

# The Chilling Fields

## *A report by Discovery Channel's Jane Stevens*

"In the engine room, the small fire quickly turned fierce. The engineers had found a small fire near the port engine, located on the bottom deck, and put it out. But it was not the main source of the fire, which was on the port engine. It quickly flared. Third engineer Rob Cave, first officer Peter Dunbar and second officer Scott Laughlin fought the blaze, which seemed still manageable at this point.

They ran out of the engine room to retrieve more extinguishers. At that moment, a fireball swept through the port engine. Two other engineers on the deck above fled through separate watertight doors and locked them. On the bridge, Hansen heard an explosion, and knew that the situation had turned critical. Suddenly, just seven minutes after the alarm sounded, the whole ship went black.

Outside in the bitter cold, two decks down, a soft murmur went through the expeditioners and crew assembling on the thin layer of snow on the heli-deck. The sudden darkness was absolute. The silence, stunning. On a ship, we live with constant background noise, the continual exhale of air from the vents, water pulsing through pipes, and below all that, the comforting heartbeat of the engines. Now the ship was dead, and we heard only the silence of the Antarctic sea ice, silence unbroken for thousands of square miles around us.

The 308-foot Aurora, once vibrant and huge, shrank to insignificance. ....

.... It was at that moment, just 22 minutes after the alarm went off, that I realised the seriousness of the situation. The black night seemed to close in on us, trap us in a nightmare that wasn't a dream. But the mind does funny things at times like these. I tucked my face into the top of my life vest to keep my nose warm, and dropped into a love-hate relationship with the bright orange lifeboat.

I dreaded the thought of getting into the windowless, claustrophobia-inducing craft that looks like an overgrown rolypoly bug. That would certainly mean that some of us, perhaps all of us, would die, because the ship would be aflame and perhaps sink. On the other hand, we might survive this ordeal in it. I was scared, as I have never been scared before. We were all scared, from the captain on down.

Antarctica doesn't offer many avenues of escape.

...[later] We had the worst thing happen to us, but under the best of circumstances. If the fire had occurred two days earlier while we were rolling through 15-foot seas, says Hansen, fuel would have sloshed back and forth, spreading the fire to other parts of the engine room and likely damaging or destroying the second engine. Crew members would have been injured. The lifeboat would have repeatedly slammed into the ship as it was being lowered, injuring those inside. If it had happened one day later - yesterday - we would have had to muster into a blizzard with 40 to 60 knot winds, and a wind chill of up to minus 58 degrees F (-50 degrees C).

If we were in thick sea ice, instead of fairly loose pack, the ship would have risked becoming beset or even crushed. If we were in looser pancake ice, we'd risk being pushed by wind and current into an iceberg.

It could have been much worse, he said. Because we mustered so quickly, he was able to set off the halon gas before the fire raged further. And it was within moments of releasing the halon that the plastic tops of cylinders containing liquid petroleum gas had just melted off. If the officers and engineer hadn't left to retrieve more fire extinguishers, they would have been killed in the explosion.

As it is, we're drifting northwest at about half a knot, and sitting quietly in the midst of large floes of ice, which occasionally break apart and push together as a swell rolls underneath. An iceberg six miles away is now two miles away.

But we're not out of the water yet, so to speak. In fact, 60 hours after the first alarm sounded, we're still dead in the sea ice. The engineers have the second engine running, but are trying to figure out how to repair the engine's auxiliary systems to actually get the ship moving...