90° N

Life In The Spotlight

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Coast Guard

Polar Sea forges to pole

By Bill Stump
Sea and Sky

WASHINGTON — It was a trip full of historic firsts for the Coast Guard Icebreaker Polar Sea, from being the first U.S. surface ship to reach the North Pole to being the first Coast Guard vessel to land a Russian helicopter on its flight deck.

But perhaps the most memorable moment was the Russian barbeque for 500 people on the ice near the North Pole — complete with radioactive sausage and reindeer meat.

The Polar Sea will be steaming into Seattle Oct. 8 after a three-month odyssey called the U.S./Canada Arctic Ocean Section 1994 Expedition, a joint mission with the Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker Louis S. St. Laurent.

The trip was arranged by the U.S. National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration and the Canadian Institute of Ocean Sciences. More than 70 scientists were aboard the two icebreakers.

"Our primary mission other than breaking ice is scientific exploration. That's what we've been doing for 50 years," said Capt. Lawson W. Brigham, skipper of the Polar Sea, one of two polar icebreakers in the service along with the Polar Star. "The Coast Guard has the only U.S. platform that can get that deep into the ice."

Surprising journey

Although the trip took four years to plan, it was the unplanned events that provided much of the drama and fun.

The Polar Sea lost one of its three propeller blades while chopping its way across 1,700 cy miles of Arctic Ocean. The original plan was to travel near the North Pole — making a run for it if conditions permitted — then double back to Barrow, Alaska. But with one-third less power due to the lost propeller, Brigham decided to press on to Greenland and return through the Panama Canal.

"By continuing, we only had to cut through 600 more miles," Brigham explained.

The change enabled the Polar Sea to record two more firsts. It became — along with the Canadian ship — the first surface vessel to cross the Arctic Ocean via the North Pole, and the first U.S. vessel to circumnavigate the North American continent.

They were not alone

The U.S. and Canadian icebreakers thought they were alone in the remote arctic until a routine helicopter operation sighted a Russian icebreaker 18 miles from the North Pole.

Radio contact was made with the nuclear-powered Russian icebreaker Yamal which was carrying 70 children from around the world and a film crew for a documentary. Russia's nuclear icebreakers, which easily cut through the ice, routinely take paying customers to the pole.

After making contact, the Russian skipper, Capt. Andrei Smirnoff, invited the icebreakers' crews to a barbeque.

About 500 people gathered on the ice near the ships. Grills were fired up and friendships forged. The crews exchanged ship tours.

During the rendezvous, a Russian Kamov-525 helicopter landed on the Polar Sea, the first time a Russian helicopter had landed on a Coast Guard vessel and marks the first time ever on a U.S. ship.

Scientific study

Throughout the trip, the scientists, with help from the crew of 140, made 14 stops to take scientific samplings.

"We would take ice and water samples, or take a 25- to 50-foot section of mud from the bottom," said Marine Services Technician First Class Corey Bennett. The weather was usually sunny and clear, with temperatures in the 20s and 30s.

Scientists on the Canadian icebreaker caught and tagged polar bears, one of which spent part of a day on the Polar Sea's starboard beam.

The Polar Sea also had a five-member dive team on board to take underwater samples.

"It's beautiful under the ice, although it's a little eerie and kind of disorderly," said Lt. April Brown, leader of the dive team. "The ice isn't flat underneath like it is on top. It's honeycombed with little caves and jagged edges."

The divers, who also maintain the ship, discovered the missing propeller blade when difficulties were first sensed.

Communications were even more crucial than usual during this mission, because a ship traveling above 80 degrees north latitude is outside the usable range of the International Maritime Satellite. In its place, the Polar Sea was able to use the Lincoln Experimental Satellite, which allowed it to access the Internet E-mail service.

The E-mail provided yet another first. While at the North Pole, the Polar Sea was able to send what they believe to be the longest-reaching E-mail message in history — from the icebreaker to the Amundsen-Scott Station in the South Pole, according to Radioman Second Class Jeff Spears.

The ship also sent out a Coast Guard-wide message from the pole. "This achievement is dedicated to all Coast Guard and Navy men and women who have served aboard United States polar icebreakers at both ends of the globe. Their accomplishment is the place for more."

Ship of records: The Polar Sea reached the North Pole, the first U.S. ship do do so. Other firsts on its record trip: first Coast Guard vessel to land a Russian helicopter on her deck and longest-distance E-mail message sent.

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Moving America Together

Coast Guard Cutter Completes Historic North Pole Expedition

FEEDBACK

Long Distance E-Mail

ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING THINGS ABOUT THE INTERNET is that it allows people in remote locations to keep in touch. Consider Coast Guard Cmdr. Mike Powers, who is stationed on the USCGC Polar Sea in the Arctic Ocean. His ship is part of a U.S.-Canadian joint expedition carrying 70 scientists. They hook up to the Internet when the air force's Lincoln Experimental Satellite is in range. The satellite transmits to a Miami computer. Powers says they exchange data with colleagues at home. More important, for a 55-day stint in the middle of nowhere, is the ability to write to family and hear back in a day or two.

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