

# Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

## Ice Station Zebra

by

### Alistair MacLean

### Book Information

Alistair MacLean, Ice Station Zebra

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224 Pages

Book Level: 7.4

Interest Level: UG

Suspense and action prevail as a submarine crew attempts to save the members of an expedition trapped in the polar ice.

**Topics:** Adventure, Rescue/Save; Classics, Classics (All); Countries/Regions, Arctic; Popular Groupings, College Bound; Transportation/Vehicles, Ships/Boats

### Main Characters

Commander Swanson the captain of the U.S. nuclear submarine "Dolphin"

Dr. Benson the ship's doctor aboard the "Dolphin"

Dr. Carpenter the narrator of the story, a British counter-espionage agent sent to foil Russian operatives at a British polar ice station

Dr. Jolly the British doctor at Ice Station Zebra, who turns out to be a Russian operative and a murderer

Kinnaird a radio operator at Ice Station Zebra who conspires with Dr. Jolly

Lt. Hansen the second in command to Swanson; a competent, reliable officer

Lt. Mills the torpedoman aboard the "Dolphin" who is killed in a mishap

Zabrinski and Rawlings the men aboard the "Dolphin" who help Carpenter throughout the ordeal with the Zebra

### Vocabulary

**ballast** anything used as weight on a vessel to stabilize it

**espionage** spying to obtain secrets from another country

**lead** an area of open water within the polar ice cap

**polynya** an area of thin ice or open water within sea ice

**skulduggery** deception or trickery

**suborned** influenced to do something illegal or wrong

**surface fathometer** a device used for measuring the thickness of floating ice

### Synopsis

*Ice Station Zebra* is a suspenseful thriller in which a nuclear submarine is sent on a mission to find the survivors of a fire in an outpost on the Northern polar ice cap. The story, narrated by "Dr. Carpenter," begins in Scotland where the U.S. nuclear submarine "Dolphin" is docked. To convince its skipper, Commander Swanson, to allow him aboard, Carpenter tells him that Ice Station Zebra is actually monitoring Russian missiles. This turns out to be a lie.

The "Dolphin" sets out from Scotland to the last known location of the drift station, which was ostensibly established as a British meteorological station on a free-drifting plate of ice in the polar ice cap. The "Dolphin" makes radio contact with the ice station and eventually surfaces within five miles of Ice Station Zebra. Carpenter, along with the American crewmembers Hansen, Rawlings, and Zabrinski, face a raging ice storm to walk to the station. After a difficult walk across the polar ice that costs Zabrinski a broken leg, they reach the burned-out remains of the former station. There they find seven men dead; among them is Carpenter's brother. Twelve others are still alive, but in bad shape. Carpenter and Hansen leave the others to return to the "Dolphin" before the ice closes in around it. The men are nearly lost on the difficult trip back but are able to find the ship when a torpedo blows a hole through the ice. As the "Dolphin" dives once again, water rushes in an open torpedo hatch, nearly sinking the submarine. But Swanson is able to correct the situation, and he brings the "Dolphin" within a few hundred yards of the decimated station.

When Swanson visits the site, he finds no evidence of the sophisticated computer equipment Carpenter

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had claimed would be there, so Swanson threatens to arrest him. Carpenter tells him there have been murders committed at the station and the fire was started as a cover-up. Swanson is skeptical, but maintains his faith in the mysterious doctor. After most of the Zebra survivors are taken aboard the "Dolphin," Carpenter warns Swanson that the murderer is definitely aboard the ship. After that, numerous mishaps occur that Carpenter is sure are deliberate. First, Dr. Benson falls and is rendered unconscious. Then, a hatch falls on Dr. Carpenter, severely injuring his left hand. Finally, fire breaks out in the machinery room, and, as a result, the crew members are in danger of dying from carbon monoxide poisoning but are saved at the last minute by the skipper's ingenuity.

When Carpenter orders all of the survivors into the crew wardroom, he already knows that Dr. Jolly, the station physician, was planted at Zebra by the Russians and that his real mission was to secure certain satellite photos in a canister that were set to be dropped from the satellite onto the polar ice cap near the station. Carpenter explains to the group how Jolly killed the men at Zebra and set the fire as a cover-up. Once aboard, he sought to eliminate doctors Carpenter and Benson so that he would be the only doctor available to X-ray Zabrinski's broken leg. He had hidden the films in Zabrinski's plaster cast, and the X-ray examination would allow him to retrieve them. Just when it seems that Carpenter has control, Kinnaird, the station radio operator, pulls a gun on him, and Kinnaird and Jolly demand to be delivered to a waiting navy vessel. In the end, Carpenter is one step ahead of them. He had sensed Jolly and Kinnaird's plan days before when he put the murder weapon back in its hiding place, knowing that Kinnaird would return for it and give himself away. When tensions reach a peak in the wardroom, Carpenter signals Rawlings, who then shoots the gun cleanly out of Kinnaird's hands. As for the satellite films, they had been replaced by worthless photos shot aboard the "Dolphin." Neither the satellite films nor the traitors would now find their way into Russian hands.

## Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

### Initial Understanding

Some of the details about the operation and layout of the "Dolphin" that Carpenter observed during his first tour of the ship come into play later in the story. What significance does the ship's garbage-disposal system have to the details of the plot's final resolution?

*Early in the story, Dr. Benson explains that the "Dolphin" sends its garbage out to sea weighted down by bricks. He points out that without the bricks, the garbage would float to the surface and give away the ship's position. At the end of the story, we learn that Jolly attempted to deliver the satellite films to the Russians using this same garbage-disposal system.*

### Literary Analysis

How does the author use Carpenter's narration to give the reader clues about the true nature of his mission and the operations at *Ice Station Zebra*?

*Carpenter often includes comments in his narration that indicate more than his own dialogue in a particular chapter. For example, after creating a story to tell Commander Swanson and Admiral Garvie about the nature of Zebra's mission, he comments, "I'd never heard any of it myself...." In this way, the reader is kept one step ahead of the characters in the action.*

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#### Inferential Comprehension

When it appears that Carpenter, Hansen, and the others would be unable to walk back to the "Dolphin" from Ice Station Zebra, Carpenter explains that rescue by plane would be virtually impossible. Rawlings responds by saying, "What's your middle name, Doc? ... Jeremiah?" What can you infer about the Biblical character Jeremiah from Rawling's comment?

*Rawlings is implying that Carpenter is being overly pessimistic. Therefore, asking if Carpenter is named Jeremiah suggests that this character was known for pronouncing doom. Indeed, Jeremiah, featured in the Old Testament of the Bible, proclaimed a coming judgment and is known as "the weeping prophet."*

#### Constructing Meaning

Carpenter wants to prevent Swanson from locking up all the Zebra survivors before he can find out who the murderer is, telling the commander, "Whoever it is has to be given enough rope to trip himself up." What does Carpenter mean by his comment?

*Carpenter wants the murderer to have sufficient freedom to act and possibly make a mistake that Carpenter could use to entrap him or prove his guilt.*

### Teachable Skills

**Understanding Characterization** Although the story is told from the point of view of Dr. Carpenter, one of the strongest characters in the book is Commander Swanson, the unflappable submarine commander, who is decisive, ingenious, and trustworthy, but not afraid of an easy camaraderie with his officers and crew. Ask students to discuss who they would choose to play Swanson in a film version of *Ice Station Zebra*.

**Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors** *Ice Station Zebra* was written in the early 1960's, a time when the "Cold War" between Russia and the United States was still at its peak. The book's tale of counter-espionage is certainly a good illustration of Cold War attitudes. As a student research project, assign the class to study the

Cold War. What forms did the mistrust between United States and the Soviet Union take? What events are generally considered to mark the end of the Cold War?

**Understanding Sequence** At the end of the story, Carpenter's dialogue serves to tie up all of the loose ends in the plot and reveals the identity of the murderers. The story is fairly detailed and complicated. To help students understand the sequence of events detailed in Carpenter's "tie-up," assign small groups to prepare a set of cards. On each card, students will write down an action or incident from the story, beginning with Jolly's retrieval of the Russian satellite films near Ice Station Zebra. Ask different groups to exchange cards and attempt to put the actions or incidents in correct chronological sequence.

**Recognizing Setting** When the "Dolphin" sets out to find the lost "meteorological" personnel, Drift Ice Station Zebra's last known location is 85 degrees 40'N latitude and 21 degrees 30' E longitude. As an exercise in understanding the setting of this story, ask the class to find this location on a classroom globe. Ask them to measure its distance from the North Pole and trace the likely route taken by the "Dolphin" from Zebra back to Scotland.