

## **Crevasse Roulette. The First Trans-Antarctic Crossing 1957–58**

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Source: Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine Research, 42(2) : 238-239

Published By: Institute of Arctic and Alpine Research (INSTAAR),  
University of Colorado

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1657/1938-4246-42.2.238>

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## Book Reviews

CREVASSE ROULETTE. THE FIRST TRANS-ANTARCTIC CROSSING 1957–58. By Jon Stephenson. Kenthurst, New South Wales, Australia: Rosenberg Publishing, 2009. 192 pp. \$49.95 AUD (hardback). ISBN 1877058661.

CREVASSE ROULETTE describes the crossing of the Antarctic continent by the Trans-Antarctic Expedition (TAE), led by Sir Vivian Fuchs. It is a compelling story of navigating through difficult crevasse fields and extricating Sno-Cats from seemingly impossible situations, but it is also the story of high-quality leadership provided by Sir Vivian, also known as Bunny. As part of the International Geophysical Year (IGY), I spent the Antarctic winter of 1957 with nine other scientists a mere 80 km (50 miles) from the TAE base of Shackleton. There could not have been a greater difference between our experiences at Ellsworth Station and those at Shackleton. By all accounts, Bunny Fuchs was a skillful leader with a genuine interest in the welfare of the members of his expedition. A geologist himself, Fuchs recognized the passion for science among his younger scientists and encouraged research whenever possible. On the other hand, Finn Ronne, our leader at Ellsworth, had little interest in the scientific program of the IGY. As far as we could tell, he was primarily interested in geographical discoveries for which he could get credit. Jon Stephenson, in fact, notes the problems we had at Ellsworth during the winter of 1957 and judges that “the greatest difficulties [at Ellsworth] probably resulted from his [Ronne’s] inflated opinion of his own experience and knowledge.”

Leadership is all important in isolated situations like Antarctic bases during the winter, and successful leaders such as Fuchs deserve recognition. I was impressed by the respect for and pride of Bunny Fuchs by Stephenson. For example, after they reached the Pole Station on 19 January 1958, Stephenson describes the brief speech of Fuchs: “Bunny was in his element, wearing clean clothes, red moccasins, and a white roll neck sweater. He looked impressively fit, his pointed beard trimmed, and he spoke with impressive dignity. I was thrilled to be a member of his team.”

The TAE had started a year ahead of our own arrival at Ellsworth Station, and it had started badly. Their ship, the *Theron*, spent five frustrating weeks battling thick sea ice. It was an ominous start for Fuchs, who noted in his diary, “Looking back one realizes that this was one of the occasions when the fate of the whole expedition must have hung in the balance.” The freezing into the ice of Shackleton’s ship, the *Endurance*, 50 years earlier must have seemed close enough to touch. The *Theron* reached Vahsel Bay on 30 January, more than a month behind schedule and perilously close to the end of the season. Everything was hurriedly unloaded on sea ice in front of the ice shelf, and the ship sailed away 10 days later. The eight men of the advance party left most of the material on the sea ice and concentrated on the building their hut on the ice shelf. Unfortunately, a blizzard on 20 March broke up the sea ice. Twenty-five tons of coal, 300 drums of vehicle fuel, a tractor, and a boat were lost. The eight men would spend the winter in a Sno-Cat crate. (see Anthea Arnold’s EIGHT MEN IN A CRATE) Their experiences were eerily similar to those of

Shackleton’s support party on the opposite side of the continent in the Ross Sea 50 years earlier (see Beau Riffenburgh’s SHACKLETON’S FORGOTTEN EXPEDITION). In spite of these incredible difficulties, the advance party accomplished everything that had been asked of them, including a 580-km (360-mile) journey to study the geology of the Theron Mountains, and they had scouted out the start of the route across the continent.

Fuchs returned to Vahsel Bay with his full team on the *Magga Dan* on 12 January 1957. The *Theron* lost 5 weeks but the *Magga Dan* lost only 5 days. Stephenson, a newly minted PhD in geology, arrived on the ship, and his delight to be in such a magical place comes through loud and clear. He was chosen to be one of three to spend the winter alone at the South Ice base, 440 km (275 miles) south of Shackleton. After all preparations for the winter had been made at South Ice, Stephenson was restless and requested permission for a visit to the nearby Whichaway Nunataks. Fuchs was cautiously supportive, warning him that the season was advanced and bad weather might come at any time, but recognizing how keenly Stephenson wanted to do some research, he gave permission to have him flown out with one companion. They had fuel and food for 10 days even though they expected to be picked up after only one day of surveying and geologizing. However, as Fuchs had feared, the weather did change and the plane could not reach them. After waiting 8 days, they began man-hauling their sled the 50 km (30 miles) back to South Ice. The temperature dropped to  $-46^{\circ}\text{C}$  ( $-50^{\circ}\text{F}$ ), they were traveling much more slowly than they had anticipated (sleds do not slide very well at that temperature), and they began to realize they might not be able to locate the small building of South Ice in all the white vastness. Eventually the plane found them, but it was a close call in the name of geology. To his credit, Fuchs was willing to allow certain risks for the sake of science.

Their winter isolation at South Ice apparently had little of the tension that other Antarctic winters often have. Stephenson’s two companions had already spent two winters or more in either the Arctic or Antarctic and regaled him with countless interesting stories. Eventually the talk got to be too much for him, and he withdrew entirely from speaking to the others for several weeks, not an unusual situation on Antarctic expeditions.

After the winter, Stephenson had a chance for another “geological holiday” before the departure for the Pole. He was able to study the geology of the Shackleton Range and Theron Mountains. The color photographs of both places in his book are exquisite, especially the view of Mt. Faraway, which appears on the back cover.

The main goal of the TAE was not to perform geological research but the dangerous task of driving to the Pole. The journey turned out to have a serious challenge navigating through crevasse fields, and there are more dramatic pictures of Sno-Cats precariously perched at the edges of giant crevasses. Stephenson and Ken Blaiklock drove dog sleds all the way to the Pole, acting as scouts for the vehicles. He has compelling descriptions of that lonely and isolated time, reveling in following Ken’s dog team into the unknown. “It was a wonderful privilege, though I didn’t fully appreciate it until some years later.” Blaiklock navigated using a sun compass, which contained a series of printed azimuth cards for each day, giving the direction of the sun every 10 minutes at

DOI: 10.1657/1938-4246-42.2.238

various latitudes. That particular sun compass had been used by the desert explorer Bagnold in the Sahara in the 1920s, some 100 degrees of latitude to the north! Bagnold's theory for the physics of blown sand even had some parallels with the physics of blown snow. To pass the time while sledding he tried singing but found that it would distract the dogs, "who would pause to look back, querying the noise."

One of the subtexts of the story is the interaction between Bunny Fuchs and Ed Hillary, who was supporting the TAE by scouting a route from the Ross Sea and laying down a fuel cache for the journey beyond the Pole. Hillary had already obtained well-deserved fame from the ascent of Mt. Everest. His proximity to Scott Base and McMurdo Sound meant that he had better radio contact and could send out regular bulletins to the delight of the press. Although Fuchs was the leader, he was less well known and received little attention from the press. Furthermore, his personality was such that he distanced himself from publicity; he only sent out radio communications when there was real progress to report. The press turned it into a race between Hillary and Fuchs, which, of course, it was not. Hillary got to the Pole two weeks before Fuchs. There were no hard feelings, and Hillary guided Fuchs through crevasses to Scott Base. The traverse of the continent took 99 days and covered 3473 km (2158 mi). Fuchs had predicted that it would take him 100 days.

Like all who have spent time in the Antarctic, Stephenson was entranced by the beauty and quietness of that place. In remembering his first feelings at Shackleton Base, he quotes Joseph Conrad about a sailor's tale he heard in his youth that he eventually turned into the story "Nostromo." For Conrad it took 26 years for the memories to jell, "remembering that distant time when everything was *so fresh, so surprising, so venturesome, so interesting*. Perhaps, perhaps [Conrad mused], there still was in the world something to write about." Joseph Conrad found a voice for those memories in "Nostromo." Jon Stephenson has shown that there was indeed something for him to write about in his crossing of the Antarctic 52 years earlier. He has done it well, and the book is certainly worth reading.

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