

Albatross Award of the American Miscellaneous Society

Scripps Institution of Oceanography Archives

The Albatross Award was established by the American Miscellaneous Society (AMSOC). AMSOC was christened by Gordon Lill and Carl Alexis of the Geophysics branch of the Office of Naval Research (ONR) in the summer of 1952 over a pile of proposals to that office that could be categorized no more closely than one at a time, i.e., they were all miscellaneous (Knauss et al., 1998; Shor, 1978). Knauss et al recounts (1998) that AMSOC was formed “to see the lighter side of heavier problems.” Carl Alexis provided AMSOC’s motto, *Illegitimi non Carborundum ... don’t let the bastards grind you down* (Knauss et al., 1998).

Willard Bascom (Bascom, 1961) described AMSOC as follows:

Any scientist who has business with ONR's Geophysics Branch is likely to claim membership in the American Miscellaneous Society since there are no official membership rolls. In fact, there are no bylaws, officers, publications or formal meetings. Nor are there any dues, for funds are a source of controversy. The membership is largely composed of university professors or scientific researchers but the rumor that only persons can be admitted whose research proposals to ONR have been turned down because they are too far-fetched is completely false — it is merely a coincidence.

AMSOC has been described as “a mildly loony, invisible college of otherwise mature academicians ... exceedingly democratic, but harmlessly anarchic” (G, 1973).

Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “... there appears to be no remaining records of AMSOC bylaws, and some question if there ever was a written record. Nevertheless, the two key bylaws that all AMSOC members recall and cherish are:

- 1) Any two founding members of AMSOC constitute a quorum and can take any initiative or action in the name of AMSOC without consulting with, or receiving the approval of, other members.
- 2) All member of AMSOC automatically become founding members of AMSOC at confirmation of membership.”

In 1998, Knauss et al. estimated there were about one hundred AMSOC members (Knauss et al., 1998). Two of AMSOC’s earliest committees were one to inform animals of their proper taxonomic classification and another seeking to establish groups around the world prepared to greet visitors from outer space (Knauss et al., 1998).

AMSOC took a serious turn a few years after founding when a Moho Subcommittee was established to study the Mohorovicic Discontinuity marking the boundary between the earth's crust and mantle. When Project Mohole was funded by NSF, AMSOC took charge in 1958 as an official study unit of the National Research Council's Division of Earth Sciences.. and got into Long COres drilling program (LOCO) and the ocean drilling business. After the success of Project Mohole Phase I involving drillings off Guadalupe, Mexico, in March and April 1961, operational control returned to NSF, and the AMSOC Committee continued in an advisory capacity. After negotiations with NSF, the AMSOC Committee dissolved itself in 1964.

AMSOC occasionally awards its albatross, a mounted adult specimen, to a deserving oceanographer. The recipient keeps it until delivery to the succeeding honoree at a scientific meeting. AMSOC’s Albatross Award originated in 1959 at a dinner party at the home of Gordon and Mildred Lill whose guests included Arthur Maxwell and his wife and John Knauss visiting from Scripps Institution of Oceanography (Knauss et al., 1998). They lamented the lack of awards and prizes for oceanographers and decided to rectify the situation (Knauss et al., 1998). The albatross itself came from a store room at the Scripps Aquarium-Museum in 1959 (Knauss et al., 1998).

Following are recipients of Albatross Awards (Knauss et al., 1998):

- 1) Gordon Lill, John Knauss, and Arthur Maxwell received the Albatross Award in Washington, D.C. in 1959 “for conceiving the Award.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “since it was their idea in the first place, they gave the first one to themselves, knowing they might not otherwise be nominated.”
- 2) Walter Munk received the Albatross Award in New York in 1959 at the First International Congress on Oceanography “for work on tidal friction and the length of the day; for example, drive all cars to Fairbanks.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “there is more than one way to change the length of the day.”
- 3) John Swallow received the Albatross Award in Helsinki in 1960 at the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics meeting “for innovative measurements of ocean currents both AC and DC.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “the deep circulation has never been the same since Swallow figured out a way to measure it directly.”
- 4) Harrison Brown received the Albatross Award in Hawaii in 1961 at the Pacific Science Congress “for contributions to political oceanography” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “Harrison Brown was the first chairman of the National Academy of Science Committee on Oceanography, which is generally accepted as establishing wide-based support for oceanography in both the political and scientific communities.”
- 5) Victor Vacquier received the Albatross Award in Berkeley in 1963 at the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics meeting “for displacing Pacific Ocean 700 miles.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “Vaquier and his magnetometer measured ... magnetic stripes and delineations in the Pacific.”
- 6) Henry Stommel received the Albatross Award in Tokyo in 1966 at the Pacific Science Congress “for having abandoned oceanography’s most cherished chairs.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “when Stommel first became unhappy with the Woods Hole administration he went to Harvard, then he accepted a brand new Captain Cook chair at Hawaii, only to say no to both Harvard and Hawaii and settle at MIT.”
- 7) Sumner Pike received the Albatross Award in Woods Hole in 1968 at a National Academy of Science Committee on Oceanography (NASCO) meeting in Woods Hole in 1968 “for study of the oceans and other liquids after 5:00pm.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “Sumner Pike was the wise old man of NASCO, a former investment banker, and a member of the original Atomic Energy Commission. Pike brought wisdom and common sense to a committee otherwise made up of natural scientists.”
- 8) Bill von Arx received the Albatross Award in Tokyo in 1970 at a Joint Oceanographic Assembly “for contribution and confusion resulting from GEK (also for using big words).” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that von Arx was “the inventor and prime exploiter of the Geomagnetic Electro Kinectograph... [which] does measure ocean surface currents, sort of.”
- 9) Roger Revelle received the Albatross Award in Mexico City in 1973 at an American Association for the Advance of Science meeting “for coveting the bird over all other awards.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that Revelle “was honored with [American Geophysical Union’s] highest honor, the Bowie medal... In his acceptance speech he said there was only one award he would rather have, the Albatross.”
- 10) Sir Edward Bullard received the Albatross Award in Edinburgh in 1976 at the Joint Oceanographic Assembly “for unintelligible geomagnetism.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “oceanographers had difficulty comprehending his studies of the Earth’s magnetic field resulting from movement within the core.”



Roger Revelle after presenting Sir Edward Crisp Bullard with the Albatross Award of the American Miscellaneous Society in Edinburgh Scotland

- 11) J. Tuzo Wilson received the Albatross Award in Toronto in 1979 “for making faults run backwards.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “his flamboyant graphics at meetings explaining mid-ocean ridge fronts were spectacular, even if not always acceptable.”
- 12) John Isaacs received the Albatross Award in Woods Hole in 1980 at the Third International Congress on the History of Oceanography “for unique and non-conventional ideas concerning the oceans.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “his ideas ranged from extracting energy from ocean salinity gradients to providing Los Angeles with fresh water from icebergs towed up the Pacific from Antarctica.”
- 13) Sir George Deacon received the Albatross Award in Halifax in 1982 at the Joint Oceanographic Assembly “for fathering Margaret and the Institute of Oceanographic Sciences.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “need more be said?”
- 14) Paul Scully-Power received the Albatross Award in Vancouver in 1987 at the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics meeting “for finding a way to observe the ocean without going to sea.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that he “was the first trained oceanographer to fly in space.”
- 15) Joe Reid received the Albatross Award at the Joint Oceanographic Assembly in Acapulco in 1988 “for his outrageous insistence that ocean circulation models should bear some resemblance to reality.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “he is fighting a losing battle, as modelers continue to multiply while those who analyze data scratch for a living.”



Joe Reid and the Albatross Award, 1988

- 16) Michele Fieux received the Albatross Award in Vienna in 1991 at the International Union of Geodesy and Geophysics meeting “for energetic efforts in international and interocean exchange.” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “after resolving the foreign clearance problems, and having one cruise canceled because of a fire aboard ship, measuring the flow between the Indian and Pacific Oceans was relatively straightforward.”

- 17) Robert Dickson received the Albatross Award in 1998 “for attempting to stem the flow through the Denmark Strait with a weir of current meters. ” Knauss et al recounts (1998) that “it was a yeoman effort with 91 instruments on 20 stations arranged in three arrays.”
- 18) Michael S. McCartney received the Albatross Award in Honolulu in 2002 at the American Geophysical Union Ocean Sciences Meeting “for describing the Atlantic circulation with bewildering simplicity.”

References:

Bascom, Willard. Hole in the Bottom of the Sea. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961. Pp. 47-48.

G., R. “Do Oceanographers Have More Fun?” Science 181(4103): 926, September 7, 1973.

Knauss, John, Gordon Lill, and Arthur Maxwell “Recounting the History of the Albatross Award.” EOS, Transactions of the American Geophysical Union 79(3):31, 1998.

Shor, Elizabeth Noble. Scripps Institution of Oceanography : Probing the Oceans, 1936 to 1976. San Diego, Calif.: Tofua Press, 1978. Pp. 301-302.