**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 78 people on board was injured in the blaze, which broke out early yesterday morning while the ship was in deep water 166 km 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, and 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 Division’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 Australasia, 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 Division 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 the 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 in a lesser extent in the North Atlantic, was critical to the chemistry and biology of the world’s oceans.

**Sydney Morning Herald — 23 July, 1998**

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 ...."
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.
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 23 crew and 64 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 dappling 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 Australis 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.

THE WEST AUSTRALIAN
Friday, 24 July 1998

Antarctic ship to abandon mission

■ HOBART

The Australian icebreaker Aurora Australis will have to abandon a pioneering mid-winter Antarctic expedition and limp home through the Antarctic ice 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 ice-free area where savage winds break up the sea ice and polar bears have been linked to climate changes.