

## **Elka Vassileva – The Woman Who Conquered “Men’s” Professions The Female Face of Antarctica**

*"As part of a crew with two women and one man, who have sailed thousands of nautical miles together, I know that women and men stand equal before the forces and the freedom carried by the oceans and seas."*

– Elka Vassileva

Brave, determined, responsible, and a true adventurer – Elka Vassileva has taken part in **three consecutive expeditions** to the Bulgarian Antarctic base on Livingston Island, has **crossed the Atlantic Ocean twice**, and has worked as a skipper of various motor and sailing yachts in **Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and France**. She completed a 20 GT captain’s course with Karela Sailing and the **STCW maritime safety course in Varna**. She graduated from the **National Academy of Arts**, specializing in Metal, and participated twice in projects by Christo Javacheff – *The Floating Piers* and *The Arc de Triomphe Wrapped* in Paris.

– **Could you describe your current role in the Bulgarian Antarctic Expedition?**

– My position is **Zodiac boat operator and field assistant**, a logistician supporting the base and the scientific projects. I work mainly on water, but also on land using **snowmobiles, alpine climbing techniques with ropes and crampons on glaciers, and touring skis**.

My work on the water here in Antarctica includes navigating **uncharted waters**, with no specific nautical charts, depth information, or coastal data. Often, I must make critical decisions about whether we can safely land at locations of scientific interest. It’s not just about a **one-time landing**, but whether we can return under potentially **worsening weather conditions**, since some projects require overnight stays on remote shores.

For example, **ten days ago**, I successfully executed a landing maneuver at **Barnard Point (southern beach)** in False Bay on Livingston Island. Until then, **no successful landing had been made there** – neither by Bulgarian nor Spanish Antarctic teams. In calm seas, we landed one geologist and three logisticians, who took important samples, climbed Mount Chepelare, and even came across **airplane wreckage**. The following day, with slightly deteriorated weather, we approached the bay with the research vessel **NIK 421** and successfully retrieved the team using ship-deployed Zodiacs. I had the honor to work alongside the crew of **Bulgaria’s first polar research vessel**.

At sea, **safety always comes first** – and here in southern waters, it can be a real challenge. I tend to be quite strict, as I believe **clear and concise instructions and commands** are crucial for crew safety. People often describe me as **strict but fair**.

– **Where did your love for sailing come from?**

– My love for sailing and the freedom that the sea brings started in childhood. I initially sailed with my parents on **homemade yachts** across the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. My longest voyage was on a **31-foot yacht** from Turkey to the Caribbean and back, crossing the **Atlantic Ocean twice**, with a crew of three – my mother, father, and me.

After this 3-year voyage, I worked as a **captain and sailor** on various motor and sailing yachts in **Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, and France**.

– **What are your thoughts on women in the maritime sector – what are their strengths, and what challenges do they face?**

– As part of a crew of two women and one man, who have sailed thousands of miles together, I know that **men and women are equals** in the face of the elements and the freedom of the seas.

I truly believe that **women can be a valuable and irreplaceable part of any crew.**

Most of my maritime knowledge I've learned from my father, Vasil Vassilev. I regard him as a captain I would sail with through **any seas, waters, waves, and challenges**. He taught me that **whether you are a man or a woman doesn't matter at sea**. What matters is being **brave, decisive, direct when necessary, and above all – a free human being.**