

Plane lands at South Pole in daring winter medical rescue

June 22 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)

After flying through dangerous dark and cold, a rescue plane landed Tuesday at the South Pole to evacuate a sick worker from a remote U.S. science station, federal officials said.

The plane arrived at the South Pole after a daring 1,500-mile, nine-hour trip from a British base on the Antarctic peninsula, according to the National Science Foundation , which runs the polar outpost.

The plane's crew—a pilot, co-pilot, flight engineer and medical worker—will rest and wait for at least 10 hours. Then if weather conditions are favorable, the plane will refuel and return to Rothera, said agency spokesman Peter West. After that the sick worker will be taken out of Antarctica for treatment.

"It went all according to plan," West said from Arlington, Va.

A second worker is also ill, but officials have yet to decide whether that patient will also fly out, West said. The science foundation will not identify the workers, who are employees of Lockheed Martin which handles logistics at the station, nor their medical conditions.

There have been three emergency evacuations from the Amundsen-Scott station since 1999. Workers at the South Pole station are isolated from February through October, the coldest and darkest 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. A South Pole webcam showed the station in the distance during the landing. There was some light because of the full moon and the ability of the camera to operate on low light, West said.

It is still pitch-dark, he said.



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)

The National Science Foundation decided last week to mount the rescue operation because one 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. There are 48 people—39 men and 9 women—at the station.

The temperature Tuesday afternoon at the South Pole station was minus 75 degrees (minus 60 Celsius), with a wind chill that makes it feel like minus 108 degrees (minus 78 Celsius) according to the science foundation's weather station and webcam.

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.

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 1956. It does astronomy, physics and environmental science with telescopes, seismographs and instruments that monitor the atmosphere. The foundation runs two other science stations in Antarctica.

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

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