Episode Book

EPISODE #5713

Who Rescues You at the Ends of the Earth?

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SYNOPSIS

The Arctic has a binding search and rescue treaty signed by all eight Arctic states — including Russia and the United States. Antarctica has no equivalent at all. In this episode, we trace how the 2011 Nuuk Agreement divided the Arctic into rescue regions while explicitly refusing to touch sovereignty, and why the Antarctic Treaty System stayed silent on SAR despite hosting dozens of national programs. We walk through who actually holds the capability — the US 109th Airlift Wing's ski-equipped LC-130s, New Zealand's RCCNZ, Australia's 52.8-million-square-kilometer rescue jurisdiction — and what happens when an independent explorer gets into trouble in the deep field. The answer involves permits, voluntary tourism standards, and a lot of goodwill rather than any enforceable guarantee.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

What happens when the weather closes in, the runway is three thousand meters of ice, and the nearest aircraft is on the other side of the planet?



Corn

That's the question Daniel sent in this week. He's been thinking about our episode on how world powers built governing frameworks for territory no state owns — Antarctica, the high seas, that kind of thing — and how those bodies deliberately keep geopolitics and military matters off the agenda. He noticed that search and rescue came up as one of the few things everybody agrees to coordinate around, and it got him wondering: who actually does it?



Corn

His questions run deep. What countries maintain search and rescue capabilities that reach the poles? Is there a multilateral coordination mechanism, or is each nation on its own? If an independent explorer sets off into the deep field, are they on their own, or can they count on their country of citizenship to come get them? And for the government research stations — the permanent bases staffed year-round — what contingency plans exist, who writes them, and what bodies actually fly out when someone needs extracting?



Corn

He calls polar SAR a subspecialty of a subspecialty, which is exactly right.



Herman

It's the cleanest test of our thesis we've ever had, because the answer splits hard between north and south. The Arctic has a binding treaty. Antarctica has nothing. And the reason why tells you everything about how these frameworks actually work.



Corn

So the Arctic has a treaty and Antarctica doesn't. Start with the treaty.



Herman

Signed May twelfth, two thousand eleven, in Nuuk, Greenland. All eight Arctic Council states — Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, the United States. It entered into force January nineteenth, two thousand thirteen, after all eight ratified. Canada is the depositary.



Corn

Russia and the United States signed the same document.



Herman

And ratified it. Which, given everything else going on in the world, is worth sitting with for a second. What it does is divide the Arctic into defined search and rescue regions, SRRs, and assign each state responsibility for coverage and response inside its area. It commits the parties to cooperate.



Corn

And the sovereignty firewall?



Herman

That's the crucial part. The treaty explicitly states that the delimitation of search and rescue regions is not related to and shall not prejudice the delimitation of any boundary between states, or their sovereignty, sovereign rights, or jurisdiction. In plain terms: drawing a rescue boundary on a map does not mean you've drawn a border.



Corn

Which is precisely why eight countries who disagree about almost everything could sign it.



Herman

It was the first binding agreement ever negotiated under Arctic Council auspices. That council normally produces soft law — declarations, guidelines, things with no teeth. SAR became the safe first agreement because it was narrow, technical, and



Herman (continued)

sovereignty-neutral. Everybody could cooperate on the rescue without touching the claim.



Corn

One caveat, though. The treaty establishes who is responsible for which area. It doesn't create a standing multinational polar rescue force.



Herman

Correct. Each state still delivers SAR with its own national assets. It's a coordination and responsibility-allocation framework, not an operational capability. There's no Arctic rescue squadron sitting on a runway somewhere waiting for a call.



Corn

Now flip it south. Antarctica.



Herman

No equivalent. No binding SAR agreement. The Antarctic Treaty System is deliberately silent on operational search and rescue as a formal mechanism. The Antarctic Treaty itself, signed December first, nineteen fifty-nine, in force June twenty-third, nineteen sixty-one — fifty-eight parties as of a couple years ago, twenty-nine Consultative Parties with voting rights. It demilitarized the continent and froze territorial claims. The Madrid Protocol in nineteen ninety-one added environmental protection. Nothing on SAR.



Corn

Why not? It's the same logic as the Arctic, isn't it? You'd think SAR would be the easy first agreement down there too.



Herman

That's the question, and I think the answer is that the Antarctic Treaty already did the hard part differently. It didn't divide the continent into national responsibility zones. It froze claims entirely — nobody administers a rescue region because nobody administers



Herman (continued)

anything. Creating a SAR mechanism would have required operational cooperation that touches sovereignty, military assets, and jurisdiction. Exactly the things the treaty was designed to avoid. So it never happened.



Corn

And yet military aircraft fly rescue missions down there all the time. Isn't there a contradiction?



Herman

There's a legal hook, and it's a good one. The treaty bans military activity. It does not ban military logistics. Military personnel and equipment are explicitly permitted for logistical and scientific support. That's how US Air Force LC-130s fly onto the ice, how Royal Navy vessels operate in the Southern Ocean, how Argentine and Chilean military assets do rescues on the Peninsula. The treaty bans military operations, not military logistics.



Corn

So the aircraft that would drop bombs in a war are the same aircraft that fly a sick scientist off the plateau.



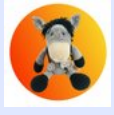
Herman

Same airframe. Different paperwork.



Corn

So who actually has the capability? Walk me through the big operators.



Herman

Start with the United States. The National Science Foundation's Office of Polar Programs runs the US Antarctic Program. They contract the logistics — historically Raytheon, now Leidos — and they rely on US Air Force and Air National Guard LC-130 ski-equipped Hercules for the heavy lifting. The 109th Airlift Wing out of the New York Air National



Herman (continued)

Guard is the workhorse for deep-field access. McMurdo Station and Amundsen-Scott at the South Pole are the anchors.



Corn

Ski-equipped Hercules. That's a C-130 with skis bolted on.



Herman

Essentially — though "bolted on" undersells it. The ski landing gear lets it set down on snow and ice runways that would swallow a wheeled aircraft. The 109th is the only outfit in the US military that flies that configuration as a primary mission. They've been doing it for decades.



Corn

New Zealand.



Herman

Antarctica New Zealand runs Scott Base, and critically, Rescue Coordination Centre New Zealand — RCCNZ — is the official SAR authority for a vast swath of the Southern Ocean and the Ross Sea region. That's maritime and aeronautical SAR over an enormous area. RCCNZ is a genuine node in the system. If something goes wrong on the Ross Ice Shelf side, RCCNZ is likely coordinating.



Corn

Australia.



Herman

Australian Antarctic Division, and the Joint Rescue Coordination Centre in Canberra, run by AMSA, the Australian Maritime Safety Authority. Their jurisdiction spans roughly fifty-two point eight million square kilometers of the Indian, Pacific, and Southern Oceans. That's about eleven percent of Earth's surface. Including Australia's Antarctic and



Herman (continued)

sub-Antarctic territories.



Corn

Eleven percent of the planet. One rescue coordination center.



Herman

One center, and it's mostly watching empty water. But that's the point — someone has to be responsible for it, and Australia took it.



Corn

Chile and Argentina.



Herman

Both maintain stations and air links. Chile's gateway is Punta Arenas. Argentina's is Ushuaia. Both have historically conducted rescues in the Antarctic Peninsula region, which is the most accessible part of the continent — relatively speaking. The Peninsula juts north toward South America, so it's where most tourist traffic and most incidents happen.



Corn

United Kingdom.



Herman

British Antarctic Survey, Rothera and Halley stations, with the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force providing occasional support. And then there's the wider list — Russia, China, Japan, France, Germany, Italy, South Korea, South Africa, Norway, India, Brazil, Poland. Most of them have stations and some capability. Not all of them have the range to do a deep-field rescue.



Corn

So the blunt summary: there's no standing international Antarctic rescue service.



Herman

None. If something goes wrong, the response is assembled ad hoc from whichever national program is nearest, has the right aircraft, and is willing to help. It's coordinated through informal channels and a long-standing culture of scientific cooperation. That culture is real — people at these stations know each other, they've worked together for decades, and they help each other out. But it's not a treaty. It's not a guarantee. It's goodwill and geography.



Corn

And here's where Daniel's question gets sharp. What happens when it's not a government scientist at a station? What happens when it's an independent explorer who got into trouble?



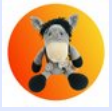
Herman

The honest answer is: largely, you're on your own. There is no Antarctic SAR convention creating a duty. No treaty obligates any state to rescue a private expedition.



Corn

At sea there's a duty. Article 98 of UNCLOS, the SAR Convention.



Herman

There is, and it's real — the duty to render assistance at sea. But that applies to maritime distress, and it's implemented through national search and rescue regions. In the Southern Ocean, that means RCCNZ, the Australian JRCC, or Chile and Argentina's maritime authorities, depending on where you are. If your ship sinks in the Ross Sea, RCCNZ is coming. If your tent blows away at the South Pole, that's a different regime entirely.



Corn

Does citizenship help?



Herman

Less than you'd think. A country may choose to assist its citizen, and in practice the country of citizenship is often the first call. But it's not generally legally required to mount a rescue in Antarctica. And even when a country wants to help, the actual rescue usually falls to whichever national program is closest and has the right aircraft. Your government might pay for it. Your government might not be the one flying.



Corn

There's a cost element here too.



Herman

Enormous. A single LC-130 mission to the interior runs into the hundreds of thousands of dollars before you've even accounted for the crew and the fuel cache. This is not a helicopter ride.



Corn

So what stops people from just showing up?



Herman

The permit system, mostly. Under the Antarctic Treaty's Environmental Protocol, parties require advance notification and environmental impact assessment for all activities, including private expeditions. The US requires expeditions to notify the State Department's Office of Oceans and Polar Affairs, which reports the plans to other nations. It's partly a safety and coordination mechanism — it means the authorities know you're coming, they know your route, they know your timeline.



Corn

It's a heads-up system.



Herman

And then there's IAATO — the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators — which sets guidelines and standards for tourism and private expeditions. But those are voluntary industry standards. They're not a rescue guarantee. Nobody signs an IAATO form and gets a promise that a Hercules is on standby.



Corn

So the system relies on prevention rather than response.



Herman

Heavily. Permits, notification, IAATO standards, route planning, contingency gear. The whole architecture is designed to discourage the scenario where you need a rescue, because the rescue itself is so fragile. An independent explorer who gets into trouble in the deep interior is in serious jeopardy. Rescue may take days. It may take weeks. It may depend on a weather window that doesn't open. It may require assets that simply aren't available that season.



Corn

Which is a strange thing to sit with, because the continent is full of stations with aircraft.



Herman

The stations exist. The guarantee doesn't. That gap is the whole story.



Corn

So switch to the structured case. Government research stations. A scientist at McMurdo gets hurt. What happens?



Herman

That's a much more organized world. Each national program is responsible for its own people. NSF's Office of Polar Programs, Antarctica New Zealand, the Australian Antarctic Division, British Antarctic Survey — they all maintain their own emergency response plans, medical evacuation procedures, and search and rescue protocols. The planning is done by the national program, often in coordination with the station's own medical and logistics staff.



Corn

Who writes those plans?



Herman

The program does, usually with input from the station leadership, the medical officer, and the logistics contractors. Then they coordinate with national defense assets — the LC-130s, the helicopters, the icebreakers — and with neighboring stations under informal mutual-aid arrangements. And with the relevant rescue coordination center, RCCNZ or the Australian JRCC, for anything maritime or aeronautical.



Corn

And what actually gets sent?



Herman

Depends on where you are. Ski-equipped fixed-wing aircraft for interior and plateau rescues — the LC-130, the Twin Otter, the Basler BT-67, which is a turboprop conversion of a Douglas DC-3. Helicopters from icebreakers or coastal stations for coastal and Peninsula work. Icebreakers for maritime incidents — the US Coast Guard Polar Star is the classic example. And station-based field parties and mountaineers for ground searches.



Corn

Now give me the hardest case.



Herman

The South Pole. Amundsen-Scott Station sits at two thousand eight hundred and thirty-five meters on the polar plateau — nine thousand three hundred feet. Temperatures routinely hit minus sixty Celsius. Aircraft can only operate in narrow seasonal windows. A winter medevac from the South Pole is one of the most extreme rescue scenarios on Earth.



Corn

How extreme are we talking?



Herman

Historically it requires an LC-130 with ski landing gear and a specialized crew. Sometimes a fuel cache has to be dropped ahead of time to enable the round trip. You're flying into air so cold that hydraulics behave differently, fuel gels, and any mechanical problem becomes a survival situation in itself. These missions have been done. They are rare, dangerous, and weather-dependent. There's a documented case from a few years back where the flight cost the US Antarctic Program somewhere around half a million dollars.



Corn

For one patient.



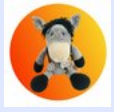
Herman

And that was a mission that succeeded.



Corn

There's a thing nagging at me. You said the Arctic proved the thesis in the affirmative.



Herman

Right.



Corn

Say what you mean by that.



Herman

The thesis being that these governance frameworks deliberately exclude geopolitics and military matters, focusing on a narrow set of technical concerns. The Arctic proves it works — SAR was the first binding agreement precisely because it was narrow, technical, and sovereignty-neutral. Everybody could cooperate on the rescue without touching the claim. Same logic as the scientific cooperation that's been happening in Antarctica since the fifties.



Corn

And Antarctica proves it in the negative?



Herman

Antarctica proves the limits. The Antarctic Treaty System never created a SAR mechanism because doing so would have required operational cooperation that touches sovereignty, military assets, and jurisdiction. It's frozen claims, not administered territory. There's no authority to delegate the responsibility to. So it relies on national programs and informal mutual aid instead.



Corn

Which means the answer to Daniel's question about whether there's a multilateral mechanism is: yes in the north, no in the south. And the reason is structural.



Herman

It's the cleanest illustration we've had. Same species of problem, two completely different architectures, and the difference comes down to whether sovereignty was frozen or bracketed.



Corn

Here's the part I keep coming back to. You have a continent where dozens of nations operate permanent stations with aircraft, helicopters, icebreakers, and trained field teams. And you have independent explorers in the same continent who are, in practical terms, on their own.



Herman

That's the emotional core of the whole thing. For a government scientist at a station, the system works. Mostly. There's a plan, there's an aircraft, there's a chain of command. For an independent explorer, the system is a patchwork of goodwill, weather luck, and whichever country happens to have an aircraft nearby. If a station commander at McMurdo decides your case is worth diverting an LC-130, you're fine. If not, or if there's a competing priority, you're waiting.



Corn

That's not a moral failing. That's just what the structure permits.



Herman

Right. Nobody's legally required to come. And the people running those stations are making real decisions about real risk — sending a crew into minus sixty weather has its own cost.



Corn

So the difference between a scientist and an explorer isn't paperwork. It's whether the system decided in advance to care about you.



Herman

The permit system is that decision. When you notify the State Department's Office of Oceans and Polar Affairs, you're effectively enrolling in the system. You're on the map. The stations know you're coming. If you go off the map, you fall out of the system.



Corn

That's a hell of a detail. And it gets at something the research couldn't quite capture — what it actually feels like to be at the bottom of the world and need help.



Corn

Go on.



Hilbert

I spent a season on a ship resupplying the Peninsula. Late nineties— no, it would have been two thousand nine. Two thousand nine, two thousand ten. We had a Chilean navy doctor aboard, and he told me the thing that decides these cases isn't the aircraft. It's the radio schedule.



Herman

Say more.



Hilbert

The stations run scheduled check-ins. Every few hours, somebody keys a mic and says the weather and the mood. If a station misses one, nobody panics. Miss two, and you start calling around. Miss a third, and you've already lost a day. The whole system runs on that rhythm — the check-ins, the station-to-station calls, the gossip. The aircraft is the headline. The radio schedule is the actual infrastructure.



Corn

So by the time the aircraft is even mentioned, the clock has been running for hours.



Hilbert

Longer than that. We had a case where a Polish research team went a day and a half silent because their generator failed and their backup antenna froze. Nothing was wrong. They were eating dinner by candlelight. But the coordination that swung into action — three countries on the phone, an aircraft moved from one mission to another, a doctor on



Hilbert (continued)

another ship asked to stand by — that was real. It stopped when they came back on the air. All those arrangements dissolved like they never happened.



Herman

And that's the thing the research papers never say. The mutter scale of it.



Hilbert

You know what I remember most is the silence. After the check-in came back and everybody stood down, the radio room went quiet and the officer on watch made a cup of tea. That's it. That's how these things end. Not with a rescue. With a cup of tea.



Corn

That's a hell of a detail.



Herman

It's the actual texture of it. The treaties are real, the aircraft are real, but the operational unit is a radio schedule and a person deciding whether to make a call.



Corn

So let me try to name the wrong belief, because I think there's a big one. Most people, when they hear there are research stations at both poles and multiple countries operating them, assume there must be some international polar rescue service — a number you call, a hangar somewhere, an obligation on somebody's part.



Herman

There's no standing international rescue service at either pole. The Arctic has a coordination treaty, but it still relies on national assets. Antarctica has no SAR agreement at all. What looks like a system is a patchwork of national programs, informal mutual aid, and the willingness of a station commander on the nearest continent to send an aircraft.



Corn

And for the independent explorer?



Herman

No legal duty to rescue. Citizenship might help. Geography decides more than law does. Which is why the whole architecture is built around prevention — the permit, the notification, the check-in schedule — rather than the promise of response.



Corn

Here's what I keep chewing on. The Arctic proved the model works when the issue is narrow enough. The Antarctic proves what happens when the issue touches the one thing the treaty system cannot touch — sovereignty.



Herman

Which makes SAR the perfect probe. It's the thing that looks like it should be easy, and in the north it was. And in the south it wasn't, because the Antarctic Treaty had already pre-decided what could and couldn't be coordinated.



Corn

Which means the next time somebody asks why Antarctica doesn't have a SAR agreement, the honest answer isn't that nobody tried. It's that creating one would have required reopening a question the treaty spent sixty years keeping closed.



Herman

So the explorers go, and the stations run their check-ins, and the aircraft sit on their skis, and the system holds as long as nothing unusual happens.



Corn

That's the machine behind a polar rescue story — or the absence of one. Next time you hear about someone being pulled off the ice, you'll know who decided to send the aircraft, who paid for it, and who was making the call.



Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, who is apparently the only person on the team who has stood in a radio room at two in the morning waiting for a check-in that never came.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you liked this one, a review wherever you're listening helps other people find the show.



Herman

You can find every episode at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

We'll be back soon.