The uttermost north

Mike Banks

At last I had reached the shore of the Arctic Ocean. I was standing on a rocky promontory on the N coast of Ellesmere Island, looking across to where the pack ice continued unbroken to the Pole, a mere 450 miles away. The three of us, Commander Angus Erskine, the expedition leader, CPO Steve Williams and I had dragged a sledge or humped a heavy rucksack 100 miles through unexplored country to get to this headland at 82° 30′ N. It was one of the northernmost points in the Commonwealth, in the uttermost reaches of the Canadian Arctic. It was also the furthest N I had ever been.

It should have been an ebullient occasion but somehow the lowering Arctic weather seemed to hold undertones of menace and we were a subdued trio. Despite the fact that it was late July, snow still covered the ground (the summer was very late in coming to the Arctic in 1972), so that it was impossible to see where the land ended and the sea ice began. Our feet were wet and cold, as they had been for the last week of thaw. We turned back towards our tent and were delighted to spot a ptarmigan hen with a brood of nine chicks, one of the most northerly breeding birds. Confident in her camouflage, the hen let me walk up to within six feet to take photographs.

I had joined this seven-man Royal Navy Ellesmere Island Expedition as archaeologist and photographer at the invitation of Angus Erskine, an old polar colleague of mine. The aim of the expedition was something of a rarity these days: to make first ascents in a range of mountains which were not only virgin but had never been trodden by man before. It was completely unexplored territory. In these modern times, however, it did not bear that alluring label 'blank on the map' because the whole region had been mapped fairly accurately from air photographs.

Our objective was a group of mountains in a latitude of about 82° 15′ N lying between Milne fjord in the NE and Yelverton Inlet in the SW. We referred to these mountains as the 'Navy Mountains' but the name is unofficial. This coast had first been visited by Lt Bob Aldrich's party from the Nares expedition of 1875 so it was pleasantly nostalgic to make a naval come-back to the area.

It would normally have been prohibitively expensive to fly to so remote a place but the expedition was able to take advantage of a routine RAF polar navigational flight which took us to Resolute Bay in Cornwallis Island. From there it was a relatively short, and cheap, hop to Ellesmere Island. For this purpose we chartered a twin-engined Otter aircraft equipped for ski landings, which would put us down close to our mountain range where we would set up a Base Camp. We were to be in the field for seven weeks.

As we flew towards our mountains we were disconcerted to see low cloud ahead. The pilot turned up a side valley, skimmed over some snowy passes and managed to dodge round a good few of the cloud banks. Then unbroken cloud blocked our route.

'I'll put you down here,' he said to Angus Erskine, pointing to a snow saddle just ahead. He did one low run to check that the snow was tolerably flat and uncrevassed and then swooped in to a soft landing, the skis cutting furrows a foot deep in the snow. We hastily unloaded the plane and watched it take off and disappear, to become conscious of the frozen silence of the high Arctic.

Things had happened so fast that we had only the haziest notion of our position. I therefore spent two days climbing nearby snow mountains with Angus Erskine, trying to locate our whereabouts from the somewhat vague contour lines on the map. We eventually fixed our position about 22 miles short of our planned landing area. The party had, in the process, climbed a couple of peaks over 2150 m.

67 *Otter aircraft lands the party* This and next photo: M. E. B. Banks

It then took us twelve days of heavy sledge hauling to ferry our half ton of stores to a Base Camp near our mountains. It was hard, gruelling labour, dragging a boat-type sledge loaded with about 300 lb of food and stores. At first it seemed all uphill and we gained an insight into the toughness of the old school of man-hauling explorers of the McClintock school. The journey to our Base Camp involved a mere 66 miles of man-hauling but we thought it quite enough.

Splitting into small groups we then set about climbing as many mountains as possible within reach of Base. We soon found that the rock was indescribably rotten, making rock-climbing a hazardous business. In fact, it was so friable we christened it 'broken biscuit'. We therefore kept to the snow where possible, resorting to ski-mountaineering techniques. We would ski as high as possible up a peak using skins on our skis. When the snow became too steep for ski-ing we would take off skis, stick them in the snow, and continue on foot. Hard snow high on the peaks, and occasional patches of ice, usually called for the use of crampons.

In all thirteen virgin peaks were climbed. These peaks were, for the most part, fairly straightforward snow climbs. Their attraction did not lie in their difficulty but in the deep satisfaction in exploring and climbing lonely and shapely mountains in an exceptionally remote and inaccessible region of the Arctic.

As the very first visitors to the region we had a duty to undertake a certain amount of scientific investigation. A rock sample I collected from a virgin peak turned out to be a garnet-gneiss which provided an interesting link with a similar bedrock at Cape Columbia, the northernmost tip of Ellesmere Island.

Our most serious scientific work was focused on the only wide, flat valley in the whole region which we thought might be large enough to sustain wild life including musk-ox. We also planned to search for traces of prehistoric Eskimo habitations.

We saw no musk-ox but found a bone later identified as caribou. We saw fox and hare tracks and identified five species of bird: snow bunting, ptarmigan, long-tailed skua, knot and turnstone. Deep snow prevented our finding any Eskimo remains. A botanical collection was also made. The principal flower was the attractive purple saxifrage which grew in such profusion that we called the valley 'Purple Valley', and this name has been accepted by the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names.

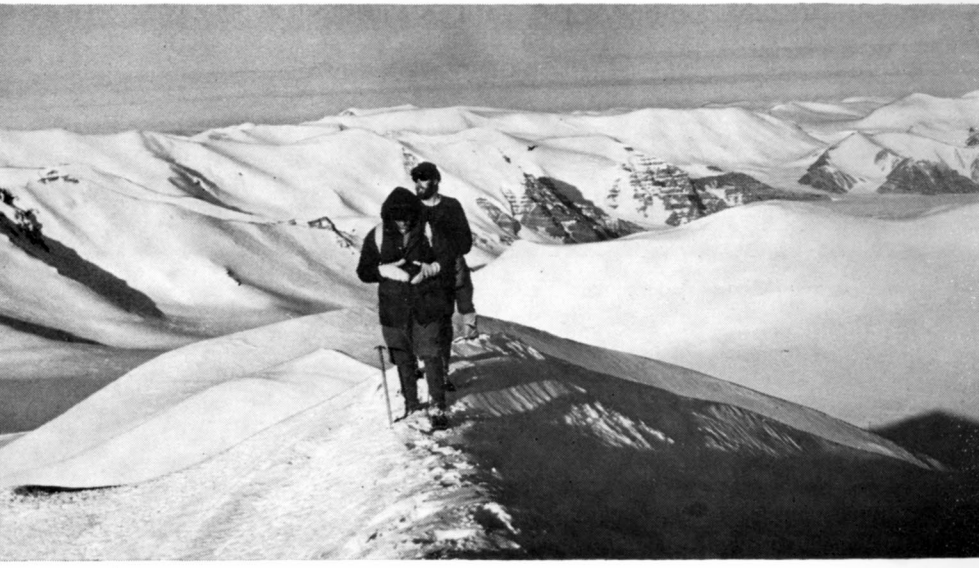
While three of us had been investigating Purple Valley another party had set out for the highest peak in the range, a little under 2150 m. It involved a ski approach of some seven miles. In excellent weather the three men (Corporal Roy Pennington RM, Marine Sam Roberts and Petty Officer Chris Gibbins) ascended at first hard-packed snow on a spur. This fined down into a knife-edged ridge which steepened dramatically for the final 300 ft giving good front-point climbing. The summit was attained and, because there were two Com-

mandos in the party, the mountain was christened Commando Peak, a name also officially accepted by the Canadian Government.

Our work completed, we turned our faces S and hauled our sledges the 115 miles to the small outpost at the head of Tanquary fjord where our aircraft would pick us up. This was a hard but pleasant journey through snowy uplands in the course of which we dragged our sledges over a 1740 m col and found time to climb a further four virgin peaks.

Once off the ice, the final two-day march down the banks of the Air Force River was most rewarding. We saw the rare and beautiful snowy owl, one of the most impressive northern birds of prey. An Arctic hare came up and examined us from close quarters. A couple of expedition members, lingering behind a day or so, managed to coax a little Arctic fox to take food from their hands. One day at lunch time they settled down to watch a solitary musk-ox while they munched their meal but took to their heels when the musk-ox, a bad-tempered old bull, showed a close and apparently unfriendly interest in them.

Before we connected with a homeward RAF navigational flight we lazed away some idyllic days in the unique atmosphere of the perpetual summer sunlight of the very high latitudes. Angus Erskine and I, who had started our expeditioning together in N Greenland 21 years earlier, worked out that we had now both taken part in ten mountaineering or polar expeditions. It was pleasant to reflect that we had seen enough untrodden country in Ellesmere Island to keep us going for another ten.



68 *Climbing among the mountains of Ellesmere Land*