

CLAUDIO BUNTE – Life at Esperanza in 1978-1979

Olivos, Buenos Aires, Argentina

How old were you?

In 1976, the military dictatorship appeared in Argentina. That year was very special for my country because we underwent two situations in contrast, the world football championship and the border conflict with Chile.

In 1978, I was 19 and was doing my military service in the Air Defense Group - GADA 101 in Ciudadela, Buenos Aires, Argentina. After the first three months had gone by, I was assigned to the Operations Office as a draftsman because I graduated as a mechanical technician in high school. In that office, I made several drawings for a possible military intervention in Chile.

At the beginning of June I read the monthly magazine "El Soldado Argentino", where there was an ad requesting volunteer soldiers, who should have some training in technical skills to join the Antarctic Summer Campaign of 1978-1979.

The Antarctic Campaign had the task of building five households to complete a total of 10. Besides, the installation of a new generator and the usual maintenance tasks of vehicles and base facilities. After sending in my resumé, I waited eagerly until two months later I received a response in which my application had been accepted. On Monday, September 4th, I went to the Antarctic Command to begin the Antarctic adventure which I had always been dreaming of, together with other 27 new adventure companions. On November 21st, we set sails from Buenos Aires on the Aguirre Bay ship of the Argentine Navy and after seven days we arrived in Base Esperanza.



What was your first impression of Hope Bay/Antarctica?

My first impression when I saw the coast, the houses and the main base, from the deck of the ship, was tremendously shocking. I wanted to run over the water to get there as soon as possible. My childhood dream was coming true and I still could not believe it. I took a deep breath of the pure Antarctic air and immediately burst into tears of happiness.



What was your job/role?

I worked as part of the power plant team and took part in the installation of a new generator. Besides, the team carried out the usual tasks of mechanical and electrical maintenance of the base facilities. We also repaired and maintained the vehicles called "Snow tracks".

There were guard duty night shifts at the power plant, which happened every day from 10 pm to 8 am.





What did you enjoy the most?

Among all the tasks I did in Antarctica, I enjoyed two of them very much.

The first one was the tuning of a vertical piano that was in the main base. The piano was in a rather neglected state because it had not been played for a very long time. After cleaning it and repairing some pegs and hammers, I was in charge of tuning it. With the help of the Principal Sub-Officer, who had brought his accordion to the campaign, as usual, and following the rhythm of a tango song called "La Cumparsita", I managed to tune it. After a few hours the piano sounded as if it were new. During the weekends, in our breaks, I used to play many of the pieces I had studied for more than ten years in the conservatory. In February, one Sunday afternoon, there was a magical moment because of a heavy snowfall that was hitting the windows. The sound of the snow acted as a silent audience of tangos, waltzes and many other melodies.



The second task was to paint all the posters and flags in each of the base's buildings and houses. It even included a huge poster that read "Welcome to Argentina" which could be seen from the decks of the ships immediately when they entered the bay.



What were the hardest and the most challenging thing about working there?

The hardest task we accomplished was to change the shackles of the pontoons of the vehicles when the temperature outdoors was of about -20°C . The shackles were fastened with cotters that could only be placed without gloves. Therefore, every attempt to place the cotters would only take us thirty seconds due to the intense cold.

The most challenging task was the construction of a manual crane in only four hours. This crane was used to for the lifting of packing cases during the loading and unloading of ships. The urgency of this work had to do with an accident which happened during the last unloading. Due to the bad handling of a packing case, one of my companions fell into the very cold water of the bay. Thanks to our quick intervention, we managed to rescue him and save him from hypothermia. All the materials used for its construction were from the existing scrap in the base.

What was the most dangerous thing about being there?

I usually performed the job of being on guard duty seven days a week, which did not allow me to share some of the excursions around the base with the rest of my companions.

So one Sunday after lunch, I went by foot by myself up to the Malvinas Argentinas shelter, about three kilometers away from the base. The trip was great. All of Antarctica's landscape was in front of my eyes. It was a great moment I will keep in my mind forever. However, that walk could have cost my life because the road to reach the shelter was in a cracks zone. I did not see any crack due to a thick layer of snow that had fallen the night before.

What was your greatest lesson?

I had several lessons that I finally understood with the passing of years. The biggest lesson I learned was that when someone has a dream and wants it fervently, in addition to doing what is necessary, life will put things in order in a magical and secret way for that dream to happen.

What did you do after leaving Esperanza?

When I returned to the continent, everything seemed strange and I thought the people around me were crazy because of how they moved and walked. The city air obviously did not have the same purity as the air in Antarctica so for two weeks I had strong chest pains every time I breathed in heavily.

One month after our arrival, I left the military service and then I returned to my job which I had at the time of enrolling. At that time I resumed my studies at the University, graduating six years later as a metallurgical engineer.

Currently my recurrent dream is to return to Esperanza with my wife and I hope it is to celebrate the forty years from my first time there.

