

SUMMARY

The North Pole Expedition of the Airborne Ranger Club of Finland reached the geographic North Pole on 29 April 2006 at 16.31 GMT. It was the first Finnish expedition to ski to the North Pole without external assistance. Only 32 people in the world have achieved this goal.

Our seven-man expedition left Ward Hunt in northern Canada on 5 March 2006. It took 54 days and 23 hours to complete the ski trek of more than 800 kilometres (some 500 miles). The greatest challenges faced by the expedition proved to be fatigue and lack of sleep. Progress during the two-month journey was slowed by severe cold of -45 degrees Celsius, vast areas of almost impassable pack ice and frequent breaks in the ice that the expedition had to cross by floating their sledges or by swimming. Overcoming tribulations of this kind further strengthened morale and team spirit.

The journey was preceded by two arduous years of preparations. Apart from practical arrangements, there were product development projects to be worked on with equipment manufacturers, and these took up a great deal of time. Physical training extended right up to departure. The best practice turned out to be dragging a 25-30 kilogram automobile tyre along a fitness path or gravel road. We practised pulling for five hours a week.

The final stage in the preparations took place in the Inuit village of Resolute Bay in northern Canada. The expedition spent a week and a half there adjusting to the frigid conditions, putting the finishing touches to their equipment and packing the weekly food sacks.

Extrême cold tested the expedition during the first two weeks of skiing. Serious frostbite was avoided by constant protection of hands and faces. Otherwise, the numbing cold did not really hinder daily routines. The few hours of daylight were used efficiently for skiing. At camps work was conducted with headlamps.

Progress was very slow as snow crunched under skis and sledge runners at temperatures close to -50 degrees Celsius. The powerful drag created by snow friction and ten-metre high piles of pack ice forced the expedition to reduce the weight in the sledges by half. The only alternative left was to advance by splitting the loads and then doing each two-hour leg twice. As a result of all this coming and going, many hours of skiing were recorded, but the distance traversed was reduced to a few kilometres per day. Fortunately, each kilometre travelled brought the expedition that much closer to its destination.

According to the carefully planned schedule, the expedition should have covered longer distances each day. Expectations of more even ice grew. Eventually, the continuous pack ice yielded to a jigsaw puzzle of flat ice floes. On the ice field the edges of the big floes rubbed together, converting the pack ice into a transition zone that sometimes seemed virtually impassable. Skiing developed a rhythm based on the flat stretches and the pack ice, and the distances traversed in a day increased to more than 10 kilometres. All the while, each day was 45 minutes longer than the previous one and by the end of March the expedition was able to enjoy 'night-less nights'.

The loads in the sledges decreased daily by 1.5 kilos as food and fuel rations diminished. This gradually sped up the pace. From the 25th of March the expedition no longer had to split the sledge loads in two.

New breaks appeared constantly between the ice floes. Skiing on weak ice required care and new areas of open water slowed progress. After taking stock of the situation, we usually went on by jumping across the cracks, using the sledges as bridges or ferries, or swimming in dry suits. On a few crossings this didn't succeed and the Arctic Swimming Club acquired new members.

Towards the end, the distances travelled daily became significantly longer. Workdays stretched and the target distance was set at more than 20 kilometres of skiing. As the last three weeks of the trek began, there were still 500 kilometres to the destination. The schedule was extremely tight; it required 13-hour days and 24 kilometres of skiing per day.

The North Pole was approached slowly but surely, relying on cooperation and resolve, and also on the motivation of each individual member. At last we were covering ground at an even pace that kept us on schedule. There was no margin for setbacks or extra days off for maintenance and rest. To keep on schedule and to ensure arrival at the Pole on time, the expedition had to make choices and sacrifices. The amount of rest was further reduced, but without compromising on safety.

During the final week, fatigue and lack of sleep during the previous month and a half were already slowing us down. We managed to log 33 to 35 kilometres each day, however, and could sense the closeness of the Pole. During the final two days, Mother Nature intervened and challenged the expedition to a harrowing final spurt. We staggered in the face of a storm-force headwind that drove the ice southward. For every three kilometres advanced, the ice took us one kilometre in the opposite direction.

In the end, we reached the North Pole with pure Finnish *sisu* or guts after 24 hours of continuous skiing. Arrival at the Pole was marked by planting the Finnish flag in the place indicated by the GPS navigator, on a snow dune in the middle of an Arctic ice field. ■