

Fire endangers Hobart's ice ship

By DAVID CARRIGG

AN engine-room fire has left the Hobart-based Antarctic research ship Aurora Australis without power in dangerous sea ice off the Antarctic coast.

None of the 79 people on board was injured in the blaze, which broke out early yesterday morning while the ship was in deep water 185km off the coast.

The extent of the damage is not known.

Australian Antarctic Division director Rex Moncur said the fire was extinguished by flooding the engine room with an inert gas.

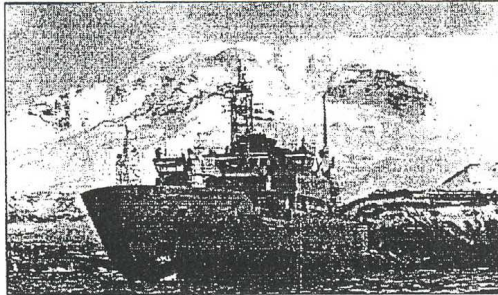
The gas had to be cleared before crew wearing breathing apparatus could enter and assess the situation.

He said it could be some time before the extent of damage was known.

The 25 crew and 54 expeditioners, mostly from Hobart, would wear thermal clothing and stay below decks to keep warm.

"There is always a risk of becoming ice-bound in these waters at this time of the year but at this stage we don't expect to launch a rescue mission from Hobart," Mr Moncur said.

The ship was in regular radio contact with the Antarctic Div-



A file photo of the Aurora Australis in Antarctica.

ision's Hobart office.

He expected the expeditioners and crew to abandon the pioneering winter voyage and return the ship to Hobart for repairs in about a week.

The Antarctic Division, which hires the ship from P&O Australia, would not be hiring another vessel for the expedition.

"It's a pretty specialist vessel so you couldn't get the sort of research capability that this ship has got readily available," Mr Moncur said.

"We hope the next voyage can still proceed on schedule, which is early September."

The Aurora Australis is owned by P&O Australia and chartered by the Antarctic Div-

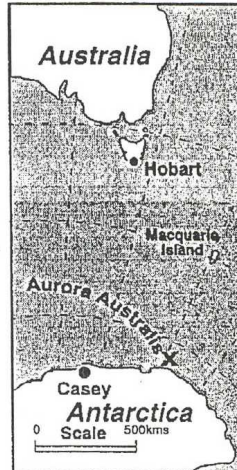
ision for about \$11 million a year.

P&O Australia managing director Richard Hein said yesterday the company was assessing the situation and a number of rescue options were being considered.

It was too early to say whether P&O would be liable for the cost of the aborted mission.

The vessel left Hobart last Wednesday for a seven-week voyage mainly to study a polynya, an area where savage winds break up the sea ice and cause heavy, salt-laden water to sink to the bottom.

The ship was nearing the polynya when the fire broke out.



Oceanographers believe a closer study of the phenomenon will lead to a better understanding of climate change.

CSIRO Marine Research oceanographer Steve Rintoul said the dense bottom water, created only in a few places in Antarctica and to a lesser extent in the North Atlantic, was critical to the chemistry and biology of the world's oceans.

Fire strands Antarctic ship in sea ice

AN engine room fire has disabled the icebreaker Aurora Australis in sea ice, deep in Antarctic waters.

There were no injuries and the ship was not in danger after Tuesday night's fire.

Australian Antarctic Division director Mr Rex Moncur said. But Mr Moncur said he expected it would have to abandon its pioneering mid-winter voyage to the edge of the Ant-

arctic continent and return to Hobart for repairs.

The cause of the fire was not known but the engines have been turned off, with the ship 100 nautical miles from the Antarctic coast.

THE CANBERRA TIMES

Thursday 23 July 1998

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Antarctic voyage stopped by fire

But Mr Moncur said he expected Aurora Australis would have to abandon its pioneering mid-winter voyage to the edge of the Antarctic continent to return to Hobart for repairs.

The fire had been extinguished and the engines were turned off, leaving the ship in sea ice about 100 nautical miles from the Antarctic coast, he said. The weather was good.

HOBART: An engine room fire has disabled the Australian icebreaker Aurora Australis in sea ice, deep in Antarctic waters.

Australian Antarctic Division director Rex Moncur said there were no injuries and the ship was not in danger after Tuesday night's fire.

Crew had to wear breathing apparatus to enter the engine room and it was likely to be 24 hours before the damage could be fully assessed.

The Aurora, with 54 expeditioners and 25 crew, left Hobart last Wednesday for a seven-week voyage which was to have focused on a polynya, an area where savage winds break up the sea ice and cause heavy, salt-laden water to sink to the bottom.

Mr Moncur said, the cause of the fire was not yet known.

2:45 am July 22, 1998

"Please don't be alarmed but we have an uncontrolled fire in the engine room ..."

about 10 minutes later ...

"Please don't be alarmed but we're lowering the lifeboats ..."

Sydney Morning Herald
23 July, 1998

ICEBREAKER BURNS

A pioneering \$2-million Australian scientific voyage to the mid-winter Antarctic polynya is expected to be scrapped following an engine room fire on the Aurora Australis yesterday. The 54 people on board were forced on deck in the



Aurora fire could end voyage south

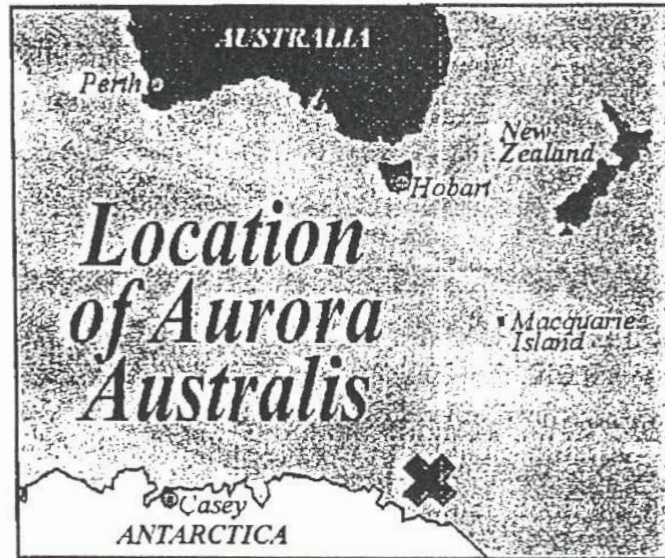
By Sandra Langdon

ANTARCTIC research vessel the Aurora Australis is expected to abandon its winter voyage following a fire in its engine room on Tuesday night.

Australian Antarctic Division director Rex Moncur said yesterday the fire was extinguished and the vessel was in no immediate danger.

However, it was unclear how the fire started and the extent of the damage was still being assessed.

"They are going through the process of checking all the things that might have been damaged and will then be making a decision whether to restart one of the engines and return to



Hobart on one engine," Mr Moncur said.

The vessel is in sea ice about 1300 nautical miles (2500 km) south of Hobart and 100 nautical miles (185 km) from the Antarctic coast.

Weather conditions were considered good yesterday.

There were no injuries among the ship's 54 expeditioners and 25 crew, who set out on the voyage last Wednesday.

However, if the vessel is forced to return it will be a setback for scientists who hoped to study a newly discovered source of dense, oxygen-rich bottom water on what was the Aurora Australis' first deep winter voyage to the edge of the Antarctic continent.

Bottom water is critical to the chemistry and biology of the world's oceans and is made only in a few places in Antarctica and the North Atlantic.

"We are going to have to replan our activities. The likelihood is research will be set back 12 months," Mr Moncur said.

The Aurora Australis is owned by P&O Australia and chartered to the Antarctic Division.

Blaze on ice vessel

By SARAH DENT,
environment reporter

A FUEL leak is being blamed for a fire in the engine room of Australia's Antarctic research vessel *Aurora Australis*.

The 94m ship, owned by P&O Australia, is stuck in sea ice about 2500km south of Hobart and 185km from the Antarctic coast.

Engineers, unable to assess the full damage of the fire, hope to restart at least one of the engines today in the hope of returning to Hobart.

They fear they will have to abandon their voyage — the first in mid-winter to study climate change.

Australian Antarctic Division director Rex Moncur said none of the ship's 54 scientists and students or 25 crew was injured in the blaze.

He said weather conditions were good and the vessel was in no danger.

"People on the ship had to go down to the engine room with breathing apparatus on so it has been difficult to determine the extent of the fire and the damage it has caused.

"All the ship's safety systems worked well to extinguish the fire.

"It's hard to say what the cause was but it was probably a fuel leak."

The nine-year-old *Aurora Australis*, capable of breaking through ice 1.8m thick, has made more than 50 trips to the Antarctic.

It left Hobart last Wednesday for a seven-week voyage to study polynya, an area where winds break up the sea ice and cause heavy, salt-laden water to sink to the ocean floor. Scientists are hoping to better understand the phenomenon as part of climate and global warming studies.

Hard battle to repair ice ship

By DAVID CARRIGG

THE Hobart-based Antarctic research ship *Aurora Australis* remains crippled in ice floes 180km off Antarctica.

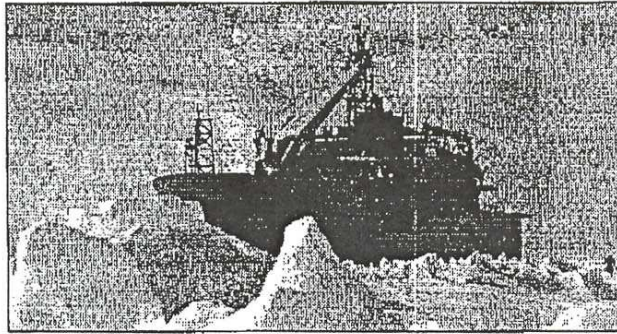
A fire swept through the ship's engine room early on Wednesday but none of the 79 people onboard was injured.

One engine was destroyed and the crew is desperately trying to restore the remaining engine in a bid to avert a costly salvage operation.

Voyage leader Ian Allison said yesterday the ship's two generators were operating, and heating and communications had been restored.

Engineers had not fixed the remaining engine and were still working on replacing burnt wiring.

Mr Allison said morale among the 25 crew and 54 expeditioners, mostly from Hobart, was still high.



A file photo of *Aurora Australis* in Antarctic ice.

He said the outside temperature was -18°.

Australian Antarctic Division director Rex Moncur said progress repairing the engine was slow because cable and wiring had been burnt and lighting in the engine room was limited.

"One engine is burnt and one is a write-off," he said.

"If the engineers can get

the burnt engine working, the ship could return to Hobart within seven days."

But the going would be slow because the ship would be unable to force its way through ice. Mr Moncur said the ship's helicopter would have to fly ahead and spot a clear path for the ship.

"The ship is drifting at about one to two knots and

under no pressure from the ice, which is dampening the swell," he said.

The Antarctic Division has chartered the vessel from P&O Australia since 1990, paying about \$10 million for each six-month season.

Questions over who will pay for the abandoned trip, which cost more than \$1 million, and the possible cost of chartering a vessel to salvage the *Aurora Australis* remain unanswered.

Mr Moncur said P&O Australia was responsible for all engineering on the ship but it was too early to comment on who would pay.

An Antarctic Division spokesman said family of those onboard were not able to speak directly with the ship. However, updated information was available on the Antarctic Division's website at www.antdiv.gov.au or on 1800 030 744.

MEDIA MONITORS

THE WEST AUSTRALIAN
Friday, 24 July 1998

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Antarctic ship to abandon mission

■ HOBART

THE Australian icebreaker *Aurora Australis* will have to abandon a pioneering mid-winter expedition and limp home through the Antarctic sea ice on one engine.

The ship remained disabled in sea ice yesterday about 185km from the Antarctic continent after an

engine fire on Tuesday night, Australian Antarctic Division director Rex Moncur said yesterday.

The 54 adventurers and 25 crew were without heating for the first 24 hours.

The *Aurora* left Hobart last week for a seven-week voyage which was to have focused on a polynya, an area where savage winds break up the sea ice and cause heavy, salt-laden water to sink to the bottom.

Polynya have been linked to climate changes.

Fire brings icebreaker home early

THE icebreaker *Aurora Australis* will have to abandon a pioneering mid-winter Antarctic expedition and limp home on one engine.

Australian Antarctic Division director Rex Moncur said yesterday that after an engine room fire on Tuesday night the ship was still disabled in sea ice about 100 nautical miles from the Antarctic continent.

The crew started two auxiliary generators overnight to provide the ship with heating and light, Mr Moncur said.

The 54 expeditioners and 25 crew were without heating for the first 24 hours.

During this period everyone wore heavy clothes, but they were not in danger from the bitter cold because of the ship's thermal bulk, he said.

The fire was in one of the two main engines.

Mr Moncur hoped the second engine, which was not directly affected, would be started soon.

But all its piping and cabling first needed to be checked.

Contact had been made with other Antarctic nations in case help was needed, he said.

But he was confident the *Aurora*, chartered from P&O, could return to Hobart on one engine.

The *Aurora* left Hobart last Wednesday for a seven-week voyage.