

Forsaking the land for the open sea – for a while, anyway

Arviat's Leo Karetak talks about working on-board an Arctic resupply vessel

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ARVIAT - It took a while getting used to his cramped quarters, but for Arviat resident Leo Karetak it didn't matter – he was doing what he wanted.

Karetak was among the crew on one of Nunavut Eastern Arctic Shipping's vessels, who took a chance taking NEAS' basic seamanship and cargo course and wound up with a job on the MV Avataq for the entire shipping season.

The course, aimed at residents of Nunavut's Baffin and Kivalliq regions, as well as residents of Quebec's Nunavik region, gives candidates the skills they need to work as deckhands on one of NEAS's four vessels, which deliver supplies during multiple sailings throughout Nunavut from July to November.

Karetak heard about the course from one of his brothers, who worked for NEAS in previous years.

The first part of the course, consisting of classroom-based lessons on first aid and tying knots, took place in Iqaluit at Nunavut Arctic College.

"It was understandable. They made it clear and simple," said Karetak.

Then, Karetak and 11 other candidates – including seven from the Baffin and Kivalliq regions – travelled to Holland College in Charlottetown, PEI for hands-on training.

"Most of all, they were mainly concerned that we knew the safety stuff in the program," he said.

But once students finished the course in the spring, there was no guarantee they would go on to work on a ship.

NEAS has trained a pool of a pool of 40 to 50 candidates from Nunavut and Nunavik in recent years, creating competition for spots on vessels.

"We hired those that we had room for," said Suzanne Paquin, president and CEO of NEAS. "What happens is, we have some that were there the year before who have priority (if they choose to come back)."

Students need to distinguish themselves, she added.

"When you see the candidates, and you see who has most potential, we choose the eight best candidates."

Ultimately, Karetak was selected. After foul weather delayed his June flight out of Arviat, he started work on the Avataq in July, bunking in a cramped, 10-foot-by-11-foot room with Peter lee Angootealuk of Coral Harbour.

The tiny quarters took some getting used to.

"The shower and the washroom were all cramped up," said Karetak.

The day started with breakfast at 7 a.m.

"We would go around the ship every morning and make sure everything was tight and secure," he said.

"I was an ordinary seaman, so what I had to do is, after the cargo was put on the ship, we would always have to do the lashing. That's the chain and bars that keep the stuff on the ship together, so they don't move around."



Arviat resident Leo Karetak stands aboard Nunavut Eastern Arctic Shipping's MV Avataq, where he worked this summer as a deckhand, ensuring the cargo remained securely fastened to the ship. - photo courtesy of Leo Karetak

Asked what it was like to be away from home for so long, Karetak said, "The first few weeks, it was kind of hard because we didn't really know the people there, but eventually, once we got to know everyone on the ship, it became pretty easy and all right."

Besides, the seasonal nature of the work allows Karetak to retain his ties to the family and the land, he said.

"This five-month-on-five-month-off is good. It gives me time to go and help my grandparents and my parents with hunting and everything."