
DEREK FORDHAM

Greenland 1999

The author has attempted to contact all expeditions registered with The Danish Polar Centre; however, not all have responded and indeed some may not have registered, so these notes cannot be regarded as comprehensive.

The Inland Ice

Unusually bad weather in the spring and early summer appears to have extracted a toll from parties in the field at that time and a number of expeditions attempting to traverse the Inland Ice had to be evacuated by helicopter. The first to enter the fray were Glenn Morris and David Johnson (UK) for whom the weather presented whiteouts, blizzards and gales in temperatures down to -35°C for much of their time on the ice cap and seriously slowed down their first British crossing of the ice cap following Nansen's 1888 route. They started the 500km traverse, from Umivik to Lysfjord, near Nuuk, on 15 April and reached the west coast some 44 days later.

Further north, on the well travelled, and longer, Kangerdlugssuaq to Isortok route, the weather was much the same for Janne Sogn and her three companions (Norway, Germany, UK). They started on 27 April from Kangerdlugssuaq on the west coast and therefore had to cross the badly crevassed zone near Pt. 660m with fully laden pulks. They reached Isortok on the east coast after taking 28 days to travel some 600km in poor weather which included, on different occasions, rain and very low temperatures. The group included Terje Fardal, a professional Norwegian ski race manager who was carrying out a comparative test of ski bases. Between them the party had two pairs of conventional waxable skis, one pair of non-wax fish-scale and one pair which had a section of synthetic 'skin' let into the base. Surprisingly in such a ski-proficient party, they all felt the latter type had performed best, largely due to the difficulty of waxing and de-waxing in low temperatures and bad weather.

On the Inland Ice, Sogn's group made a chance meeting with Hans Christian Florian (Denmark) who, together with Sjur Mørdre (Norway), was crossing from the east coast with dogs to collect a party on the west coast. On the highest point of the Inland Ice they encountered -38°C . They were frostbitten and, an indication of the severity of the weather, this experienced team lost several dogs due to the low temperatures on each leg of the journey and also ran low on food and fuel.

At the same time as Sogn's expedition left the west coast Martin Planker and Fabio Pasini (Italy) started from Isortok on the east coast heading west. They had a very hard trip with temperatures down to -35°C . During their 30-day crossing to Kangerdlugssuaq they experienced very severe weather which left them with frostbite to faces, hands and feet and only their strong resolve enabled them to summon sufficient strength to reach the airfield at Kangerdlugssuaq once they had escaped from the ice cap.

On 10 May, taking advantage of an option which seems to be of increasing popularity, Mike Sharp and Martin Burton were helicoptered on to the Inland Ice near Isortok, together with two Greenlanders and two small teams of dogs. Averaging 35km/day they reached DYE 2, the abandoned early warning station on the ice cap on 19 May, having experienced windy and cold weather with temperatures down to -30°C . From DYE 2 they flew out to Kangerdlugssuaq in a chartered Twin Otter which brought in a party of three Italians who then returned to Isortok with the Greenlanders and their dogs.

This system of helicopter access to the edge of the ice cap and a finish at DYE 2, some 200km short of Kangerdlugssuaq, avoids the real difficulties of a traverse of the Inland Ice which are length, and ascent onto and descent from the ice cap, but does avoid problems with the regulations which do not allow dogs from East Greenland into West Greenland.

The poor weather also slowed down Paul Walker and Roger Mear (UK) who were leading a 7-man Tangent Expeditions commercial group attempting an E-W traverse. Using Spider wind kites the group had ambitiously planned to reach Kangerdlugssuaq 18 days after leaving the Hahn Glacier on 30 May. One member had to be evacuated after four days and on day 15, having only reached the highest point on the route, Roger Mear, needing to fulfil guiding commitments in the Alps, continued alone and, using a wind kite, covered the 260km to the west coast in an amazing three days. On day 24 the remainder of the group reached a point estimated to be some two or three days from the ice edge on the west coast and at this point, as a result of injury and lack of food, they called for helicopter evacuation.

As part of a multi-year programme of expeditions planned to culminate at the North Pole in 2005, an eight-man team from The Airborne Rangers Club of Finland led by Kari Vainio (Finland) were helicoptered to the Hahn Glacier on the east coast on 2 June and took 32 days to cross to Kangerdlugssuaq. The weather seems to have improved a little at this period and, although a few days travel were lost to storms, the main difficulties were encountered negotiating melt rivers on the notoriously broken western edge of the Inland Ice. Probably due to the heavy snowfalls earlier in the year, the melt rivers were unusually large and on several occasions required wading with water above the waist, and in one instance a raft had to be constructed from pulks.

Also in June a six-man group from Tierras Polares led by Ramon Larramendi (Spain) made a short 100km crossing from the Sondre Qipisargo Glacier to Kangerdlugssuaq – the name means big fjord in Greenlandic, and this accounts for the name occurring many times on the map of Greenland! This one is at latitude 61°N on the west coast near Narsak which the party reached in 12 days. They described the expedition as ‘an exploratory trip following a walk (!) to the North Pole the previous month’.

On 1 August a four-person team organised by Ingerid Boyum Aase (Norway) started from Ammassalik and initially had some problems with crevassing on the ascent of the Apusererpia Glacier to the ice plateau at 1000m. They were not delayed by bad weather and the lowest temperature encountered was -18°C . Travelling some 10 hours each day they made a fast crossing and reached Pt. 660m, after some problems with melt rivers, on 20 August.

Also in August Sjur Mørdre (Norway) made his third traverse of the year from Isortok to Kangerdlugssuaq, this time without dogs.

Last year these notes referred to rumours that a car test track was to be established on the Inland Ice. This nightmare scenario is now reality! With the permission of The Greenland Home Rule authorities (!) Volkswagen are building a 35km access road from the airfield at Kangerdlugssuaq to the ice cap near to Pt. 660m, where expeditions following the popular trade route from Ammassalik (east coast) to Kangerdlugssuaq (west coast) exit the ice cap. From the ice edge it is planned to construct an ice road some 80km in from the Russell Glacier to an altitude of about 1500m. A small 'satellite town' will be established at the track which will be in the order of 50km in diameter (!) and used from May to September to test vehicles in cold conditions. It will cost in the order of 100 million Danish Kroner, about £10 million, for an agreed 15-year period. In a James Bond film such a set-up would be impressive. But this is not a film, and to those familiar with the area it will be unbelievable that the landscape of one of the world's most beautiful wilderness areas has been sacrificed in this manner by the Greenland Home Rule authorities and that future expeditions using the route to and from Kangerdlugssuaq will encounter on the Inland Ice the very cars, pollution and commercialism they have sought to escape.

The East Coast

A three-man party led by Dan Kagg (Sweden) spent a month from 13 June in the Tasermiut Fjord area in the south. After assembling equipment, the arrival of which was delayed by pack ice, they set off for **Pt. 2511m** which was reached and climbed in six days. They managed to climb one further peak on the return to the coast in deteriorating weather.

In the area immediately north of Ammassalik an Army ski mountaineering expedition, code-named Greenland Tiger and led by Nick Short (UK), was flown into a base camp on the Haabets Glacier on 1 July. From this camp they climbed ten peaks of grades up to AD in a three-week period of good weather. The final week was spent skiing out to Tasilaq fjord via the Tasilaq Fjeldhytte, a finely situated small hut which can be booked by contacting the doctor in Ammassalik, Hans Christian Florian (tel: 00 299 98 1320). At the same time and a little to the west Al Powell (UK) and five companions formed the British Schweizerland Expedition and also experienced good weather for their stay at the head of 16 September Glacier. Two of the party skied in from the Knud Rasmussens Glacier on 24 July, the remainder joining them by helicopter a few days later. The expedition's main objectives – a new route on the South Face of **Tupilak (2264m)** and an ascent of the South Pillar of **Rodebjerg (2140m)**, were achieved within the first five days and a further eight new routes were made including five at ED on the mountains at the junction of the 16th September, Haabets and Knud Rasmussens Glaciers before the group skied out down the Knud Rasmussens Glacier on 17 August.

Further north on 16 June the eight-member British Lemon Mountains Expedition led by Richard Pash (UK) flew by ski-equipped Twin Otter from Iceland to a site on the Cocker Glacier at the head of Kangerdlugssuaq (this one is at latitude 68°30' on the east coast!). The party then moved to a base

camp on the Hedgehog Glacier at which an air drop of supplies was made and from where they climbed 18 routes, of which 12 were first ascents, and explored the surrounding glaciers before being picked up by the Twin Otter on 24 June.

In the Watkins Mountains Skip Horner (USA) flew in to the Gunnbjørnsfjeld landing site on 2 May with four companions. They immediately made a dump of gear on the col under the summit block and returned to camp. A three-day storm and one metre of snow followed, and only on 7 May were they able to break a new trail back to the col at the same time as many avalanches were falling into the surrounding basin. The storm then returned for a further three days and after retrieving their gear the party were flown out on 11 May. Visiting this area early in the year can pay off in terms of weather and snow conditions but this year Skip appears to have encountered the downside since out of four visits to Gunnbjørnsfjeld this was the first with really bad weather. However, the weather seemed then to improve as a three-man party comprising Leifur Om Svarvarsson, Gudjon Marteinsson and Ed McGough (Iceland) made an ascent of **Gunnbjørnsfjeld (3693m)** on 12 May and an ascent of **Dome (3682m)**, the second highest summit in the Arctic, by the NE Ridge.

Paul Walker's Tangent Expeditions flew a five-man group into the Woolley Glacier on 15 June under the leadership of Scott Umpleby (UK). The expedition focused on exploring the region around the head of the glacier, first visited by Jim Lowther's expedition in 1988. First ascents of **Forefinger (3367m)**, **Midnight Peak (3249m)**, **Terra Nova Peak (3020m)** and **Flash Point (2960m)** were made from a base camp on the glacier, together with an unsuccessful attempt on **Julia (3455m)** first climbed by Lowther's party. The group then skied 25kms to the Gunnbjørnsfjeld base camp site from where an ascent of Gunnbjørnsfjeld (the 27th!) was made. An attempt on **Dome** was abandoned due to unstable snow conditions and the party flew out on 2 July just prior to a further ascent of Gunnbjørnsfjeld by a Finnish/Swedish group.

Across the Christian den IVs Gletscher from Gunnbjørnsfjeld Paul Walker (UK) led another nine-man Tangent expedition to the previously unvisited Lindberghs Fjelde. The party were landed in the southern part of the group for a 16-day stay by a ski-equipped Twin Otter on 25 July, and from two base camps climbed a total of 16 mountains and four minor peaks. The range was found to consist largely of easy grade alpine peaks in the height range 2600m-3200m with considerable opportunities for exploratory climbing and ski-mountaineering but extending also, in this region where the rock changes from basalt to gneiss, to the potential for some serious long ridge and face routes on large mountain massifs such as **Jaetteborg (2810m)** and **Snebordet**, both of which are unclimbed and have tremendous faces of 1600m overlooking the Christian den IVs Gletscher to the east.

The Tangent machine was also at work in the Rignys Bjerg at about latitude 69°N where a small group led by Nigel Edwards (UK) were landed in late May. They made a total of ten first ascents from two base camps to the NE of the landing site. On 2 July Brinley Mitchell, Pete McEwan and Ian MacDonald (UK) flew to a new landing site to the NE of the one used by the Edwards group and made three first ascents of new mountains by routes of PD standard and a further more technical route on another peak. The party experienced

much bad weather and made a number of useful exploratory ski journeys through the previously unvisited glacier systems leading towards the edge of the Inland Ice.

Further north, in the so-called 'Arctic Riviera', the three-man Maria Island Expedition (UK) used an inflatable boat to reach and ascend various peaks on Ymers Island. The group also explored routes up onto the ice cap in the inner reaches of Rhedins, Røhss and Dicksons Fjords. Unseasonally extensive ice and coastal fog hampered boat movements and access to the snout of the Hisingers Gletscher.

Up at 73°N in Louise Boyd's Land the five-person Cambridge NE Greenland Expedition led by Matthew Tinsley (UK) were flown into the area on 2 July and spent six weeks divided between botanical research and climbing and exploration of this almost completely unvisited area. The expedition made 15 first ascents, noting some fine granitic-looking faces and spires in the region, and finished with a 150km ski journey southwards to their pick-up point at the head of Kjerulfs Fjord. En route two new routes on the previously unclimbed North Face of **Petermanns Bjerg (2944m)** were established and nearer to the pick-up point two attempts on **Shackletons Bjerg (2808m)** were frustrated by bad weather before the expedition made its way down the very broken Hisingers Gletscher to Kjerulfs Fjord.

Those Greenland explorers who have reason to be grateful for the old trappers' huts which dot the coast of NE Greenland will be pleased to learn that the Nanok Hunting Company is now re-born, not for hunting but with the express intention of reinstating their huts, many of which are now in a parlous condition. During 1999 work was carried out on Sandodden, Myggbukta, Hoelsbu and Germaniahavn and the renovation will continue in future years.

Almost as far north as anyone featured in this edition of the *Alpine Journal* was Dennis Schmitt (USA) continuing his explorations of J. V. Jensenland during July. As in previous years this was a broad-based project spread between ornithology, archæology and mountaineering and the main mountain objective was a twin-peaked summit above the Ulvhohen valley. From the expedition's base camp this was climbed in a 22-hour period from the north and then with some difficulty on exposed ridges to both the north and the higher south summits. From the world's most northerly lake, a little west of Kap Morris Jesup, ascents were also made of **Hammken Point** and **Ikiorti (1000m)**, the world's most northerly mountains.

However, just a little further north than Dennis Schmitt, and almost anyone else(!), were John Andersen and Frederik Jacobi (Denmark) who made the first kajak passage around Kap Morris Jesup, the most northerly point of Greenland, and the world. Starting from Station Nord on the NE Greenland coast on 22 June they headed NW using the kajaks as pulks and were lucky enough to encounter open water just west of Kap Morris Jesup, thus becoming the first people to kajak north of latitude 83°N. On the final 350km, they travelled on the ice cap to avoid passing the face of the 100km-wide Humboldt Glacier and reached Qaanaaq in NW Greenland after a journey of 1800km in 72 days.