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In 1995, I was invited by the National Aeronautical Association of Russia to participate in very spectacular event:



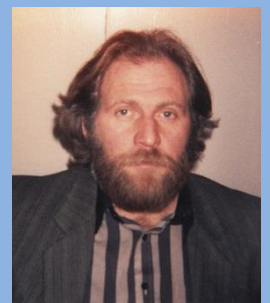
НАЦИОНАЛЬНАЯ АВИАЦИОННАЯ
АССОЦИАЦИЯ РОССИИ
NATIONAL AERONAUTICAL
ASSOCIATION OF RUSSIA

PARACHUTE JUMP ON THE NORTH POLE



This daring mission was organized by Russian Federation in honor of 50 years of the victory in the 2nd World War. Due to its complexity, it was entrusted to Russian Red Cross as these professionals already had an extensive experience in Polar areas. Internally, the task was delegated to the famous Russian parachutist and intellectual, Sergey Insarov (nominated as a mission commander).

By its definition, Geographical North Pole is a place on Earth's North hemisphere at which Earth's axis of rotation touches the surface of the Earth. On our nowadays planet, it is not a land, it is a part of the Polar Sea, mostly frozen throughout the year. The sea depth at the North Pole is currently 4,261 m / 13,980 ft as measured by the small Russian submarine "Mir" in 2007.



Sergey Insarov '95



Peary celebrates reaching North Pole 1909

Historically, it seems that it is still not clear who was the first person on the North Pole. First recorded attempts were made in 1800's; British naval officer William Edward Parry in 1827 reached 82°45', British explorer Albert Markham in 1876 reached 83°20', Norwegian explorers Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen in 1895 reached 86°14'. In 1900's first claims of reaching North Pole (90° of latitude) were made by US explorer Frederick Cook (claimed to have reached the North Pole on April 21st 1908) and US Navy engineer Robert Peary (claimed to have reached the Pole on dog sledges on April 6th 1909). However, first verified arrival to the North Pole was made on May 12th 1926, by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. He reached the North Pole in an airship "Norge", together with his US sponsor Lincoln Ellsworth.



Relief chart of the North Pole published by "National Geographic"

Although there is not much data about early Soviet expeditions on the North Pole, they were certainly very successful in conquering this magnificent environment. Starting from May 1937, Soviet Union always had "Ice Station" in the vicinity of the North Pole. That station was generally small in size, usually hosting just few scientists who were collecting data for various purposes. The first commander of Soviet Ice Station was Soviet scientist (geographer) Ivan Dmitrievich Papanin.

Politically, North Pole does not belong to any country, however the only country permanently present there - was Soviet Union (nowadays Russia). Similarly, South Pole was always organized and operated predominantly by the United States. In 1956 Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station was built and it remained operative till the present days. In the early 1990's, although still under very strict control of Russian government, North Pole Ice station started to provide limited support to some Polar expeditions. Till the year of 1995, the number of these expeditions was very symbolic, it was estimated that the number of people who arrived to the North Pole before 1995 was approximately similar to the number of people who climbed the Mt. Everest, which was about 1000. 1995 skydiving expedition was planned to be the biggest event on the North Pole ever.



Soviet scientist Ivan Dmitrievich Papanin

Because of all those facts, this invitation was a real blast for me. Being one of the men/parachutists who had opportunity to be on the “top of the World” was something worth to live for. I was extensively preparing for this adventure, reading all the literature I could find in the libraries, as in 1994 and early 1995 there were no internet and Google. Referring to the data found, I was preparing special jumping suit that should protect me from -50°C cold relative wind that will be blowing 350 km/h at me, at the exit from the airplane and later in freefall. At that time, I was student of Faculty of Mechanical Engineering (group for Aeronautics) at Belgrade University (Yugoslavia), I already had some knowledge of the expected aerodynamic conditions, however being 23 years old and all by myself in this demanding (zero tolerance) project was quite a challenge. Luckily, few months later from the starting point, after I already did lot of research, I have got support. My suggestions and thoughts were followed by Yugoslav Parachute Industry “Kluz” and its director Zdravko Mekterović, who helped me to get the suit I wanted and brand-new parachute with small adjustments, designed for this mission. I felt like a real representative of my country, and that feeling of belonging was very important, very special and very strong. I was very proud.



Yugoslavian Parachute Industry
“Kluz”

Time really flew. There were always some new things to be added on and some to be skipped. Trying to prepare everything for the mission and to simultaneously pass all the exams at University was not an easy task. Finally, ready or not, the time came, and a group started to gather in Moscow, in early April 1995. ...136 parachutists, dozens of journalists and scientists, coming out of 19 countries of the World and all 5 continents.

Yugoslavian officials in Moscow have also heard about this event and were expecting my arrival. Among others, Yugoslavian ambassador at that time, Danilo Ž. Marković and famous Yugoslavian businessman in Moscow, Stanimir Petrović have found some time for small welcoming ceremony and logistic support. Those moments meant a lot to me.



Volosovo airport, 1995, Vladimir Milosavljevic (YU)
with Yugoslav parachute “Kluz 6” and “Antikor” suit
Left: Nathalie Chudiak (NL), Right: Bill Miller (UK)



Mikael Andersson (SE) & Vladimir Milosavljevic (YU), exit MI-8 helicopter
Airport Volosovo, Russia. Photo by: Graham Nightingale (UK)

On April 10th 1995, everybody was there and mission officially started. Russians were very good organizers, with outstanding hospitality and very professional manners. Mission started with 2 days of Moscow sight-seeing, friendship and team building while accommodating to the climate and time zone. On the third day, followed up by 3rd Moscow Aeroclub parachuting specialists, we were transferred to the Sport Airport Volosovo, about 100 km South from Moscow, for practice parachute jumps and equipment tests.

The weather at Volosovo was cold, but still much warmer than what we expected for the North Pole. Head of operations at Volosovo was experienced Soviet parachutist Vladimir Gorbunov; he organized jumps for us from a famous Russian helicopter MI-8, as this aircraft has similar tail gate as huge IL-76 jet that we will use for the North Pole jump. Here, we tried different pieces of our equipment and different exiting techniques from the aircraft, so that we learn how approximately to go out of huge jet and what approximate conditions to expect in free fall. Tandem masters were particularly busy with these tests as they were also caring their passengers, mostly representatives of Expedition major sponsors. Here, in Volosovo, we also noticed each other's flying skills and techniques, so general plan for the "big jump" was developed. All the jumps were successful, there were no injuries and no reserve parachute deployments.



Vladimir Gorbunov (RU)



Nathalie Chudiak (NL)
Photo by: Peet Schoonen

4 days later, in the morning of April 16th 1995 we were packing, transferring back to Moscow. It was crowded. Parachutists, scientists, media professionals, logistic personnel, all caring their bags and equipment, with faces full of particular readiness. In the middle of that rush, I remember a face of one of the Expedition organizers, Nathalie Chudiak (NL), standing in peace, thinking of something. At that time a "Westerner" had to pass very detailed checks in order to enter Russia even for a pure visit and she was one of the breaking-through professionals who actually managed to establish first trustful connections between the airmen of (at that time) two very opposing Worlds. Many years later, Nathalie (skydiver, airplane and helicopter pilot) will become a President of Federation of European Women Pilots (FEWP) and will lead this organization with success. ...and now, when I am thinking of those moments, I do remember other faces that were in this rush, legends of this Expedition, very successful individuals, highly recognized professionals in their fields. I felt and I still do feel respect and honor that I was on the same task with them.

A bus ride took us to Chkalovsky Airport, about 40 km East of Moscow. ...to board Russian airliner Tupolev TU-154 and fly to the Taymir peninsula, far North of the middle Siberia, town of Hatanga. We were all surprised how this "unknown" airport (Chkalovsky) had such a big number of airliners. ...over 40 of them were parked in some disciplined order, giving us real impression of power of huge Soviet Union. Everything was very sensational as almost none of us (except Russians) knew how this part of the World looks like. Later, as we took off, we were impressed again; very soon after leaving Moscow area, we saw extremely big planes of peaceful nature, miles and miles of land, forest, partially covered with snow and partially bare. Big Russia. After over 4 hours of flight, we landed at some place for refueling. ...but we didn't know where. ...and we did not ask, as the whole atmosphere was "sounding" like some sort of secret. We saw airport personnel all focused on our airplane and all dressed in the same cold weather dark blue jackets and characteristic Soviet winter caps, like uniforms. It was not allowed to go outside of the airplane and it was not allowed to use cameras to film anything at that point. We just complied...



At Chkalovski airport, Moscow, with famous Russian parachutist Mark Potapov. Photo by Wilma Holthuis (NL)



Inside Tupolev TU-154 with World Parachute Industry inventor, American Bill Booth

After about an hour, we continued our journey, over the wide plains of Russian taigas, having breath taking views on absolute wilderness. As we were coming closer to the Polar areas, a daylight time extended, however, the darkness was coming anyway since we also crossed few time zones to the East. The twilight was long and slow in this area. I remember the moment when the airplane started to descent, the air was smooth and the sun was almost exactly on the horizon. It was very romantic.

We landed in Hatanga some minutes after 11pm, deep in the twilight. The outside temperature was reading -9°C and it was considered as relatively warm for that part of the year. There was no wind, the air was dry, feeling of being outside and first time in real Siberia was magnificent. People,

buildings, structure and equipment, made my first impression that Hatanga was well organized polar town. Everything looked a bit old and painted predominantly in military style, but also very functional. In this initial contact, I noticed that the airport personnel knew exact details of our mission and they were very supportive. ...and I would say, despite the difficult geographic position of Hatanga, these people were also very well educated.

Next morning, we woke up in real Siberia. Hotel, food smells, people faces, clothes, manners, some October Revolution captions..., everything was very original. After the breakfast we went out, for a walk, to see the town – Hatanga. ...calmly, without pressure, as no one knew when exactly we will depart to the Pole. We were simply enjoying our new polar surrounding, with a smell of real adventure, accommodating to the climate and time zone, trying to talk to the locals we met, about their town, life and customs. In these conversations I found out that town Hatanga was founded in 1605, however, it was majorly built in 1930's by Stalin prisoners. Those days of expansion, the town counted about 22,000 people, while in 1995, that number was only 2500. ...but still, inside the town there was very detailed infrastructure: market, post office, primary and high school, hospital, very well-organized airport (with 2700 m long runway), even a theatre and a museum... Inside the

buildings it was normal, pleasantly warm temperature. Russian government entirely supported this part of the country, no one was expressing any wariness for living in these cruel conditions. ...and there was a large river Hatanga along the North edge of the town (on the opposite side from the airport), still frozen in that part of the year, with some stranded fisherman boats.



Streets of Hatanga, 16th of April 1995
Photo by: Vladimir Milosavljevic

Inhabitants mentioned that river Hatanga is full of fish and it is navigable only through the months of Jun, July and August. By the way, name "Hatanga" means navigable river. The town was placed basically in between the long airport runway and river Hatanga. It looked modest and quiet, somehow romantic, with occasional cheer brought by the kids, running with their red cheeks, playing on sledges with their dogs, jumping head down into the deep snow from a small trampoline. ...like in some far away World. ...and then, suddenly, as a guide, or just a memory to a big era of Soviet history, huge wall painting of famous German theorists of socialist society, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. ...and next to them, to the right, "tovarisch" Lenin! Still very fresh...



Marx, Engels & Lenin in Hatanga '95.
Photo by: Max Dereta (NL)

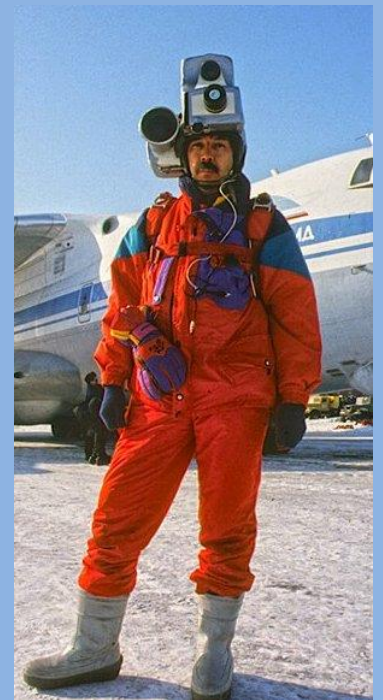


Frozen river Hatanga with stranded fishing boats
Photo by: Max Dereta (NL)

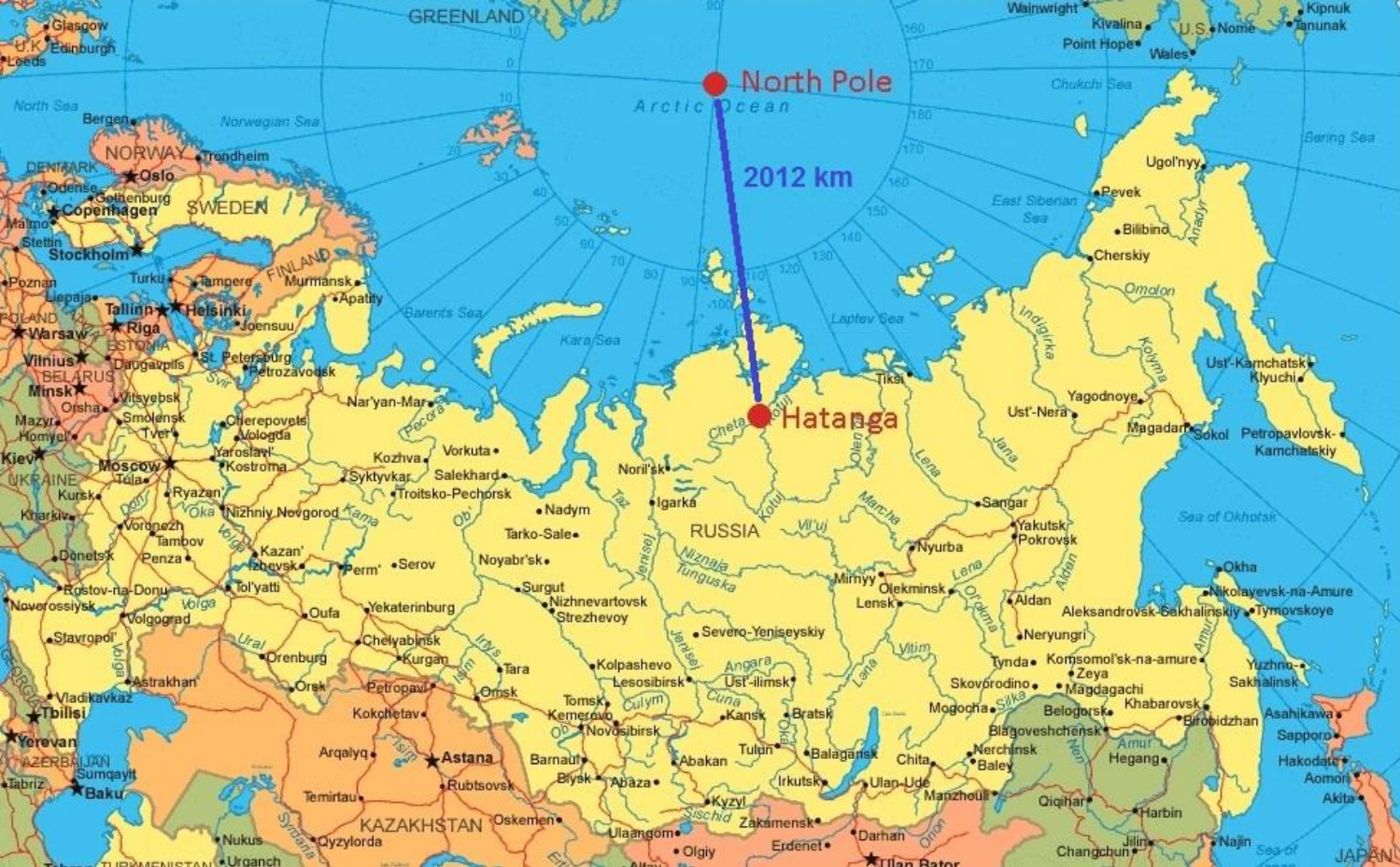
That day in Hatanga (17th of April 1995) was wonderful, clear skies with very calm wind. At that part of the year in that area daylight dominates, with only 1 hour of total darkness (pure black), plus about 1 hour of dusk and 1 hour of dawn. Walking down the streets and plains of this place full of history and specific architecture was real education for me. Feeling and understanding Polar life, relations among these people, their relations with their country, gave me quite new observations on possible society modifications and set-ups. Although very remote and isolated, Hatanga showed many interesting colors. I still remember the interpretation their song “My dear North” (“Севере, севере мои, севере мои дарагои”) performed by their local cultural-artistic group.

Later that day, we gathered in the hotel again. Although without any certain information, we knew that we should stay focused on our mission. I had few plans how to jump on the North Pole, but final version was not clear yet. It was also a commercial moment for most of the parachutists, a lifetime chance to make good promotion of themselves and companies/sponsors involved. Freefall photographers were in great demand in this mission and teams were quickly changing in accordance with various new deals and reasons. At that time there were no Go Pro like cameras so that everybody could easily film something. In order to get any picture and especially good quality ones, freefall photographers had to use conventional equipment that usually included big fragile cameras with large stands. ...and there was no memory stick or hard disc inside the camera, just a light sensitive film for maximum 36 photos, so even with an excellent freefalling flying skills and excellent flight planning i.e. positioning relatively to the sun and other skydivers, these photographers had very limited chances to capture the exact picture they want. One of the top masters of those skills in that era was Netherlander (Croatian born) Max Dereta.

During that afternoon of April 17th 1995 we were all invited to the general meeting where entire mission plan was explained. The distance from Hatanga to the North Pole was 2012 km (1257 s.m.). Trip to the Pole should take about 3.5 hours. The decision was made that Russian parachutists will jump first. Mission commander Sergey Insarov said that the airplane speed at the exit will be about 350 km/h (close to 100 m/s), which means that every second we will be 100 m (330 ft) away from our target. It was clear that we will have to exit quickly and pull (open parachutes) high. It was also explained that linked exits are not recommended due to the high airspeed which may cause suit damage or premature parachute deployment. Sergey continued, as we approach the North Pole, the airplane will descent to 300 m (1000 ft) AGL/MSL and open the tailgate, for cabin depressurization and reserve parachute automatic opening devices calibration. Then, it will climb to 500 m (1600 ft) and overfly the Pole while Russian crew (parachutists) will throw out the cargo – our survival equipment, to have some sort of back-up if things do not go as planned. Then, IL-76 will turn and climb to 1300 m (4300 ft) and in the 1st pass Russian parachutists will go out, group leader will be Konstantin Kozlov. 2nd pass will be from 3000 m (10,000 ft) at which American skydivers will go out, group leader will be American Bill Booth. ...and at the last, 3rd pass, also from 3000 m (10,000 ft), Europeans will go out, led by French skydiver - Patrick de Gayardon. Parachutists from other continents (South America, Africa, Asia and Australia) were basically merged into these two major groups (US and EU).



Freefall photographer Max Dereta in polar equipment



Then Sergey came to the safety issues. He highly recommended that all skydivers jumping from 3000 m (10,000 ft) should have whole face protected with masks and good goggles as we expect temperatures of -50°C on exit, at which our tears will freeze immediately if our goggles go off. He also pointed out that in one of the missions, a skydiver was walking several times in and out of the hotel with his parachute on and accumulated invisible moisture. On the exit from the airplane, he got solid ice cover over his harness, he could not open his main canopy and he had to activate his spring-loaded reserve... Luckily, spring was strong enough to break through the ice layer, his reserve canopy deployed normally, and he landed with no injury.

Sergey continued that after opening parachute, North Pole landing spot will be marked with 2 red smoke signal torches and 2 MI-8 helicopters. We should aim and land close to those landmarks. Additionally, we should expect cracks in the ice, some of them even kilometers long, so second priority will be to avoid these cracks and to land at the side where the landmarks are. ...if we land on the other side of the crack and become stranded, we should put our parachute over the nearby highest iceberg and wait for the helicopter. To increase security, everybody got additional task, 2 names/people to remember. If he/she can't find them upon landing, he/she must report that to the mission command and search will start. Luckily this task was very easy for me, as names that I have got to remember were names of my 2 roommates. During this briefing, American skydivers suggested lubricating cables of main parachute release system with silicon, as this will prevent ice formation and eventual blockage (malfunction) of this system.

After this briefing, we still didn't know when exactly we will depart to the North Pole, date and time, as this was the decision and responsibility of the mission commander, Sergey Insarov, who was consistently coordinating between the weather reports from the North Pole, IL-76 flight crew and us, skydivers. Nobody was loudly predicting any of these numbers, but we knew that things are becoming "hot" as that early afternoon we saw huge Ilyushin IL-76 approaching and landing at Hatanga airport. That airplane was really magnificent. It gave a special feeling to all of us.



Medal of Parachutist who jumped on the North Pole

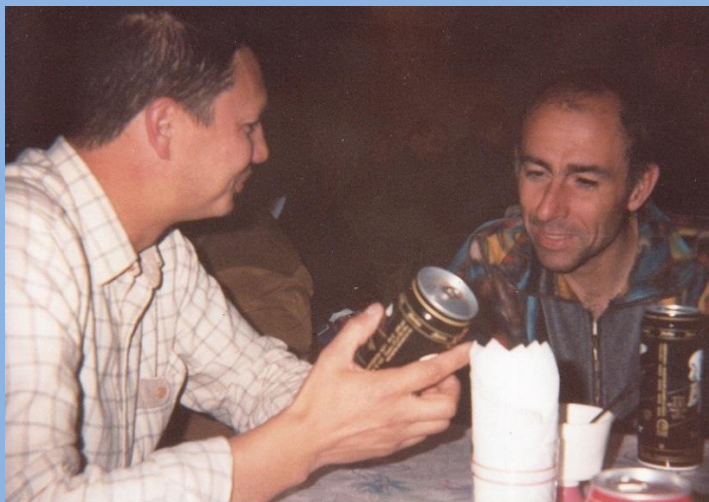
During that afternoon chat, me and my room mates, French skydivers Mario Gervasi and Jean-Claude Laffaille, decided to jump together. We had a plan to jump out the airplane in close unlinked exit, gather in freefall and make photos of ourselves, as Jean-Claude planned to put small photo camera on his parachute chest strap. We were discussing all safety issues mentioned in briefing, we concluded that we are ready and that we have no opened issues.

Shortly after this conversation, I was in the hotel lobby again; somehow, at one moment, standing close to the mission commander Insarov. I looked at him and completely unexpected to me, he faced to me and calmly said: "Volodia (nick-name for Vladimir in Russian), I will tell you a big secret, first to you. We will depart to the North Pole this evening".

Somehow through the history, Russians and Yugoslavians had special relations, but at first, I was not sure if he was serious. I was puzzled. I still remember his intelligent blue eyes looking at me that moment. ...without hearing my question from my side, he simply confirmed "да" (yes). I felt very honored. Very soon after our short conversation, a word was spread and group leaders were called over public announcement for a meeting. All parachutists were also informed to assemble in the hotel lobby after the dinner at 7:30pm. Estimated time of departure to the North Pole will be 8pm Hatanga time!

It was a rush. The food we got was very strong and energetic. Everybody ate fast, very excited, walking around, carrying equipment, talking loud... I ran upstairs into my room to pick up my equipment and I came down to the lobby again, carrying all my stuff. In one corner a group of American and British parachutists were doing final preparations, lubricating their main parachute release system with silicon, offering that service also to all others. I gave them my parachute with many thanks for their service. Then I found some space, to drop everything down and do a slow count of all my equipment items.

At that moment, Patrick de Gayardon came to the lobby also and put his stuff next to mine. Those days, Patrick was absolutely World's most famous skydiver. Competitor, World champion, innovator, mastermind of very particular skydiving projects. He had very specific, optimistic appearance, his energy was evident, as well as his very brave attitude. 192cm toll, strong, humoristic, polite, open minded and very accessible. We started to chat as we already exchanged few words here and there. I asked him if I may take a quick look of his famous skyboard and he handled it over to me immediately. I noticed very interesting knowledge applied to the board design, particularly in the position of the foot stands and "3-ring" board release system. The board was flat, and I noticed, when I straightened it up, it was exactly my size/height (177cm)! I looked at Patrick and he smiled watching me noticing that coincidence. Then he showed me his new "Sector" sport watch he was wearing over his jumpsuit for promotion. Those were few impressions I wrote in my diary in Hatanga. ...and I also remember his first conversation with Russian & World Champion Valery Rozov at Volosovo few weeks later. At that time Valery just started jumping with a board, he had very modest skydiving equipment and small skyboard for beginners. Patrick came for a quick visit but noticed him and stopped by to see what he does, to give him his support. I never told him, but I marked him (Patrick de Gayardon) as one of my lifetime heroes.



Beer in Hatanga! French parachutists Jean-Claude Laffaille & Mario Gervasi (FR). Photo by Vladimir Milosavljevic



Patrick de Gayardon
Photo by Patrick Passe (FR)



Vladimir Milosavljevic, in front of the Soviet jet IL-76, Hatanga, Russia, prior to boarding to the North Pole, 17 April 1995

Later in the afternoon the weather in Hatanga turned to be cloudy, with thick gray cloud coverage. Since the decision was made, I estimated that probably it is better on the Pole. I also calculated, if we depart at 8 PM and fly 3.5 hours, plus the airplane maneuvering over the Pole, we will jump around midnight, Hatanga time. Considering that we were still under the jet leg from Moscow time zone and whole day on our feet, it will be very demanding. But I was ready.

With these thoughts I was walking towards the airport apron, soon standing in front of the huge IL-76 jet at -15°C . Its engines were running peacefully, on idle. I put all my equipment on the snow, checked pins of both of my parachutes, my jumping suit, goggles, 2 pairs of gloves (one wool and one leather), 2 caps (1 full face) and finally, pocket for my small photo camera that should witness this spectacular event. Freefall photographers were also out, performing final checks of their equipment, positioning their "Newton" ring-sights for proper camera targeting in freefall. We were standing outside for quite a while and there was no rush, everybody wanted to do all preparations in peace and full concentration. ...and probably to feel a bit of cold weather with all the equipment on.



Aft view of IL-76, Hatanga, Russia, 17 April 1995

I was one of the last people who boarded the airplane. I still remember climbing tiny slicky aluminum ladders and my first impression of huge internal cabin space, longitudinally divided by 4 rows of wooden benches for sitting, and no seat belts. Initially it was cold inside, but after all doors were closed and huge Soviet jet started to move, we got some heat. The taxiways and runway were covered with ice and some snow, however Russian flight crew was performing all procedures very routinely. At that time, it was not unusual to have cockpit door opened and from my seat I could see flight crew on both IL-76 cockpit platforms. As this airplane will also fly back after the North Pole drop, it was full of fuel and very close to its maximum take-off limit. The take-off sequence took a while, without much runway left, but finally, after we lifted off, parachutists gave a loud cheer, the unique reaction which really raised our team spirit. We are flying to the North Pole!



Inside the IL-76, flying to the North Pole



Mission commander Sergey Insarov coordinating with IL-76 flight crew

During the flight, everybody was pretty quiet, some people were even sleeping and some simply closed their eyes for concentration. After about an hour we were over the Ice cap and people started to look out through their windows more often. ...and I did, it was the first time I saw this environment, something completely unreal to me, huge plains of white ice and clear blue skies. No trees, no buildings, no roads, railways, powerlines... Nothing... Like another planet..., like we all entered into some fairytale, a dream. As the impressions were settling down, we were slowly approaching to the North Pole and a tension started to raise again. Soon, first public announcement came "1 hour to the North Pole"! Most of the skydivers started to move and out of sleepy silence their faces got characters! They started to talk to each other, turning around, checking their equipment. I was still calm, looking at my room mates, Mario and Jean-Claude, confirming to each other that we are OK and ready.

Then, the airplane started a very long descent, it was a smooth glide through the air... Everything appeared to be stable, well organized, but busy. Each parachutist did his/her own preparation routine as in freefall there will be no others to help. To any observer it was evident that something big is going to happen. Then the next official announcement came "15 minutes to the North Pole"! Particular fact about IL-76 airplanes is that all of them are equipped with some army installations as well, for large paratroops operations. One of these items was extremely loud siren which now shortly sounded and we couldn't believe how loud it was! ...like judgement day! From that moment everybody became really serious, following up the instructions and plan set in Hatanga. As I didn't know how cold it will be inside when the door open, I put my entire jump suit on and I stood up on the bench to be able to see what is going on in the tail section. I saw Russian parachutists fully equipped, standing ready in front of the huge tailgate door, next to



Russian parachutists were ready. Mikhail Rybochkin to the left and Konstantin Kozlov to the right

the big pile of cargo. ...and in few moments, door started to move, the entire vertical wall of the tail section rotated around the upper hinge and went upward... I did not expect that, ...fantastic, incredible...! Soviet Union technology in extreme conditions, live transmission! At that moment most of the western parachutists started to calibrate their reserve parachute automatic openers (mostly German Airtec Cypress). I did not have any kind of that equipment, and I knew even during my preparations, if my arms freeze and do not open my parachute, nobody will... But I had no doubts, I will jump, no retreat!

In these thoughts, I stepped down, took my parachute, put it on the bench, opened velcro covers and quickly checked pins of both parachutes again. Then I put my parachute on my back, but still lightly, without fastening my straps... I also signaled to my room mates “thumbs up” we go! Then I have heard “satanic siren” again and I saw some rush on the exit tailgate door, Russians who were connected by secure lines to the airplane cabin, started to push the cargo out. The scene was spectacular! Cargo parachutes were opening one by one and I felt all that space, the North Pole alive! After about 10 seconds all cargo was out, the siren silenced and the airplane started left climbing turn to 1,300 m (4,300 ft). It was absolute James Bond situation!



IL-76 cargo specialist crew, after cargo drop

We were there, and the spectacular North Pole was showing us its incredible untouched beauty. Loud noise produced by 4 large jet engines and fast airstream on the tailgate increased this feeling drastically, it was a life time view and sensation. After climbing turn, the airplane was flying straight and level again, altitude reading 1,300 m (4,300 ft). Quick siren sign to get ready and then steady, extremely loud signal... I see now Konstantin Kozlov running few steps to the gate and diving out, quickly followed by the other Russian parachutists, about 20 of them, very skilled and very brave.



Russian parachutists exit IL-76 tailgate over the North Pole, Altitude: 1300 m (4300 ft) AGL/MSL
17 April 1995

Freefall photographers were densely grouped to the side and some behind this group, filming this spectacular exit. In one moment, I saw tall Max Dereta standing in the crowd and filming without parachute on his back! I was shocked! In next few seconds all Russian parachutists were out, and the huge airplane started next climbing turn.

Now Americans were mounting for the exit, gesticulating and spotting the smoke signals given from the “ground”. I saw Bill Booth standing to the left side of the tail gate commanding... Very soon, again, airplane captain gave quick siren signal, and then again, loooong and horrible! (...so that you exit even if you didn't plan to. ;-)) Bill Both dove out... ...then, like a liquid, other skydivers followed: American sportsmen, special forces, adventurers, and many others who merged into American group. This flow of jumpers was even more spectacular since fast airplane flight gave the opportunity to see and follow skydivers almost all the way to the deployment altitude. ...and they were about 40 seconds in freefall...



© Max Dereta

Exit of Max Dereta (NL) over the North Pole, 17th April 1995

Then the siren was silenced again and the airplane started another turn. Now there was much more space in the airplane. Europeans who were on standby now started to move towards the tail section. I was still standing on the long bench, looking where all others are, checking and touching important parts of my equipment, fastening my chest and leg straps and slowly moving towards the tailgate door. I. My heart rate was probably very high, but I was acting like nothing special was going on. Soon, I stepped down and stood up next to my French mates Mario and Jean-Claude. We were all observing what was going on. The jam was high again, the whole group of about 60 people came closer to the tailgate, standing very densely, it started to be very hot in polar suit and all equipment on. I was fully ready, my mind was up, my whole body including face was covered and protected, just my goggles were still leaning on my forehead, waiting for the sign to put them down and go! At this moment I could not see much out as I was totally surrounded, but I felt when the airplane returned into a straight and level flight. Soon, the siren gave us a short sign. Through the crowd, I saw for a moment Patrick de Gayardon on his skyboard, gesticulating, asking for assistance from his camera flyers to bring him closer to the door. Then a long loud signal came on and – GOOOOOO!

Patrick was out, in fractions I saw Max Dereta with his huge head mounted cameras, turning towards the inside (cabin) and floating out with his group. Then tandems started to exit, very quickly. Mission leader Sergey Insarov was to the left and in front of me. He exited as a tandem master, with very famous Russian freefall photographer Andrey



Konstantin Kozlov (RU)
First exited IL-76 jet and first
landed on the North Pole

Veselov. Other tandems were also exiting, the siren was horribly steady “on” giving us a real rush. Go go go...!!! I put my goggles down (on) and I tried to give a signal to my mates, but the tailgate was very wide, over 3.5 m (10+ ft), so other jumpers were just passing all around us, jumping out in very random order. Aware of the situation, we also made few steps forward and jumped in a dive...! What a blast!!! I felt extremely strong jet stream of the airplane, I thought my hands will connect on my back! In a fraction of the second, it reminded me on my Yugoslav Army jumps from Antonov 26 flying 350km/h on the jumprun, but this was much faster. At this very first contact with Polar air, I did not feel any cold at any part of my body which increased my self-confidence, as I was concerned with this transfer from about +20°C (inside) to about -50°C (outside). While still riding on the jet blast and staying almost horizontal with leaving airplane, I slightly turned to the right, noticing fantastic picture over my shoulder; huge Soviet jet flying away and jumpers diving out...! Incredible!

In few seconds the jet blast was gone and I looked around and down, focusing to my room mates. I saw Jean-Claude a bit away horizontally and too far below (over 100 m below), but Mario was reachable. I started tracking to Mario using various techniques and I reached him in about 7-8 seconds. I was “standing” behind him, he did not see me as he was facing the opposite direction, watching Jean-Claude. Then he turned to his left and saw me in front of him, but he did not seem to be surprised. He showed me (pointed with a finger) that Jean-Claude is too far down. I acknowledged with my thumb. Then Mario tracked away from me. I was “standing still” for a moment (actually falling 180 km/h), looking at both of them, but observing more Jean-Claude as now he was coming closer, “2 o’clock” and below me without knowledge that I am above. While controlling this situation (having also



View from about 100 m above, just before landing on the North Pole



Vladimir Milosavljevic just landed on the North Pole 17th April 1995. Photo by: Konstantin Kozlov (RU)

few other falling jumpers in my peripheral vision) I was I absorbing this North Pole beauty... View, sensations, thoughts... ..spectacular, unreal, like over some other planet. Next moment I saw Jean-Claude waving, means, he will open his parachute now! I judged that we had some horizontal distance, however, just in case, I started to wave too, for the guys above me. When I saw Jean-Claude’s pilot-chute out, I pulled mine too, but I held it in my hand, not to open too high, just to be ready to release it if I see him coming “up” on me. The parachute I had on my back was Yugoslav “Kluz 6” with rarely fast opening. Next moment I saw Jean-Claude coming “up”, passing well clear to my right. After about a second, I also released my pilot-chute and I felt a strong opening shock. I looked up, a slider came down, all 9 cells inflated! I was hanging on the light Polar wind, under the parachute over the North Pole, altitude a bit over 1200 m (4000 ft) Fantastic!!! Unreal!!!

Very soon, I saw other parachutes around me, but no one was really close. At first, I could not find target ground references, but I did not mind a lot, I just followed the other parachutes... In this absolute joy and almost a minute later, from about 3000 ft I spotted tiny red smoke signals. There were also 2 Russian MI-8 helicopters visible and some dots (people) over very white background. I checked again my parachute cells, 3 ring attachments, everything was OK. I estimated the wind and I planned my approach route. Soon I understood that most probably I will have no problem to come exactly to the desired

point, very close to the Axis of rotation. Considering other parachutes in the air, I was flying my own “traffic pattern”, partially downwind, then base and final. On the final approach I did small adjustments to the course as there were many people on the ground, constantly moving... Moment later I came to the ground view, I flared and... “thumb”! I landed on the North Pole!!! Although my parachute enabled me very soft landing, after touchdown I did not want to stay on my feet. I sat in the snow and then completely laid down, trying to relax of overwhelming emotions, facing the sky telling myself “do you know where you are!?”. It was -27°C on the Pole, the snow was not sticky, it was more like a flour... (Later some reports also reported -30°C.)

A minute later I stood up, collecting my parachute and seeing Russian parachutist Konstantin Kozlov approaching to me: “Владимир, ти приехал на Северни полюс!” (Vladimir, you arrived to the North Pole!). We hugged each other and shortly, he took his “working in all conditions” Russian photo camera “Smena 8” and invited me to make some pictures. I saw flags and I saw flag on my country – Yugoslavia. I was very proud.



Graham Nightingale (UK) and Vladimir Milosavljevic (YU)
17th April 1995, North Pole

After months of preparation I was finally there, but it was really difficult to make a big picture, to imagine that right now I am standing on the Top of the World! ...a point around which the whole World rotates, a point from which wherever you go – you go South!!! Then I met with Mario and Jean-Claude. We briefly discussed our jump and Jean-Claude told me that his camera mounted on his chest strap went away as the elastic lines he put froze and broke apart. Then I approached closely to the North Pole axis which was custom made for this expedition and placed exactly on the 90° of latitude about an hour earlier, measured by the ground crew (with GPS). Later, we noticed that the ice is really moving as after 3 hours GPS showed the axis about 100 m away.

The axis was nice, it had pointers to the capital cities of every Expedition participant. I quickly found Belgrade, 5110 km far from the North Pole, it meant a lot to me. My bag, brought by the ground crew, was also waiting for me. Various friends who also just landed helped me to make nice pictures for my sponsors (Kluz, Antikor, Sartid, Tvim, Minel, Termoelektro, Foto Elite, Zmaj,...). ...and, as I always considered education as “something”, I also made few pictures for my dear Belgrade University, for its history. I felt that my mission was fully accomplished. Then, for my personal memories, I also took pictures with all dear people I could find around (Wilma Holthuis, Konstantin Kozlov, Nathalie Chudiak, Max Dereta, Graham Nightingale, Sveta Golubeva, Olga Surigina, Steve Patoir, Jim Petterson, Bill Miller, Milkan Uletilovic, Dr Scott...). I saw these pictures a month later, after I came home to Yugoslavia and have developed the films. It was very special feeling.



Max Dereta (NL) & Vladimir Milosavljevic (YU)
17th April 1995, North Pole

After posing, I took one empty plastic water-bottle I found nearby (2 liters of volume) and I filled it up with snow, exactly from the North Pole Axis. I wanted to have some material memory from this magnificent spot. Although well sealed, in the incoming years this clear water was slowly evaporating, fading away, just like our memories on this spectacular event.

The small amount of water remained, reminded me to find pictures and notes from these days, to contact friends and to try to write this imperfect story about our North Pole adventure.

PICTURES FOR YUGOSLAVIA, SERBIA AND BELGRADE





The evacuation from the Pole started about 3 hours after our parachute landing. I remember a moment when I was collecting my stuff into my parachute bag... Konstantin Kozlov (RU) approached to me carrying a flag of Yugoslavia that was standing recently next to the North Pole axis. He gave it to me with a serious note to keep it forever. I was very honored. I thanked him and after all these years it is still with me, probably still with some Polar wind in it...

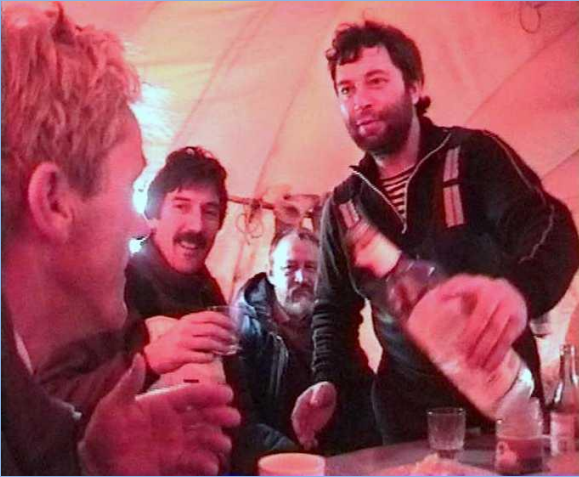
Soon, we were inside of one of the two MI-8 helicopters, preparing for departure to the Ice Airport called “Центар Снаса” (Salvation Center). Again, Soviet technology proved to work excellent in these conditions; helicopter started „normally“ at -30°C, without any external power unit. We flew very low, about 10 m (33 ft) above the ground (ice) and pilots said that at that moment Ice Airport was 114 km away. The claim „at that moment“ was because this distance is not constant as the ice and everything on the ice is constantly moving. The navigation technique used was homing the NDB (nondirectional radio beacon) installed at the Ice Airport and turned “on” upon request from the helicopter pilots.

Ice airport was very unique place, operated at that moment by 24 people, employed there for entire season (six months of the daylight). It was predominantly helicopter base, but it had also 1000 m (3300 ft) long ice runway, marked with red flags along the both sides for airplane landings. The whole base had 12 well distributed large igloo shaped tents, with small meteorological station and emergency room in between. Ice airport operators told me that usually in April the ice is about 1 m (3.3 ft) thick which surprised me as I thought it’s much thicker. They also showed me holes they recently drilled in the ice and I noticed



Ice Airport “Центар Снаса” (Salvation Center)

that water was really close, about 10 cm from the ice surface, which matched the information that 9/10 of the iceberg is always under the water. Even bigger surprise was that in these demanding conditions, they operate their (Russian) midsize jet AN-74 for all sorts of supplies. While chatting with this unique ground crew, they informed me that one of these special airplanes just departed from Hatanga, heading to us, for our evacuation to Siberia. As simple as that...



Inside one of the tents, serving Russian vodka!
Ice Airport, North Pole 1995

Atmosphere inside of these tents was very specific, very Russian. Tent floors were covered with some special plastic type insulators, providing that each tent was equipped with an oil furnace which raised inside temperature to the pleasant +15°C. Russian crew showed great hospitality. ...which, in my opinion, was coming more from their nature than from their business orientation. In abundance of free time, their main entertainment were Russian folk music audio tapes and vodka! ...and they were ready to share both things with us. In that atmosphere for a moment we forgot where we are; Russians, who did not speak any other language and a group of Westerners who could speak languages but not Russian, communicated very well, the bottle looks like pretty much the same all around the World! :-)

Outside the tents, there was similar random order of everything: firewood, saws, axes, shovels, various boxes... Food was also in the boxes, obviously frozen and well protected from unleashed dogs that were brought to the Pole for security reasons (although in 1995 there were no wild animals this far North). The airport was well equipped and supplied with noticeable large amounts of barrels of jet fuel, snowmobiles, bulldozers and many accessories. Water was, of course, all around. This good supply and probably the outstanding tent atmosphere (with “vodka internal heating system” :-)) produced pretty relaxed lifestyle of the Ice Airport personnel. Some of them were wearing only T-shirts even outside the tents. Easy-going, but always ready, routinely organized for all the tasks they performed. They were professionals of the fading Soviet era.



Vladimir Milosavljevic & Patrick de Gayardon, Ice Airport
North Pole 18th April 1995



Steve Patoir (US) and Vladimir Milosavljevic (YU)
Photo by: Graham Nightingale (UK)

Staying at the Ice Station (slightly over 7 hours) put us in absolutely new dimension. My watch was still running on Hatanga time and I noticed that I was on my feet over 24 hours, without any reference that I should go to sleep. I was tired and a bit disoriented, looking at my watch without any logic, I needed to calculate numbers in order to get some conclusions... The sun was just circling around, at about 20° from the horizon and it fooled my biorhythm completely...

At around 10 AM (Hatanga time, April 18th), spectacular high-wing Soviet jet Antonov-74 appeared on the horizon. It was flying long stable approach and it finally landed at the Ice Airport, rising a cloud of snow when applied its reversers.



Antonov 74 landed at Ice Airport, 18th April 1995.
Photo by: Vladimir Milosavljevic

Again, it was a real movie as there was no airplane that looked like this one. AN-74 was specially designed Polar airliner, with tailgate for easy cargo loading and engines above its wings, providing engine protection from the ice particles (to be sucked in) during the critical (take-off) phase of flight. It was also designed as a STOL airplane (with Short Take-Off and Landing distance), it needs only 620 m (2034 ft) for take-off and 420 m (1377 ft) for landing in standard weather conditions (1013 hPa and 15°C). In Polar conditions, those distances are even shorter due to the lower temperature (low density altitude). Considering all information about the Ice Airport, especially average ice thickness of only 100 cm, I really admired Russian pilots who regularly fly in these fantastic conditions.

Very soon, we walked to this airplane and started to load our stuff. This AN-74 had no seats, just a large ferry tank in the center of the cabin, so we placed our stuff, and later ourselves, all around it. Take-off sequence from the Ice Airport appeared easy, although we felt some bumps due to the runway imperfections. The flight to Hatanga was smooth, but it took almost 5 hours. For all of us, after all we experienced, it was long. We were all tired, sleepy, exhausted... Next two days, we spent in Hatanga, summing our impressions. On the second day (last day in Hatanga), we jumped out of MI-8 helicopter into the isolated nomad's settlement in Siberian taiga. The jump was again from 3000 m... Upon landing, we met nomads, very nice and modest people. In the evening we celebrated our success with local Hatanga cultural society, saying farewell to this magnificent adventure.

Today, when I am thinking about everything, I would say North Pole Skydiving Expedition '95 was a lifetime story. We all won. I will never forget the energy and braveness of the participants. North Pole Parachute World Team was acting as one. It was, and it still is very special feeling.

Evacuation from The North Pole 1995, Photo by: Johan Persson (SE)

