

# ARMY PERSONNEL HELP UNLOAD SUPPLIES FOR SCIENTISTS IN ANTARCTICA

by Luz Baguioro, Public Affairs Manager – Joint Forces New Zealand

It's the world's coldest and most inhospitable natural laboratory. But for 22 drivers and 23 cargo handlers from the New Zealand Army, Antarctica was their temporary home from January to early February.



Private James Foote

Braving temperatures that sometimes dropped to minus 30 degrees, the Army drivers were behind the wheels of five-tonne six-wheel-drive M-818 military trucks, working around the clock to unload a year's worth of supplies for scientists working on the continent.

Sergeant Kat Wise, who was in charge of the driving team, said they worked 12-hour shifts and moved up to six containers each a day. They unloaded about 3000 tonnes of supplies brought by cargo ship MV Ocean Giant.

"The roads here are wide and the speed limit is 15 kilometres per hour so driving on ice with a 40-foot container is manageable. But it can still be challenging because weather conditions can change dramatically during the day," said Sergeant Wise, who also deployed to the continent as a driver in 2008.

"On some days or a part of the day you'll have sunny, blue skies. But the weather can suddenly turn, with a heavy blizzard and fog creating treacherous conditions on the road."

Notwithstanding the sometimes dreary conditions, there is room for some levity as all the trucks have names – Hot Shot, Lightning, Shagnasty's Nightmare, Frank and Woody, among others.

All the drivers are experienced in driving Class 5 vehicles and many of them have hauled cargo in active combat zones in Afghanistan and the Sinai Peninsula. But more training was done on the ice in early January to familiarise them with the different road conditions in Antarctica.

Lieutenant Commander Ross Hickey, the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) Senior National Officer in Antarctica, said 23 movement operators from the Army worked with personnel from the United States Navy's Cargo Handling Battalion One to unload the ship's cargo and reload it with waste and items for repair from the previous 12 months.

Two drivers and two terminal operators from the Australian Defence Force were also in Antarctica, operating as part of the NZDF contingent.

Major General Tim Gall, the Commander Joint Forces New Zealand, said Antarctica had been one of the NZDF's major missions for more than 50 years, with up to 200 personnel deployed during the summer season.



Sergeant Kat Wise

"Our aircraft fly scientists and tonnes of supplies to the continent. Our personnel, with their specialist skills, are helping advance Antarctic research in a tangible way," Major General Gall said.

NZDF personnel who deploy to Antarctica in the summer season include air crew, refuelling operators, Army engineers, heavy plant operators, communications specialists and staff providing ground support and passenger and cargo handling.

Scott Base, New Zealand's permanent research support station on the continent, is home to about 85 scientists and support staff.

McMurdo is the hub of United States scientific activity in Antarctica and supports the US station located at the South Pole. It accommodates more than 1000 scientists and support people during the summer season.

## SOUTH AUCKLAND MAN IS ONE OF ARMY'S ICE-ROAD TRUCKERS

Takurua Pou joined the New Zealand Army five years ago with a clear goal: to follow in his father's footsteps and make his family and friends proud of him.

"I wanted to be a role model for my family and friends. I also wanted to make my family, especially my father, proud of me," said Private Pou, who was one of 22 Army drivers who went to Antarctica in January to help offload about 3000 tonnes of supplies for scientists working in the world's most important natural laboratory.

On the continent, he drove one of the five-tonne, six-wheel-drive M-818 military trucks to deliver 20-foot to 40-foot containers filled with supplies for United States scientists at McMurdo Station. Like the rest of the driving team, he worked 12-hour shifts to help unload supplies brought by cargo ship MV Ocean Giant.

"I was excited when my platoon commander told me that I was going to work there. Not many people get this opportunity," Private Pou said.

"The biggest challenge has been the weather, because temperatures can sometimes drop to as low as minus 30 degrees. We were told about the dangers of extreme temperatures before going there so we were prepared."

Private Pou enlisted in the Army in June 2012 after graduating from James Cook High School in Manurewa, South Auckland, where he was a deputy head boy.

"I wanted to be a rifleman or a gunner but all the places were filled during my intake. Instead of waiting another six months, I decided to train as a driver and have enjoyed it ever since," he said.

Private Pou went to Fiji in February 2016 as part of an NZDF contingent to help after the devastation caused by Tropical Cyclone Winston.

Based on Vanuabalavu Island in Fiji's remote Lau archipelago, Private Pou delivered building material, military equipment, food and other humanitarian aid to communities damaged by the cyclone.

"The challenge for drivers like me was navigating carefully through gravel, sand, soft mud and fallen coconut trees," he said.

"It was great to be able to help our Fijian neighbours, and to do what we as a Defence Force are trained to do."



Private Takurua Pou