

Raj Kumar takes BITSAA Delhi to the Bottom of the Earth

By BITSAA DELHI Chapter

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BITSIAN Raj Kumar made us feel very proud when he became the First Bitsian to step on South Pole in BITSAA Delhi Chapter's 50th year on 27th December 2006 and unfurled the Indian Tricolour, Indian Navy Flag and BITSAA Delhi Chapter's Message!

FROM THE HIGH SEAS TO THE FROZEN SEAS

Indian Navy skies to the geographical South Pole

From the log By Raj Kumar Bitsian & BITSAA Delhi Member

Once again I found myself at the helm of affairs and realized it soon that an expedition to the South Pole would be an equally challenging task if not more than that of climbing Mt Everest. Logistically, it was certainly much more complex, coupled with the fact that cross country skiing, while pulling heavily laden pulk sleds, as required for skiing to the poles, is a non existing sport in India, made our expedition that much more difficult to set off.

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Our journey to Antarctica followed the extremely long route via Paris, New York, Lima, Santiago and Punta Arenas. We must have set some long distance flying records, I am certain. Our doctor with an another lady doctor even delivered a baby onboard the flight, at 30,000 ft, just two hours short of landing at Paris. This was definitely a record of some sort. With our spirits soaring and hopes buoying high, we boarded the IL 76 Russian aircraft from Punta Arenas on 12 Dec. The four and half hour long flight went without a shudder and we landed on the blue ice runway at the Patriot Hill base camp in Antarctica. We were now at 80 deg South Latitude. The temperatures hovered around 12 deg below zero.

.....Within few hours of setting up our tents the infamous Antarctica weather hit us in full fury. The air became white, temperature plunged to 20 below zero and the blizzard threatened to uproot our tents. Over the next couple of days the storm raged and we could not embark on our journey. We finally boarded the tiny twin otter aircraft on 16 Dec that would drop us at 88 deg South around the 086 W meridian, from where we would ski the last two degrees, about 250 km. After several attempts the aircraft managed to land on an extremely uneven ice surface. We landed amidst huge sastrugis. A 40 knot wind howled with the temp hovering around 30 deg C below. The air was riddled with fine snow dust. We had planned to ski 8 hr each day in periods of 1 hr at one go with 10 min breaks in between each hour.

Day after day, with nothing else in sight, and often with frost frozen ski goggles, through which we could barely see, we pulled the heavy sleds uphill, following the needle of the compass and the shadow of the sun, heading due south. While we skied no one spoke. We all kept our heads down and lost in our own thoughts, did our best to keep up with the guy ahead. We needed every bit of our strength to make it to the pole on time..... We lost one more day due to heavy storm. The ice played tricks with our eyes and we saw strange phenomenon all around. Perihelion, the round circle with four bright spots around the sun, was an

amazing sight. No signs of any life anywhere, it seemed as if we were on a different planet altogether. We felt like the early explorers invading a strange and unknown land where we had no idea what could happen. Even as I looked up at the sky and marvelled at the stark deep blue above,Finally on 27 Dec, I was leading the team during last 1 hr stretch suddenly I saw something different and pointed my ski pole to the horizon and gave a joyful cry. Lo and behold, a tiny white dome sprouted from where I pointed. It was the sat dome of the South Pole. We were now 22 km from the pole. We barely slept that night, the excitement of reaching the pole next day kept us awake, full of anticipation. Next day we were up earlier and started skiing with renewed gusto. The distance was deceptive. Even after several hours of skiing, the dome and the structures barely increased in size. The horizon seemed to be receding. The ice stretched endlessly wherever we looked. We were now at around 12,000 ft and we had to go slow. Eventually the distant shapes started taking definite forms and colour. At exactly 0200 hrs on 28 Dec 2006, we proudly unfurled the national flag at the South Pole and it fluttered so beautifully in the morning breeze. The pole station follows New Zealand time hence it was around 10 am local time. We shrieked, we jumped up and down. I even did an impromptu summersault, landing on hard ice in a rather undignified manner. We sang the national anthem and hailed the Indian Navy. Zillions of pictures were clicked. As we overcame our initial euphoria and all members walked away to pitch tents, I wondered if our journey and our dream had really concluded or was it only half done.

Following records were created

1. First all navy team in the world to ski to the geographic South Pole
2. First Indian team to ski to the geographic South Pole
3. First submariners in the world (04 members) – to ski to the geographic South Pole
4. The Indian Navy team of 9 members have now become the member of the exclusive club of those who have skied to the South Pole that has less than 300 members.

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BITS Pilani Alumni Association Delhi Chapter is completing 50 years of its existence on 29th September, 2007. To celebrate the momentous occasion of its Golden Jubilee, BITSAA Delhi has planned a Seminar on “Restructuring Indian Education System - Challenges & Opportunities” at Hotel Taj Mahal Man Singh Road New Delhi 110011 on the same day.

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