

Plane on way to South Pole for daring winter medical rescue

June 21 2016, by Seth Borenstein



In this 2003 photo, provided by the National Science Foundation, a Twin Otter flies out of the South Pole on a previous medical flight. 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. (Jason Medley, National Science Foundation via AP)

Flying through dangerous cold and pitch-dark, a small plane is making a 1,500-mile trip to evacuate a sick worker from a remote U.S. science station on the South Pole.

A Canadian Twin Otter plane left a British base in Antarctica Tuesday morning for the nine-hour flight, said Peter West, spokesman for the National Science Foundation, which runs the U.S. station. A second turboprop stayed behind on the ice-covered runway at the Rothera station in case something goes wrong with the rescue attempt.

There have been three emergency evacuations from the Amundsen-Scott station since 1999. Workers at the South Pole station are isolated during the coldest months when it's too risky for routine flights.

The latest mission is pushing the limits of what is acceptable, said Tim Stockings, operations director at the British Antarctic Survey in London. He said being prepared is key.

"The air and Antarctica are unforgiving environments and punishes any slackness very hard," Stockings said. "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 first day of winter in the Southern Hemisphere was Monday—the sun will not rise at the South Pole till the first day of spring in September.



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)

Usually the rescue flight crew—a pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer and medical worker—has to rest before a return flight from the pole, West said. After refueling at the pole, the plane will return to the British base and then the ill worker will be taken out of Antarctica for medical treatment, he said.

The National Science Foundation decided last week to mount the rescue operation because the unidentified staffer needed medical care that can't

be provided there. The station has a doctor, a physician's assistant and is connected to doctors in the U.S. for consults, West said.

The foundation has not disclosed the individual's illness or condition but said the worker is an employee of Lockheed Martin, which provides logistical support. There are 48 people—39 men and 9 women—at the station, West said.

He said two station workers are ill and officials were still trying to decide whether to evacuate both or just the sickest one.

The danger is the dark, the cold and the weather, Stockings and West said. 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.

The temperature Tuesday morning at the South Pole station was minus 75 degrees (minus 59 Celsius), according to Weather Underground.

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

Scientists have had a station at the South Pole since 1911. It does astronomy, physics and environmental science with telescopes, seismographs and instruments that monitor the atmosphere.

More information: National Science Foundation: www.nsf.gov

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