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Touchdown

A man stands alone on the ice. Nothing is around him but the harsh glaring white of the polar **ice cap**. This is Antarctica, the Earth's southernmost continent. Here, it is difficult to see where the ground stops and the sky begins. The man **squints** upward, waiting...

SAMPLE

A small, far-off speck appears in the sky. Soon, the man hears the distant **drone** of engines. Finally, he can see the shape of an aircraft. It cuts a wide circle in the air above the ice and begins to descend.

On board, the crew prepares for landing. The pilot's voice crackles over the communication system.

*"I see the **skiway** fine... Landing gear down, skis are down, indicators are checked."*

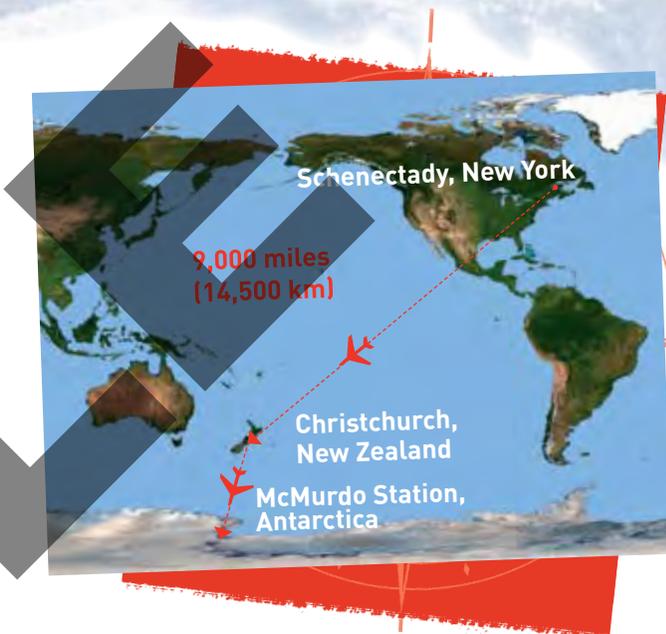
The touchdown is perfect. The massive aircraft taxis slowly across the ice, toward the waiting man. His frozen **grimace** turns into a broad smile.



This aircraft – or “ski-bird” – is operated by the 109th Airlift Wing, a **non-combatant** arm of the U.S. Air Force. Flying these planes to and from the **North**

and South Poles is one of the most dangerous jobs for a flight crew. These brave ice pilots are a long way from their home base in Schenectady, New York – 9,000 miles (14,500 kilometers) away!

The polar ice caps are some of the most treacherous places in the world for exploration and scientific discovery. They are home to some of the most brutal weather and **terrain** on Earth. Still, this doesn't stop the ski-birds from touching down and taking off in these places. Fitted with large skis, the huge C-130 Hercules military transport planes regularly service the demands of international polar scientific research.



Sometimes, as little as 3 feet → (1 meter) of ice separates these giants from the ocean below!

