

# Helicopter Sinking!! Ship Ahoy!!.... the Antarctica Odyssey



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**THE SOUTH POLE:** The end of the earth lies in an icy continent called Antarctica which is as large as the USA and Europe put together. This is the most hostile, coldest & windiest continent surrounded by the Southern ocean (Antarctic, Pacific, and Indian & Atlantic Ocean). The story of Antarctica is the story of human endurance. Man's fascination for exploring the depths of unknown is well known and Antarctica is no exception.

It is a continent of peace, tranquility and science. (Natural lab) .It offers an opportunity to scientific community world over to search for the answers to many unresolved questions pertaining to our Mother Earth. The experiments carried out on polar science mainly consist of research work in Glaciology, Micro biology, Meteorology & Oceanographic studies. The mysterious continent is very famous for Snow storms, Blizzards & Magnetic storms.

It was the vision of then Prime Minister of India late Mrs. Indira Gandhi to establish an Indian research station in Antarctica in order to prove India's scientific capabilities. India's foray in the Antarctica commenced with the launching of the first expedition in 1981 lead by Dr. S Z Qasim.

Subsequent to the first expedition India has been sending multidisciplinary and multi institutional scientific expeditions to Antarctica regularly on an annual basis. The expeditions are governed by the bye laws of "Antarctica treaty" in 1959.

The wild life of the peripheral region of the continent comprising birds such as Petrels Skuas, Penguins & large animals like Seals, Whales. It demonstrates art of surviving, breeding & community living in the most hostile environment.

I had the opportunity to be a member of the **Third Indian scientific expedition to Antarctica**. The nodal agency responsible for the expedition was then Department of Ocean development; which was then directly under the Prime Minister. Presently these annual expeditions are controlled by "**National center for Antarctica & Ocean research (NCAOR)**" which comes under ministry of Earth Sciences.

The Third Indian scientific expedition had a team of 83 members drawn from various National Labs, Institutes & Universities and the logistic supports provided by the three wings of the Defense forces & headed by **Dr. Harsh Gupta a famous earth scientist**. There were 16 scientists, 12 wintering team members in the team lead by then Lt Col Sharma. The preparation for the expedition commenced 6 months in advance to the departure of the expedition.

The **Mission** of this Expedition was to set up the First Indian research station 'Dakshin Gangothri', in Antarctica.

The team was provided with precooked food by CFTRI Mysore in addition to normal continental food on the ship.

Necessary Polar kitting consisting of 26 types of dresses, shoes, solar goggles etc. were provided by DOD. The **Chariot was "FIN POLARIS"**. An ice class ship from Finland with experienced crew. IAF was tasked to modify two MI8 helicopters & navy 2 Chetak helicopters. The structure material for the building was from Structure Ply UK. The army contingent was tasked to build the Base camp & have been trained in advance for the task.

The entire team met at DOD HQ Delhi for familiarisation of the members & to increase group integration, team spirit & co-operation. The team had a short stint at HAWS (High altitude warfare school) to gain experience in snow survival and movement on the snow.

The great adventure commenced on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1983, left Goa on board the ship "Fin Polaris" along with two MI-8 helicopters and Two Chetak Helicopters.

The voyage to Antarctica takes about 24 to 27 days depending upon the en-route weather. On board the ship the leader acts as a task force commander and have regular meetings about the

tasks with the leaders of individual contingent. Production planning techniques applied from day one to the end of the expedition.

The ship soon crossed by **Equator** three or four days later with the team members taking a ceremonial dip in the sea and offering prayers to **Lord Neptune**. We had a short refueling halt at Maldives. The ship sailed through the **roaring forties** of the



southern ocean with many of the members suffering from sea sickness due to the tossing of the ship with high pitching and high rolling. Nearing to Antarctica was welcomed by occasional sighting of albatross, cool wind and flat sheet of ice (**Pan Cake Ice**) gradually increasing the thickness forming the **pack ice** thereby obstructing the ship movement. The specially designed hull of the ice class ship rams through this pack ice cracking it and moves very slowly forward. The ship captain with the help of Chetek helicopter, airborne to have a look of the direction to move the ship identifying the areas of **POLYNYA**( areas of open water). Finally the ship anchored about 30KMS from the ice shelf on the 26<sup>th</sup> Dec from where the team has to start its mission. We had a grand white Christmas celebration on board the ship. Hectic activities began on the ship. **Leader & Glaciologist** with the help of Chetek helicopter after reccing selected the permanent base site 12 KMS inside the coast line.



The first MI8 helicopter was pulled out of ship hold, prepared for flying at 02:00 hrs on the 29<sup>th</sup> Dec. On this "land of the midnight sun" there is sunlight for 24 hrs during the summer (Dec to Mar) and by 1 PM we had completed 8 sorties and around 2PM the MI-8 Helicopter was ready for the next sortie. During the 9<sup>th</sup> sortie while carrying out under slung operation on Hover lost power, and crashed into the freezing /icy water and turned upside down as it began sinking.

Ice cold water was gushing through the broken tail boom and all the emergency escape hatches were below the water line and I could see the sunlight coming through the Perspex window. Aware that every passing second brought us close to the death. Lessons from jungle & snow survival course reminded me to be calm and unperturbed, and to act fast. Emergency fire axe helped me in breaking the Perspex after making several efforts and my gymnastic skill helped me in climbing on top of the inverted sinking helicopter.

On top of the helicopter I could see all my team mates on the ship in the state of shock and panic. They feared that they would see us drowning right in front of their eyes while they remain helpless due to the icy cold water. Then realizing the gravity of the situation I helped two of my

maintenance crews as well as the two other flying crews who were inside the helicopter to climb on top of the helicopter through the broken Perspex window. The present scenario was that all five of us on top of the inverted sinking helicopter near the main wheels waiting to be rescued.

At this moment it dawned on me that I was bleeding profusely due to head and lip injury..

The naval Chetak plunged into action for winching operation and hovered over the MI8 helicopter. I was hooked to the end of the 40 feet winch cable. You can imagine my fate hanging 40 feet below on the winch of a flying helicopter and over cold sea hoping that I may not get into free fall into the sea due to cable failure. Subsequently during winching two of the team members slipped from the winch and had free fall into the sea. By now MI8 helicopter also sank and all the four in the sea battling for life.

People aboard the ship screamed at the site of the four people drowning in the sea. The ship crew then got into the rescue operation by lowering the life boat with Dr. B K Singh of army with his emergency medical kit. Rushed to the site and pulled out the copilot, gave him, mouth to mouth respiration and also pulled out the other three members who were in a state of hypothermia and injected them on the boat. The rescue operation lasted for 10 minutes and all of us were rescued under dramatic circumstances.

In spite of the nerve racking experience on the first day of the Expedition, the team carried on with their mission. However details of this near fatal accident were withheld from the media so as not to affect the morale of the families of the crew and the expedition members. Flying task resumed on the third day with the other MI8 helicopter. Air force, Army, Navy and other members of the team worked round the clock keeping the mission in mind. Transported 700 tonnes of structural material, flown 130 stories and built the Dakshin Gangotri base in a record time. The team worked against all adverse situations such as Blizzards, Snow storms, poor visibility, feeling of insomnia and home sickness.

The team set sail on 29<sup>th</sup> Feb 84, leaving behind 12 of their colleagues for wintering and reached GOA on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1984, where DOD has organized a grand reception. The stay of 63 days on the ice continent remained memorable for all the team members. India became the first country to set up a permanent base camp in Antarctica within a period of one Antarctic summer displaying high level of dedicated team effort and group motivation. The expedition displayed high level of planning, execution of task and high level of leadership.

We the crew of the ill-fated MI8 helicopter had been given a memorable second life and cannot forget the unexpected dip in the Antarctica Sea. I will always cherish the priceless memories of this adventurous expedition to this magnificent icy continent forever.