

Obituary

Phillip Garth Law, (Fig. 1) who died on 28 February 2010, was an Antarctic traveller of renown and a polar scientist of great distinction.

I think anyone who's been to Antarctica becomes absolutely obsessed with the beauty and grandeur and the magnitude of it all. . . and those rare moments of discovery when I landed on quite unknown shores and raised the Australian flag, and said, 'Here we are for the first time' (Phillip Law).

While lecturing in physics at Melbourne University in 1947, Law became aware that the Australian Government, egged on by Sir Douglas Mawson, had established the Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) to build meteorological and scientific stations on Heard and Macquarie islands in sub-Antarctica and to reconnoitre a site for a permanent station on the Antarctic mainland. The Government was looking for a Chief Scientific Officer. He instinctively grasped that this mix of high adventure and science was tailor made for him.

By 1949 he was acting officer in charge of the Antarctic Division (including ANARE) and directed its operations for the next 17 years, personally leading 28 voyages to Antarctica during which he not only chose the sites and established bases Mawson, Davis and Casey on prized ice free locations, but used the annual resupply voyages (despite being chronically seasick on every voyage) to explore more than 3000 miles of unknown coastline, and some 800,000 square miles of greater Antarctica.

He called this technique, 'hit and run exploration', in which the expedition would take advantage of good weather to land by launch, DUKW amphibious landing craft or helicopters when they became available, and work around the clock while surveyors took accurate astrofixes from exposed rock where it could be found, geologists chipped samples and biologists assessed the wildlife before the weather broke, as it always did.

The vast Australian Antarctic Territory was the world's last great geographical unknown. Using fixed wing aircraft from Mawson station's purpose built hangar (Antarctica's first) RAAF pilots in Beaver aircraft were the first to see the great ranges of the Prince Charles Mountains, holding back the biggest glacier in the world, the Lambert. Other major geographical discoveries crowded in during the late 1950s and 60s, reached by a combination of traditional sledging with dogs, aircraft, and over-snow vehicles. Phil Law used to say, 'I'm one of the last people in the world who's had the joy of new exploration', jokingly adding that he had discovered ten times as much territory as Scott, Shackleton and Mawson put together.

Phillip Garth Law was born at Tallangatta, Victoria, on 21 April 1912, the second son of a schoolteacher, Arthur Law, and Lillie (nee Chapman). Small of stature, the young Phillip was bullied at school, but pugnacious by nature, he took up boxing to defend himself. He was also an enthusiastic bushwalker in the Grampian Ranges and skied in the Australian Alps. After studying science at Melbourne University, he spent some time as a school teacher. In 1939 he returned to full time study and gained his MSc in physics in 1941. That was also the year he married

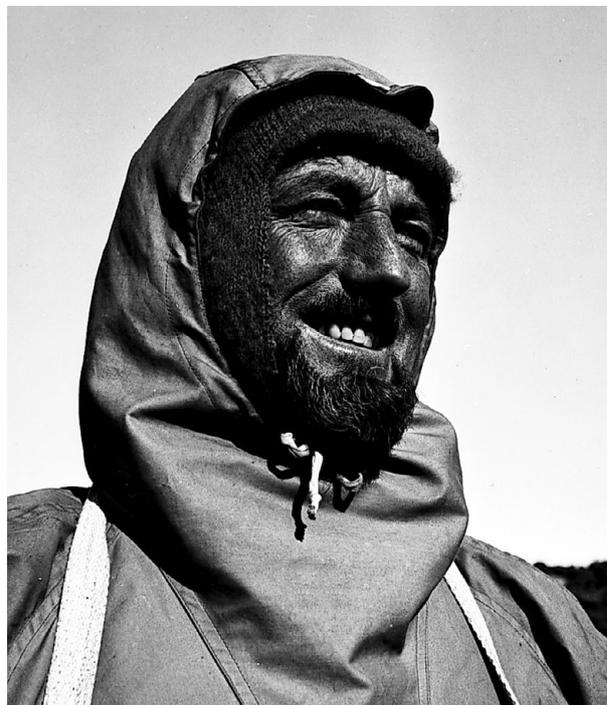


Fig. 1. Phillip Garth Law (1912–2010). Photograph by G.Lowe, taken in 1956 (Australian Antarctic Division © Commonwealth of Australia).

teacher, artist and writer, Nel Allan. Due to Nel's congenital heart condition, the couple decided not to have children.

During World War II Law became secretary of the Scientific Instruments and Optical Committee, travelling on a three month tour of the battlefronts of New Guinea looking first hand at the problems of munitions optics.

Until ice strengthened ships became available in 1954, the Antarctic Division had to content itself with its stations on Heard and Macquarie Islands. Law knew that the Australian Government would soon lose interest in Antarctic operations unless a comprehensive scientific programme was established and a permanent presence secured on the Antarctic continent. Obtaining meteorological data was an obvious practical advantage, but Australia had no glaciologists. Law encouraged physicists to take up that discipline, and fostered cosmic ray studies and upper atmosphere physics. Doctors on the sub-Antarctic stations were asked to undertake biology research.

During the International Geophysical Year in Antarctica of 1957–1958 and at the height of the cold war, Australia was nervous about the Soviet Union building research stations on Australian claimed territory. When Law and his men arrived as the Russians were building Mirny station in 1956, he was unsure how they would be received. A hilarious, vodka fuelled dinner began an enduring Antarctic tradition of harmonious and unfailingly bibulous international relations. This initial contact was helped by Phil Law's uncanny resemblance to Vladimir

Ilyich Lenin, whose bust stood outside the main hut. Delighted Russians asked Law to pose beside the great revolutionary for photographs. The cold war never came to Antarctica.

Phil Law took a great interest in the living conditions of the men on the Antarctic stations; no woman wintered on continental Antarctica until 1980. He made sure that there was a comprehensive library of polar literature and popular novels, a gramophone with classical and light music records. He hoped standards of behaviour would be kept high. There was a formal dinner every Sunday night, and red and white wine consumed. Phil even conducted wine appreciation classes for members of expeditions about to go south, in an era when wine in popular culture was considered plonk that derelicts drank from brown paper covered bottles. He recalls one diesel mechanic calling out, 'Hey Phil, what kind of wine do ya drink with bully beef?'

Always pushing hard for his Antarctic programmes, Phil Law often got up the noses of the mandarins of the Department of External Affairs, more used to the niceties of international diplomacy than the mundane logistics of running Antarctic stations. They could be petty too. In 1960 he was awarded the prestigious Founder's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society, but was refused permission to travel to Britain to receive it personally. He and the Antarctic Division parted company in 1966 after an unsuccessful campaign by Law to get properly funded and adequate salaried positions for his senior scientific and administrative staff. He moved on to a second career as executive vice-president of the Victoria Institute of Colleges, not altogether free from bureaucratic obstruction either, but he was able to change the status and scope of colleges, and was successful in his campaign to have diplomas replaced by degrees.

His interest in Antarctic matters remained undimmed for the rest of his life. Nel Law died in 1990 having been the first Australian woman to set foot on Antarctica when Phil Law took her, amid some controversy, to the continent in 1961. Although a stickler for rules generally, he could sometimes bend them for his own purposes. Nel's wonderful paintings of that trip remain an enduring legacy.

He held many prestigious positions; vice-president, Victoria Institute of Colleges 1966–1977; chairman, Australian National Committee for Antarctic Research 1966–1980; president, Royal Society of Victoria, 1967–1969, fellow, Australian Academy of Science 1978, foundation fellow, Royal Society of Victoria, 1995, and the list is much longer. He wrote a number of books including *Antarctic odyssey*, published by Heinemann Australia in 1983 describing the early years of ANARE and the dramatic and hazardous events of the location and founding of Mawson station; the only natural harbour on the coast of greater Antarctica.

Phil Law's many honours included a CBE in 1961, the Polar Medal in 1969, an AO in 1975, and an AC in 1995. Interviewed by Andrea Stretton for *Australian Biography* in 1993 at the age of 80, Phil said he was not surprised at a certain increasing interest in his career.

I've always felt these sorts of things come with survival. But most people are not recognised until fifty years after what they did. Most of them, unfortunately, die before they're recognised. If you're lucky enough to live to eighty you collect a bit of it. If I live till ninety I'll probably collect a bit more. If I died at sixty I'd be nothing.

Phillip Garth Law made it to his 98th year, richly deserving his sobriquet, 'Mr Antarctica'.

Tim Bowden