

SNAPSHOTS



By ZHANG LEI

It suddenly snows in the Qinling Mountains, and Guanyintang town in Sanmenxia, Henan province, is ankle-deep in the white stuff. People in this little remote town are then homebound. But no matter how windy it is and how heavy the snowfall is, some people have no respite.

The “railroad icemen” are a group of people who have work to do because ice-breaking is vital to the safety of the railways.

An ice-breaking team from China Railway’s Zhengzhou Bureau’s Luoyang section are up at 5:30 am. Then, after a brief and hasty breakfast, they embark on their journey deep into the mountains.

Captain Wang Jianhua, 55, leads the way, accompanied by eight team members.

Due to the wind and snow, their clothes are wet in no time.

Meanwhile, trains meander through the mountains in the Guanyintang Tunnel, part of the Lanzhou-Lianyungang Railway, one of China’s busiest lines.

The line, which runs between Xi’an, Shaanxi province, and Zhengzhou, Henan province, carries more than 300 trains a day.

The Guanyintang Tunnel, built in 1919 and 601 meters long, has grown dilapidated with age, and the water that seeps through the cracks freezes into ice in this high-altitude cave.

The ice could cause short circuits and pose risks to speeding trains and passengers.

So, at 6:40 am, the ice team arrives at the site.

After checking their ice-breaking tools they wait for the two-hour “blank time”, which is typically from around 7 am to about 9 am daily, when there is no train passing through Guanyintang Tunnel from the west to the east.

At 7:20 am, the team enters the dark tunnel and is met with a damp, windy atmosphere.

At this point, the temperature inside the tunnel is -10 C, and a drop of water can turn into ice within moments.

“There is ice,” shouts Li Yubin, one of the team members.

And with a flashlight in his hand, he moves cautiously.

Due to the slippery gravel along



The ‘railroad icemen’ are a group of people who are vital for the safety of the railways

“Railroad icemen” are workers who keep railway tunnels in the mountains free of ice, no matter what weather conditions they face. PHOTOS BY LI AN / XINHUA



the track, it is very difficult to walk and he can move only on railroad crossties.

But the team is unfazed. Thanks to months spent walking on the evenly arranged crossties, they can move with their eyes closed.

The workers carry ladders on their shoulders and move so quickly that an operation can take less than half an hour, leaving only a pile of residual ice below the ladders.

The ice-breaking on the cave walls has become more frequent and important since the electrification of the railway in the early 1980s.

Although tunnel cracks are filled with anti-penetrating agents each summer, the ice-breaking work is still necessary.

The work is monotonous but dangerous as well.

At another site, Huang Zhixiu,

52, chops off a nearly 2-meter-long icicle, and suddenly ice splinters clatter around.

Huang gasps while chopping the ice, saying that there was a time when his face was cut open and covered in blood.

Compared with ice-breaking on the walls, ice-breaking on the roof is even more dangerous. Another team led by Captain Li Huanqun is responsible for the task.

Their tool to clear the ice is an insulated rod.

“The top of the tunnel has high-voltage railway power lines with voltage up to 27,000 volts, and we have to check them before each ice-breaking attempt to ensure safety,” says Li Huanqun. “Although the current generation of insulated rods are much lighter than the old ones, holding a 7-meter-long pole for two hours is strenuous work.”

For more than 30 years, the wall ice-breaking team and the rooftop ice-breaking team meet in this deep tunnel every day.

But due to the pressure of their jobs, the two captains are just nod-

ding acquaintances, and they do not even know each other’s name.

The retirement age for these ice-breakers is 55. And this year marks the last Spring Festival on the job not only for Wang Jianhua, but also for Li Huanqun.

The two captains have much in common as well as a common unique skill: Just by looking at the temperature and wind direction, they know how much ice they will encounter and how many hours they need to remove it.

They also have common concerns — both are reluctant to leave their team members, and they worry about their safety all the time.

But despite their hard work, there is satisfaction.

“Every time I remove the ice, and I watch the trains go through the tunnel, I see the passengers warm and safe,” says Wang Jianhua.

After nearly two hours of heavy work in the dark tunnel, the ice-breaking teams leave.

With ladders on their shoulders, the men in orange uniforms make their way back to base.