

THE LAUNCH BY AUSTRALIA POST OF A SERIES OF AUSTRALIAN ANTARCTIC STAMPS COMMEMORATING THE VOYAGES OF THE DANISH SHIPS – *KISTA DAN, THALA DAN, MAGGA DAN AND NELLA DAN.*

SPEECH BY DR PHILLIP LAW ON 15 APRIL 2003 AT THE POLLY WOODSIDE MUSEUM.

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I welcome this opportunity to speak about our famous Antarctic ships and congratulate Australia Post upon choosing them as a theme for the latest series of antarctic stamps.

Australia's establishment of a permanent presence in Antarctica has been utterly dependent upon the availability of ice-strengthened ships. As I was associated with it all, I am in a position where I can trace for you the saga of the Dan ships and the Danish company J. Lauritzen Lines from which the Australian national antarctic Research Expeditions (ANARE) chartered the vessels.

When the ANARE was established in 1947 I joined the organisation as its Chief Scientist. The leader was Group Captain Stuart Campbell. ANARE had three objectives: to set up scientific stations at Heard Island and Macquarie Island; to search the coast of Australian Antarctic Territory; and to find a site for a permanent station. The problem was to find suitable ships for this program.

The Australian Navy provided an LST (Landing Ship Tanks) ex-World War II for the Heard and Macquarie exercises and Sir Douglas Mawson and his collaborating captain recommended using the ship *Wyatt Earp* for the Antarctic search. These were the only two ships in Australia suitable for the voyages.

The *Wyatt Earp* was a 1920s vintage Norwegian sardine trawler that had been used by the American Antarctic explorer Lincoln Ellsworth in the 1930s, after which it was purchased by the Australian Government in 1939. After use during the war as a cargo transport, it was moored as a hulk in the Torrens River at Port Adelaide. For use by ANARE it had to be practically rebuilt and fitted with more powerful diesel engines. As it eventuated, it proved to be utterly inadequate.

Wyatt Earp became *HMAS Wyatt Earp* when the Navy commissioned her late in 1947. I sailed south in this crummy ship leaving Melbourne in December 1947. It was a dreadful voyage and we were lucky to survive it. The ship failed to penetrate the pack ice belt surrounding Antarctica and returned without even sighting the coast. The government then sold her. The other ship, LST 3501 (later *Labuan*), succeeded in establishing the two island stations early in 1948.

Stuart Campbell spent the rest of 1948 searching the world for a suitable polar ship without success. Realising the Antarctic station proposal could not be achieved, and not being interested in the scientific programs at the island stations, he resigned as leader of the ANARE and, in January 1949, I was appointed to take his place. The Government then created the Antarctic Division to co-ordinate the future program and I became the first Director.

As a scientist I enjoyed expanding the scientific programs at Heard and Macquarie islands and as an adventurer I enjoyed the annual relief voyages to Heard and Macquarie. However, my eyes were still focussed upon the great Antarctic continent.

Again failing to find a suitable ship overseas, I proposed to the Government that Australia should build a polar ship and funds were provided for a design to be developed. I worked in 1951 and 1952 with the Chief Naval Architect of the Australian Shipbuilding Board to produce detailed plans for such a ship. (Claude Barker)

Shortly after the design was completed, I learned that a Danish shipping company was, in 1951 and 1952, building an ice-breaking ship to service the Danish lead mines on the east coast of Greenland. Realising that such work could not proceed during winter in the Northern Hemisphere, I contacted Lauritzens and enquired whether they would contemplate chartering their new ship to ANARE for the northern winter (which was our summer).

The ship was *M.V. Kista Dan*, of about 1,500 tons and with accommodation for around 20 passengers. Lauritzens agreed so I drew up plans for an Antarctic expedition using *Kista Dan* in 1954 and submitted these through the Department of External Affairs to the Australian Government. As part of the exercise in financing the proposal, I agreed to close the Heard Island station and transfer available equipment to the new Antarctic station.

Kista Dan arrived in Melbourne in December 1953 and, after using her to relieve the Macquarie Island station, I sailed with her to Antarctica in January 1954. During a highly adventurous and dangerous voyage, we succeeded in discovering a suitable site in MacRobertson Land for the new station, landed stores and built several huts and officially named the station "Mawson". I then took *Kista Dan* eastward to explore unmapped areas of the coast and made the first landing and investigation of the Vestfold Hills where later I was to establish a second station, "Davis". Leaving there we ran into a severe hurricane, the Captain could no longer hold the ship heading into a 150 knot wind, and she "broached to" and drifted side on for 36 hours amongst pack ice, bergy bits and icebergs, in immense seas. We were lucky to survive. If we had sunk it would have been the worst accident in Antarctic shipping history, with the loss of more than fifty lives.

We continued to use *Kista Dan* for the years 1955 to 1958, including the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957-58 and the establishment of Davis Station at the Vestfold Hills. After the IGY, the USA offered Australia its Wilkes Station, so *Kista Dan* was used to take over that base in 1959. Over all the years of *Kista's* service we explored huge stretches of the coast of Australian Antarctic Territory.

Lauritzen found that Antarctic chartering was profitable and, as other nations began operating in Antarctica during and following the IGY, the company set up a polar division and built three more ships – the sister ships *Thala Dan* and *Magga Dan* and, later, the *Nella Dan*. Incidentally, *Nella Dan* was named after my wife Nel who, in 1961, became the first Australian woman to visit Antarctica.

As each new ship became available, ANARE had first option on its uses so, over the years, we used the Dan ships as follows:

<i>Kista Dan</i>	December 1953 – March 1957
<i>Thala Dan</i>	December 1957 – March 1982
<i>Magga Dan</i>	January 1959 – March 1962
<i>Nella Dan</i>	January 1962 – December 1987

(In the overlapping years, two ships were used)

Nella Dan made 85 voyages altogether for ANARE (believed to be more than any other Antarctic vessel). She was finally wrecked at Macquarie Island.

Kista Dan became, deservedly, a very famous ship. After her use by ANARE, she was used by the British Antarctic Survey. She then sailed several times under charter in Canadian polar waters and, finally, she was used by Sir Ranulph Fiennes (under another name, "Benjamin Bowring") as the support ship for his Trans-Globe Expedition that circled the world, north to south, crossing both poles. *Kista Dan* was finally broken up and sold as scrap iron.

Magga Dan was used by Sir Vivian Fuchs to support his part of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1955-58, by the French in 1963, by the Belgians in 1964-67, and in 1968 made the first tourist cruise to the Ross Sea from New Zealand, organised by Lindblad Travel (U.S.A.). She was ultimately broken up like *Kista Dan*.

Thala Dan, after 1982, was used by the Brazilian Government for its Antarctic programs.

So, today, we and Australia Post, are honouring four ships that have not only played a major role in establishing and supporting the ANARE stations, but have also been an important part of the broader history of international activities in polar regions.

I would finally like to pay a tribute to the Lauritzen Shipping company of Denmark. When we first chartered *Kista Dan*, J. Lauritzen Lines was a medium-sized family company headed by two brothers – Knud and Ivor – who were the sons of the founder, J. Lauritzen. I became a good friend of Knud and we collaborated closely over the period 1953–1966. Upon my retirement in 1966, the association with Lauritzen Lines continued until the wrecking of *Nella Dan* in December 1987. By then, Lauritzen Lines had expanded enormously, becoming a public company and the largest shipping line in Denmark. It no longer operates polar ships. The Dan ships were particularly well suited, in size and quality, to our requirements and our men made lasting friendships with their officers and crews. Undoubtedly the Lauritzen Company made a major contribution to the establishment and development of Australia's Antarctic stations.

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Lecture to the Danish Club, 18 September 2003

I accepted the invitation to lecture here tonight — a very rare acceptance — because I wanted to pay a tribute to the part played by Denmark in the development of Australia's role in Antarctic affairs.

At a time when Australia's plans to establish a permanent station in Antarctica were stalled through lack of a suitable ship, Denmark provided the answer to the problem in the form of the small icebreaker "Kista Dan". In December 1953, her departure from Melbourne with the pioneer Mawson party marked the beginning of a 34-year association with the Danish shipping company "J. Lauritzen" from which we chartered, in succession, four ships.

I was honoured to become a friend of the head of the company — Knud Lauritzen — who on several occasions entertained me and my wife Nel during our several visits to Copenhagen. One entertainment was particularly memorable. Our visit coincided with a visit to Copenhagen by the Royal Covent Garden Ballet Company from London. Lauritzen had arranged a bay cruise for the ballet dancers on board the company's small training sailing barque "Lilla Dan" and had invited Nel and me to join them.

It was a perfect warm sunny day. We sailed along, sunning ourselves on deck and partaking of oysters, prawns, crayfish and champagne. A piano accordion player provided jazz music and the ballet dancers dived enthusiastically. It was really magic!