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Successful Completion of an Ambitious Project – A Midwinter Night’s Dream

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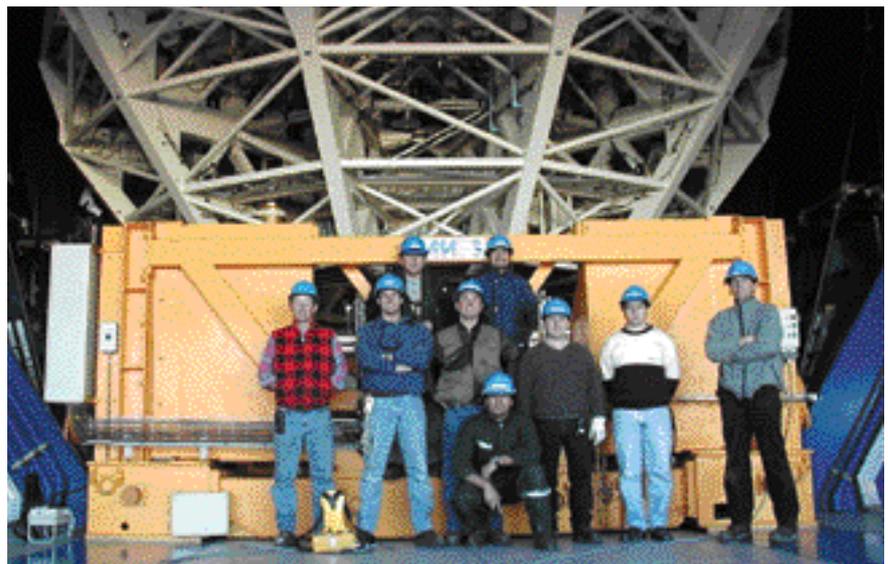
At 21:44 hours on the night of September 3, the test camera at the Cassegrain focus was opened for 30 seconds, and the fourth VLT Unit Telescope, Yepun, saw First Light. A historic event in the life of ESO; this first light marks the successful conclusion of the important period which started with the approval of the VLT project by the ESO Council in December 1987. Exceptionally for such a complex and expensive project, the four VLT telescopes have come into operation ahead of schedule. The VLT is no longer only a project, it is now also an Observatory. The first challenge has been met, thanks to the skill and dedication of astronomers, engineers and technicians at ESO and its collaborating institutes and of many industrial firms throughout Europe: four 8.2-m telescopes of exceptional quality are standing on Cerro Paranal.

The primary mirror arrived at Paranal on April 11, received an aluminium coating in early June, and by the end of July was installed in its cell, ready for use. The secondary mirror followed rapidly; it arrived on August 25th, was coated on the 26th and set in its mount on the 27th. The primary mirror of Yepun is the best of all the large astronomical mirrors polished by REOSC to date, with a surface precision of only 8.5 nanometres. To fully exploit its outstanding optics, we will install the adap-

tive optics instruments, NAOS CONICA and SINFONI, as well as our first laser guide star, on Yepun, rather than on Melipal (UT3) as we had originally planned.

By virtue of becoming ESO's Director General at the right time, I had the priv-

ilege of actually being in the observing hut of Yepun at the crucial moment, sharing the excitement of the VLT Manager, Massimo Tarenghi, of the Director of Paranal Observatory, Roberto Gilmozzi, and of the members of the commissioning team, Jason Spyromilio,



Most of the crew that put together Yepun is here photographed after the installation of the M1 mirror cell at the bottom of the mechanical structure (on July 30, 2000). Back row (left to right): Erich Bugueno (Mechanical Supervisor), Erito Flores (Maintenance Technician); front row (left to right) Peter Gray (Mechanical Engineer), German Ehrenfeld (Mechanical Engineer), Mario Tapia (Mechanical Engineer), Christian Juica (kneeling – Mechanical Technician), Nelson Montano (Maintenance Engineer), Hansel Sepulveda (Mechanical Technician) and Roberto Tamai (Mechanical Engineer).