

Obituary

Baron Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery died on 13 July 2006 at the age of 86 (Fig. 1). On 11 January 1958, the 60 year old flag of *Belgica* flew once more in Antarctica when a short ceremony marked the construction of a geophysical observatory in Dronning Maud Land. This Belgian contribution to the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957–1958, as well as the subsequent Belgian Antarctic programmes were made possible thanks to the interest, initiative and unrelenting effort of Baron Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery. Like his famous father Adrien de Gerlache, at the end of the previous century, he managed to convince politicians and scientists that the world was not confined by the borders of Belgium.

Gaston de Gerlache was born in Brussels in 1919, the second son of the captain of the legendary *Belgica*. As a young boy he was surrounded by polar books, presented to his father by the pioneers of the heroic age and that to his death filled the bookshelves of his study. As a junior officer in the Belgian forces, and after the occupation of the country by the Germans, he spent some time in a POW camp. On his return to Belgium, after release, he joined the resistance and escaped from the country in 1942. After a seven months' undercover journey with false identities, arrests and escapes that reads like a spy thriller, he reached England where he was promptly imprisoned for a further month. He had to prove his identity and intentions before he could join the Belgian section of the Royal Air Force. After a long period of training he received his 'wings' towards the end of the war. He cherished a photograph of himself sitting in the cockpit of his Spitfire (Fig. 2).

On his return to Belgium, de Gerlache continued flying as a reserve officer, became a lawyer and legal adviser first to industrial groups in textile manufacturing and later in the insurance business in which he ended his career as president and chief executive of a large group.

There was little interest in Belgium in participating in the IGY except for those programmes that could be carried out in Belgium or in the Belgian possessions in tropical Africa. Two earlier proposals for participation in Antarctic research had been shelved and quickly forgotten. When de Gerlache decided to try to continue what was to become a family tradition he had better assets: his wartime experience and his subsequent legal career led to a unique combination of a man of action but one who understood the stream of paperwork, the beloved tool of governments.

The memory of his father, still very much alive in Belgium, opened many doors and the impressive series of results from the *Belgica* expedition helped him

to convince the scientific community. The local IGY committee reversed its negative attitude and, when King Baudouin showed his interest, the last sceptics became supporters and government support was secured.

It was necessary for preparations to start immediately and now, fifty years later, it is far from easy to imagine the mountain of problems that had to be overcome. Additional funding from private sources was needed, there was no Antarctic experience at that time except for de Gerlache himself, who had spent some time as an observer in Adélie Land, and who undertook the leadership of the expedition. A team of technicians and scientists had to be found willing to spend one long year in isolation with the prospect, still frightening in the 1950s, of the long Antarctic night. An ice-strengthened ship had to be secured. A site for the station had to be chosen. This meant landing and building an observatory in the least accessible and virtually unexplored part of the continent protected by an extensive zone of unpredictable pack ice. De Gerlache's organisational talent and his ability to delegate allowed him to overcome all these hurdles. As a member of the expedition that was to take over the station one year later, this writer greatly admired the very thorough preparations that had been made and which solved many of our problems.

Not long after landing in Dronning Maud Land, at the end of 1957, the observatory became operational and began feeding a steady stream of geophysical data into the Antarctic network. The IGY-programme was expanded and this was one of the first stations at which the radioactivity of the air was continuously monitored. Stable isotope (O_{18}/O_{16}) and other glaciological studies were initiated. The first reconnaissance inland was made and a small mountain range was photographed and mapped from a light Auster aircraft of WWII vintage, with an underpowered Bell helicopter as stand by for rescue purposes. The new massif was christened the Belgica Mountains. On a flight inland, the ski of the Auster was caught by a sastrugi, breaking both the strut and ski. Nine years later, the author located the aircraft lying upside down. Underneath, undisturbed by gales and blizzards, the pipe of one of the men on board was found, still ready for use.

There was, of course, no radio contact. De Gerlache and his three companions started to walk back, unaware of the panic at the station and the turmoil in the international press. When the aircraft did not return on schedule, the base informed Brussels and international help was



Fig. 1. Baron Gaston de Gerlache de Gomery.

requested. The Soviet Union dispatched a twin engine Ilyushin from the other side of Antarctica. After several days of flying and down to its last fuel, the plane woke the four Belgians sleeping in their small tent. . . an exciting rescue and one in the finest traditions of international co-operation in the south. The taking off of de Gerlache's group and its replacement by the next over wintering party was also difficult due to severe sea ice but eventually the party was welcomed in Ostend on 2 April 1959 by King Baudouin.

In 1959, de Gerlache was a delegate to the first meeting relating to the Antarctic Treaty in Washington. It was his expedition in 1958 that gained Belgium the status of 'interested nation' and by signing the Treaty, Belgium became one of the 12 original signatory nations. The Belgian station remained operational in 1959 and 1960, but was closed down at the beginning of 1961, due to the lack of further governmental support.

Again, it was thanks to de Gerlache and his relentless efforts, that the Belgian station was rebuilt in 1964 with the Netherlands participating for a payment of one third of the costs. De Gerlache had the overall responsibility as chairman of both the Belgian Antarctic Committee and the Belgian-Dutch Antarctic Committee.

He visited, with evident pleasure, his old hunting grounds again in the summer of 1965, as leader of a large



Fig. 2. Baron de Gerlache in his Spitfire.

Belgian summer party. The fieldwork of two geological-glaciological parties in the Sør Rondane increased during 1966. At the station the programme recommended by SCAR was carried out. The agreements with the Netherlands were correctly fulfilled but inspired no new or major initiatives. It was again regretted that the station had to be closed at the beginning of 1967. There was no attempt to renew this collaboration.

Belgium continued its research for three more summer seasons in western Dronning Maud Land, this time in collaboration with South Africa. De Gerlache, always open to new ideas, endorsed the mapping programme by airborne Radio Echo Sounder which was still in an experimental phase. As chairman he kept a very close watch on the preparations. With his clear, systematic and analytical examination, solutions to possible problems emerged almost automatically.

Starting with the Geology Symposium in Oslo in 1970, a group of scientists launched the idea of a joint European effort in Antarctica. The Council of Europe recognised it as a working party and it chose de Gerlache as chairman and delegate to the Council's Committee on Science and Technology. The idea of collaborating was sound; the science programme was novel, ahead of its time and good and the collaboration and understandings between the smaller countries excellent. Unfortunately the bigger countries had different ideas and the working group was soon forgotten.

In 1985 the 13th Antarctic Treaty meeting was organised in Belgium. De Gerlache stressed the contradiction of Belgium being active in the international diplomatic negotiations about Antarctica without having an Antarctic research programme. Together with the national committee, he submitted a proposal to renew polar research.

The government could not ignore his arguments but the minister responsible passed the idea to his department and that transformed it according to its wishes, and more especially to have it under its control. Antarctica became the property of an anonymous administration that replaced private initiative. As a result, Belgian scientists have been enjoying hospitality aboard ships and aircraft of other nations without having to pay their share of the very high logistic costs. A very cost effective way to carry out research but is it a form of collaboration? Belgian scientists are still active in Antarctica but Belgium, itself, is no longer there.

From 1992 until 1999, de Gerlache was chairman of the Belgian National Committee for Antarctic Research of the Royal Academy. He became honorary president of this Committee when he resigned after the *Belgica* Symposium in 1998 that he helped to organise.

His interest in the world and in Antarctic matters did not diminish when his health slowly deteriorated. When the writer last saw him a few weeks before his death, his mind was as keen as ever, the news about the whereabouts of *Belgica* and the state of the wreck moved him. He

also tired quickly but joked about it. When the writer telephoned him to inform him that an attempt would be made to recover the wreck, he asked to be kept informed. His wish was that the remains of his father's ship be treated with dignity.

When he died in July 2006, he left his wife of many years, Lily van Oost, the charming and inquisitive hostess to so many polar travellers, his children and a score of grandchildren behind. His children have polar interests and are continuing the family tradition.

Gaston de Gerlache bequeathed his rich Antarctic legacy to his three sons who can be proud of this. He wrote *Retour dans l'Antarctique* about his 1958 expedition. He received many medals and decorations for his war and military activities and tokens of honour for his civilian achievements, for example, the U.S. Polar Medal and the Bellinghousen Medal from the Moscow Academy of Science. He was a delegate to many of the Antarctic Treaty meetings and, within the framework of this treaty, he visited the U.S. and Chilean stations in Antarctica as an observer.

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