

# The Science Observer

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## The Wireless Crew

George Ainsworth and his assistants, Sawyer and Sandell, were overjoyed when they finally established radio contact between Macquarie Island and Mawson's party in Antarctica. Their delight turned to sadness when they heard that two members of their own expedition, Ninnis and Mertz, had died in Antarctica. Soon afterwards, they heard that Captain Robert Scott and several other members of the British South Pole expedition had also perished.

### *Setting up a radio station*



Wireless Hill. Photo Tavis Potts., 2000.

When they first set up a radio station on Macquarie Island, Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) wireless operators, Ainsworth, Sandell and Sawyer did not know whether they would be able to receive and transmit messages to Mawson's expedition in Antarctica. All they could do was transmit their Morse Code signals, wait and hope. Constant gales battered the aerial system and wireless hut, and on several occasions the aerial blew down.

Ainsworth, Sandell and Sawyer took turns sleeping in the wireless station at the top of Wireless Hill. They had to brave strong winds whenever they descended the hill to have their meals in the expedition hut they dubbed 'King George V Villa'.

On the night of 2 February 1912, Sawyer was on duty. He heard a radio message from Wellington, New Zealand, calling Suva station. On 13 February 1912, the Wireless Hill station established communication with the S.S. *Ulimaroa*. By the following night signals were received from three other ships, one as far distant as Cape Horn. On March 10 1912, Wireless Hill communicated with Suva, two thousand four hundred miles away.

*This was a remarkable performance for a one-and-a-half kilowatt wireless set.*

From 12 May 1912 onwards, Sandell and Sawyer sent a daily weather report to the meteorologist at Wellington.



Telefunken Transmitter at Macquarie Island 1912  
Photo courtesy Australian Antarctic Division

The *Aurora* visited Macquarie Island on 7 June 1912, returning from

Antarctica. At 9.30 the next morning Captain Davis brought a boat ashore with supplies, and a mailbag that was seized with great delight. The *Aurora* then headed to Lusitania Bay to land stores for Blake and Hamilton.

*A ferocious storm blew up, but the station maintained radio contact with the ship.*

The wind made terrific noises in the aerial wires, and although this did not affect the transmission, it interfered with reception of messages.

On 25 September 1912, Sawyer heard some very faint Morse code signals from Adelie Land in Antarctica. All he could receive was:

*'Please inform Pennant Hills....'*

He tried to return the call for hour, without any luck. Four days later, he heard the tapping of another message from Adelie Land:

*'Having a hell of a time waiting for calm weather to put up our masts.'*

Again Sawyer called repeatedly but heard no reply.

On 3 February 1913, after a silence of about four months, the Macquarie Island station again heard a message from Adelie Land, but the Antarctic station was unable to receive them.

*When communication was finally established between the two stations, the news from Antarctica was not good.*

Douglas Mawson and two expeditioners had not yet returned from a sledging trip. On the 8 February 1913 Wireless Hill intercepted a message from Adelie Land to the *Aurora*, asking that the vessel return at once and pick up the rest of the party as

*Lieutenant Ninnis and Dr Mertz were dead.*

Sawyer tried to call Adelie Land, but without success. On the following day Wireless Hill received further bad news, this time from Australia: that

*Captain Robert Scott's British party had perished after returning from the South Pole.*

The Wireless Hill station finally managed two-way communication with Adelie Land on 20 February 1913. They received a message confirming the deaths of Ninnis and Mertz. Sawyer had a short talk with Jeffryes, the Adelie Land operator, and told him the Macquarie Island party were all well.

On the night of 7 March 1913, Ainsworth received a message from Dr Mawson saying that the party would probably remain another season in Antarctica and that he wanted the Macquarie Island station to keep going until the end of the year. Ainsworth read this message to Sandell, Sawyer, Blake and Hamilton, and asked if they wanted to return home in April or remain till the end of the year. All the men wanted to stay.

*By that time the biggest problem to the Macquarie*

*Island Expedition was a shortage of food.*

On 27 April 1913, Wireless Hill received a message saying that the *Rachel Cohen* was sailing for Macquarie Island on 2 May and would bring supplies and take expeditioners back to Hobart if they wished. The message was forwarded to Mawson in Antarctica. He replied that the *Aurora* would pick them up about the middle of November and take them to Antarctica. However, if any member of the expedition wanted to return home aboard by the *Rachel Cohen* he would be free to do so.



Wireless operator in Antarctica receiving messages in Morse Code. Photo courtesy Australian Antarctic Division.

Ainsworth reduced their rations, knowing that it would still be some weeks before the *Rachel Cohen* brought their stores.

*Like many sealers and shipwrecked sailors before them, they were forced to supplement their dwindling supplies by living off the land, hunting wekas, catching fish*

and eating portions of elephant seals.

By 8 July 1913, the scientists' provisions were almost gone. The sealers, too were short of supplies. According to New Zealand journalist, E. W. Waite:

*'Mawson's men were the first to run out of food supplies, falling short in March last. The substances which first failed were meat, sugar, milk, and flour, and these commodities were received from the sealers in exchange for vegetables, of which they had a sufficient supply. Then the sealers' stores became exhausted, and both parties suffered want, but there was at no time any question of starvation, for there is abundant food on the island, provided by the sea elephants, but there was not the variety requisite to keep the men in good health.'*

The scientists accepted a generous donation of twenty pounds of biscuits from the sealers, and managed to make soup by adding sago and a few lentils. Their desserts were cornflour and hot water flavored with cocoa, sago and tapioca.

By 22 July 1913, the *Rachel Cohen* still had not arrived. She had been blown off-course and badly damaged. She headed for New Zealand, where she had docked for repair. Lack of food was now a serious concern. Wireless Hill eventually received a message that the New Zealand steamer, *Tutanekai*, would bring them the stores that had been aboard the *Rachel Cohen*.



The *Rachel Cohen* under tow, from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*.

By then, Sawyer had become ill and wanted to go home. On 18 August 1913, Wireless Hill received a message stating the *Tutanekai* would arrive at Macquarie Island on 18 November 1913. The night before Sawyer left on the *Tutanekai*, Ainsworth, Blake, Hamilton and Sandell gave him a send-off dinner of sea-elephant's tongue, and opened a



Macquarie Island sealers, from J.S. Cumpston, *Macquarie Island*.

precious bottle of claret. According to journalist, E.R. Waite, who arrived on the Tutanekai:

*On board the Tutanekai, were New Zealand reporters, who had heard stories that the Macquarie Island expedition were starving, and were keen to write up this story:*

*Photographers had their cameras in operation, the newspaper scribes moved their pencils more rapidly than at any time since the voyage commenced, and the ship's crew ran to and fro under the orders of their officers to get the boats ready.*

*A bearded man, wearing knee-high raw-hide boots, a rough woolen cap, a coarse grey woolen shirt and a coat stitched and restitched to rival Joseph's famous article of apparel, jumped on board. He looked a picture of manly strength and virility. It was George F. Ainsworth ...One could not help thinking that the appearance of the man, and that of the men (Mr Hatch's) in the boat, at once discounted the starvation story.*



The AAE Macquarie Island crew from left: Hamilton, Blake, Sandell and Sawyer, from J..S. Cumpston, Macquarie Island.

*The last of the sealers returned to Hobart aboard the Rachel Cohen on 28 November 1913, the same day the Aurora arrived to take Ainsworth, Blake, Hamilton and Sandell to Antarctica.*

## References

- Ainsworth, G. 1996 re-print, in Mawson, D., *Home of the Blizzard*, Wakefield Press, pp335-398.
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Other stories about the AAE can be found in:  
[Building Wireless Hill - The AAE](#),  
[Hurley's 'Juvenile Trick'](#)  
[Hamilton, Blake and Mac](#)