

THE INAUGURATION OF LAW-RACOVITA STATION

In the spirit of the Antarctic Treaty, Australia has opened the doors of Law Base – in the Larsemann Hills – to Romania. Along with delegates from China, Russia and Romania, Australian Government Antarctic Division Chief Scientist, Michael Stoddart, helped celebrate the first day of joint occupancy of ‘Law-Racovita’ station, on 20th February 2006.



Davis Station Leader, John Rich (left), hands the ceremonial key to Law-Racovita station to Romanian colleague Teodor Negoita.

The Australian delegation – Davis Station Leader John Rich, Deputy Station Leader Chris Tickner, physicist Ray Morris, pilot Dave Pullinger, and I – arrived at the Chinese station, Zhongshan, at 10 am local time, to be greeted by Mr Wei Wen Liang, head of Chinese Antarctic logistics and a very senior figure in China's Antarctic programme, and a number of his colleagues.

Joining them was Mr Vladimir Bondarchyk, the Station Leader at Progress II (Russia), and of course Dr Teodor Negoita, our colleague from Romania, resplendent in the largest hat made of wolf fur and wearing the largest grin. Teodor knew the day belonged to him and was unable to hide his joy that Australia had come to visit him and Romania, in his beloved Larsemann Hills.

We started the ceremonies with an official reception by Mr Wei, who commended Australia for helping Romania by making Law Base available for use by their Antarctic programme – an act strongly applauded by all parties at the Antarctic Treaty Consultative Meeting in 2005.

Next we toured Zhongshan with Dr Yang Huigen, head of science at the Chinese Polar Institute. His pride in the Chinese scientific programme swelled as he spoke of the significant infrastructure work that was about to overtake Zhongshan.

Lunch was a magnificent banquet, accompanied by *moltai* (53% alcohol by volume, aptly described as ‘rocket fuel’) served, thankfully, in thimbles. Dark Shanghai beer, Australian Coolabah cask red and soft drinks were served in more orthodox vessels.

After lunch we moved to Law by helicopter, Kässbohrer and Lada, to welcome Law-Racovita into the world. The flags of Romania, Australia, China and Russia flew high on the staves to greet us for the first of many photographs. Inside, a table had been set with traditional Romanian fare; smoked sprats, homemade cheeses, lamb and pork salamis and other meats, preserved figs, tomatoes and olives. Two bottles of Chinese red and a bottle of Smirnoff completed the necessities for a successful inauguration.

John Rich spoke eloquently on behalf of Australian Government Antarctic Division Director, Tony Press, welcoming Romania to Law-Racovita and wishing them every success for their future scientific endeavours in the Larsemann Hills. Taking from

his bag a huge brass key, beautifully crafted in the workshop at Davis by Wayne Scandrett, he presented Teodor with the means for joint occupancy of the station. Amid rousing applause and salutations in four languages (‘Nerok!’, ‘Zazdoraviya!’, ‘Campei!’, ‘Cheers!’), Teodor was rendered speechless – a sight to behold.

At some point in the proceedings Vladimir invited us to visit Progress I. Encountering a Chinese traverse party on the iceway at Progress I, Vladimir briskly veered the balloon-tired Lada off to the left and promptly put the offside wheels into a crack. When the list got to 45 degrees it was clear we were not going to get out other than through the rear door, which Chris and I did with some alacrity. A friendly Chinese Kässbohrer was press-ganged into assistance and in a few minutes we were on our way. The experience failed to inhibit Vladimir's flamboyance at the wheel and when he cheerfully explained that just in front of us there had opened up a four-metre-deep crack, which had recently been filled, more than one heart missed a beat! Turning around at the airstrip a kilometre further on, we returned in the same jocular manner – though avoiding further mishap.

Our arrival back at Law-Racovita triggered another round of toasts and photographs before our procession could depart for Progress II. Here the fare was Russian, with caviar, cheese, sausages, olives and redcurrant jam. To support the jam was bread made from Russian flour and Australian yeast. And another bottle of the best Smirnoff. Again there were toasts to friendship and collaboration between nations in Antarctica, and enthusiastic welcomes to Romania as a new neighbour in the Larsemanns.

By 9pm our stalwart helicopter pilot's flying day was edging towards its close and we had to go our various ways. The day was one to lift the spirits, bringing our diverse community together in a common purpose and in friendship. As Dave started the Squirrel's engine for the run home, we thought of the many toasts he had drunk during the day with only water, tea and coffee to fend off the cold...a true professional. The glaciers and bergs along the way scintillated with mellowing tints of carmine, alizarin, tangerine, amber, heliotrope, lilac and ochre as the sun slid towards the horizon, bringing to an end a rare day which none of us will forget.

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