



## Then came Mikhail Somov

By Lex Harris

Wintering electronics engineer and keen photographer at Casey Station in 1983 and 1986.

The Mikhail Somov incident happened on Voyage 5, early 1987.

Looking in my archive of that time I see that I kept a detailed dairy back then.

Nella Dan arrived at Casey on the morning of Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> January 1987 and departed for Edgeworth David at about 7:15pm. The ShipAd for V5 had the following schedule:

V5 Nella Dan	Edgeworth David Area		14.1.87
	Davis, Law Base Area	17.1.87	20.1.87
	Maquarie Island	30.1.87	30.1.87
	Hobart		

I joined the voyage at Casey after wintering there in 1986, and the plan was to spend the summer with Ian Allison doing Glaciology research in the Bunger Hills before going home to Australia.

But it was not to be.

Nella Dan encountered heavy pack the day after on 5<sup>th</sup> January, and I recall Capt. Arne Sørensen steering from the crow's nest all day.

That night there was open water for a while through a large polynya then we rammed into more heavy pack ice the next day. We were just 80 miles from the ice shelf but couldn't get through. By 7<sup>th</sup> January the pack ice was closing in, and we were just hovering around 64S 102E, trying to keep a bit of water around the ship, but by 8<sup>th</sup> January we were beset.

The helicopter pilots Gerry Findlay, Gene Johnson and Peter Waters flew a number of ice reconnaissance flights over the next few days in our two on-board Bell 206 Jet Rangers, but the news was not good – heavily ridged sea ice to the west and south, some with sastrugi to 1m indicating fast ice. The



### *About the storyteller*

Lex Harris was wintering Electronics Engineer at Casey in 1983 and 1986.

Lex was a part of the Glaciology Traverse Team both years. He each time spent much of the year away from the station on long inland traverses.

After 5 years with the Antarctic Division and a couple more living and working in Indonesia, he returned to his home town of Perth Western Australia where he lives with his wife Marianne.

About Nella Dan...



helicopter flights confirmed what we knew from our satellite facsimile images – a huge iceberg to the west, estimated as 30km x 50km in size, which was thought to be the actual cause of the ice build-up.

A decision was made to abandon the Bunger Hills program and head to Larsemann Hills as soon as Nella Dan was free, which was not good news for Ian Allison and me as the glaciers in that area were not significant enough for Ian to study.

By 13<sup>th</sup> of January we were still beset with no prospect of breaking free.

Fortunately, on 13<sup>th</sup> January Captain Arne Sorensen received an Inmarsat call from the Soviet ice strengthened supply vessel, Mikhail Somov, offering help. Mikhail Somov was in the area heading for Bunger Hills. The first Soviet MI-8 chopper appeared at about 10:30pm, flying a reconnaissance over Nella Dan. Around midnight we first saw Mikhail Somov's lights on the horizon.

She was about 20 miles away. Two Jet Rangers left from Nella to Somov and returned without landing. Somov arrived at about 3:30am and immediately began breaking Nella out. She broke a "V" around Nella's bow, then drove along Nella's starboard side (greatest ice pressure) till the ice trapping us cracked, and we were free.

It took till about 8:00am to get Nella free, lots of backwards-forwards work, breaking up the ice around Nella. Then she sailed north, with Nella following about 4 Nm behind, to the edge of the pack ice about 35 miles north of where Nella was beset.

We reached the edge of the pack about 3:00pm on Wed 14<sup>th</sup> January. Nella pulled up alongside Mikhail Somov and tied up for a couple of hours.

VIPS from both sides inspected each other's ships. The rest of us "not-so-VIPs" just tossed goodies to each other across the water, Russian hats, mitts etc. for whisky, music etc.

We left Somov at about 5pm and headed for Larsemann Hills. Mikhail Somov turned south again to Bunger Hills. The pack was no problem for Mikhail Somov, but it was decided that Nella would not follow to Bunger Hills in case she could not get out again later in the season.



Nella Dan reached Larsemann Hills on the morning of Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> January and after some very skilfull maneouvers by Captain Arne Sorenson through spectacular icebergs, moored to some fast ice.

After a day of flying in stores and fuel and setting up Law Base, Nella Dan departed for Davis at around midnight.

A party of 19 people stayed for a 4-5 week season at Law Base, with Lloyd Fletcher as Officer in Charge.

After a brief visit to Davis Nella Dan returned to Hobart with a short stop en-route at Macquarie Island.

Bonus information:

Mikhail Somov was built in 1975 and is still operating.

Mikhael Somov knew what besetment was all about. In 1985 the ship was trapped in ice near Antarctica for four months (March - July, 1985) before being rescued by the icebreaker Vladivostok.

Link to more information and film about the Mikhail Somov:

<https://www.net-film.ru/en/film-9208/>

[http://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:350768/mmsi:273450550/imo:7518202/vessel:MIKHAIL\\_SOMOV](http://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:350768/mmsi:273450550/imo:7518202/vessel:MIKHAIL_SOMOV)

One of the two MI-8s (helicopters) that was on Mikhail Somov back then crashed in in Siberia some years later. Lex Harris' photos of the MI-8 on Mikhail Somov is in use in this database on helicopters:

[http://www.helicopter-database.de/photo\\_search.php?type=99999®=&cn=&operator=99999&airport=99999&author=1207&PhotoDate=99999&photoid=&category=99999&sortBy=99999&country=99999](http://www.helicopter-database.de/photo_search.php?type=99999®=&cn=&operator=99999&airport=99999&author=1207&PhotoDate=99999&photoid=&category=99999&sortBy=99999&country=99999)