

ONLINE SUPPLEMENT



EXPLORER'S GAZETTE

Published Quarterly in Pensacola, Florida USA for the Old Antarctic Explorers Association

Uniting All OAEs in Perpetuating the History of U.S. Navy Involvement in Antarctica

Volume 9, Issue 4

Old Antarctic Explorers Association, Inc

Oct-Dec 2009

Pensacola News Journal

Wednesday, November 11, 2009

Vets on top of the world at bottom of Earth

[Troy Moon](#) • tmoon@pnj.com • November 11, 2009

Pensacola's Navy veterans have left their mark on the world—even our most remote continent, Antarctica.

Just take a peek at a good atlas and you'll see:

- Mount Shinn, named for Pensacola resident Conrad "Gus" Shinn, the Naval aviator who, in 1956, became the first person to land a plane at the South Pole.
- Mount Blackwelder, named for Pensacola resident and retired Navy helicopter pilot Billy Blackwelder.
- Baker Rocks, a rock formation named for Pensacola's Billy-Ace Penguin Baker who spent four winters in total darkness in the Antarctic.

Beach-bound Pensacola even has its own mountain range in the Antarctic—the Pensacola Mountains, named to commemorate the city that trained the Naval aviators who helped open up continent at the bottom of the world.

Even as we honor veterans today with combat experience who helped guard and defend our freedom, so should there be space to honor veterans who opened a door through which science followed.

"The Navy blazed the trail in the Antarctic," said Roger Talbert, 63, a retired Navy senior chief who is the president of the local chapter of the Old Antarctic Explorers Association. "There's a lot of scientific research there, and the biggest thing the Navy did was to provide the means for the scientists to get where they needed to go."

'Just another landing'

And none so much as Shinn, who, on Halloween in 1956, piloted his ski-equipped, propeller-driven DC-3, *Que Sera Sera*, to the vast continent long considered Earth's "Last Frontier." Carrying a crew of five and two observers, Shinn and his team became the first humans to stand at the

South Pole since European explorers made the trip by dogsled in 1911–12. They had departed from the U.S.'s McMurdo Station off Ross Island in the Antarctic for the 800-mile trip to the South Pole.

Shinn, a Pensacola resident since 1964, spent about 45 minutes on the ice at the South Pole, with temperatures sinking as low as 60-below. The group has flown to the South Pole on a "proving flight," Shinn said, to see if flights to the pole would be feasible.

"It's cold, it's high and it's dry. But for me, it was just another landing," Shinn said at the monthly gathering of the local chapter of the Old Antarctic Explorers Association at The Shrimp Basket in Warrington.



Conrad "Gus" Shinn became the first person to land a plane at the South Pole in 1956. Shinn is a member of the local chapter of the Old Antarctic Explorers Association.

The departure was a little tougher. Heat from the plane had melted some of the ice below the plane, but it re-froze so that the plane was "frozen in."

"We couldn't move at all," Shinn said. Officials had ordered a U.S. Air Force C-124 transport plane to accompany the flight to the pole and fly overhead while Shinn and his team were on the ice. If Shinn's plane wasn't

able to take off, the transport plane would crash-land and serve as a shelter until help could arrive. For a while, that dire situation seemed entirely possible.

The *Que Sera Sera* was finally able to take off when Shinn fired 16 onboard rockets to free up the plane.

“The whole area whites-out with ice,” Shinn said. “There were lots of ice crystals in the air and no visibility, so you’re strictly on your own in the cockpit.”

Shinn and his team returned to McMurdo safely. The first South Pole Station opened in March 1957, just a few months after Shinn’s flight.

From a sightseeing perspective, though, the South Pole was ruined said Shinn, who made his last flight to the pole in 1958.

“It’s different now,” said Shinn, a retired Navy lieutenant commander. “They’ve got all this modern technology there now. It’s altogether different.”

A man named “Penguin”

Shinn is just one of many Pensacola residents who have contributed to the expansion of Antarctic exploration.

The Gulf Coast chapter of the Old Antarctic Explorers Association formed in 1999 and has about 200 members.

One of those who has spent the most time in the Antarctic is Billy-Ace Penguin Baker, 73, who spent four full winters in the Antarctic from 1962 to 1980. In winter, the continent is in total darkness day and night. Baker is the official historian of the national Old Antarctic Explorers Association.

“It was very isolated,” said Baker, a Navy radioman who had his middle name legally changed to “Penguin” 10 years ago, a testament to his love of the continent and its natural life. “Not only was it dark, but from March until September, no one came in or went out. There was no mail, some amateur radio contact. But you really were isolated.”

Baker said there were about 150 people stationed at McMurdo during the winter seasons.

“There was a lot of beer drinking,” he said. “But the hard liquor was rationed. ... There wasn’t much there to do.”

Still, there are memories of Baker’s time there that will last a lifetime.

“One year in the winter, I saw a black line on the ice,” he said. “It kept getting more prominent.”

It was a line of Emperor Penguins making the long annual trip to mate and to feed their offspring, reminiscent of the 2005 film *March of the Penguins*.

But they were heading in the wrong direction, Baker said.

“They turned around and disappeared,” he said. “That was the first and only time I saw Emperor Penguins down there.”

VIDEO INTERVIEWS

Veterans talk about their time in Antarctica:



• [Billy Blackwelder](#)



• [Larry Preston](#)



• [Gus Shinn](#)



• [Quinn Evans](#)



• [Les Liptak](#)



• [Billy-Ace Penguin Baker](#)

