

Winter climbing in Lyngen

J. M. G. Sheridan

In the early winter of 1973, the Mountain Leaders of the Royal Marines and one of their Instructors' Courses, were given clearance to visit the Lyngen Alps in N Norway on completion of their Arctic Training.

What could be better than to do this training in a mountain area which had seldom, if ever, had visitors in the winter and where many of the mountains were still to have winter ascents? The Lyngen Peninsula lies E of Tromsø, the Paris of the North, at 70°N. On either side of the Peninsula are the very long Ullsfjord and Lyngenfjord and this majestic area of mountains, ice-capped summits, hanging glaciers, icefalls and precipices covers an area of 540 square miles. The peninsula is almost cut in half by Kjosenfjord which isolates the N half to such a degree that there is little habitation.

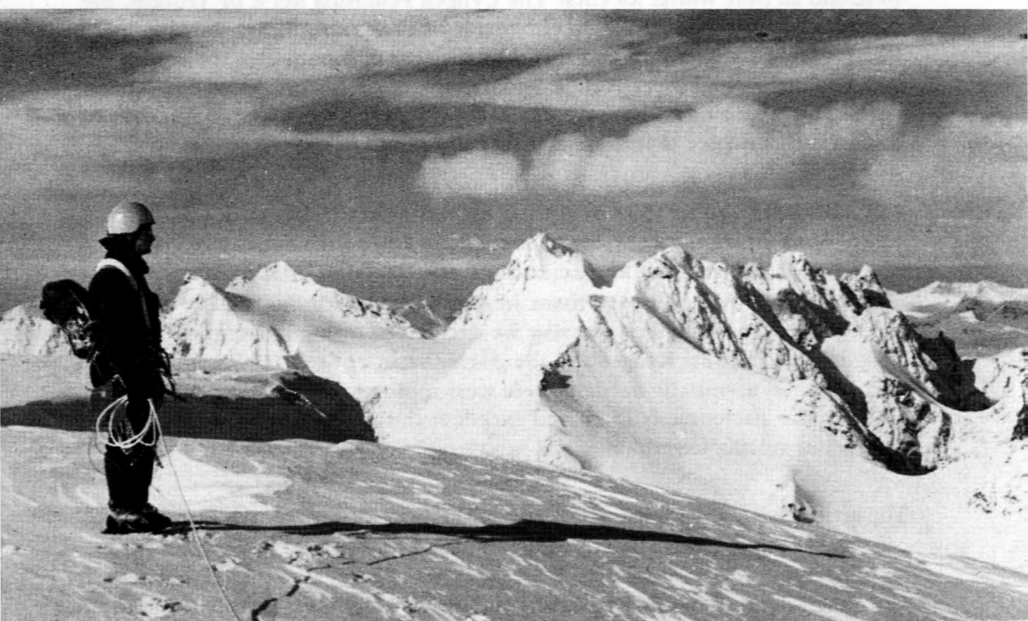
The mountains rise to 1833 m at their highest point, Jiekkevarri, which is the centre of an enormous complex of precipices, knife-edge ridges and glaciers. By virtue of the latitude the glaciers flow down to about 450 m above sea level at their lowest point—so there are alpine dangers and difficulty without the rigours of altitude. For our visit we decided to turn our attention to the Langdal and Ellendal Ranges and the glacier basin of Steindalsbreen. This area had attracted us initially because there were more peaks requiring winter ascents, and also the glacier ice-falls offered excellent training grounds for instruction in crevasse rescue, ice-climbing and safety techniques.

The area needed a reconnaissance and in the first week of March, 3 of us set off on skis at the mouth of Steindalen on the Lyngenfjord coast. We were to reconnoitre the basin which lay 1000 m up and 12 km away. The 1.6 km wide basin feeds an ice-fall one km wide which flows away for a further 2 km to the glacier snout. It was on the moraine on the N side of the glacier that we put up our two-man tent. A cosy night with disciplined sleeping arrangements for 3 followed. The ice-fall produced no problems and the basin revealed its compass; to the N Najalvarre (1590 m) with a magnificent ridge stretching for 1.6 km from its summit; to the SW Anntind (1505 m) with its ice-cap and long flowing glacier from the summit, and Vaktind and Dinotind almost like sentries guarding either side of the ice-fall to the E. Between Anntind and Najalvarre a prominent sharp peak rose, isolated and lonely; this was Sfinxen (1250 m).

The reconnaissance confirmed the location of the base camp for the 15 day period and with haste before a brewing storm, we sped down the glacier on our skis, deciding to leave the tent in situ to await our return the following week.

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I calculated that we would need 5 days to move the tents, food and equipment up to the high Base Camp for 21 men and 15 days. The important point was to get up to the camp whatever the weather and, because of the complexity of the route, to have a team of 3 men marking the route with sticks up the glacier and through the ice-fall. This as it happened, enabled us to continue to load-carry in appalling weather which persisted throughout the 5 days. Loads were initially pulled in pulks, a type of sledge, to the snout of the glacier where an intermediate camp was established. The continuous snow fall had created a high avalanche risk and the tent that had been left a week earlier had disappeared. While we endeavoured to find this tent, the route up the ice-fall had been marked and the shuttle service of stores was continuing from the road. By the evening of the third day everything was up at the intermediate camp. By the fifth day everything had been shifted to the top camp, most men doing 2 trips each day.



24 On the summit of Anntind. Photo: J. M. G. Sheridan

The sixth day the weather momentarily cleared and at dawn (at -26°C) the eager shouts of one of us awakened the others; the view was magnificent. Peaks surrounded us, peaks that were skirted with bergschrunds and inviting in their magnificence.

We began our 14 day stay at the high camp with a bad storm which lasted 3 days, almost constant digging was required to keep the tents free from drifting up. It was cold and the weather was so bad that no one ventured away from their tents for 3 days. The first clear day, our fourth up at the high camp, was used for instructing the students on the course in snow and ice climbing, belays, arresting falls, crevasse rescue and step cutting on hard glacier ice. We were

committed to using our skis to get from one side of the large glacier basin to the other, and this necessitated either using ski boots and carrying mountain boots or wearing mountain boots and bearing the discomfort of cross-country skiing with a stiff-soled boot. Nevertheless that discomfort was preferable to changing boots in such low temperatures at the foot of a climb.

During the next 10 days, whenever the weather was favourable we managed to climb several peaks. Sfinxen (1280 m) was climbed by a party of 3 and the bad snow conditions on the S Ridge made the going quite difficult. The hardest pitch of this ridge was Scottish Grade III and it proved to be an enjoyable 800 ft route.

Dinotind (1326 m) (marked Nallancakka on the map) was climbed by 3 routes all of middling Grade II and Grade II Sup standard. These were the SW Ridge, the W face and the NW Ridge. The long ridge running E from the N Summit of Dinotind was traversed later and included in a long expedition to climb Gaskacakka (1516 m) by the W Ridge. From the col below the W Ridge, the route is nearly 2000 ft long and in places very steep; reminiscent of Observatory Ridge on Ben Nevis. The party of 8 who climbed this peak was caught out by darkness and, instead of returning along the ridge, they made a descent from the col down to the glacier whence they walked up to the high camp. They arrived exhausted and very cold just before midnight after 18 hours climbing.

Anntind (1506 m) was climbed by a large party of 3 ropes and the views of the sharp peaks and glaciers of the Lakselvdal Range were truly alpine in nature. These peaks still await winter ascents apart from Titind which had a German party on it in October and November 1972. From Anntind a steep descent was made to climb Ellendaltind to the W which boasts a short but very fine ridge between the summit peaks. Najalvarre (1590 m) remained unclimbed due, in the main, to bad weather and snow conditions and remains a plum for picking by the next party. A traverse of the E Ridge of this mountain looks to be a difficult and a major undertaking.

The remainder of our stay was marred by bad weather; so much for the long zones of high pressure that, we had heard, would prevail at the end of March! The descent to the road was laborious the lower we went, and the last 2 km was free of snow which frayed the edges and tempers after a very worthwhile 3 weeks. And as if to see how we would avoid the problem of pulling our pulks over bare rocks and scrub, a Norwegian Army light aircraft flew low over us and dropped the mail. Thereafter for some time there were few cares for the pulks.