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Clark Antarctic Series Part II: Ship and Crew Life

By ALISHA REXFORD
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SUBMITTED PHOTO
 Glenn W. Clark is pictured with a mix of students, scientist and crew who graduated from Polliwags (never been to Antarctica) to Shellbacks (those who have made the trek) after completing their first Antarctic circle crossing.

EDITOR'S NOTE- This is part two of a small series following Parishville-Hopkinton Central School science teacher Glenn W. Clark's involvement last winter in the National Science Foundation's 2013-2014 Antarctic Research Consortium research trip to Eastern Antarctica. Since his return to the north country last spring, he has been educating the public about the excursion in a three piece presentation on science, expedition life and findings.

Northern New York Newspaper reporter Alisha M. Rexford reported on the science portion of his

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trip. In this edition she will cover Mr. Clark's experience on board the research vessel, including its living quarters, researchers and ship crew. For more information into other aspects of the trip, including his blog, the researchers involved and various resources for teachers looking to explore the arctic and Antarctic region in the classroom go to www.polartrec.com.

PARISHVILLE - When Glenn W. Clark was one of 17 teachers nationally selected by PolarTREC (Teachers and Researchers Exploring and Collaborating) to participate in a two-month long interdisciplinary science cruise, he could not have anticipated the diversity that lay below the deck and surface of the Mertz and Totten Glacial systems they had set out to study.

"We were able to complete hundreds of deployments in marine geology, geophysics and physical oceanography," he wrote upon completion of the scientific portion of his trip. "We have a treasure trove of specimens and data worth its weight in gold, scientifically speaking.

"This experience could never have been replicated in any college course and certainly not in a professional development workshop. The immersion into all the aspects of the cruise, whether it be working on the back deck, the lab, manning the watch desk or communicating with the crew, makes this program an irreplaceable experience," the teacher wrote in his blog after returning home

The 47-day Antarctic sea expedition was fully conducted aboard the RVIB Nathaniel B. Palmer research ocean liner, privately owned by a company called Edison Chouest Offshore. The privately owned enterprise has three ships including the N.B. Palmer, the largest of its caliber, which are deployed throughout the world.

The vessel that Mr. Clark and crew occupied was an impressive specimen commissioned in 1992 and was named after the first American "polliwog" in 1820 to travel to the Antarctic region and join the small few deemed "shellbacks." Upon his arrival to the Antarctic Circle, Mr. Clark quickly discovered that he and all others who had never crossed the threshold had been traditionally referred to as polliwogs. He says, however, that once you cross the Antarctic divided, you become a shellback.

The ship's dimensions are 308- by 60-foot, with seven 5,600-square-foot labs spread throughout the ship's seven levels. It accommodates up to 70 individuals, has the capacity to hold up to 460,000 gallons in fuel, make 3,000 gallons of water per day from waste heat and houses four 12,720-horsepower caterpillar diesel engines, which permit it to break ice up to 3 feet in width. In addition, all sewage on board is treated with peat moss instead of chemicals, so that there's no polluted waste.

"This type of cruise appears to be becoming more and more popular as an effort to curb costs and enable the teams of scientists to work together," Mr. Clark said.

He refers to this home away from home as "simple but comfortable," with individual rooms housing up to two people, who usually work separate 12-hour shifts to ensure a good night's rest. Each room has its own shower and bathroom facilities onboard. There's even a laundry room, sauna, gym, dining area, satellite phone and lounging area for the crew to play cards or foosball, watch movies or just relax with a good book.

"One thing I'd really like to emphasize is how much goes into doing an expedition, not only in terms of its diversity of crew but also the preparation for the trip," Mr. Clark said.

He explained how the interdisciplinary cruise was several years in the making and took a lot of collaboration from many different institutions and occupations to make the whole thing possible. The research mission was not only an international endeavor, with scientists from the United States, Portugal, Chile, France, Australia and others partaking, but also a multi-institutional cooperation between governmental agencies, colleges and universities across the globe.

Participants such as Hamilton College, Colgate University, University of Texas, Texas A&M

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University, University of South Florida, University of Wisconsin, Oregon State University, University of Tasmania, Macquarie University, Columbia University, University of Aveiro, Geoscience Australia, Lockheed Martin, Antarctic Climate and Ecosystems Cooperative Research Center, Edison Chouest, U.S. Antarctic Program, and the National Science Foundation, among many others took part in the project devoted to climate research.

“Everyone, the cooks, engineers, the captain, technicians were involved and interested in learning about everyone’s participation in the program and the research that was going on,” Mr. Clark said.

The science teacher said he was intrigued by the diversity of the crew and irrefutable significance of each individual’s involvement in the project. He explained how every person’s role in the end contributed to the greater cause of promoting awareness about the impact of global warming temperatures.

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“It’s important for everyone to realize you don’t have to be a scientist or specialist to take part in something like this,” he said.

The trip included an array of occupations outside of the traditional research stereotype, which contributed to its success.

This includes the ship’s captains and mates who drove the ship and were responsible for all operations on board; and able body seamen (ABS) whose positions varied from maintenance, crane operation and ship inspection, to working with the captains.

The vessel’s oilers also helped to maintain the ship, ensure proper plumbing and sanitation, and worked alongside engineers on board, while the latter (the engineers) were accountable for all moveable parts in the engine room, salt removal and, in Clark’s words, “literally kept us alive.”

In addition to the ship savvy folk, there was also a head chef, his assistant, an electrical technician, an information technician, a marine technician and lab technicians on board, and a project manager who was responsible for overseeing the technicians and also worked as a liaison between the crew and scientists.

The teacher said he wants his students and public to know they don’t have to be geniuses to make a difference and that everyone’s role is equally as important in contributing to the cause.

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