

In 1977 the Federal Government approved the Military Operation POLAR DIP 1977 to take place on O'Reilly Island, NorthWest Territory in late August of that year. The mandate was to operate Naval Reserve Divers in Arctic waters, to show a Canadian presence in Arctic regions, and to search for Sir John Franklin's ships, HMS EREBUS and HMS TERROR. These two Royal Navy Ships had been locked in the ice from 1845 to 1848, at which time the crew abandoned the ships, with all lost to the ice and starvation. Inuit(Eskimos) in later years claim to have seen a copper bottomed ship washed up on a gravel spit on the northern point of O'Reilly Island at one point in time.

The Commanding Officer of the overall expedition was RCN LCdr Mike Lafontaine, Clearance Diving Officer from HMCS BRUNSWICKER, with a Reserve Ships Diving Officer from HMCS UNICORN, Diving Chief Chuck Rolfe and Petty Officers Glynn Munroe & Roy Fox from HMCS DISCOVERY, plus various other Ships Divers comprising the Dive Team. Included in the expedition were a CBC crew to film and document the Operation(in the hope that we would find the ships), and a Public Relations group from NDHQ, which included a female RCAF Officer.

The entire group met up in RCAF STATION TRENTON for a briefing of the whole evolution, and what the objectives were that we expected to achieve. Then on to Winnipeg, Manitoba for issuance of Arctic equipment and cold weather Army wear. It was a good long flight from there up to the manned(by mostly Newfoundlanders it appeared)Distant Early Warning(DEW Line)Base at Gladman Point NWT by RCAF C-130 Hercules aircraft. Now the Gladman Point gravel airstrip was low at both ends, with a high spot in the centre, so the Pilot looking at the high spot on his horizontal plane, figured he was ready to touch down, but the aircraft was still at least 25 ft above the low spot, and when he cut the engines for landing, it dropped to the strip with a resounding bang! I've experienced catapult shots off Aircraft Carriers before, and landed on catching the arrestor wires, but thought my time had come when we hit the low end of the landing strip of this gravel runway. All our diving equipment and survival & camping gear were tied down in the fuselage, but everything seemed to be moving around a bit, and with all the dirt & dust flying everywhere, it was a bit hairy to say the least.

Everything was quickly off loaded, as the aircraft then turned around and left for warmer climes. We consolidated our base at Gladman Point, King William Island(nearest civilian inhabitation was the village of Gjoa Haven, a few hundred miles away) and commenced to move equipment, tents and personnel over to our Dive Camp on O'Reilly Island NWT. This was accomplished by an RCAF Beaver floatplane, which can operate on both land and water. Even though it was daylight for 24 hrs a day, we maintained our usual daytime routine of breakfast at 0700, dinner at Noon, supper at 1700 and bed at 2100 or 2200hrs. Field Army Ration Packs – MRE's(Meal Ready to Eat) was our daily fare, with some being quite good, while others were not. The warmest temperature we experienced during our time there was 12 C one day.

We reconnoitred the 12 ft high gravel spit on the north end of the Island on a daily basis to see if we could dive that most likely spot, where the Eskimos's said they had seen the ship, however pack ice was constantly moving over the site. Naval Diving evolutions do not take place under moving ice, as it could all jam together, thereby causing the Diver to drown when all the air in his tanks is exhausted. In fact, it is frequently the case that one can go to bed with no ice to be seen, then look out a few hours later to find that it is now completely covered with ice, all due to the vagaries of wind and tide. This forced us to conduct diving operations in the sheltered bay. The CBC camera crew was very frustrated with this turn

of events because they had been tasked to provide a 30 minute TV program. To solve this dilemma, we had the camera crew come out in their Zodiac inflatable boat to film the Divers as we did an evolution of diving in the sheltered bay. I, as the Diving Supervisor, gave specific instructions to the Divers on the surface as to where to operate in a grid search, asking them pertinent questions as to what they discovered upon surfacing from the dive. All of the necessary film footage was then made into a half hour TV documentary about our so-called search for the lost ship HMS EREBUS – which all goes to show that one must be cautious about what one views on TV now-a-days as gospel truth!!

It was my opinion that the Reserve Ships Diving Officer was ill-suited for the task of Supervising Divers on this Operation. The main reason in my estimation, is that when in charge of underwater operations, Divers will let you know that they are getting too cold (in these cases it was ½ hour in the water for most of the Divers), and it is up to the Supervisor using his acquired knowledge to decide when to get them out of the water. This Supervisor unflinchingly told them to go back down and continue the task, and he would call them up when he figured it was time to do so. All the Divers wore ¼ inch wetsuits with 5 zippers (the Chief's suit only had 1 zipper), which allows cold water to flush through more readily, causing Divers to lose body heat. Whereas the Chief could easily stay down for more than an hour. Needless to say, when the Chief was supervising this Ships Diving Officer's dive, and he surfaced after only 15 minutes stating he wanted out of the water because he was getting cold, he was informed that he must continue his task until it was completed – another 15 minutes. After that exercise, he allowed any cold Diver out of the water when so informed.

One incident that occurred on O'Reilly Island, is that the Reserve Ships Diving Officer's tent burned down one night. Every day the RCAF floatplane would take one of the Dive Team and any of the other personnel back to Gladman DEW Line base for a clean-up shower and sleep overnight, returning them in the morning flight. The one night the Chief's turn came up, and when he returned to the Island next morning, he was told about this "incident". Everyone on the expedition had been explicitly told at the briefing in Trenton, that absolutely no booze was to be taken by anybody on this Operation. Evidently the Reserve Ships Diving Officer had brought a hidden bottle of Rum, and decided to imbibe it when the Chief Petty Officer was away at the DEW Line Base that night. When the Reserve Officer went into his tent to sleep that night, somehow the small heater inside caught the tent on fire, and he bailed out with only singed eyebrows.

Roy Fox took many photos of the Divers and Dive Operations at O'Reilly Island, which can be seen on our website navydiver.ca, click on Divers Scrapbook, then on Operation Polar Dip 1977, Photo's by Roy Fox. Chuck Rolfe also took some slide macro photos of the flora on the Island, which he loaned out to be shown at a large Dive & Photo Show in Toronto, Ontario, but he was unable to find them after the Show was over – bummer that! On our walk about of the Island one day, we found a small Inukshuk together with a stone cache of what must have been blubber, but it had all liquefied into the most horrible oily stench one could imagine. I suppose if one was starving to death, it might prove to be a lifesaver, if one could get it down without spewing it all back up.

Upon completion of the Diving Operation, all the equipment and gear was to be returned to base at the Gladman Point airstrip, to be loaded on the C-130 Hercules & return to Winnipeg, thence back to our respective Units. With 80% already moved back to Gladman, the floatplane had one of its' floats holed by gravel on the airstrip. The two-way radios had proved incapable of transmissions between the Dive Camp and the Dew Line base throughout the Operation, so when the aircraft did not come back to the Island, we were incommunicado as to what was happening. After a day of this, the Military had requested that an airliner flying its course at 30,000 ft come down to 1000 ft and check out what was

doing at our camp on O'Reilly Island, which it did, reported the situation to Gladman, and went on its flight over the North Pole to Europe. The Military then hired a civilian twin-engine Otter turpoprop floatplane to fly the 1100 Km from Yellowknife NWT to pick us up with what gear we still had on O'Reilly, and get us over to Gladman, where the C -130 was waiting to fly us home. At this time the schedule was so close, that we unloaded from the Otter directly into the waiting C -130, and we were on our way out of the Arctic.

Other than our underwater search not locating the HMS EREBUS or HMS TERROR, there was the tent burning down incident, followed by the case of one Diver thinking he was a Barrack Room Lawyer, creating some confusion when it came to everyone on the expedition handling caretaking duties, such as: preparing the community meals, and the subsequent clean-up thereafter. One lousy apple can take the shine off all the others. We did accomplish our raison d'être; we exercised the Reserve Divers in cold water operations, we showed a Canadian presence in the Arctic, and we did provide for a 30 minute CBC Television program.

MEMBERSHIP AND COMMENDATION

Bob Coren in Fredericton NB sent along a cheque to pay for 5 more years CNDA Membership. He also stated that he wishes to express his appreciation of the fine efforts of all the CNDA Executive who conduct the business of the 3 Chapters, and of the National Directors. It is through your efforts we continue to foster a close bond between our Naval Divers, both present and past. Your collective efforts are a refreshing reminder of a proud Service, whose members continue to descend into the deep dark depths, and work in that silent world on the strength of their knowledge & skills – Bravo Zulu to you all!!