

Antarctic Expedition

18 February to 3 March 2019

Background

South Australia has a very strong connection with Antarctic exploration, as witnessed by the polar gallery at the SA Museum. Most of that gallery is devoted to Sir Douglas Mawson, but two others who are less well known were John Riddoch Rymill, and Sir Hubert Wilkins.

The aim of the 2019 Waterhouse Club expedition to Antarctica was to follow in the footsteps and commemorate the achievements of these two South Australians who were also very prominent in increasing our understanding of Antarctica:

Between 1934 and 1937, South Australian John Rymill from Penola led the British Graham Land Expedition (BGLE) to the western side of the Antarctic Peninsula. Its aim was to explore and map Graham Land, the name given to most of the Peninsula, as well as to conduct scientific observations and experiments. It was very highly successful in these aims, mapping over 1000 miles of coastline, and proving once and for all that the area was a peninsula connected to the Antarctic mainland and not an archipelago as had been previously suggested.

The BGLE was the last privately funded Antarctic expedition of the heroic era, in the same league as those of Scott, Mawson and Shackleton. The expedition used a combination of traditional and modern methods. Their vessel was a topsail schooner named "Penola" and most of the land exploration and surveying was conducted by sledging parties using dogs, but they also made very good use of a light aircraft for forward scouting, laying depots and aerial surveying. The work of the BGLE has been described as "polar exploration at its very best".

Amongst his many celebrated achievements, Sir Hubert Wilkins was a pioneer of polar aviation. After being the first to fly across the Arctic from Alaska to Spitsbergen in April 1928, for which he was knighted, Wilkins was first in Antarctica in late 1928 and early 1929. He conducted the first aerial exploration on the continent, flying down the Peninsula from an airstrip on Deception Island. While his observations were proved erroneous by the BGLE, his flights paved the way for future aviation in Antarctica.

The 2019 Waterhouse Club Antarctic Expedition - Inception

The WHC Expedition to Antarctica was conceived following an address to the Club by Peter Rymill, son of John, who has an intimate knowledge of the BGLE. The primary objective was to revisit the sites of the two bases used by the BGLE as well as other significant sites. En route, we would also attempt visit sites associated with Wilkins, notably Deception Island.

The voyage was arranged with One Ocean Expeditions (OOE) aboard their ship Akademik Sergey Vavilov. This was the largest expedition ever run by the WHC. The trip proved so popular that WHC managed to completely book out the ship's 92 berths with club members and friends, as well as a contingent of 14 from the Rymill family, including John Rymill's six great grandchildren.

As well as Peter Rymill, we were accompanied by three SA Museum scientists Mark Pharaoh (Manager, Polar Collection), Diego Garcia-Bellido (Senior Researcher, Paleontology) and Peter Shaughnessy (Honorary Research Associate, Mammals).

The Expedition

The expedition began in Punta Arenas in Southern Chile on 19 February. After meeting there we flew across the Southern Ocean to King George Island in the South Shetland Islands where we joined the ship and proceeded south down the Peninsula.

Then followed thirteen days of spectacular scenery, very close encounters with wildlife, and shore visits to historic huts, operating bases and places of extraordinary natural beauty. A short description of each day is contained in the appendix.

The expedition was nothing short of an unforgettable success, thanks to the detailed initial planning by WHC with One Ocean, and the tireless work of the One Ocean Expedition Leader, Danny Johnston, and his team of highly experienced specialist staff which included a historian, a glaciologist, polar guides with detailed knowledge of whales, seals, and birds, and a kayaking team.

We achieved our primary goal of visiting key BGLE and Wilkins sites by calling at:

- Port Lockroy, where the main BGLE party on *Penola* linked up with an advance party with the dogs and aircraft before moving south - now the site of a British base run by the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust.
- Winter Island in the Argentine Island Group where the BGLE had its northern base for its first year (1935-36) – now the site of an historic British base, Wordie House, built on the foundations of the BGLE hut.
- Barry Island in the Debenham Group in Marguerite Bay where the BGLE had its southern base for the second year (1936-37) – now the site of an operating Argentinian Base, San Martin. A commemorative plaque was presented and is now in the San Martin Base's museum.
- Deception Island in the South Shetland Group from which Wilkins flew in 1928 and 1929.

The wildlife encounters were many and varied. We made shore excursions every day, sometimes twice, and would always see Chinstrap, Gentoo and/or Adelie penguins. Crabeater and Weddell seals were plentiful on ice floes and ashore. Groups of Antarctic fur seals were seen ashore in a number of locations and a small group of elephant seals were a highlight on Livingstone Island. However, no expeditioner will forget their sightings of the magnificent Leopard seals, the region's top predator, sometimes at very close quarters.

Whales were everywhere and seen every day, from the ship and close up from zodiacs. Most were humpbacks, feeding up at the end of summer before starting their annual northward migration, but we also found orcas and minkes.

The scenery was breathtaking. In that part of Antarctica there are places where the ship sails past 8000 and 9000 foot mountains immediately adjacent to the coast. Perhaps the most stunning landscape was the Lemaire Channel, a challenging, narrow passage with mountains and glaciers on both sides, but there was always a backdrop of icebergs, glaciers, islands, and mountains, viewed in everything from bright sunshine, through overcast skies to sunsets and moonlight.

The weather, while obviously cold, was extraordinarily kind, to the point that the One Ocean staff would say they had never experienced a run of good weather like it. Apart from one or two windy nights we did not experience rough seas, and on only one occasion was there a need to change shore excursion plans due to a strong wind off the continent.

Sailing back across Drake's Passage to Ushuaia in Argentina was quite comfortable, and so calm that the captain was able to take the ship within three miles of Cape Horn for a perfect view – a very appropriate way to round out the voyage.

Acknowledgements

Heartfelt thanks go to WHC committee and secretariat, particularly Ant Simpson, Margie Heylen and Natalie Rollinson for their support and assistance, Richard Cunningham and his OOE Sydney office staff for all their pre-trip admin work, Mark Pharaoh, Diego Garcia-Bellido and Peter Shaughnessy for all their input throughout, Danny Johnston and his very professional OOE expedition team on board the Vavilov for getting us there and back, and finally Peter Rymill for his wonderful presentations and his passion for the BGLE story which provided the inspiration for the expedition.

Mark Mussared
WHC Expedition Leader, April 2019

Appendix – Expedition Progress Day by Day

(Refer also to map on last page)

Date		Location <i>(# denotes excursion)</i>	Comments
19 Feb	am	Punta Arenas	Flight across Drake's Passage.
	pm	King George Is. , South Shetlands	Embarkation
20 Feb	am	Gerlache Strait	Killer whales, humpback whales.
	pm	Orne Harbour #	First continental landing. Hike to Chinstrap penguin colony. Many humpbacks, crabeater seals.
	eve	Paradise Harbour # , near Waterboat Point	30 souls venture ashore to camp on the ice overnight at Leith Cove.
21 Feb	am	Transit Neumayer Channel to Dorian Bay #	Old UKAS ice runway and transit hut. View of Pt. Lockroy. View to Mt Francais (9000') on Anvers Is. First kayak outing.
	pm	Port Lockroy # <i>(In transit: Peter Rymill's presentation on Port Lockroy and BGLE North Base, Winter Island)</i>	Site of BGLE team rendezvous in Jan 1935. Now historic UK "Base A" administered by UK Antarctic Heritage Trust, manned during summer as museum and gift shop. Gentoo penguins everywhere. First leopard seal.
22 Feb	am	Transit Lemaire Channel and Penola Strait to Petermann Island #	Spectacular mountain and glacier scenery in narrow channel with clear sky and sunshine. Gentou and Adelie penguin colonies. Historic cross memorial.
	pm	Winter Island # (Argentine Island Group)	Site of BGLE Northern Base, 1935/36. (Destroyed in tsunami, 1950s.) Now historic Wordie House (UK "Base F") Spectacular views back to Mt. Francais, Mt. Scott and Mt. Shackleton in bright sunshine.
	eve	Start push south	Outside Biscoe Islands.
23 Feb	am	At sea, near northern end Adelaide Island	Ice conditions prevent planned visit to Detaille Is. Continue south outside Adelaide Is. 7:30am: Cross Antarctic Circle, 66° 33' S.
	pm	At sea east of Adelaide Is.	Continue south under grey sky. Excellent view of ice piedmont of Adelaide Is. Lectures, inc. Peter Rymill's presentation on South Base at Barry Is.

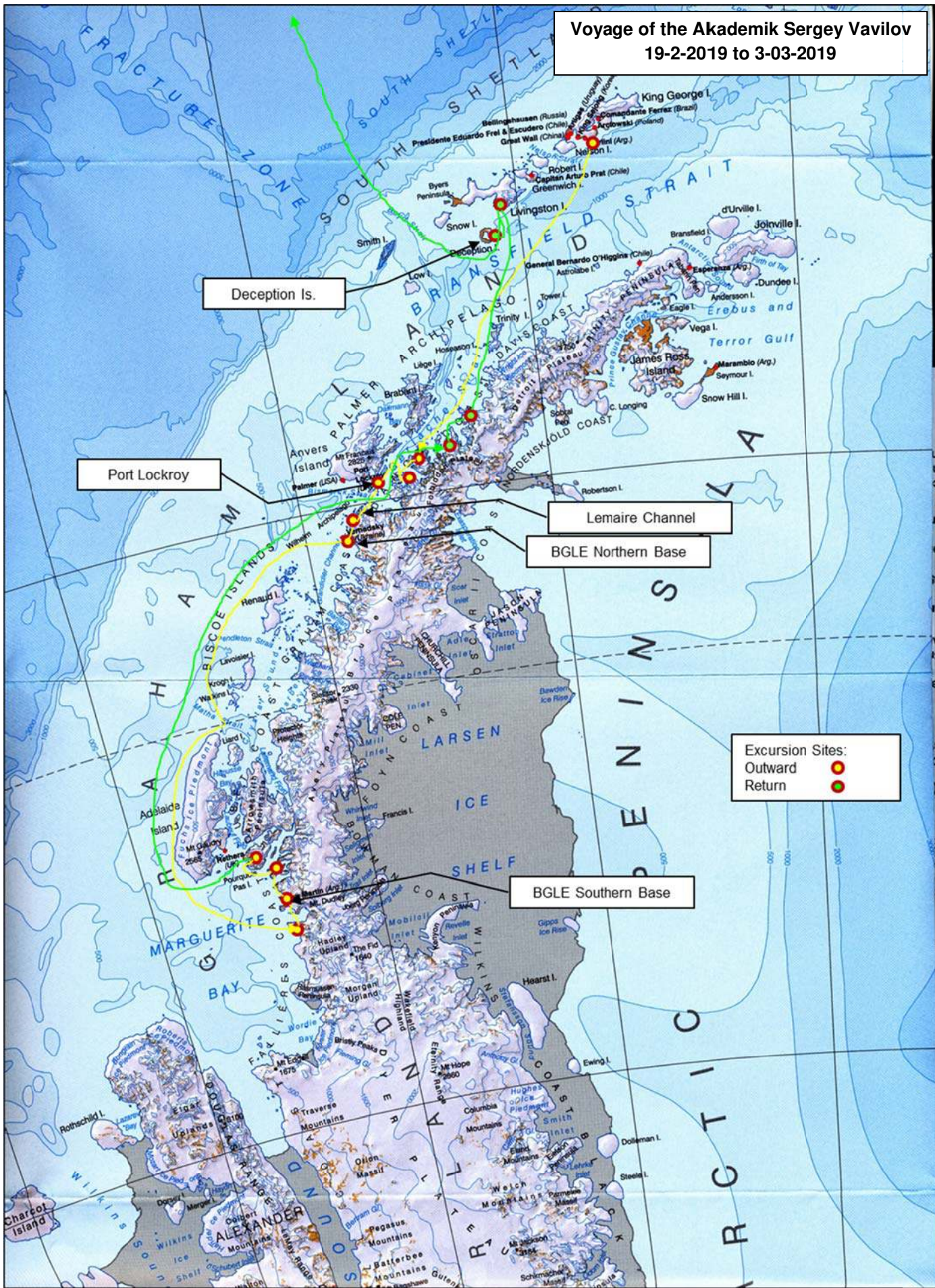
Date		Location (# denotes excursion)	Comments
24 Feb	am	Red Rock Ridge # Marguerite Bay	Landmark for BGLE men returning from sledging trips south. Overcast, more sea ice, colder. Large adelic penguin colony. Many crabeater seals. Found old BAS ration box, ca. 1950s. Furthest south for expedition and furthest south ever for the ship: 68° 17'
	pm	San Martin Base, Barry Island # (Debenham Islands, Marguerite Bay)	Site of BGLE southern base. Now Argentinian base - since 1950s. Grand welcome from base commander, Capitan Diego, and men. Introduction of Peter Rymill and family. Presentation of Rymill wine (The Surveyor) and WHC plaque. Unveiling ceremony. Tour of the base and old BGLE site.
	Eve	Barry Island	BBQ on aft deck of Vavilov with Argentinians. Vote of thanks to OOE for achieving WHC's BGLE objectives. Toast to John Rymill and BGLE men.
25 Feb	am	Horseshoe Island # (Marguerite Bay)	Preserved historic huts of old UK "Base Y" Cloudy but bright.
	pm	Bongrain Point # (Pourquois Pas Is.)	Large Adelie penguin colony. Also many Antarctic fur seals. Hike to lateral moraine of large glacier. Many humpback whales in the bay. Sun breaking through.
	Eve	Start sailing north	Leaving Marguerite Bay. Spectacular sunset and light on mountains and icebergs.
26 Feb	am	At sea. Sailing north, outside Biscoe Islands..	Snow overnight - covering ship. Misty. 20-25kts SW wind with light swell. Recross Antarctic Circle.
	pm	At sea. Continue north towards Bismarck Strait.	Lectures, inc. Mark Pharaoh's presentation on Wilkins.
27 Feb	am	Wilhelmina Bay Continue to: Foyn Harbour #	40 – 50 kt E winds off glacier – partially katabatic. Too windy for zodiac cruise. Zodiac cruise – old whaling relics inc. wrecks of ship and water boats. Cold with wind chill.
	pm	Charlotte Bay Move to: Graham Passage #	Too windy for zodiacs. 3 hour zodiac cruise in still, sunny, bright conditions. Calving iceberg, humpback whales, penguins, seals, terns, skuas, gulls. Massive glaciers. Silence....

Date		Location (# denotes excursion)	Comments
28 Feb	am	Hannah Point, Livingstone Island #	Nesting giant petrels. Also kelp gulls and sheath bills. Elephant seals – moulting. Chinstrap and Gentoo penguins – many moulting. One wayward Macaroni penguin. Antarctic fur seals on sandy beach. Long hike along beach to “fossil library” below basalt cliffs with interpretation by Diego.
	pm	Deception Island #	Site of Hubert Wilkins’ flight in 1928 - the. first in Antarctica Sailed into narrow entrance (Neptune’s Bellows) of active volcanic caldera in bright sunshine. Stop in Whalers’ Bay. Extensive remains of old whaling station of early 1900s, buildings, tanks, hangar etc. Long hike to “The Nipple”, ~4km and 250m elevation, overlooking massive penguin colony on Bally Head and back into the harbour. Fur seals on beach. Some foolhardy folk take “Polar Plunge” in 0° water!
	eve	Start sailing north	Last views of Antarctica.
01 Mar	am	At sea – sailing nw	Drake’s Passage <15 kts wind, smooth - “Drake Lake” First wandering and black-browed albatross.
	pm	At sea, continuing north	Continuing calm. Lectures inc. Peter Rymill’s presentations on BGLE prequel and sequel. Further lectures. OOE charity auction raises \$2500.
02 Mar	am	At sea - Cape Horn	Calm conditions. Pass within 3 miles of Cape Horn. Lighthouses and albatross sculpture easily visible. Enter the South Atlantic – round the Horn.
	pm	Continue towards Ushuaia	
	Eve	Continue towards Ushuaia	Captain’s dinner. Vote of thanks to the Captain and crew. Danny’s vote of thanks to OOE expedition team. Mark Mussared’s speech and vote of thanks to expeditioners, Captain and crew, Danny and OOE team, and presentation of WHC gifts to Danny. Ant Simpson’s speech thanking Mark and Caroline, and presentation of bosun’s pipe and jacket respectively.
03 Mar	am	Ushuaia	Disembark and farewells.

*I am the albatross that waits for you at the end of the earth.
I am the forgotten soul of the dead sailors who crossed Cape Horn from all the seas of the world.
But they did not die in furious waves.
Today they fly in my wings to eternity in the last trough of Antarctic wind.*

(Inscribed on albatross sculpture at Cape Horn)

Voyage of the Akademik Sergey Vavilov
19-2-2019 to 3-03-2019



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