BELARE FIELD COURSE IN SVALBARD



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On request from the IPF, the Norwegian Polar Institute office in Longyearbyen kindly organised a field training course for some of the BELARE 2007-2008 team at the beginning of October 2007.

The training was initially meant to take place on the Nordeskiodbreen but had to be moved to a glacier closer to Longyearbyen due to bad weather.

Longyearbyen is a very international place and home to many different nationalities. The Svalbard Treaty of 1920 established that Norway would be the country to govern the islands. However, a provision included in the Treaty allows nationals from all other countries the freedom of movement and establishment in these northermost towns. During their stay, the BELARE team was continuously reminded of this fact. The instructors included a Dane and an Englishman, and the camp cook and assistant were from Germany and Finland respectively. The UNIS campus where they had their "classroom" sessions was also home to students from all over the world.

Our course began in the classroom with a talk on extreme environment medicine given by Dr Ole Tveiten from Longyearbyen's Sikkenhus (including when to cut off fingers or toes with gangrene and when to wait). We discovered the do's and don'ts of crevasse rescue techniques - an ABC procedure to follow - how to treat wounds, bleedings, burns, fractures, hypothermia, frostbites, infections, head and spinal injuries.

Armed with this knowledge the team proceeded to learn rope techniques under the solid guidance of Jens and Harvey.

"The wilderness gapes all around us, as the snow begins to obliterate all vestiges of any optical contrast to guide us. So we follow meekly behind our rifle toting guides as they move sure-footed out into the crevasse zones. We rope up. Nothing happens. A few hours and no major drama or loss of personnel later, we arrive at the lip of the crevasse and timidly peek over, making sure to have all safety ropes and then some, secured. The ice screws are in. The harnesses jingle and clank as we flaunt our Petzl ware and over we go, abseiling into the bottomless pits. Well, not exactly. I don't think our psyches would have been able to deal with bottomless on the first try, so we settle for a decent little crevasse."

The team camped in an area called Bjorndal or "Bear Valley" and although they were continuously reminded of the presence of bears, they saw little trace of them. Several days of this and the team is ready for their very own SAR (search and rescue exercise), with the Governor's helicopter thrown in for good measure. The whole thing works like a charm. They even had fake reporters asking embarrassing questions. It was very authentic.

A great dinner around a log fire and a vist to the Svalbard Museum, and before they had time to realize what was happening, the BELARE team had been shoved back on the army jet and was winging its way back to Melsbroek.

"Antarctica here we come."