

# Construction on Ice

by Elaine Parker

I don't know what the dollars-per-square-foot construction cost is down here, but it's plenty. "Down here" is McMurdo Station, Antarctica, where I've spent the past two Antarctic summers working in the station's construction supply department.

A large part of the job is breaking down shipping containers full of stuff and repacking it into crates, which we build on site from dimension lumber

and plywood. It's something like refilling the bins at a gigantic outdoor hardware store. The smallest task can blossom into a grueling test of endurance, and the winds that come screaming off the polar plateau have a way of getting your attention. I've seen the wind send full 55-gallon drums rumbling around like deranged rolling pins, and scatter 4x12 stress-skin panels like playing cards.

Above all, you have to be creative. If you need something that's not on station, you'd better figure out a way to make do, because the resupply ship comes only once a year — unless sea ice conditions prevent it from coming at all. And you think the back of your pickup is cluttered? Rooting around for missing items down here is practically a full-time job.

On one fairly typical workday last year, for example, a plumber clumped into my office looking for 300  $5/8 \times 3\frac{1}{2}$ -inch grade 5 bolts with nuts and washers. I searched the database of supplies and found that there were plenty of them in three separate locations. So I layered up with clothing, climbed into Lorelee — our faithful, never-shut-down forklift — and headed off to the first site listed, an ancient Jamesway shelter. No bolts. I made a note to change the computer records.

Next stop was milvan #816, one of the big cargo containers that come in on the supply ship. I shoveled out the door, chipped off the ice encasing it, and pried open the complaining metal with a crowbar and sledge. There were the bolts. Wrong grade. Make another note.

After lunch, I drove out to the storage area we call the cargo lines. There are rows and rows of God-knows-what sitting out there in the blizzards, some of it dating back to when the station was built, back in the '60s. I call these Pandora's boxes, because you know that when you get into them, there'll be some sort of hell to pay. In an ancient crate decorated by fused cargo straps and rusty nails, the label long since weathered off, I found my bolts. It was a nest of buried treasure, containing hundreds of pounds of hardware of every description, all carefully housed long ago by some conscientious worker — painstakingly separated, counted, packaged, and recorded.



*The author at McMurdo Station, Antarctica.* Diesel engines are left running continuously to avoid difficult cold starts. On the other hand, round-the-clock summer daylight makes it possible to work outdoors at any hour.



*If we don't have it, you don't need it.* McMurdo's outdoor storage yards contain countless crates and boxes of materials, some of which date back to the 1960s.

I chopped and shoveled until I could get my forks under it, then gingerly lifted it to take it back to the office. All it took was one little bump in the road to shatter the crate and spray loose hardware all over the main thoroughfare. (It would later take two people two days to clean up the mess and rebuild the crate.)

To add insult to injury, I managed to collect the 300 bolts I was after, but as hard as I raked through the debris, I never did find the nuts and washers. I made another note and called it a day.



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**Stormy weather.** Antarctica is the highest, driest, windiest, coldest place on earth. In weather like this, the ballast provided by a 50-lb. box of nails can make the difference between walking and being blown off your feet.

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