



Critical Communications for Mount Everest Team with Singtel IsatPhone 2

Team Singapura Everest 2015 survives Nepal Earthquake with prompt post-quake updates, timely evacuation and help for stranded Singaporeans with Singtel IsatPhone 2



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Executive Summary

Organisation

Team Singapura Everest 2015

Expedition

- Third Singapore team to attempt to summit Mount Everest
- Expedition planned from March 25 to June 10 2015
- Aim to summit Mount Everest as a SG50 gift to celebrate the nation's 50th year of independence in 2015
- Quest aborted due to April 25 Nepal Earthquake
- Narrow escape from avalanche triggered by earthquake

Expedition Requirements

- Required reliable, rugged and lightweight satellite phone that can withstand the harsh conditions atop Mount Everest
- Needed ability to stay connected with family and friends in Singapore during expedition
- Wanted a high-performing satellite communications platform that will ensure connectedness at all times -- critical for emergency evacuation arrangements in the event of a disaster

Singtel Solution

- Singtel IsatPhone 2

Benefits

- Assured of rugged satellite phone platform to make calls, send SMS, verify altitude and more, during expedition
- Provided 'sole' lifeline to 'outside world' after the earthquake
- Ensured prompt post-quake update for assurance to family and friends
- Enabled team to provide GPS coordinates on exact locations for safe and timely emergency evacuation out of Mount Everest
- Enabled humanitarian help to others stranded in Kathmandu; including helping worried Singaporeans trying to locate uncontactable family and friends in Nepal

2015 sees Singapore marking the 50th anniversary of its independence. SG50 salutes a special moment in Singapore's history, where the entire nation celebrates what the 'little red dot' has been through as a nation, what makes one Singaporean, and our hopes and dreams for the future.

For a special group of Singaporeans, their preparation for SG50 began in 2010. Propelled by their 'dare to dream' gusto, the group came together to embark on perhaps the biggest mission of their lives – to scale Mount Everest, the world's highest summit – in 2015 as their Jubilee gift to Singapore. The team of five comprising of Hilwan Idrus (captain), Nur Yusrina Ya'akob (co-captain), brothers Ismail Bin Latiff and Zulkifli Bin Latiff, and Seumas Yeo, makes up the Aluminaid Team Singapura Everest 2015 (TSE). They are the third Singapore team to challenge the Mount Everest summit.



Grueling Harshness on Mount Everest

As the highest mountain in the world, Mount Everest stands at an awe-inspiring 8,848 metres or 29,029 feet, the normal cruising altitude of a commercial aircraft. Located in the Himalayas mountain range on the border of Nepal and Tibet, climbers on Mount Everest face some of the harshest conditions on Earth ranging from high winds, unrelenting rain or snow storms, to altitude sickness, poor visibility and more. In fact, altitudes above 8,000 metres are often referred to as the 'Death Zone', due to the much lowered oxygen levels. For many, just reaching the Everest Base Camp (EBC) at 5,545-metres, is an accomplishment.

To effectively equip themselves, the team committed to thrice-weekly trainings, including sessions at a purpose-built gym to simulate high altitude, low-oxygen environments. They also undertook yearly expeditions to other regional peaks -- from Malaysia's Mount Kinabalu (2011), Nepal's Mera Peak (2012) to China's Cho Oyu (2014) – as a lead-up to their monumental feat.

Reliability and Ruggedness for the World's Most Extreme Conditions

The bleak conditions atop Mount Everest were top-of-mind, when the team evaluated the communications equipment for their Mount Everest expedition.

Recalling their mission-critical requirements, Mr Hilwan Idrus, a software developer and TSE's Captain explained, "The satellite phone is the key piece of equipment that will ensure that we stay connected with the 'outside world' during our expedition. Without it, we would be largely uncontactable during the expedition – something we experienced during our month-long Mera Peak expedition. It would also be our lifeline to call for help during an emergency." Indeed, not having a satellite phone would be unthinkable for the planned three-month Mount Everest expedition, as the nearest Internet café is a two-hour trek from the EBC, with no guarantee of a stable signal.

Why Singtel

Explaining the choice of Singtel as their communications equipment sponsor, Mr Hilwan said, "While we needed a satellite phone that is lightweight yet deliver the highest standards in robustness and ruggedness – it was equally important to work with an industry leader for assured performance. Looking at Singtel's strong communication network, especially in Satellite, we asked ourselves, "If not Singtel, then who else?" – the choice was clear."

Singtel's commitment to the team's cause further cemented the decision. "Singtel believed in our dream and was there to support us over the years. We are familiar with Singtel, as they also sponsored the communications equipment for our Cho Oyu expedition. In many ways, they went beyond the sponsorship to provide moral support in the form of complimentary data and also in other unexpected ways during the actual expedition," added Ms Nur Yusrina Ya'akob, a primary school teacher and the team's Co-Captain.

During the team's last 'practice' expedition to Cho Oyu, Singtel sponsored the IsatPhone 2 for easy, point-and-call convenience and its Broadband Global Area Network (BGAN) satellite system for fast setup and hassle-free notebook connection to reliable data transmission within 5 minutes.

Singtel IsatPhone 2: Reliable Satellite Connections Across the Globe

For the Mount Everest expedition, Singtel sponsored 2 units of the Singtel IsatPhone 2 to help the team stay connected with the expedition coordinator, family and friends back in Singapore. Assured of reliable satellite communications wherever they are, the team enjoyed the convenience of making calls, sending SMS, verifying their altitude and more. Location services, including a tracking and assistance button, also enabled the team to provide GPS coordinates on their exact location when it matters. Round-the-clock support from Singtel's technical expertise offered further assurance.

Leading the industry with its 8-hour talk time and up to 160 hours of standby time, IsatPhone 2 was easy to use and ready to connect within 45 seconds of fast network registration. Designed to withstand extreme conditions ranging from -20°C to +55°C, delivering dust, splash and shock resistance (IP65, IK04) and humidity tolerance from 0 to 95%, the rugged IsatPhone 2 is made for expeditions such as this.

"Heading out to Mount Everest's extreme and remote location, we knew we could rely on IsatPhone 2's ruggedness. Besides the long battery life, the larger key pad made dialling very easy, even when wearing thick gloves. Even in bright sunlight at high altitudes, we did not have any problem reading the phone's display – thanks to the phone's high-visibility, scratch-resistant transfective display," said Mr Ismail Bin Latiff, a team member, who works in Singapore Civil Defence Force's Disaster Assistance and Rescue Team (SCDF DART).

Other communications equipment used in the expedition included: each team member's mobile phones with Wifi (setup by expedition's operator); data plans from Ncell, Nepal's leading mobile service provider; and Thuraya satellite phone which Singtel made special arrangements as a backup, complete with complimentary airtime courtesy of Singtel.

Narrow Escape from Nepal Avalanche

The team faced arduous obstacles both before and during its three-month expedition – scheduled from March 25 to June 10, with plans to reach the summit on May 28 and 29. After suffering a stroke during the Cho Oyu expedition, Mr Hilwan, the team Captain, remained in Singapore to manage the expedition's communications centre, being the focal point of contact for parents and media by issuing official statements via social media sites like Facebook. Another team member, Mr Seumas Yeo, an economics graduate, had to evacuate to Kathmandu for surgery after an injury incurred early in the expedition.

The team of Ms Yusrina, Mr Ismail and his brother, Mr Zulkifli Bin Latiff, who also serves the SCDF, had their bid to scale Mount Everest cut short by an avalanche triggered by the 7.8-magnitude earthquake which struck Nepal on April 25. The team narrowly escaped the snow plume which descended at top speed from Pumori, one of the mountains surrounding Everest. "While we were disappointed at abandoning the expedition, we were very fortunate to have survived the avalanche, as our campsite was erected at one end of the EBC. The campsite beside us, which was about 100 metres away, was completely flattened," said Mr Ismail. The quake claimed more than 8,000 lives, while the series of avalanches, which left the EBC in ruins, took 19 lives.



Benefits

With the quake destroying all terrestrial communication links, Singtel's satellite phones became the team's sole lifeline during its aftermath.

Prompt Post-Quake Update Provided Assurance to Family and Friends

According to Ms Yusrina, the first tasks after the avalanche were to activate the satellite phone, account for everyone at camp and check the tents' conditions. She said, "Nothing worked after the avalanche. The satellite phone was our only link to Hilwan back in Singapore to inform him of what happened and let him know that we were all safe. In the face of disaster, having the satellite phone assured us that we could still communicate and connect with others. More importantly, it helped us get news quickly to our worried-stricken family and friends that we were safe – with no injuries nor fatalities."

Prompt updates from the team also allowed Mr Hilwan to post timely statements on its Facebook page. Media agencies also contacted Ms Yusrina directly via the satellite phone for breaking-news interviews on Apr 25 and 26.

She added, "With the quake's epicentre just 80km to the northwest of Kathmandu, our mountain guides were worried sick about the safety of their families and homes in Kathmandu. We were glad to help them contact their families during those frantic moments by passing the satellite phones around."

Empowered Timely Emergency Evacuation

Evacuating out of a disaster zone is no mean feat. Equipped with the IsatPhone 2, the team was able to promptly make evacuation arrangements. "Thanks to the IsatPhone 2, we successfully arranged for our evacuation out of EBC via helicopter with our insurer and also our eventual evacuation from Kathmandu via SilkAir. Due to instability due to aftershocks, the helicopters would land, pick us up and leave. We were talking to the insurer almost up to the minute of the evacuation, while ensuring that we made it to the helipad at least 20 minutes before the helicopters arrive. It was very stressful but the IsatPhone 2 made it all possible," said Ms Yusrina. The team was airlifted to Kathmandu on May 1 and left Kathmandu for Singapore on May 4 after acclimatisation.

Enabled Humanitarian Help to Others Stranded in Kathmandu

Besides its own safety and evacuation, the team was also worried about Mr Seumas, who had the other IsatPhone 2 while recuperating in Kathmandu. "As all telecommunications and electrical connections in Nepal were down, the only way we could reach Seumas was via the satellite phone. With no way to charge the phone, he switched the phone off or put on standby mode to conserve the charge. Thanks to the 160-hour long standby time of the IsatPhone 2, we were able to eventually contact him," said Mr Ismail.

Singtel played a key part in helping to evacuate Mr Seumas on board a Republic of Singapore Air Force C-130 aircraft, together with other Singaporeans on April 29. Mr Hilwan added, "We are very grateful to Singtel's Mr Lee Foh Cheong, who helped in his personal capacity, to arrange for Seumas' safe evacuation from Kathmandu. During the process, he kept in touch with me daily and also texted Seumas on the satellite phone on the evacuation details." Upon Seumas' departure, the satellite phone was passed along to Mr Sanjay Radakrishna, a Singaporean teacher who was on a humanitarian mission in Nepal at the time.

With the Kathmandu airport in chaos after the quake, the Singtel IsatPhone 2 also helped a multitude of Singaporeans and others that were frantically looking for a way out of the disaster zone. When news broke that the team was safe and contactable via their satellite phones, Mr Hilwan received more than 25 requests for help via WhatsApp, SMS and Facebook from Singaporeans trying to locate their uncontactable loved ones in Nepal.

Inspired to Motivate

Looking back on their momentous experience, the team is thankful for the many opportunities to share their mountaineering experience with individuals and climbers and inspire others to not be afraid to chase their dreams. "Quoting Sir Edmund Hillary, who was the first to conquer the peak of Mount Everest in 1953 along with fellow climber Tenzing Norgay – "It is not the mountain we conquer, but ourselves." This experience has given us much motivation to inspire others with our experience," said Mr Hilwan. Indeed, upon their return from Nepal, the team has been busy with media interviews, sharing at schools, Radio and TV talk shows and more.

Fitting Singtel Collaboration Celebrates the Singapore Spirit

Thanking Singtel for the sponsorship, Mr Hilwan concluded, "As we celebrate Singapore's 50 years of independence, we see the Singtel partnership as a very fitting collaboration. In the light of what our team has gone through in the Nepal earthquake, Singtel has certainly gone beyond the extra mile and for that – we are very appreciative."

// During a disaster, the lack of communication puts one in a desperate mode. Communication is key to help us answer all the what, why, where, how and when questions during an emergency. Singtel is proud of what Team Singapura Everest 2015 has achieved and is honoured to have played our part in their quest. //

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