Arctic Dreams

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Kangerdlugssuaq

The British Kangerdlugssuaq Expedition 1998

I finally sighted Brian just below the summit snow slopes. He was silhouetted on a ridge, waved a ski stick, and glissaded rapidly down towards me. Brian did everything rapidly.

'What's it like?' He looked quizzical, and stared contemplatively into the distance.

'Deep snow. And at the top, lonely. Very lonely.'

I plodded on, increasingly hopeful now that I would get to the top. This was the second peak of the day, I was tired, and there was still the descent to come. I abandoned my sack to save weight. Brian's steps, going in eighteen inches through the crusty snow, helped enormously. I arrived on the summit quite suddenly at 11pm and saw spread out in front something that for me had always been one of the expedition's major objectives – not another mountain but a view, the view of the whole of Kangerdlugssuaq fjord from its mouth in the Denmark Strait to its head in the west where the huge Kangerdlugssuaq Glacier, coming straight off the ice cap, crunched into the chaos of 'bergs and brash ice which covered it. In the low grey light – the sun finally dipped below the horizon as I was descending an hour later – the fjord was the brightest thing I could see, a stream of glowing whiteness surrounded by shadows. Smooth snow slopes fell away for 7000ft to reach it. On the other side of the fjord the Lemon Mountains etched the horizon.

The terrain between the shore and the Lemon's highest points – the Cathedral, the Chisel, and a number of other peaks forming the southern limit of the Frederiksborg Glacier drainage – was as far as I knew unvisited and contained some fine objectives, particularly around the Courtauld Glacier. For a number of weeks I had toyed with the idea of drawing them into the present expedition's objectives. We could descend to the fjord carrying an inflatable rubber dinghy, row across, and see what there was. I stuck stubbornly to this plan until dissuaded, finally and irrevocably, by a thirty-second conversation with Brian. He thought it would be highly dangerous. This knocked me somewhat. Brian Davison is a very bold mountaineer, as well as knowing a thing or two about Polar latitudes, and it seemed to me that if he thought it dangerous it was probably near-suicidal. In any event it was quite obvious now, looking down on the fjord shores, that merely to reach sea level from a ski landing inland would be problematic. To pull sledges to within five or six miles of the shore, as we had done, was easy

enough. But the remaining distance was an entirely different proposition, as the glaciers dried and the occasional crevasse zones transformed themselves into continuous icefalls. The most logical way to proceed would, of course, be to do what Deer and Fontaine had done on their circumnavigation of the fjord during Wager's expedition of 1935-6 – to come in winter or early spring. Not in August!

But never mind. The view before me was probably the wildest I had ever seen, and the feeling it engendered was just as Brian had promised. It felt a very lonely and a very exposed place. It even occurred to me that you could lose your grip here if you weren't careful. I turned and started back down, as the air over the ice cap seemed to clear and the light sparkled in a little ridge of fine weather that somehow I just knew wouldn't last.

I was on Kangerdlugssuaq Tinde, the highest peak overlooking the southern shore of Kangerdlugssuaq fjord, East Greenland. It was 3 August, three weeks into our five-week exploration of the area. Readers of the *Alpine Journal* may recall the two articles in the 1993 volume detailing earlier trips to the same general area – the expedition under Stan Woolley and Jim Lowther in 1990 which approached from the south, climbing and exploring as far as the Hutchinson Glacier, some thirty miles from the fjord shore, and the 1992 expedition to the Lemon Mountains on the northern shore, which climbed the highest mountain here (the Cathedral) and a number of other summits. The present expedition was conceived in a similar vein and had similar ambitions.

East Greenland is not a cheap destination and even those of us who have been seduced by its atmosphere would not pretend that it offers the most diverse of landscapes. Furthermore, since 1990 it has started to lose some of its pioneering flavour as more people have begun to take an interest. The speed with which one can get into the field has even attracted commercial, guided activity. Greenland is almost 'back in fashion'. And none of these, of course, are points in its favour.

But despite such drawbacks, I was attracted back for a number of reasons. The cost of these expeditions has, in Sterling terms, risen very little. Given normal grants it stands at around £2000 per person, which seemed a great deal in 1990. It doesn't seem so much now. As for the commercial activity – it has naturally stuck to easy peaks, mostly composed of basalt, of which there are huge swathes along the edges of the ice cap. But they are not in the Kangerdlugssuaq basin. The rock in the basin is largely syenite, which to a layman like myself is pretty well indistinguishable from granite. It varies in quality from Chamonix best to that disintegrating biscuit quality, almost a mud, which you typically find in brèches on granite ridges, and which we certainly came across this year. This is rarely, if ever, territory for novices, and commercial expeditions have yet to invade it. Furthermore, I was interested to see what the terrain between the Hutchinson Glacier and the fjord shore had to offer. This was a zone we had seen into from a

subsidiary summit of Redekammen, a mountain bordering the Hutchinson, in 1990, and it was already clear then that it would offer something significantly different in character from the higher ice-cap margins further south and west.

But it was this last point, the existence of Redekammen, which was the deciding factor. It is an extensive mountain, almost a massif, guarding the edge of the basin where the ground starts to drop more rapidly towards the sea. At 2555m it is almost as high, possibly as high, as anything in the basin. There are two or three peaks on the southern side which the Danish *Geodoetisk Institut* maps mark at 2600m, and a similar number on the northern shore. The Cathedral, or *Domkirkebjerget*, is given as 2660m. My impression in 1990, only strengthened this year, was that some of these heights are suspect. Be that as it may, even if Redekammen is not the highest mountain in the basin it is certainly one of the best – quite difficult, complex, and with a superb pointed rock finger of a summit. 'Redekammen' derives from the Danish for 'comb', and it is well named. When five of us were there in 1990 we could see a route to the top, but felt we had insufficient time to pursue it, given all the pointed rock pinnacles we would have to tackle on the way. This was a good decision I think, the right one at the time, but it did leave me unfinished business. For me, it was worth returning to Kangerdlugssuaq for Redekammen alone.

The more experienced expedition climbers on our team comprised Brian, Dave Wilkinson and myself. Two days after arriving, while Brian and I were climbing our first mountain of the trip very rapidly and in rather dubious snow, he reawakened an old knee injury in a skiing fall. So it was left to Dave and me to investigate Redekammen. It was already clear that the weather was much more unsettled, the snow more problematic, than in 1990 or 1992, and it took us a week of watching and waiting, climbing a couple of other peaks in the meantime, before we got the weather window we needed. It lasted for little more than 24 hours, but that proved just enough. We started the climb at 4am and reached the summit around midday. We were back in the tents by 4am the next morning, still in perfect weather, but when we woke six hours later it was raining and continued to do so, on and off, for the next week.

The lower third of the climb was a sérac barrier, and though everything seemed to be much slower-moving and consequently safer than in the Alps or Himalaya, Dave nevertheless insisted on a six-hour wait on the way down to give it a chance to re-freeze. We whiled away the time gazing at the stunning view and having a short kip. Dave made endless brews and fed me biscuits. I couldn't have had a more enjoyable or stronger companion, and I don't say that just because he had held the rope so solidly when I fell through a cornice higher up. It made a healthy bite out of the ridge, which remained visible from base camp for the remainder of the expedition. Above that rather frightening snow had been a number of gendarmes, all but one of which we could bypass to reach the final rock

finger. This was about 150ft high and, as expected, the crux of the climb. The outcome remained in doubt to the very end, not least because we had cut our technical gear to an absolute minimum so as to be able to move fast. Dave later suggested an Alpine grade of TD, though in better conditions it could well be easier. But we both agreed that an accurate grading was almost impossible, and perhaps pointless; for my own part, it was the sheer seriousness, that feeling of exposure and loneliness, which presented the greatest challenge. Not just on this climb but throughout the expedition I had these feelings more strongly than in either 1990 or 1992.

One reason was the weather. Out of 34 days in the field, from 13 July to 15 August inclusive, only ten were fine all day with the appearance of a settled air mass, and of those ten no less than four came at the very end of the expedition when we had just experienced a four-day storm, snow conditions were even worse than usual, and we were in any case confined to barracks waiting for the plane. Another six or so were half good – clearing midday perhaps, or clagging in in the afternoon. It was on one of these that we climbed Kangerdlugssuaq Tinde. The rest were overcast if not precipitating, and mostly very warm. Most of the precipitation was rain. We had a day's snow immediately after arriving and four days in the last week which put down two feet and probably marked the end of summer. It was unlikely that so much new snow would consolidate properly at that time of year. Four of us did a couple of climbs the night before the plane arrived on 15 August, and found conditions decidedly trying.

But then, they were trying most of the time. Presumably as a result of the rain, the top 18 inches or so of snow were sometimes fractured into a kind of suspension of ball bearings, or something akin to heavyweight polystyrene chips. This was not the perfect névé I could have sworn I remembered from previous occasions!

A feature of this expedition was the diversity of the team. Besides Dave, Brian and myself (all Alpine Club members), it comprised Helen Geddes, Ken Findlay, Pete Nelson, Graham Robinson and John 'Roc' Hudson. With the exception of Ken, this group's climbing expertise was relatively modest, though this didn't stop them climbing several virgin summits or exploring new territory successfully. There was also some advantage in that this group contained the best skiers. Helen was the only real expert on the expedition, but it was Graham, the least experienced mountaineer, who with great aplomb found the route through the worst crevasse zone of the whole trip. We thereafter called him 'the crevasse master' – doubly appropriate as a few days later he became the first – though not the last – member of the expedition to fall into one.

Whilst Dave and I had been laying siege to Redekammen, this group had made a successful tour west onto the edge of the ice cap and Brian, supposedly laid up with his damaged knee, had climbed some eight peaks in lightning forays from Base Camp. Reunited, and following several days of bad weather, we embarked on a twelve-day circular tour north and east,

climbing peaks as we went and as the fancy took us. I had always envisaged Kangerdlugssuaq Tinde as the culmination of this journey, and there was a great deal of interest and satisfaction in simply finding our way to it. Several days' journeying brought us to a glacier junction and point of decision immediately west of Hovedvejs-nunatakker, 1660m, a peak whose highest point was subsequently climbed easily from the east by Helen, Pete, Graham, Roc and, independently, Ken. Its west face is something of a contrast, offering a tremendous series of clean granite pillars. The rock looks superb, and this is surely something to interest big-wall *aficionados*. It would have interested us – Brian particularly – if we had had more time.

To avoid ending up at too low an altitude and getting mixed up with crevasse zones and sledge-unfriendly territory, we decided to approach Kangerdlugssuaq Tinde from the Hovedvejen. This we did without difficulty, making a camp on the col a mile south of Pt. 1800m. From here Dave, Brian, Ken and I set off over two cols, finally dumping the skis four miles from camp below the SW face of the mountain. The glacier was dry here – the only dry glacier we experienced – but ahead of us was a problem. The glacier which, according to the map, pushed north to a snow col between Kangerdlugssuaq Tinde and Pt. 2000m to its west didn't in fact exist. (If we had thought to look at the satellite photos properly, we would have seen this.) Instead we were faced with a snow cwm, backed by a steep rock wall and seamed with rock-strewn ice gullies. For Ken this whole day had by now developed into something of a baptism by fire; certainly, if he expected a considered discussion followed by an agreed team decision at this point, he must have been very disappointed, as Brian immediately set off one way and I another, followed more or less tolerantly by Dave. Ken was left with the only rope in the party, no one to tie it to, and a great deal of freedom in which to make his own decision. By dint of climbing very fast and very light Brian and I managed to climb both Kangerdlugssuaq Tinde and Pt. 2000m. They were equally fine peaks but neither could be said to have been team-spirited ascents.

The return to Base Camp was enlivened by a team day on Fangetarnet, 1610m, a 'judicious retreat' (ie a failure) by Dave and me on a wonderful rock peak immediately to Fangetarnet's west, and an impending storm complete with classic lens-shaped clouds which caught everyone but Dave and me still short of Base. By luck rather than judgement we had gone on ahead and got back to the delights of unlimited food and home-brewed beer (another of Dave's efforts) literally ten minutes before the snow started. Two days later it stopped and the clouds lifted for just long enough for the others to make it back; by which time Brian had lifted his tally of summits to 26. Then it closed in for another two days. After that it cleared completely, and we had a long and increasingly anxious four-day wait for the plane, which was discouraged from coming in by unwarranted pessimism on the part of the Icelandic meteo. We had an emergency beacon with us but no two-way radio or satellite phone, and for peace of mind if nothing

else I would be loath to go again without one or the other. When the plane did eventually appear, our exit must have been one of the most rapid and efficient in expedition history, and we got home on schedule. The Twin Otter, piloted by the same two Icelanders who had flown us in five weeks before, landed just north of Redekammen at 2.20pm on Saturday 15 August. We left for Akureyri and Reykjavik an hour later. By 10.30 on Sunday morning we were in Glasgow and on the last lap home – Brian, true to form, getting his key in his front door first.

Summary: The British Kangerdlugssuaq Expedition 1998 landed at 33°20' W, 68°15' N and explored the mountains in that area and north and east towards the fjord. Between them, members of the expedition climbed some 30 virgin summits, including Redekammen and Kangerdlugssuaq Tinde.

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