

# Obituary

**Philip Jon Stephenson**, respected polar explorer, geologist and educator, died suddenly at his home in Townsville, Australia on 24 May, 2011.

Born on 10 November 1930 in Brisbane, Jon was the youngest, by eight years, of a family of 6 boys. As a young lad he acquired a deep love of the outdoors and often went off canoeing solo on the nearby Nerang River. After spending 8 years at the Slade School in Warwick, Jon enrolled at the University of Queensland in 1948 where he studied for four years earning a B.Sc. and winning the Queensland Medal in 1951. While at university he founded the Queensland Bush Walking Club and became its first president, trekking being a passion that he enjoyed for the rest of his life. On graduation he left Australia for England to further his studies in geology and completed his PhD at Imperial College, London just prior to an event that would shape a large part of his life.

While riding a bus to a morning lecture he noticed an advertisement seeking participants for an Antarctic expedition to be led by Dr. Vivian Fuchs. Jon was taken by the opportunity and he immediately applied to join. His interest in Antarctica had first been aroused by J.M. Scott's biography of Gino Watkins. He gained an interview with Fuchs and Admiral Parry, Secretary of the TAE Committee, and soon learned to his excitement that he had been selected as the sole Australian representative of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition. Jon suspected that the intercession of his thesis advisor from Imperial College, who also happened to be a member of the TAE Committee, as well as a good word from Dr. Philip Law, might have swayed the decision in his favour. Jon was one of three men, along with Ken Blaiklock and Hal Lister, who wintered over in 1956–1957 at South Ice, the advance base for the TAE that was located on the polar plateau almost three hundred miles towards the South Pole. During that period he carried out studies in both geology and glaciology assisting Hal Lister in this regard. Jon was one of the youngest members of the crossing party but the risks of the Antarctic soon became known to him. While out on a geological trip to the Whichaway Nunataks he and Ken became storm bound and disoriented on their return to South Ice and it was only through good fortune that a search party found them before they ran out of provisions.

In late 1957, as the final push for the Antarctic crossing journey got underway, Jon and Ken were chosen to find a safe route for the tractor train. Driving their two dog teams ahead of the Sno-Cats they established snow cairns to mark the route. They completed the 400 mile trip south and became the first people since Amundsen to reach the Pole by dog-sledge while Jon became the first Australian to stand at the South Pole. One disappointment that both Jon and Ken shared was their inability to carry out an exploration of the Horlick Mountains region. They had hoped to begin this new journey on completion of the TAE however the venture had to be abandoned as their

request for logistical support from the US Navy was declined. Jon was awarded the Polar Medal in 1958 in recognition of his contribution to the TAE.

Following the expedition he spent the summer months in London before returning to Townsville to write up his scientific reports, a task that was to extend over several years. One of his reports, which he recently revisited, was on snow metamorphism. He was pleased to discover that his hypothesis for the formation of windcrust and hoar layers had not been invalidated. His key report for the expedition, published in 1966, was TAE Scientific Report 8 on the Geology of the Theron Mountains, the Shackleton Range and the Whichaway Nunataks, including a section on the paleomagnetism of the dolerite intrusions. A second paper relating to glaciology was intended to be scientific report 6 but was never completed.

Still thirsting for adventure and new experiences he next applied for a post with UNESCO to teach mineralogy at the University of Punjab in Lahore, West Pakistan. His real objective was to explore the Himalayas but this period also provided his first experience in teaching. He had a natural affinity for the profession and became as he put it an 'academic geologist' rather than a 'commercial' one. His love of teaching meant that he was unable to publish as much as he would have liked. Jon returned from Pakistan in 1961 and committed himself to a teaching career taking up a full-time post at James Cook University in Townsville where he spent the next ten years. During this time he carried out geological studies on Heard Island, Ambryn Island (Vanuatu), in Hawaii and on numerous extinct volcanoes throughout north Queensland. In 1963 Jon met and married Jennepher Anne Landsborough and together they raised three daughters of whom Jon was immensely proud.

He was an excellent photographer and his collection of TAE photographs taken with a well used expedition-issued Leica, was shown over the past few years in exhibitions in both Australia and New Zealand as well as in the United States. Several of his photos were used in the official TAE book, *The Crossing of Antarctica*. Jon recently published his own account of the expedition entitled *Crevasse Roulette* giving a unique and balanced perspective on that significant event in the history of Antarctic exploration. At the time of his death he was preparing another photographic exhibition featuring his time in Pakistan and the Karakoram Himalaya.

Jon had a lifelong passion for learning and continued through his retirement to attend conferences on geology and the Antarctic, frequently presenting papers. His most recent, on the TAE, was presented at an Antarctic conference in Hobart just last year where he donated much of his Antarctic memorabilia to the Tasmanian Museum. In 2009 he received the 'Lifetime of Adventure' award from the Australian Geographic Society. He was closely involved with the Queensland Museum from 1998 onwards.

Jon was a modest and quietly spoken man who always enjoyed the respect of those he was with. He had friends all over the world and until recently was sure to be planning a trip overseas. Among his many interests were tennis, sailing and classical music. He closely followed the fate of both the Australian cricket and rugby teams. His favourite mountain

was Mt Barney in south Queensland which he scaled and traversed several times. Jon is survived by his wife Jennepher and their three daughters, Sara, Frances and Melissa all of whom shared in his love of travel and the outdoors, and seven grandchildren.

*Stephen Hicks*