

Daring flight removes 2 sick workers from South Pole station (Update 4)

June 22 2016, by Seth Borenstein And Eva Vergara



A worker from the U.S. South Pole Amundsen-Scott station arrives at a clinic in Punta Arenas, Chile, on Wednesday, June 22, 2016. A small plane with two sick U.S. workers arrived safely in Chile after leaving Antarctica in a daring rescue mission from a remote South Pole research station, officials said. (AP Photo/Joel Estay)

Two people who fell ill while working at the U.S. research station at the South Pole have been evacuated by a small plane that made the daring

rescue flight in Antarctica's harsh winter.

The National Science Foundation said the two workers arrived safely late Wednesday in Punta Arenas, the southernmost city in Chile, after a long trip from the Amundsen-Scott station at the South Pole. They stopped for a few hours at a British station on the edge of Antarctica to be put on another plane.

"From Punta Arenas, the two patients aboard will be transported to a medical facility that can provide a level of care that is not available at Amundsen-Scott," said a statement on the National Science Foundation's Facebook page.

The foundation runs Amundsen-Scott and two other centers in Antarctica. It did not identify the sick workers or give their conditions, citing medical privacy. They were described only as seasonal employees of Lockheed Martin, which is the prime contractor for operations and research support for the foundation's Antarctic program.

At Magallanes Clinic in Punta Arenas, nurse Mauricio Seron told The Associated Press that a female patient "with a gastric problem" was the sicker of the two. He said the second was a male patient who had suffered a heart attack. The woman was carried in on a stretcher and the man walked in on his own accord.



A worker from the U.S. South Pole Amundsen-Scott station arrives at a clinic in Punta Arenas, Chile, on Wednesday, June 22, 2016. A small plane with two sick U.S. workers arrived safely in Chile after leaving Antarctica in a daring rescue mission from the remote South Pole research station, officials said. (AP Photo/Joel Estay)

In a hectic two days of flying, the rescue team flew 3,000 miles roundtrip from Britain's Rothera station to the South Pole and returned to Rothera with the sick workers Wednesday afternoon, said Peter West, spokesman for the National Science Foundation. The workers were transferred to a second Canadian-owned Twin Otter plane for the flight to Punta Arenas.

At Rothera, the temperature was a balmy 27.5 degrees (minus 2.5 Celsius) Wednesday afternoon. That was toasty compared to the South Pole where it was minus 75 (minus 60 Celsius) in the morning.

West confirmed that the operation, coming right after the equinox, was the darkest and coldest of all past missions to the South Pole for medical evacuation. He said that the departure of the two workers should not affect the functioning of the base.

Before they left, there were 48 people—39 men and nine women—at the Amundsen-Scott station for the winter.



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Normally planes don't go to the U.S. polar outpost from February to October because of the dangers of flying in the pitch-dark and cold. The

first day of winter in the Southern Hemisphere was Monday—the sun will not rise at the South Pole until the first day of spring in September.

Steve Barnett, who works with a University of Wisconsin astronomy team at the polar station but is in the U.S. now, lauded the rescue crew.

"The courage of the pilots to make the flight in extremely harsh conditions is incredible and inspiring," Barnett wrote in an email.

The extreme cold affects a lot of things on planes, including fuel, which needs to be warmed before takeoff, batteries and hydraulics, West said. The Twin Otter can fly in temperatures as low as minus 103 degrees (minus 75 degrees Celsius), he said.



In this photo provided by the National Science Foundation, a small plane picks up a sick worker at the U.S. South Pole science station. Once the sick patient and the crew rest, they will then fly off Antarctica for medical attention that could

not be provided on the remote continent. (Robert Schwarz/NSF via AP)

"The air and Antarctica are unforgiving environments and punishes any slackness very hard," said Tim Stockings, operations director for the British Antarctic Survey. "If you are complacent it will bite you."

"Things can change very quickly down there" with ice from clouds, high winds and snow, he said.

The station has a doctor and a physician's assistant and is connected to doctors in the U.S. for consultation, West said, but sometimes workers need medical care that can't be provided at the South Pole. There have been three emergency evacuations from Amundsen-Scott since 1999.

The 1999 flight, which was done in Antarctic spring during slightly better conditions, rescued the station's doctor, Jerri Nielsen, who had breast cancer and had been treating herself. Rescues also were done in 2001 and 2003, both for gallbladder problems.

Scientists have had a station at the South Pole since 1956. It does astronomy, physics and environmental science with telescopes, seismographs and instruments that monitor the atmosphere. The foundation runs two other research stations in Antarctica.



This photo provided by the National Science Foundation shows a Twin Otter aircraft on a medical evacuation flight taxis on the skyway at NSF's Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station. The small plane with two sick workers has arrived at a British research station in Antarctica, safely finishing the first leg in a daring rescue mission from a remote U.S. South Pole station, officials said. (Robert Schwarz, National Science Foundation via AP)



Two ambulances enter the airport to pick up two workers from the U.S. South Pole Amundsen-Scott in Punta Arenas, Chile, on Wednesday, June 22, 2016. A small plane with the two sick U.S. workers arrived safely in Chile after leaving Antarctica in a daring rescue mission from the remote South Pole research station, officials said. (AP Photo/Joel Estay)



This photo provided by the British Antarctic Survey, shows two planes from a Canadian company were used in the daring rescue of two sick workers from the U.S. South Pole station Wednesday, June 22, 2016. Both Twin Otters flew to the British station on the edge of Antarctica, one then continued another 1,500 miles to the South Pole, where the crew picked up the two sick workers, then flew back to the British station another 1,500 miles. The second plane that didn't make the trip then flew the sick workers off Antarctica on the way to Chile. at Rothera Research Station. (British Antarctic Survey via AP)



In this photo provided by the Courtesy British Antarctic Survey, Rothera, the British Antarctic Survey station is seen from the air. A daring South Pole medical rescue is underway. An airplane left a British base in Antarctica Tuesday, June 21, 2016, for the 1,500-mile trip to evacuate a sick person from the U.S. station. Athena Dinar, spokeswoman for the British Antarctic Survey, said one of two twin otter planes began the trip Tuesday, while the other is still at the Rothera station on the Antarctic Peninsula just in case. (British Antarctic Survey via AP)



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Citation: Daring flight removes 2 sick workers from South Pole station (Update 4) (2016, June 22) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-06-flight-south-pole-evacuating-sick.html>

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