarctic although the plane was never used in its airborne capacity. Traces of silver, gold and cassiterite were discovered, exciting geologists from all over the world.

As can be seen by the impressive list of achievements, the Australasian Antarctic Expedition was a success in almost every way. Douglas Mawson's style of leadership on the expedition, no doubt, was an important factor in that success.