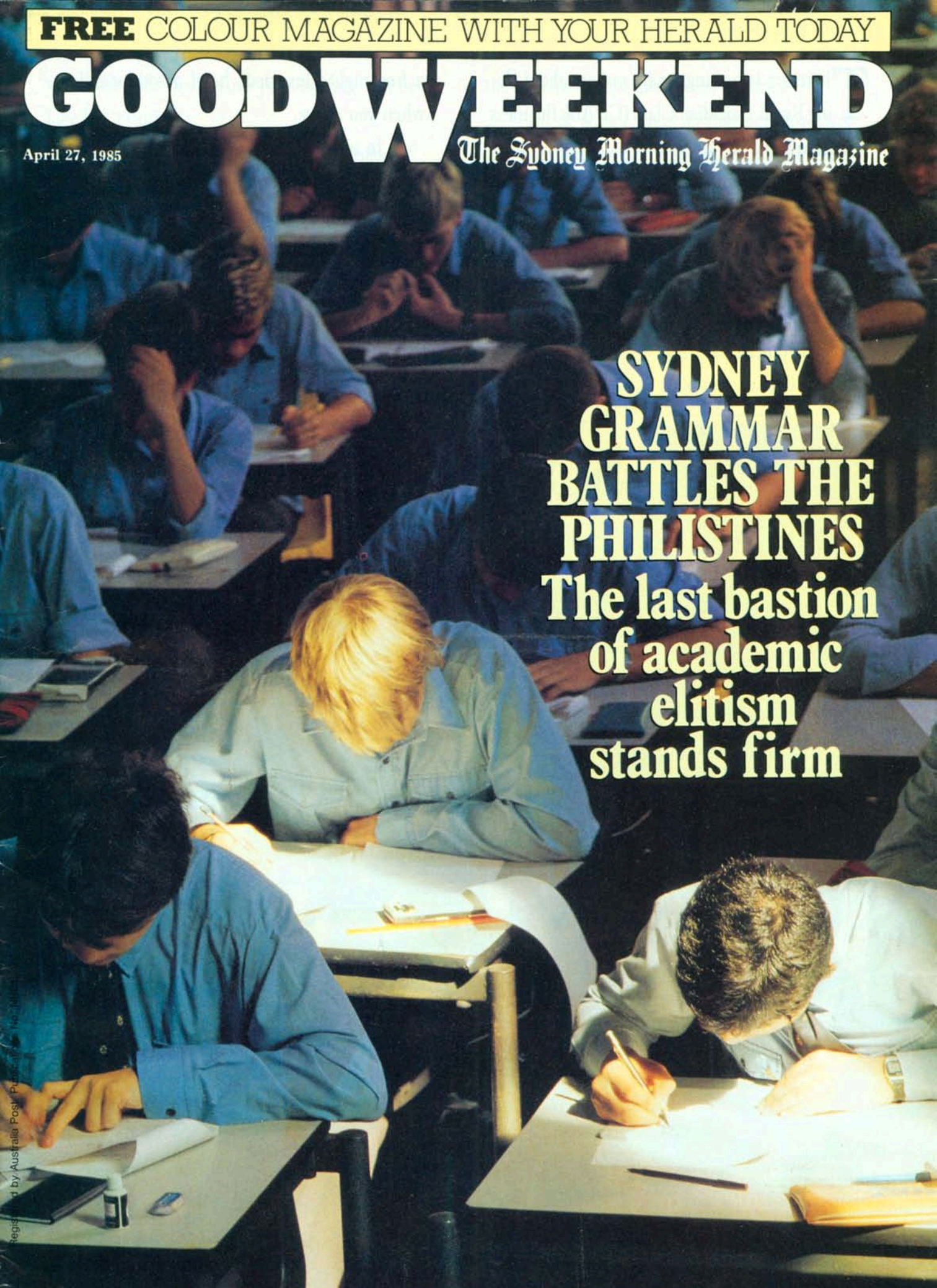


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GOOD WEEKEND

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ANTARCTICA

No dogs, cigarettes or women, please - we're British

The men of the Antarctic no longer have to hack seals to pieces and feed them to the huskies, as ROBERT TEMPLE reports.

THE FROZEN continent of Antarctica may seem an inhospitable place to call home but there are a hardy few who are hooked on the place.

Perhaps the most savage conditions are endured at the southernmost British base, known as Halley Station. It is

perched on an ice shelf 320 km from the nearest land, more than 11 km from the nearest sea.

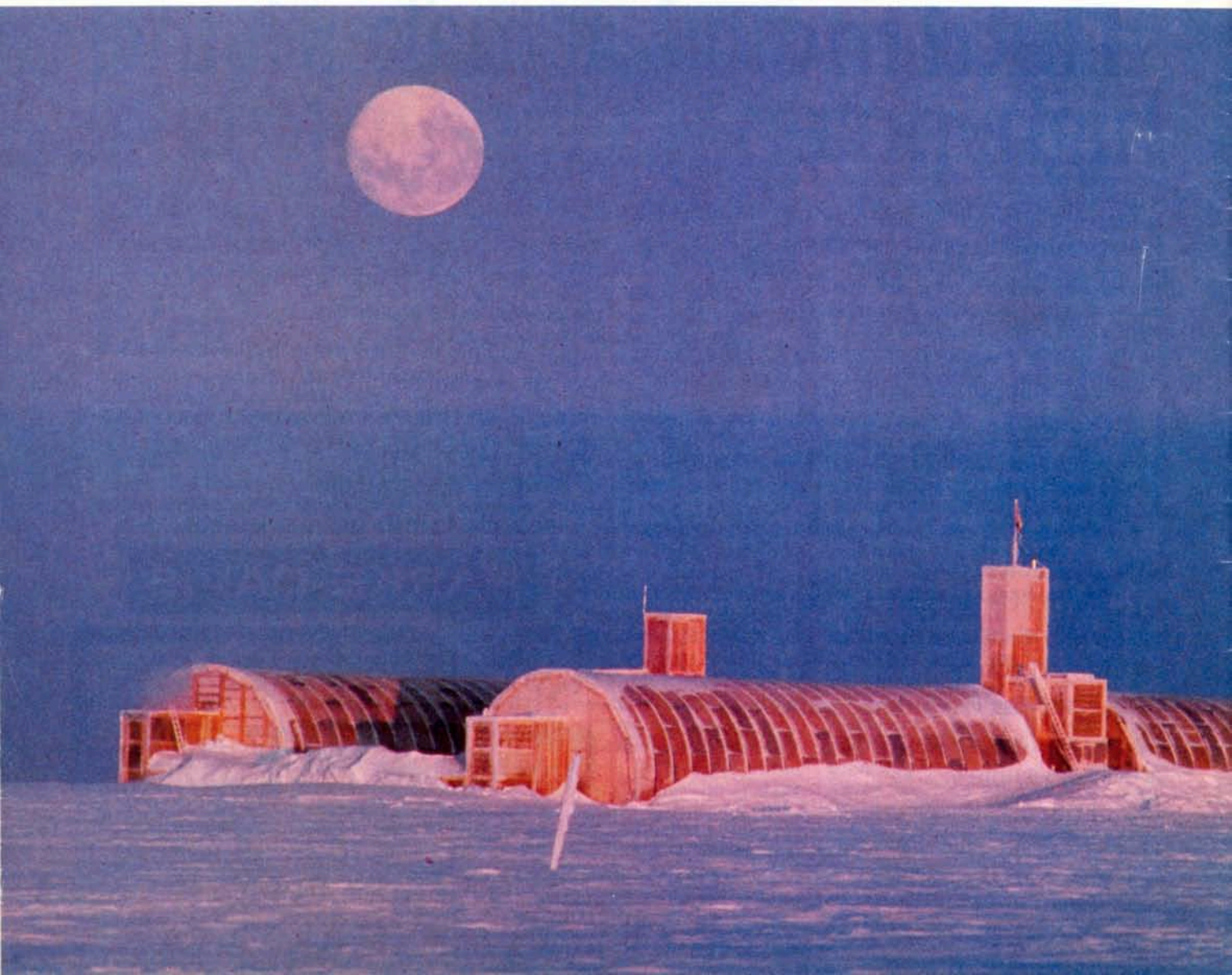
Roughly every 10 years, the base is crushed by the weight of the ice which has settled on top of it and the residents have to be evacuated to new buildings. Three Halleys have disappeared beneath the ice since the first was set up in 1957. The construction of the latest is a tale of ingenuity and endurance in the face of hellish conditions.

Four two-storied buildings inside protective wooden cylinders have been built, the first of their kind in the world. They are designed to withstand the

weight of the ice and snow destined to crush them.

A team of 62 men spent the 1982-83 Antarctic summer assembling what they could and then left a team of 13 to finish the job during the terrible winter, under the command of Doug Allan, a 33-year-old Scot. During the construction, the men had to live in a single room much of the time. Allan describes the difficulties of taking a shower:

"The only place we could have the shower was in a corner of the garage, which was unheated, and so you had a temperature of about minus 25 degrees celsius in which to take off your clothes.



You kicked the ice out of the bottom of the shower cubicle and had 47 seconds to take your shower before the water ran out in a converted coffee boiler."

Things were little better in the makeshift kitchen: "It was about minus 7 degrees celsius at your ankles and then it was comfortable about your waist. If you could stand on a chair and put your head up near the ceiling, then it wasn't too bad."

At the same time, the men had to cope with the darkness of the Antarctic winter, which lasts for 100 days. For six weeks of this time, the sun does not appear in the sky at all. Even the horizon often cannot be made out.

The rest of the polar night has periods when the sky is vaguely light, so that you can see to move about. A red glow in the sky is neither dawn nor sunset but a combination of both. As Allan says: "The sky will become faintly red, then fairly red, then faintly red and then it's dark again."

These faint traces of light might not seem like much but they were like minor miracles to the men after weeks of darkness. Allan describes his elation:

"I remember one Saturday in early

July when I stepped outside. And for the first time you could see a bit of texture in the cumulus clouds above. You could actually look through and you could see the grey of the clouds and the blue of the sky above.

"A couple of days later you could see the orange coming back to the snow carts, whereas before they'd been just dark shapes, silhouettes. And suddenly there was distance restored to the world and you could see things that were more than a metre away. When everything starts to come back like this, it's very uplifting."

The unremitting darkness does have certain advantages. This is the best time of year for the auroral lights, which can be seen best against a dark sky. The Halley Station's purpose is to study such phenomena and as soon as the construction was finished the scientists moved in.

Allan says, by way of understatement: "Obviously Halley is not the place to be if you've got claustrophobic tendencies." Residents are restricted to the buildings for the duration of the winter and there are no windows. "It is certainly one of the most isolated communities that it's

possible to get anywhere. There is no comparison to oil rigs or anything like that. Once that ship goes, you can't leave."

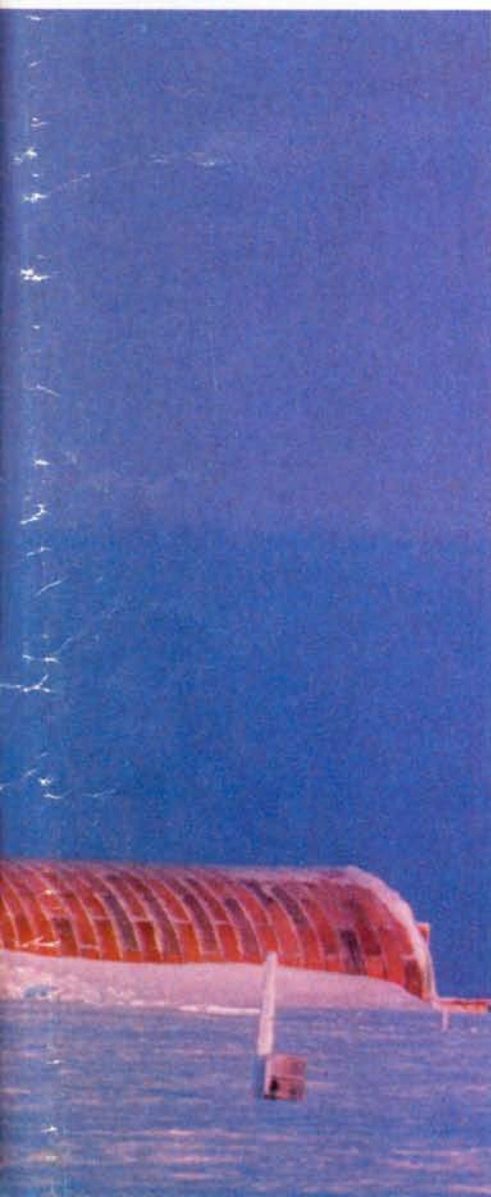
Old hands say that many people tend to get hooked on the Antarctic and have to keep going south, as they call it. But the type of men who go south is changing and so is the lifestyle.

Allan says: "It used to be a lot more roughie-toughie-type folk. When you mention Antarctica, people's minds turn to the cold, the dogs, living in tents and all that sort of thing.

"But that went right out the window years ago. They don't use dogs any more. As for the cold, you often don't have to go out in it; many jobs keep you inside.

"Nowadays, to get the sort of scientific results which the British Antarctic Survey needs, they're having to send down really whizzkid electronics engineers, biologists and so on. And you cannot get a person who is of that sort ▶

Far left, the new Halley Station; below, one of the protective wooden cylinders takes shape; bottom, some ice carving



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DOUG ALLAN



Antarctica

and at the same time expect them to go out and hack seals apart and feed them to the dogs.

"The social side of base life has become far more sophisticated nowadays. Film night used to be a good occasion to get all of the base together for a bit of a special event. Now the advent of videos has put this under pressure.

"Down there you are all interdependent and if you get someone being a social outcast, then it can split the base and make life very difficult. We can't let people disappear with their own private videos in their room every night. So although they've recently introduced videos to all the bases, they are big desk videos with big screens and it keeps videos as a special show, a social event."

Smoking is a problem. It is banned in the dormitory blocks, for safety reasons, and in dining areas. But smoking cannot be banned from shared areas such as the lounge because it would create social divisions and tensions. Non-smokers, therefore, have to lump it.

Allan says: "Everyone on base usually ends up having his own little bit of space; ideally it's a room, perhaps a laboratory where they're working. Not the bedrooms, because they're all two-man rooms. But everybody finds somewhere where he can go for a bit of peace and quiet and privacy."

The British Antarctic Survey has not let a woman stay the winter on a base.

Allan says: "Britain is the only country not to have women overwintering. The Americans and Russians have been doing it for years. The excuse has always been that the budget is tight and the bases haven't been able to offer dual facilities.

"You could winter women at some bases very easily. But if you do, I think you must winter at least two. I think it's daft to winter a single woman and yet the Americans have done it.

"As for relationships, I don't think you can make an official policy. If you were to get two people on a base showing each other special affection, then they would be bound to upset some people. It's not the most responsible thing to do but it's up to them. You can't ban it.

"I don't think having women will make things any easier but I don't think it's fair to deny women the opportunities that Antarctica offers for the furtherance of their careers and anyway it's a beautiful place for anyone to be.

"I think that in the future we will certainly be seeing women at British bases in Antarctica." □

Top, the supply ship Bransfield; centre, a display by the auroral lights; bottom, one of the snow carts used for transportation