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Beaufort Gyre Exploration Project: Dispatch 24: Fingers Crossed

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There was no sunrise this morning--white clouds lay over us like a down comforter. The whiteness was so complete that it was hard to tell where the ice pack ended and the sky began. The smell of snow was in the air, and light flakes swirled around the decks. It feels like we haven't moved since we broke down six days ago. However, the pack ice is in perpetual motion, and we have been moving with it. From last Thursday afternoon to tonight, we have drifted a total of eighteen nautical miles. To put that in perspective, we would normally cover that distance in about three hours while breaking heavy ice.

As I passed Chief Engineer Ronald Collier in the passageway today, I asked him how the shaft repairs were going. He flashed a quick smile and held two crossed fingers in the air--"hopefully this afternoon!" His weren't the only crossed fingers--I think everyone on the ship, scientists and crew, have been counting on the engine department's expertise in repairing the starboard shaft. And what a job it was--six sixteen-hour days for the sixteen-man engine department. They took breaks for caffeine, food, and a bit of sleep (in that order), but otherwise they labored below decks on the biggest at-sea repair job any of them have ever tackled.

While the repairs were being finished, we got a little outside help in our battle to escape the heavy pack ice. Just after lunch, the bridge piped an announcement "in a few minutes an ice recon plane will fly over us!" I grabbed my coat and camera and sprinted up to the broad deck on top of the pilothouse in time to see a white and red Dash-7 turboprop aircraft buzz by. It made one more loop around the *Louis*, flying only a few hundred feet over our heads, before zipping off into the clouds. I can't tell you how strange it is to see an aircraft, after three weeks of seeing nothing but ice and fog. This was no ordinary aircraft, either. It was a Canadian ice reconnaissance flight that the Captain and Ice Officer had requested. As Ice Officer Lucie Theriault explained to me "there is only so much you can tell from my Radarsat satellite ice images. There's just no substitute for the human eye." While we watched in amazement as the plane flew overhead, jpeg photos and hand-drawn ice maps were being transmitted via VHF radio from the plane directly to a receiver on the *Louis*. In a few minutes Lucie had printed out the images and was checking the ice conditions on our "escape route" out of the ice. The photos the flight crew took will help us find the easiest way out of the heavy ice. If we're lucky, we should be out of this thick multi-year ice in a day or two, and then the going will be much easier.

Just before dinner, a felt a familiar hum through the decks. It started as a vibration I could feel in the soles of my shoes. The engines were started. I made my way through the maze of ladders and passageways to the engine control room. Jonathan Lee's smile was contagious. "That's the sound of success!" he exclaimed. Engineer Larry Colbert was about to start up the port and starboard propellers. With the flick of a couple of buttons and and a slow forward pressure on the throttle, the shafts sprang to life. "We're not there yet" he cautioned. "But I must admit, this all looks good."

As we carefully eased off into the pack ice, Rick Krishfield bid a farewell to the two buoys we fought so hard to install yesterday. Rick can sleep easy tonight--he has already received confirmation from Woods Hole that they are both transmitting data with no problems. Now we are making all speed for Mooring C, the third Beaufort Gyre Observing System subsurface mooring. With a bit of luck we'll be on station in the morning and ready to go. After the Mooring C recovery we are hoping to redeploy it immediately. We are racing the clock now to finish as much of our science goals as possible in our limited time remaining.

After-watch down time for Hugh and Will. The *Louis* has a gym, sauna, and ping-pong table for entertainment.

A Canadian Dash-7 ice reconnaissance plane flew over the ship.

Engineer Larry Colbert eases the port and starboard throttles forward.

The massive propellers drive the ice away and churn up the water.

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