

The Antarctic: an Endurance Test

The "Metelitsa" (Blizzard) Women's Ski Team continues its unique crossing.

I shade my eyes and see in front of me, as if I were there, the track of a caterpillar sleigh train crawling over the ice dome from Mirnyi to Vostok Station. This is a thousand-and-a-half kilometers of the toughest roadless journey on earth. I once told about it in a story entitled "72 Degrees Below Zero". Here and today the Soviet "Metelitsa" (Blizzard) Women's Ski Team is leaving its track on the snow. About ten days ago, led by their Captain, Valentina Kuznetsova, they overcame the most difficult upgrade slope, strewn with bottomless fissures, and climbed their hundredth kilometer to the "goalposts" - the name the polar research workers have given to the two pyramids made of barrels with stakes.

The information that I have at my disposal includes short radiograms from Valentina Kuznetsova and her deputy Svetlana Gur'eva, along with a radiotelephone conversation with Molodezhnaya Station. Add to that a few memories - I managed to spend some time in these places. The following picture emerges.

The skiers move with enormous difficulty against an almost continuous head wind of as much as 15 to 18 meters a second and a low-level blizzard sharply limiting visibility. At the hundredth kilometer the altitude had exceeded 1,400 meters above sea level, but by 22 December, when the team had covered 216 kilometers of their journey, the height of the (ice) dome was already over two