

# Imperial College Alumni Association of Singapore



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## ICAAS Newsletter (Issue No. 4, 2008)

### PJ Completes Atacama Crossing

The mercury level on the thermometer must have shot past the 40°C mark when I snailed miserably through a mountain canyon. As there were little shades and virtually no natural shelters in the Atacama desert to seek refuge from, the last seven hours baking in the fiery Chilean sun had definitely darkened my skin tone to look like that of the Incas. The sun continued to beat on my aching limbs and shoulder, and negotiating a continuous uphill trail had nearly sent my misery to near breaking point. It was at this instant when I started to question on my sanity (or insanity) to enroll myself into this unnecessary torture – racing 250 km in 6 days with a 12-kg rucksack across the Atacama Desert, the driest desert in the world.

Signing up for this desert race was by no chance deliberate. As I was penning down my reflections and making new resolutions towards the end of last year, an email from a friend found its way into my inbox. Yen completed her first desert race in Sahara two years ago, and was enthusiastically and animatedly recounting her experiences during a wedding dinner that intrigued me to learn more. The email, as I recalled, contained the web link to the race organiser. So there was me in the middle of a sleepless night sealing the deal to find myself flying across the southern Pacific four months later to suffer.

Wouldn't dancing with the bikini-clad Brazilian chicks to the Samba beat in Copacabana beach be a more attractive and cheaper option? Once again, my sanity (or insanity) was being interrogated. With or without the sexy Latino babes, the reality ahead of me was to complete that last 7 km of ascending canyon on Day One.

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Photo (left): Notice the ICAAS logo sewn onto Toh Poh Joo's sweater, a result of sponsorship by several IC alumni in ICAAS' name.

### Rotary Club Group Study Exchange (GSE) Program

Alumna, Ms Ng Lee Peng (MBA, 2002), was successfully admitted to join the GSE program to Ohio (USA) in April - May 2008.

Once again, IC alumni are cordially invited to apply to join the GSC for a 5-week vocation study in Denmark on 31 August - 5 October 2008. Young working professionals of 25 - 40 years old, with at least 2 years working experience, are welcome. The candidate must not be of any blood relation with Rotarians. If you are interested to sign up, please contact IC alumnus Benjamin Wong directly at [wongcs@pacific.net.sg](mailto:wongcs@pacific.net.sg).

## Learning about Green Skies



IC alumnus, Prof. Richard J Parker, FEng, FRAeS, FIMechE, Director of Research & Technology – Rolls-Royce Group, gave an enlightening talk entitled “Blue Skies to Green Skies - Aero-Engine Technology to Reduce the Impact of Aviation on the Environment” on 2 April 2008 at the Programme Zone, located at the Jurong Regional Library. His fascinating account held the audience of over 40 people in rapt attention for over an hour. Besides IC alumni, the attendees hailed from SIA, EADS, Intl. Engine Component Overhaul, Singapore Institute of Aerospace Engineers, Ngee Ann Polytechnic and Nanyang Technological University.

*Photo caption (L-R): Lee Yew Wei (ICAAS), Dr. Nigel Hart (Rolls-Royce), Dr. Kurichi Kumar (Rolls-Royce), Dr. Lee Hing Yan (ICAAS), and Prof. Richard Parker (Rolls-Royce) having dinner at Da Paolo Bistro, Rochester Park after the talk.*

Ric obtained his BSc in Physics from Imperial College London in 1975. After reviewing the history of the jet engine, with specific reference to Roll-Royce’s critical role and current product development, he shared the technology programme for the next 10 and 20 years. He also sketched a vision for the future of aircraft propulsion.

## The Future of Grid Computing – in the Clouds?



IC alumnus, Martin Antony Walker, BSc, DIC, PhD, will provide an insight into the future of Grid Computing and share his thoughts on whether it will evolve into Cloud Computing. The talk will be held on 20 May 2008 (Tuesday) at 1600 hours in the Possibility Room, Level 5, NLB Building, 100 Victoria Street.

Admission to the event is free. All are welcome. Please register your interest to attend by sending an email to: [temp\\_wallislee@ngp.org.sg](mailto:temp_wallislee@ngp.org.sg) with “Grid Talk by Martin Walker” in the subject line.

Dr. Walker is responsible for business in the scientific research segment of the high-performance computing market for Hewlett Packard in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. He leads HP’s engagement in peta-scale computing in Europe.

Dr. Walker was Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Open Grid Forum until August 2007. He serves on the External Advisory Committee of the Baltic Grid Project and on the Technical Advisory Board of the South Eastern Europe Research and Education Network. He advises the HP-UNESCO anti brain-drain projects in South East Europe and Africa, and is a reviewer for the HP Philanthropy Technology for Teaching program. He has previously worked at Max Planck Institute for Physics and Astrophysics (Munich), Digital Equipment, Compaq, Cray Research, Inc., and Myrias Research Corporation.

Dr. Walker received a DIC and PhD in mathematics and physics from Imperial College (University of London) in 1970, and has lectured and published widely in the scientific literature on relativistic gravitational collapse, black holes, gravitational radiation, and related topics. During his research career, Dr. Walker held visiting positions at leading universities and research institutions around the world.

The talk is organized in partnership with the National Grid Office, Singapore Grid Forum, and National Library Board. Light refreshment will be sponsored by Hewlett-Packard Singapore.

## Change of Email Address

In order that you continue to receive updates on ICAAS activities, please inform us of your new email address. Do send the information to Prof. Wong Limsoon ([wongls@comp.nus.edu.sg](mailto:wongls@comp.nus.edu.sg)), who has kindly been maintaining the ICAAS mailing list and web site.

## We Seek Your Contributions ...

If you have had a class or year reunion recently, do drop us a few lines and/or send us a photo to share with others in the newsletter. This is a great way to catch up and/or locate long lost friends.

## PJ Completes Atacama Crossing (continued)



I slogged across the finishing line with a huge blister on my left heel, an aching body and an empty stomach groaning for an early dinner. A race time of just below eight hours put me on the 35<sup>th</sup> spot, and leaving behind 38 competitors in the racecourse. Not a bad start I thought.

Waking up to the second day of the race without much discomfort came as a surprise to me, however the arduous marathon distance remained daunting. What made it worst was the trek in a 5-km icy river canyon that not only left my feet wet but also made the remaining hike so unpleasant. It slowly dawned upon me that having a pair of sodden shoes potentially increased the chances of developing more unwanted blisters. When forming up behind the starting line, a surge of anxiety hit me to think of the depressing state I would later be in.

The irony of things was the river canyon walk turned out to be the highlight of the race. Sceneries were superb and the river waters despite icy actually cooled me down from the otherwise unbearable heat. We were made to climb up a mountain and roll down a magnificent sand dune before hitting a monotonous 11-km flat plain. I must have spent substantial amount of time taking over 200 pictures along the way to arrive nine and a half hours later. Ranked 38, I was thrilled with the magnificent and varied landscapes. There were two new blisters on my right toe.

The hardest part of the race took place on Day Four whereby fearsome salt plains almost ruined my running shoes, apart from causing distress to my ankles and knees. The 8-km salt plains were largely uneven and filled with thousands of potholes that made finding balance difficult. It was likened to walking on dead corals whereby the spiky bits were sharp enough to cut through the mesh on my trail running shoes. There were also soft sections on the salt plains which engulfed passers-by, adding to the misery of those stuck. Much of my relief reaching the other end of the salt plains was quickly replaced by another unexpected fear – the approaching rainstorm.

For over 50 years, the locals in the Atacama Desert had never experienced rainfall in any magnitude and there was I, with my fellow competitors, bracing the coming storm that looked brutally powerful. My running shorts and dri-fit shirt were not warm enough to protect me from the chilly gust but I had just five more kilometres to reach the campsite. I quickened my pace to avoid being completely soaked in the rain. However, back at the campsite, the same violent storm swept across it tearing apart six tents and sending several more tumbling into the nearby salt lake. A couple of the competitors suffered some minor injuries due to the fallen poles. Fortunately, the approaching storm changed its direction swiftly as it came, leaving me scrambling by its fringe.

The most anticipated stage of the race had arrived on Day Five! We had to walk over 73 km. Having conquered the salt plains, I was no longer fearful of any terrains that would come my way in this long march. I was only concerned if my tattered shoes could hold together. Having repacked my bag and especially putting my warm clothes within easy reach, I set off for the longest walk of my life!

Sceneries remained spectacular. Much of the trails was relatively flat. We started off on yet another 6 km of salt plains. I tramped carefully to avoid my exposed toes from being cut. After walking for over 8 hours covering just over 40 km, I reached the third checkpoint and was greeted by a beautiful sunset. The competitor in front of me was totally out of sight and so was the immediate one trailing behind. Changed into my long pants and fleece, and pulled my woolly hat over my ears, I marched alone solemnly into the darkness.

The batteries on my GPS watch were drained. I did not have any other device to keep track of time. I could not care more about time. I did not need one anyway. The tranquility and serenity of the desert offered were greatly appreciated and I enjoyed every moment of it. Life in an urban environment has somehow made me forget to stop and reflect. Rushing from one meeting to another, replying emails, returning phone calls, clearing mounting workloads have denied much of my time to take stock for my life. Millions of thoughts ran through my head that night as I continued my slow walk. It was the most opportune time to reflect on myself, my life and my future.

16 hours 55 minutes and 34 seconds was exactly the official time I clocked in. Subtracting the time spent at the five checkpoints refilling my hydration bag and two pee breaks, I must have spent two-third of the day walking non-stop. I hit my sleeping bag shortly after arriving at the campsite. Too tired and exhausted to prepare my meal.

After six days of constantly pounding on my poor knees and walking mindlessly for more than 240 km, the finishing line was just a stone throw away. We were being dispatched into three different groups. The slowest group was flagged off at ten, the middle pack an hour later and the cream of the Atacama crop at noontime. I belonged to the middle group which made up the bulk of the surviving competitors. I thought the idea of putting the fastest pack to be the last group was smart. In this way, slow runners like me would be able to cheer for those fast runners coming into the finishing line, like they had done so for me in the past six days.

The last 9.7 km to wrap up the Atacama Crossing 2008 was a breeze. I ran most of it, as with everyone else. I wondered what the motivational factors were that other competitors had in this last stage. The pizza and coke screaming for their attention at the end point were definitely my main source of support. I was hungry but my legs were eager to bring me across the finishing line.

I knew I was near when I saw civilisation around me. I ran past the locals and greeted them "Hola" with such zealous attitude. They reciprocated with such wonderful and radiant smiles. Following the pink route markers for more than an hour, the surrounding slowly became familiar. I turned into a small alley to find myself coming into the finishing line. I could hear the distance crowd shouting my name. I was nearly in tears. I was overwhelmed. Any pain I was suffering, any aches I was bearing and any hunger I was undergoing were drowned in the cheers of my fellow competitors, volunteers and race organisers!

I jumped for joy when I crossed the finishing line and hugged anyone within my reach. Mary, the CEO, presented me this huge heavy medal and put it over my neck. This triumph and momentous feeling was amazing and like nothing I had experienced before. I loved it! It was then I knew that this was not going to be my only race! Back in my mind, I was already planning to set myself for the next desert challenge!



Article & photos by Toh Poh Joo