

# In the wake of the Belgica

## Dixie Dansercoer and a team of passionate explorers following the steps of Adrien de Gerlache

**Antwerp, 14 September 2007** - In celebration of the 110th anniversary of the Belgica expedition, Dixie Dansercoer and a team of passionate polar explorers, intend to repeat Adrien de Gerlache's historic expedition to the Antarctic. Today, the Euronav Belgica crew is preparing to set sail from Antwerp to reach Antarctica in the winter of 2007-2008. Whilst in the Antarctic, Dixie and his team will not only follow step by step the route taken by Adrien de Gerlache, but also climb previously unexplored and unnamed mountains and gather ecological and meteorological data to compare the Antarctic today with 110 years ago. By testifying about this experience, the expedition members feel they can play an educational and awareness raising role, in particular with young people.

### **The Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration**

This story starts 110 years ago, on the 16th August 1897. Adrien Victor Joseph de Gerlache (lieutenant in the Royal Belgian Navy) and his multinational crew of Belgian, Romanian, Polish, Norwegian, Russian and American members set sail from Antwerp to Antarctica. It was the first scientific and most cosmopolitan expedition of the Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration. Two of its members subsequently became world famous: second officer Roald Amundsen the first person to reach the South Pole in 1911 and Doctor Frederick Cook who claimed to have reached the North Pole in 1908.

The initial expedition carried out groundbreaking work including gathering valuable meteorological, geological and cartographical data and information regarding unknown species, Antarctic fauna and ice phenomena. This expedition was a giant step in exploration of the still undiscovered South Land, as Antarctica was then known. The journey faced many obstacles. On 28 February 1898, after having sailed for a month in what later would be named the "de Gerlache Strait", the Belgica became trapped in the ice and stayed there for 13 months. As a consequence, Adrien de Gerlache and his crew were the first ever to overwinter in Antarctica which allowed them to thoroughly record a wealth of scientific evidence and data that was never reported before.

### **The New Age of Antarctic exploration**

Today, an expedition team of experienced polar explorers is going to follow the route that was taken by Adrien de Gerlache, 110 years ago. The expedition will be led by Dixie Dansercoer, one of the most famous Belgian polar expeditioners. Laurent Dick, Troy Henkels, Pieterjan Kempynck, all men with a special link to polar expeditions, will join him in this project. Experienced sailors Michel Tordoir and Andre Mechelynck will be the

# Press Release

skippers on board. As part of the educational mission of the expedition and to assist in sailing, a young cadet from the Bulgarian Naval Academy, Rumen Grozev, was selected to join the expedition as a first mate. Young cadets were also selected from France and Belgium to join the crew as second mates at strategic points in the journey to Antarctica. The expedition will be assisted by Belgian meteorologists including Marc De Keyser, who will keep the crew updated on weather conditions and help guide the boat on its journey.

The expedition is a tribute to a rich Belgian tradition and legacy in shipping and exploring: place-names like Antwerp Island, Liège Island, Ghent Island, Brabant Island, Belgae and Flanders Bay illustrate Belgium's long-lasting commitment and involvement in Antarctic exploration. One of the aims of the expedition is to revisit the sites of the original 20 landings and compare findings from 1897 with how the region has evolved today. The expedition also wants to demonstrate best in class behaviour on sustainable exploration of the region. The team will carry out research based on a list provided by WWF, featuring research about reducing numbers of penguins, adelies, gentoos and macaronis. One very important operation, will be comparing today's ice masses with the ice mass that was meticulously recorded during Adrien de Gerlache's initial expedition.

## **Itinerary of the current expedition**

On 15 September, the crew sets sail from Antwerp to the Canary Islands where they'll arrive at the end of September. From that point, a second mate from the Antwerp Marine Academy, Frans Doomen, will come on board. The boat will continue its route with Michel Tordoir, the first mate, Rumen Grozev, and Frans Doomen, second mate, to reach Rio de Janeiro in November. In Rio a talented young cadet from the French "Ecole de la Marine Marchande", Bénédicte Le Vourch will come on board and will assist Michel and the two other mates in sailing the tough part to Ushuaia. From that point on André Mechelynck and the full crew will set out for Antarctica where the itinerary will follow the 110 years old route in the wake of the Belgica including the 20 landings.

The "*In The Wake Of The Belgica*"-expedition is solely sponsored by Euronav.

Today's expedition is made possible through the sponsorship of Belgian shipping company Euronav, who are providing operational support. Euronav CEO, Paddy Rodgers, explained why the expedition fits with the company's own sense of purpose: "At Euronav, we have a strong belief in self improvement and we endeavour to set new and better ways of working. By sponsoring this expedition, we express our support for a pioneering spirit and a belief in the power of inspiration to effect change. We also state our desire to take responsibility for our working environment – the ocean – and motivating our staff, families and friends in the process."

The expedition progress and more information are to be found on:

[www.inthewakeofthebelgica.com](http://www.inthewakeofthebelgica.com)

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# Press Release

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**About Dixie Dansercoer**

*Since the mid-eighties, Dixie Dansercoer has undertaken numerous expeditions and challenges with their groundbreaking character, both in terms of innovation and from a technical viewpoint, at the centre. His crossing of the entire Antarctic continent on foot - together with Alain Hubert - as well as the Ultimate Arctic Expedition and the Bering Strait Odyssey, are patent illustrations of this. Together with polar travel, his ascents of Mont Blanc, Mount Kenya, Mount Fuji and Mount Everest have fundamentally changed his philosophy and his general attitude toward life. Managing challenges is therefore not new to him.*

**About Euronav**

*Euronav is one of the world's leading independent tanker companies engaged in the ocean transportation of crude oil and petroleum products. Being a leader in its market, Euronav has a strong commitment towards safety and the environment. The company is compliant with the International Safety Management Code (ISM) requirements, which assure a high level of safety and environmental protection policies and practices. Furthermore it has achieved the ISO standard 14001. The ISO 14001 Standard is a voluntary standard for Environmental Management Systems.*

*Currently the average age of Euronav's fleet is 5 years. Euronav is working towards compliance with the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) guideline on Ship Recycling Resolution A.962 (23), to be able to provide Green Passports for its vessels (documents that should follow the entire life of a vessel, beginning with its construction). To optimize the security of personnel and environment, all ships are constructed with a double-hull.*

*Euronav works towards minimising the impact of its business on the environment. This is achieved by: working with suppliers to reduce plastic packaging by requesting a minimum of unnecessary packaging, compacting rubbish prior to discharging the rubbish ashore, discharging of all sludge and slops to specialised shore side facilities, applying coatings with a high cost silicon paint that improves propulsion efficiency and reduces both carbon and paint emissions.*

## Press Information

### The Belgica: a pioneering expedition led by Adrien de Gerlache (1897 – 1899)



Over 110 years ago, Lieutenant **Adrien de Gerlache** of the Belgian Navy conceived, organised and led the first International scientific Antarctic Expedition. This expedition was the most cosmopolitan in the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration. Five nationalities were on board of the expedition ship *Belgica*: 9 Belgians, 6 Norwegians, 2 Polish, 1 American and 1 Romanian. Two of its members became world famous: second officer Roald Amundsen who reached the South Pole in 1911 and doctor Frederick Cook who claimed to have reached the North Pole in 1908.

It took about three years to prepare the Belgica expedition. The 250 tons three masted barque purchased in Norway underwent extensive refitting before it was renamed *Belgica*. On 16 August 1897, the *Belgica* set sail from Antwerp to Antarctica.

This expedition was the first purely scientific expedition to Antarctica and in this sense, the Belgica expedition was one of the most important ever to visit Antarctica. The journey, however, was not an easy trip. On passing Drakes' Passage a crew member was washed overboard. Despite a heroic act by the captain, jumping overboard with a life line, the crew member, although caught, could not be saved. On 23 January 1898, the crew spotted land: Antarctica. From 23 January to 12 February 1898, the expedition completed 20 landings on the islands and mainlands along the Belgica Strait, later renamed the de Gerlache Strait. Then the expedition set south, following the rim of the pack ice. On the 28th of February 1898, the barque became trapped in the ice of the Bellingshausen Sea. Despite incredible efforts from the crew to escape the icy water, the *Belgica* remained frozen in the ice for 13 months.

This was the first time ever that anybody overwintered in the Antarctic. The consequence of spending the winter was high: the excruciating cold, the lack of fresh food provision and 1600 hours of gloom and darkness had a pernicious impact on the crew's health, leading to depression, anxiety and "polar aenemia". Dr Frederik Cook therefore imposed a strict diet of raw penguin and seal meat that provided the basic vitamins so that the crew could survive.

# Press Information

Despite the care of the doctor, one of the expedition members died and two sailors suffered mental illness.

Finally, on the 14th March 1899, just before the onset of the second winter, the crew managed to clear the ice by cutting manually and blasting a channel of 600 meters length through pack ice of 2.6 meters thickness.

Adrien de Gerlache and his team of scientists left us a wealth of knowledge about Antarctica. For the first time meteorological data was gathered during a whole year, including during the Antarctic winter. The expedition examined the geological composition of the Antarctic Peninsula, made the first in depth study about ice phenomena in Antarctica and about the composition of seawaters and its currents; the first land animals were discovered and many new specimens of the Antarctic fauna and flora brought back. From the many organisms discovered in the Antarctic Ocean, the Antarctic food chain could be described. This expedition was a giant leap forward in the exploration of the Antarctic.

The expedition returned to Antwerp on the 5th November 1899 where the successful team was triumphantly received.

Today, Antarctica is still subject to continual scientific research. There are many Antarctic polar bases in the region and research vessels constantly scan the fragile area for data, giving us insights into climate change.

The establishment of the Belgian Roi Baudouin base (1958) and Belgium's participation in the Antarctic Treaty negotiations reinforced the country's interest in this continent. In 1985 Belgian Science Policy set in place a multi-annual scientific Antarctic research programme, in order to respond to Belgium's obligations as a founding member of the Antarctic Treaty and to consolidate its position in the Antarctic Treaty System.

In 2007-2008 and on the occasion of the International Polar Year (IPY), Belgium has started the construction of a new research station in Antarctica. The station, designed following eco-construction principles and with a maximum use of renewable energy sources and wastewater treatment, will be the first zero-emission station in Antarctica. This new research platform will be offered to Belgian as well as international researchers. Adrien de Gerlache's expedition to Antarctica initiated the rich history of Belgium's involvement in Antarctic matters. A rich history that continues today and proves its relevance given the ever changing climate.

## In the wake of the Belgica: the purpose

### **A tribute to Adrien de Gerlache**

Adrien de Gerlache was born in the city of Hasselt in 1866. At a young age, he became fascinated with sailing. Coming from a noble family, his pioneering seafaring ambitions were not supported by his family, but he was persistent and after graduating from the Université Libre de Bruxelles, he enrolled in the Nautical College of Ostend. In 1894 he started planning an expedition to the relatively undiscovered Sixth Continent: Antarctica. After three years of preparation, he finally set sail for Antarctica, heading a multinational crew on board the Belgica. At the time they departed he was only 31 years old but despite his youth, as head of the expedition, he showed true leadership and was held in high esteem by his crew.

Adrien de Gerlache was the first explorer ever to stay for 13 months in the blistering cold of the South Land as Antarctica was then known. Even though some of the crew members on the Belgica became more famous (Roald Amundsen, Frederik Cook), his accomplishments are to be greatly valued.

This heroic and almost forgotten page in the history of Belgium deserves to be brought back to public recognition.

### **Scientific research**

Adrien de Gerlache's expedition to Antarctica 110 years ago has provided us with a wealth of knowledge regarding Antarctic research. It was the first expedition ever to include scientific results that were later internationally recognised. On its way to Antarctica the expedition explored various areas. For the first time meteorological data of the geological composition of the Antarctic peninsula was gathered during a whole year, including an Antarctic winter. The first profound study about ice phenomena in Antarctica and about the composition and movement of sea waters was made. Unknown plants were reported, numerous new specimens of the Antarctica fauna were discovered and for the first time the Antarctic food chain was described.

Today, Dixie's expedition will compare Adrien de Gerlache's findings with newly gathered data and will compare today's ice mass volumes with earlier recorded data.

# Press Information

## **Protecting the environment**

By going on this expedition, the crew members express their commitment to preserve and protect the oceans by exploring one of nature's most untouched and vital reserves. This expedition wishes to comply with all rules and regulations of the 1994 Environmental Protection Act. It is the wish and desire of the expedition members to undertake this venture in order to raise public awareness to the fragile nature of Antarctica as the prime barometer of our Globe's health. Respect for the environment is extremely important for the expedition team. Therefore, throughout the expedition, they endeavour to leave nothing behind but their foot prints and take nothing back but their memories and informative video and photo shoots; because the future is our environment.

## **Educate a new generation**

Our children are tomorrow's generation. Therefore they need to be involved and become environmentally aware citizens. This autumn, an international interactive educational project will be launched in order to learn more about the environment, the ocean and all kinds of weather phenomena. This expedition should leave a marker in order to raise interest in exploring the environment and learning more in order to protect.

## The expedition team

All expedition team members have several polar voyages behind them which helped them in preparing for this great Antarctic adventure. All six are in optimal physical and mental condition to face the challenges of the "*In the wake of the Belgica*" expedition.



### **Dixie Dansercoer - Expedition Leader (Belgium)**

Dixie is one of the most famous Belgian polar expeditioners and he is the leader of the "In the wake of the Belgica" expedition. He has an impressive expedition track record and is a well-known writer and keynote speaker on this topic. Dixie has a long history of adventure and exploration, which includes crossing the entire South Pole on foot, several polar trekking and numerous significant sports performances. He was also the first person ever to have successfully crossed on foot the Arctic Ocean, from Siberia to Greenland. From his several daring adventures, he developed an understanding of the basic necessities to achieve any goal. He is married to Julie Brown.



### **Michel Tordoier - First Skipper (Belgium)**

Michel Tordoier is an experienced sailor who discovered his passion for sailing at a very young age. He successfully graduated from the Nautical College of Antwerp and built up a wealth of experience via regular sailing trips. Pushing his skills to the next level, he undertook a 32 months single-handed sailing trip, to Scotland, Orkney, Shetland, the Faroe Islands, Jan Mayen, Spitsbergen, Greenland, and back to Belgium, spending three winters in the 60° North. Michel is currently preparing a five to seven year trip to Argentina and Chile, including the Falklands, South Georgia, the Kergelen Archipelago and Antarctica.



### **André Mechelynck - Second Skipper (Belgium)**

André Mechelynck is specialised in marine mechanics and boat building. He is not only a practised boat builder, but also an experienced sailor. During the '80s and '90s, alongside Eric Tabarly, he participated several times – on the boat and in constructing participating boats - in the Whitbread Around the World Race. André also contributed to the construction of the well-known yacht "Pelagic" from Skip Novak. He gained a lot of experience in sailing during trips to Patagonia, Antarctica and South Georgia.



### **Troy Henkels – Cameraman (USA)**

Troy Henkels is 39 years old, lives in Alaska, and works as a Communications Technician. He earned a BA degree in Business Management at the University of Northern Iowa. Since that time he has travelled and lived in various places across the U.S.A. and around the world, including Alaska, and Antarctica. He is an avid mountaineer, ice climber, paraglider, mountain biker, windsurfer, kitesurfer, musician, photographer, and

# Press Information

journalist. Troy has spent a total of 16 months, two summers and a winter, in the Antarctic working as a Communications Technician. He played a key role on the Search and Rescue team at the American Base in McMurdo. Two of those months were spent at Amundsen/Scott South Pole Station. He has kite skied at the South Pole, Siple Dome, and the Ross Ice Shelf, not to mention Iceland and Alaska.



## **Laurent Dick – Photographer (Switzerland / USA)**

Laurent is a professional photographer, author, multi-media producer and public lecturer based in Alaska.

Being a local in the polar region, Laurent has also worked as a mountain guide on Mount McKinley and has guided wilderness/rafting trips throughout Alaska. Laurent has also worked as the official photographer and media liaison of Yukon Quest International Sled Dog Race. As a year-round resident of Alaska and Canada for 16 years, Laurent has extensively photographed throughout Alaska and Canada.



## **Pieterjan Kempynck – Communications (Belgium)**

Pieterjan is responsible for expedition communications and acts as liaison officer with the expedition's base camp at Euronav Antwerp. Pieterjan currently works as a management consultant and was first introduced to the world of polar expeditions when he acted as project manager at the base camp for The Bering Strait Odyssey, Dixie's and Troy's attempt to cross the Bering Strait - from Alaska to Siberia and back again (2005).

Together with a small team, Pieterjan travelled to Alaska to support the departure of the expedition. Pieterjan is an avid all-round sportsman (wind & kitesurfing, biking, running), has travelled extensively to find the best waves and has been participating in national windsurf championships (1987-1990) and multiple national and international cycling events (a.o. Cristalp).



## **Rumen Grozev - First Mate (Bulgaria)**

Rumen Grozdev Grozev is a final-year student at the "Nicola Vaptsarov" Naval Academy in Varna Bulgaria and a graduate of the Mathematical High School. He is an enthusiastic sportsman whose daily regime includes bodybuilding and jogging. He also enjoys swimming, scuba diving, and football. He has a wealth of experience at sea including sailing in the

Black Sea and the Pacific Ocean. He is certified as a radio operator (GMDSS-GOC) and holds an amateur diver certificate. 33 candidates from 4 participating schools applied for the first mate position. Rumen was one of 10 cadets selected to attend the sea trials in the North Sea. His performance at the sea trials, and especially his sense of humour, team spirit and tenacity, singled out Rumen as the winner of the First Mate position for the "In the Wake of the Belgica" expedition.

## The Euronav Belgica

The Euronav Belgica is a 47' expedition sailing yacht, made by the French yard Caroff Duflos. Her hull is made of steel and the deck is made of stainless steel. The yacht has a retractable keel to meet the risks of sailing in ice bound areas which also enables it even to sail onto a beach.

It is a sister ship of Eric Brossier's "Vagabond" sailing vessel that completed the first arctic circumnavigation (via the North-East and North-West passage) in 2002. Dutchman Henk van de Velde used a similar yacht from the same yard on his North Pole passage attempt. The Euronav Belgica has sailed around the world with previous owners. During the "In The Wake Of The Belgica" expedition, she will be flying the Belgian flag.

All necessary safety equipment, conforming to an ocean going vessel, is on board. The yacht carries a 10 man life raft, together with 2 EPIRBs and 2 handheld Iridium satellite phones. The Yacht is therefore fully equipped for both security and communication between the expedition and the public following the expedition, whether through conventional media or online.

The Euronav Belgica will set sail under the Euronav flag.

