



ANTARCTIC PENINSULA WILDERNESS: FOOTPRINTS ON CHILEAN CREWS, 1948-1958

LA DIFÍCIL NATURALEZA DE LA PENÍNSULA ANTÁRTICA: HUELLAS EN LAS DOTACIONES CHILENA, 1948-1958

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyzes the permanent and transitory footprints that the Antarctic wilderness left on 218 army servicemen who wintered in Chilean Antarctic Base Bernardo O'Higgins between 1948 and 1958. The research –based on military personnel records, diaries, as well as books published by such staff- does not focus in the traditional perspective that examines the impact of human activities on nature, but aspires –on the one hand- to examine men's perceptions of the white continent, and –on the other hand- it aims to analyze and understand how the hostile Antarctic wilderness has affected men's behaviors and feelings over time.

KEY WORDS: Antarctic Wilderness – O'Higgins Antarctic Base – Psychological Traces – Chilean Early Percepciones of Antarctic Wilderness

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza las huellas –transitorias y permanentes- que la naturaleza antártica dejó en 218 miembros del ejército chileno que invernaron en la base antártica Bernardo O'Higgins entre 1948 y 1958. La investigación -basada en registros institucionales, diarios personales y libros publicados por miembros de las dotaciones- no se concentra en el tradicional estudio de la acción humana sobre el medio ambiente, sino que pretende –por una parte- examinar las percepciones que las dotaciones antárticas han tenido sobre el continente blanco –y por otra- aspira a analizar cómo la hostil naturaleza antártica ha afectado la conducta y los sentimientos de quienes han vivido en medio de ella.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Naturaleza Antártica – Base Antártica O'Higgins – Trastornos Psicológicos – Percepciones Chilenas Tempranas sobre la Naturaleza Antártica

Approximately 218 servicemen spent the austral winter and/or summer at the Bernardo O'Higgins military Antarctic Base from 1948 to 1958. This was a historical period that began with the inauguration of the Base and ended with the International Geophysical Year (IGY) scientific event.

Albeit the subject of research is generally the permanent or transitory footprints left by man on the white continent, this paper analyzes these men's perceptions of Antarctica as well as the impact of the stay on their lives.

This paper is based on military personnel records and assessments, diaries, books published by such staff, and press articles. Interviews were held with various staff members to compare the information gathered –however, exclusively in relation to Antarctic wilderness. The paper is divided

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into three parts: the first referred to the location of O'Higgins Base and a short institutional history of the Base; the second part refers to staff selection and their initial perception of Antarctica; and the third and last section refers to such staff's personal perceptions of nature at the Base during the first decade of its existence.

1. LOCATION AND SHORT INSTITUTIONAL HISTORY OF O'HIGGINS BASE

The Base was built during the 1948 austral summer, on Isabel Riquelme islet—a location chosen somewhat hastily, taking into consideration it was “protected from south-east winds”, the cliff was “not steep and allowed mooring barges for unloading”, there was no “immediate danger of collapse”, and there was a nearby colony of penguins¹.

It was inaugurated in February 1948. The staff that stayed the winter had to undergo a strict lifestyle in a difficult and unknown setting, knowing that little or no help could be expected from Punta Arenas or the other Chilean Base, due to the absence of any means of transport capable of crossing the Bransfield strait in winter.

Making and implementing the Army's Antarctic policy had started in the austral summer of the previous year, 1947, when an institutional delegation visited the Antarctic². As of 1949 the Army resolved to “centralize administration, selection and instruction” of Base staff, assigning this responsibility to the Infantry and Andean Units Inspection to practice “morale, intellectual, technical, disciplinary, and administrative oversight of the staff assigned to the Base³.”

2. STAFF SELECTION AND CHILEAN PERCEPTIONS OF THE ANTARCTIC PRIOR TO 1948

Analyzing the staff selection process provides an idea of the attributes looked for in applicants, and whether this process included any psychological preparation for facing the difficulties proper to Antarctic wilderness.

In fact, the staff selection process was a matter of constant concern for the institution. A series of examinations, tests, acclimatization, ski, and special induction courses were employed and which applicants had to pass before travelling to the Antarctic⁴. These were all designed and directed by Majors Raúl Silva Maturana and Sebastián Carbonell Santander, who after visiting the Antarctic submitted a report on various aspects to be considered in the selection. Such aspects included applicants should be in “good physical condition and health”, although initially they did not contemplate “psychological aspects that could affect healthy coexistence at the Base”⁵; nevertheless, in practice this aspect or the “health of the spirit” was considered of utmost importance by all officers at the Base⁶.

Hugo Schmidt Prado, the first commander of the Base, said his staff had gone from a period of nostalgia to another of irritation, and lastly a period of “spiritual peace and remarkable tranquility”, and that during this time they had learned to know and admire a wilderness so different to that of continental Chile and think of the group “rather than their own individual wellbeing”⁷. Seemingly, this

was the case; in fact, the officer responsible for the changeover said, in this regard, that notwithstanding all the difficulties, staff was “in good condition, both physically as well as in terms of morale”, and “it was not the case that any member suffered mental disturbances”⁸.

However, from that time on, selection tests carefully analyzed applicants “not only in terms of their physical condition but also their psychological condition” given the “severe demands imposed by service in an isolated region”⁹. There are few mentions in the documentation to nervous disorders among staff, except for in 1951, when there is a record of Commander Sergio Möller Escala having shown “great tact in resolving psychological issues of the staff under his command”; however, on handing over the Base, all were in “the best physical and psychological condition... enjoying a great spirit of sacrifice, cooperation, companionship, and were hard-working and jovial spirits”¹⁰.

In 1952, albeit Commander Aquiles López reorganized the internal regime at the Base so that staff “should not feel so affected by the distance, loneliness, and weather conditions”, it is possible to suppose certain delicate situations occurred in relation to “the morale of the men... and in general with the psychological issues derived from isolation”, as recognized by the intervening officer responsible for replacing such staff”¹¹.

As highlighted on several occasions, certain staff members —on account of their stable and jovial temperament— greatly contributed to keeping-up good spirits among staff. Such is the case of the young Lt. Orlando Cantuarias, whose “cheery and optimistic” disposition and “not being affected by the isolation or prolonged coexistence” had become a “true tonic” for staff at the Base¹². Or later, Lt. Héctor Orozco, who efficiently collaborated to keeping-up morale of staff affected by the “isolation and communications difficulties”; he was also congratulated by his commander, given his “initiative and serene action in the difficult situations experienced daily in Antarctic Territory”¹³.

Explorations are also circumstances when psychological aspects can be affected by suddenly changing weather conditions when explorers are alone and isolated in difficult settings. In 1953, Lt. Tomás Harris was on a 6-day expedition to Esperanza Bay, having to withstand “with manhood, loyalty, and confidence all bad weather and hardships of life in inhospitable areas, when all psychological efforts and spirit must be mustered to survive”¹⁴; a few months later he made longer explorations and showed his “strong character in withstanding and overcoming the difficult moments experienced in unknown regions without a chance of receiving help in case of need”¹⁵. It should be noted that a few years later he returned to the Base for duties related to the International Geophysical Year.

In 1957 Base staffing doubled, as a scientific Base was built in the neighboring area and all members carried out tasks related to the International Geophysical Year. However, that year and the following year, a series of tragedies cast a shadow on the Base: the death of two explorer lieutenants, a fire in the dormitories at the old Base, and the total burn-down of the scientific base called Luis Risopatrón. After these sad events, activities continued as normal during 1958, and there is no mention during this period of disorders of a psychological nature among staff.

3. PERCEPTIONS OF ANTARCTIC WILDERNESS

Since the start of permanent Chilean presence there has been fascination at the immensity and beauty of the Antarctic: something never seen before, a natural setting very different to what Chileans were accustomed. In those years when the first groups of Chileans spent the winter in the Antarctic, the first terms appeared to describe this new reality.

Hence, in 1943 a young marine said that if you arrived at the Antarctic on a clear day, you would be “captivated by the indescribable beauty of the ice in its many tones and delicate shades; you would be subdued by the grandiose Antarctic scenery, of such grandeur that there is no room for anything small”; your senses would be astonished before such majestic silence, of terrifying influence when it invades Antarctic spheres”¹⁶. This description includes several terms that will be used in future to describe this new geographical reality: “indescribable beauty” of the ice, “grandiose” and “terrifying majesty of silence”. Antarctica: an imposing and fascinating reality that attracts and, to a certain extent, also terrifies the observer.

A somewhat different, slightly pessimistic view was given by a Chilean diplomat who in 1947 saw the Antarctic as “confined by stormy seas and steep islands... under a firmament scarcely lit by the sun on a few short days a year, desolated by hurricanes... drowsed and covered in snow”. According to this writer, this white continent lay “uninhabited and in silence only rarely disturbed by the cracking of glaciers, crashing waves and soaring wind, the comings and goings of cetaceans and sea monsters”¹⁷.

Raúl Silva Maturana and Sebastián Carbonell Santander were there from January to March 1947, a summer when the weather turned “benevolent” and led to no major inconveniences. Nevertheless, they were impressed by the “desolate latitudes lacking life and vegetation”, where the only feeling of movement was produced by the “uninterrupted breaking of ice in ravines stretching out to sea”¹⁸.

That same austral summer of 1947, a group from the Instituto Geográfico Militar (IGM) made a first Antarctic land expedition and faced a blizzard, which they described as “hurricane winds carrying snow, possibly between 8 and 11 on the Beaufort scale”. Their writings describe the other side of Antarctic nature, that is, when the snow and wind threaten the very survival of explorers: “gusts of wind, snow, and ice penetrate all openings in the tents, swirling inside and forming piles of snow on the floor... the low temperatures formed a layer of ice 3 to 5 centimeters thick on all items left outside, such as skis, snow rackets, sledges, picks, crampons, tents, and so on, so firmly adhered to the floor or ice that we had to use picks to recover such items”. They also had to spend two days inside, “without neither eating or drinking anything hot nor being able to sleep on account of the loud roaring wind, the billowing tents, and the accumulated ice inside and out”. During the blizzard, they said, “we had to take refuge in the tents. Whoever dared outside risked his life, since just moving away a couple of meters could mean losing your sense of direction”¹⁹.

About the same time, other servicemen perceived a less attractive image of the Antarctic. Thus, one regrets that “Antarctic sunsets are slow, excessively slow”, since “light persists until late hours of the night, and even in the middle of the night there are dim glimpses allowing certain

visibility". The writer adds "sometimes while dreaming I experienced terror: it was the wind, that terrible wind of the poles that sweeps-up beads of ice and lashes the sea and mountains like a cruel whip"²⁰.

Nevertheless, there are elements whose beauty prevails in all the writings of those who travelled to Antarctica that summer of 1947: "majestic icebergs of whimsical shapes, which grumble and crackle like lighting coal" when passing nearby ships²¹.

When staff had to stay for several months or spend the winter in Antarctica, this increased knowledge of the continent and respect for the forces of nature. In their writings they highlight that the main feature of Antarctica is its "originality"; that is, its difference to "other parts on Earth", since "massive layers of ice cover everything, bonded to mountains and filling valleys and plateaus, slowly descending gullies and gorges as glaciers carrying to the sea"²².

In addition, since one part of the Peninsula was further explored by land, the hazards that could affect exploration were better understood, as well as the scant opportunities available to explorers in terms of getting help in such desolate lands. Hugo Schmidt Prado, the first head of Base to spend the winter at O'Higgins Base in 1948, after several months and instructing staff about the dangers of cracks, driving sledges, behavior during accidents, and the duration of patrols, ruled that "if the patrol did not return on the fifteenth day, it would be considered lost. No search would be conducted in this case or in the case of a supposed accident"²³. This implied tacit recognition of staff limitations in relation to the forces of nature and the impossibility, given their geographical location, of receiving help from the continent or any other Base.

Luis Mora Leppe, aged 41, gives an interesting testimony as a member of the relief expedition in the austral summer of 1949 which –due to problems related to the Antarctic weather- was forced to remain almost the entire summer on-board ship, since it was only possible to reach O'Higgins Base mid-March and after 18 failed attempts²⁴.

His first impression of Antarctic wilderness was marvelous "the scene before my eyes was fantastic, the sea was calm, and three ships were anchored and surrounded by heights totally covered in perennial ice. There were only glimpses of land. Enormous icebergs glided through the bay reflecting their light green color. Penguins played in the water, and some seals could momentarily be seen". "In one word", he adds "artistically and poetically speaking, the view of the bay was a masterpiece. It is truly an impression that cannot be erased, that could never be imagined as existing"²⁵. The sunset made a vivid impression. He says "it is fantastic... a truly marvelous view. I at least had never seen anything like it"²⁶.

Nevertheless, his opinion of the scenery changed as days went by. One week later he wrote "speaking sincerely, the scenery is pretty, yet so far I find nothing practical"²⁷. A bit later on, he began comparing his life to that of a caged animal: "the reality is this: on stormy days, on the anchored ship, this is a true jail. It is a vast jail, full of various types of animals that we go back and forth, occasionally growling at each other, eating when it is our turn"²⁸. This shows the difficult coexistence that normally affected staff obliged to share 24-hours a day, for weeks, in confined space. In this case his mood was affected, and by late February, after 56 days without reaching their destination,

he wrote “nothing distracts me any longer. I am indifferent to everything. I tire from just writing these few lines”²⁹. “My health is alright, but my temperament is unbearable. I must make superhuman efforts to coexist with my work and travel companions”³⁰.

This year, replacing staff was particularly difficult on account of the weather conditions and the inordinately extended ice that formed an “unassailable barrier”. However, contrary to those arriving, the staff abandoning the Base appeared “calm and optimistic”, saying that at such latitudes monotony did not exist on account of “the changing weather, the variety of shapes and colors of the ice, and the animal life that is so different to what we are used to seeing”³¹.

It is known that staff had faced difficult times, when aeriels could not resist the force of the wind and they were left isolated and without news from the rest of the world. In general, public opinion admired the fortitude and the “spiritual potency” demonstrated by these young men in their “fight against the elements of nature”, and also “merciless nature that so many times irrupted at the heart of the shelter and threatened the physical integrity of the garrison”³².

As the years went by, less was said about Antarctic wilderness, possibly as its novelty or “originality” had been partly lost. In 1954 it was still defined as the place where “solitude acquires a new meaning of grandeur and emotion” and elements such as the “almost eternal mist”, the “majestic icebergs”, and the “imposing and overwhelming silence”, the “grave seals and elegant penguins”, the “thunderous sound of icy masses crashing to sea” still drew interest³³. The following year, Eduardo Saavedra Rojas, who had several times travelled to the Base, mentioned only the “eternal snow”, “hurricane winds”, and “desolate plateaus of ice”³⁴.

Writer Salvador Reyes maintains that at O’Higgins Base, “that little house that winter covers in ice”, there was “little time for boredom or giving-in to depressing thoughts”, since the many tasks kept them busy all day. This agrees with statements by the then Lt. Gabriel Pizarro.

4. CONTEMPORARY TESTIMONIES

Last April an opportunity arose to interview eight officers who, as young lieutenants or captains, had spent the winter at O’Higgins Base between 1956 and 1993. Some had even been part of such staff several times.

They were asked about: (a) their first impressions of Antarctic wilderness; (b) how this affected the members of their garrison; and (c) how this affected their own lives. Albeit these interviews may not be a representative sample, since only one of them was part of the studied staff, they do serve to compare if the Antarctic footprint continues to be the same as described in the studied decade, more or less half a century back.

From their answers it can be said that:

a) Among the “first impressions” on arriving to Antarctica they mentioned the feeling of adventure at being in this unknown, “inhospitable” and different world, since most came originally from the central

part of Chile. On the other hand, none mentioned the distance or feeling of isolation, which could be on account of the progress made in terms of transport and communications.

Several said they did not feel lonely, but that Antarctic nature and weather were severe, challenging, and changing. Hence two explorers referred to their difficult experiences arising from the sudden weather changes during their expeditions.

Among their impressions, several mentioned the possibility of “hearing the silence” and how this contrasted with the crashing fall of icebergs.

b) When speaking of the impact of Antarctic nature on staff, there is agreement that emergencies and the force of nature tend to unite the group, and hence it is essential to have an “experienced leader”. Several mentioned how important had been their training as mountain explorers.

It is also recognized that, depending on the personal characteristics of staff members, there was friction, even a minority that fell ill on account of transitory nervous disorders. To smooth tensions, the task of the cook and the nurse were essential, as well as the prior psychological examination –compulsory since 1970- and which served to avoid possible incidents.

c) With regard to the impact of the environment on oneself: the great majority of the interviewees agreed this, together with the possibility of having “time to think”, enabled them to learn of their own “limitations and potential”, recognize the smallness of the human being in comparison to Antarctic vastness, and to be tolerant in their social relations. This showed them of what they were capable, of adapting to an unknown environment and, for example, making water in ice and surviving without vegetables.

Even more importantly, they considered this as an “unforgettable” period of elaboration and learning, and recognize they returned to their profession and private life in continental Chile with other purposes, with another approach, and different and better goals.

Without a doubt, if we human beings are able to leave footprints in the frozen continent, these are no less important than the footprint left by this complex and variable nature on those who are able to experience and learn from such wilderness.

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² Majors Raúl Silva Maturana, Sebastián Carbonell, and Pablo Ihl Clericus added consistency and continuity to Army Antarctic policy through their writings as well as the positions held during their careers.

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⁴ Applicants should be under the age of 35 years, rated as pertaining to List 1 in the last five years, be specialized in physical training, ski, and mountain service, telecommunications, medical surgery, motor mechanics or radio. Sub-officers

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¹⁷ Antonio Huneeus. "Antártida" *Memorial del Ejército de Chile* Vol. 41 n° 217 (enero-febrero, 1949), p. 107.

¹⁸ There is mention of the "strict medical control" including blood, thorax, and heart. Raúl Silva and Sebastián Carbonell. "Breve información sobre la I Expedición oficial a la Antártica chilena" *Memorial del Ejército de Chile* n° 219 (July-August, 1947), pp. 89, 93, 102, 107 and 112; "Comandante en Jefe del Ejército festejó a militares que fueron a la Antártica y Río Janeiro" *Memorial del Ejército de Chile* n° 219 (July- August, 1947), pp. 202-204.

¹⁹ Pablo Ihl, Arturo Ayala y Próspero Madrid. *Memoria de la Delegación del Instituto Geográfico Militar sobre los trabajos geográficos que efectuó durante la expedición a la Antártica en el año 1947* (Santiago: Imp. Instituto Geográfico Militar, 1947), pp. 48-50.

²⁰ Raúl Silva. *Antártica Blanca* (Santiago: Talleres Víctor Silva M., 1947), pp. 75 and 77.

²¹ Silva (1947), p. 130.

²² Sergio Contardo. "La Antártica chilena" *Memorial del Ejército de Chile* Vol. 43 n° 230 (May-June, 1949), p. 29.

²³ In 1949 there was a training and salvage patrol always ready to depart to the Antarctic. Their instruction had to be complete in October of the year prior to an expedition. Hugo Schmidt Prado, Order of the Day in "Vida de la primera guarnición militar antártica", pp. 9 and 15. Ramón Cañas Montalva, CJE (S), *Boletín del Ejército de Chile* Vol. 39 n° 16 (22 April 1949), p. 497.

²⁴ Gregorio Rodríguez. "El relevo de base O'Higgins y tres días de vida en ella" *Memorial del Ejército de Chile* Vol. 43 n° 230 (May-June, 1949), p. 23.

²⁵ Personal Diary, Luis Mora Leppe, entry on Friday 21 and Saturday 22 January 1949.

²⁶ Personal Diary, Luis Mora Leppe, entry on Tuesday 9 February 1949.

²⁷ Personal Diary, Luis Mora Leppe, entry on Saturday 29 January 1949.

²⁸ Personal Diary, Luis Mora Leppe, entry on Tuesday 1 February 1949.

²⁹ Personal Diary, Luis Mora Leppe, entry on Sunday 27 February 1949.

³⁰ Personal Diary, Luis Mora Leppe, entry on Monday 2 March 1949.

³¹ Rodríguez (1949), p. 27.

³² “Base O’Higgins sin novedad” *Memorial del Ejército de Chile* Vol. 43 n° 229 (March-April, 1949), pp. 186-188.

³³ Mallín Chileno. “La Antártica Chilena” *Memorial del Ejército de Chile* Vol. 46 n° 262 (September-October, 1954), pp. 15, 16 and 25.

³⁴ Eduardo Saavedra. “La isla Decepción y la cuarta base chilena antártica” *Memorial del Ejército de Chile* Vol. 47 n° 265 (March-April, 1955), p. 7.

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