

Indian Navy Navigates to North Pole

Having wind-sailed around the world in the INS Tarangini with operations from the South Pole to the Mount Everest in the last two to three years, the Indian Navy is all set to achieve yet another unprecedented feat of skiing to the North Pole. For the ten men undertaking this stupendous feat after leaving India on March 24, 2008 and aiming to reach the North Pole by April 9-10, 2008, it will be an acid test of the highest standards that will include mental and moral strength combined with perfect teamwork.

By succeeding in this endeavour, this team will create a record of being the first in the world to reach the 'three poles' of the Earth. On being flagged off from New Delhi the team will fly to Norway, to the township of Longyearbyen in the island of Svalbard. Their journey will continue to the Polar icecap, which are operated and then undertake a ski traverse of about 130 km to 890 North, the geographic North Pole.

The training that the team has undergone over the past year includes two expeditions, first of which was conducted in July - August 2007 to Himachal Pradesh while the second in October 2007 to Garhwal. The team also underwent ski training and an extreme cold weather survival camp at Gulmarg in January - February 2008 and intensive yoga and fitness training in Delhi to prepare for their expedition.

The hand-picked multi-professional team members of the team include Commander Satyabrata Dam, Lieutenant Avinash Khajuria, Surgeon-Lieutenant Ajay Sharma, Master Chief Engineering Artificer- Class 1 Raj Kumar, Petty Officer Medical Assistants Rakesh Kumar and Vikas Kumar, Leading Mechanic Engineer R Pandey, Seamen-Class 1 B Singh and Manoj Vats and Medical Assistant-Class 1 Sonam Tamchos.



While all the sea-faring team members are highly qualified mountaineers, their leader's achievements deserve special mention. Satya, as Dam is popularly known, a commerce graduate from DAV College, Kanpur, was commissioned in the Navy in 1988 and joined the Submarine arm in 1989. Hailing from West Bengal, he took to the mountains at the age of 10, climbing his first peak, Mount (Mt) Kolahoi at 12. He is an alumnus of the Alpine Schools of Chamonix (France), Innsbruck (Austria) and International School of Mountaineering, Switzerland and did his Basic and Advance courses from the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling. He has climbed 32 major Himalayan peaks in his 30 years of mountaineering.

He led the Navy's historic Mt Everest expedition in 2004 and became the first Indian Everest leader to summit the peak. He also led Navy's Ski Expedition to the South Pole in 2006, which created many world and national records.

The entire Arctic Ocean region freezes during the months of November to April each year turning the ocean into a gigantic ice-cap making the North Pole viable through the Skiing option. By the end of April, the ocean starts melting, breaking the ice ferociously, which

allows ships and icebreakers to crisscross the North Pole.

The various means of reaching the North Pole are by air, dog-sledging, ships, nuclear ice breakers, submarines, skiing, etc, depending on the weather and the ice / ocean conditions.

Out of all of these, a ski traverse while pulling sleds manually is considered to be the physically toughest and riskiest means to reach the North Pole. Since the area of North Pole is frozen ocean, no human habitation or flora and fauna are found, although during the winter months, Polar bear families are found in abundance, looking for sustenance. An encounter with such a bear family can be extremely dangerous. Other than the Northernmost tip of Greenland, the Norwegian island of Svalbard is the nearest landmass to the North Pole.

There is a major Indian presence of scientists and an Armed Forces detachment at the South Pole's Antarctic Station, no Indian team has ever undertaken a land traversed expedition to the North Pole. In adventure terminology, the Earth has three poles - North, South and Mt Everest, the third, which is a 'vertical' pole. No single institution in the world has done all the three poles. Amongst Indians only three personnel of the Indian Navy, i.e., this team's leader Commander Satyabrata Dam and two of its members, Master Chief ERA-1 Raj Kumar and Petty Officer MA Vikas Kumar have done Everest and South Pole and are poised for this landmark achievement of reaching all the three poles.

With less than 25 people in the world who have been to all the three poles, these three members of this team are expected to become members of the very exclusive 'Three Poles' club. ●

- By Colonel Anil Bhat, VSM