FIRST INTERCONTINENTAL FLIGHT FROM CAPE TOWN LANDS AT PERSEUS AIRSTRIP

On 22 November, the new Perseus Airstrip, located just 60 km north of the Princess Elisabeth Station, welcomed its first intercontinental flight when an Ilyushin 76 plane carrying the first scientists of the 2019-2020 season from Cape Town touched down just after 18:00 UTC.

The Perseus Airstrip is now part of DROMLAN (Dronning Maud Land Air Network), which is responsible for all logistics in the Dronning Maud Land region of East Antarctica. Under ALCI (Antarctic Logistics Center International), the logistics service provider in DROMLAN based in South Africa, the new airstrip is partly maintained by the BELARE (Belgian Antarctic Research Expedition) team members and will allow savings of both time and money for scientists doing research at the Princess Elisabeth Station and its vicinity.

An ideal location

Situated at 71°25’42” South and 23°33’57” East, the 3 km-long Perseus Airstrip sits atop a blue ice field close to rounded nunatak called Romnoes. The climate at this location is quite dry, with very little snow accumulation. This is due in part to the fact that the airstrip sits on the leeward side of Romnoes, allowing it

to be partially protected from katabatic winds from Antarctica's interior, and snow accumulation. This makes bulldozing maintenance to smooth out the airstrip easier than it would be at other locations.

Sitting on solid blue ice in a cold environment that never goes above freezing also means that the airstrip won't be at risk of melting during the austral summer, which can sometimes happen at stations at the coast when temperatures get warmer.

Great benefits to science

The new airstrip is within a couple of hours' driving distance from the PEA station.

"Before the Perseus airstrip was operational, scientists always had to fly to the Russian Novo (Novolazarevskaya) Station 450 km further to the west and take a feeder flight to get to the Princess Elisabeth Station," explained Henri Robert, the International Polar Foundation's Science Liaison Officer and one of the passengers on this flight. "Sometimes bad weather could hold up scientists at Novo for days or even a week, and that's a big loss of time if you only have four weeks to do your research project. Since a feeder flight is in this case no longer needed between Novo and PEA, the cost of the overall bill to transport people and cargo to the station can be reduced. This also offers more opportunities to bring heavy scientific equipment directly to the vicinity of the station.

When Henri arrived, he and the other scientists were driven to the Princess Elisabeth Station by members of the BELARE team in customised Toyota Hiluxes. The journey took less than four hours. The following day, a separate BELARE crew used Prinoth tractors to haul to the station the scientists' equipment along with supplies for the station, including fresh food from South Africa.

"In terms of convenience and savings, participating in the development of this runway has been well worth the investment of time and effort," Henri stated.

Contribution to infrastructure

The Perseus Airstrip project has been in the works by ALCI over the past two seasons, during which time the Princess Elisabeth Station team has participated in its maintenance.

This activity is part of the contribution BELARE makes to DROMLAN. Each station in the DROMLAN region in East Antarctica agrees to take part in the maintenance of common logistical infrastructure every research team in the region uses.

During the 2019-2020 season, ALCI is building a hangar at Perseus to house maintenance vehicles such as a firefighting truck and bulldozers that will be used to maintain the airstrip.