These two colour photos of the Large Magellanic Cloud show the sudden appearance of the bright supernova SN 1987A. They were obtained with a 6 x 6 Hasselblad camera mounted piggy-back on the GPO and Danish 1.5-m telescopes, respectively. The left-hand photo was taken on February 23, between 01:00 and 01:20 UT and is the last colour picture taken before the supernova exploded, probably a few hours later. The event happened that excited an entire generation of astronomers. Reflecting the importance of this supernova, the Central Bureau for Astronomical Telegrams issued no less than 15 IAU Circulars in the course of 9 days only, breaking all records in the history of astronomy. At ESO, these circulars were read through a computer link to the Headquarters in Garching as soon as they were issued, and immediately sent on to the observers at La Silla by telex. In this way, and also by numerous telex messages and phone calls, the scientists were kept informed about what was going on in other places.

The time immediately following the discovery was particularly hectic. Here is a provisional compilation of the main events during the first hours, drawn from the information available on March 4:

Only 48 hours separate the two photos above, but during this brief interval an event happened that excited an entire generation of astronomers. Reflecting the importance of this supernova, the Central Bureau for Astronomical Telegrams issued no less than 15 IAU Circulars in the course of 9 days only, breaking all records in the history of astronomy. At ESO, these circulars were read through a computer link to the Headquarters in Garching as soon as they were issued, and immediately sent on to the observers at La Silla by telex. In this way, and also by numerous telex messages and phone calls, the scientists were kept informed about what was going on in other places.

The time immediately following the discovery was particularly hectic. Here is a provisional compilation of the main events during the first hours, drawn from the information available on March 4:
right-hand photo was taken exactly two days later, on February 25, also at UT 01:00. On that date, the supernova had reached visual magnitude 4.5. It is well visible, left of the centre and above the LMC main body as the lower right (round) of the two bright objects. The other object, which is extended and more diffuse, is the Tarantula Nebula (30 Doradus). (Agfachrome 1000 RS emulsion, C. Madsen.)

23.06 C. Madsen at La Silla obtains colour photo of LMC (above).
23.08 L. Shelton at Las Campanas obtains photo of LMC (not yet showing the supernova).
23.12 Five pulses, above 7 MeV, are detected during a 7 sec interval with the neutrino telescope in the Mount Blanc tunnel. This experiment is a collaboration between Istituto di Cosmogeofisica, Torino, Italy, and the Institute of Nuclear Studies in Moscow, USSR.
23.44 The supernova is recorded as a 6.1 magnitude object on plates taken with the satellite tracking camera in Australia (R. H. McNaught) show the progenitor Sanduleak –69 202 at normal magnitude 12.

23.02 Shelton starts 3-hour exposure with the 25-cm astrograph of the University of Toronto station at Las Campanas.
24.2 Suspected visual sighting of the supernova by O. Duhalde, also at Las Campanas.
24.23 Shelton discovers the supernova on his plate after development. The IAU Telegram Bureau is informed soon thereafter.
24.37 Independent discovery by A. Jones, at Nelson, New Zealand, who estimated it at magnitude 5.1
24.4 A telegram announcing the discovery of the supernova, now designated "1987 A", is sent to all major observatories from the IAU Telegram Bureau.
24.46 McNaught estimates it at magnitude 4.8.
24.72 McNaught now thinks that it has brightened to 4.4
24.8 Spectral observations commence with the International Ultraviolet Explorer, a satellite telescope in orbit around the Earth, jointly operated by ESA and NASA.
24.9 A spectrum obtained with the 1.9 reflector at SAAO shows few features and appears to indicate that the object may be of Type I.
24.0 Night falls in Chile and observers at all telescopes on La Silla turn their attention to 1987 A . . .
25.05 The second colour picture of LMC, now with the supernova, is obtained by C. Madsen.

R. M. West (ESO)