Greenland: The Experience

A personal account of an expedition to Milne Island during July–August 1986

Malcolm Sales

Plates 73–74

Flying over the pack-ice between Iceland and Greenland was the culmination of years of dreams and months of planning. Seven of us (Margaret Graham, Mike Garrett, myself, John Shrewsbury, Anne and Henry Wheatcroft and Chris Whitford) with all our equipment are in a very noisy Twin Otter approaching the coast of East Greenland on our way to three weeks of adventure. Our destination was the remote and uninhabited Milne Island in Scoresby Sound.

From the air Greenland was everything we had expected. Dramatic raw geography. Endless ranges of mountains complete with sheer rock-walls and extensive glaciers. How would we cope? Not long before we find out.

The proposed landing-site (chosen from 30-year old aerial photographs) was a sandy flood-plane about 3×2km. Biggles selected a fairly flat area and brought the Twin Otter down for a smooth landing. Soon all our gear was piled on the sand. Then the Twin Otter took off. Come back in 18 days. Please. We were now on our own. Whatever happened, it was up to us to resolve it or cope until the Twin Otter returned. This is why we had come here. Out with the primus stove. On went a brew whilst we decided upon a suitable site for Base Camp. The site chosen was over a mile and a river crossing away. Portage used up the rest of the day.

Summer days are long in Greenland. There is no night. Keeping to a normal 24-hour cycle required discipline. On a couple of occasions our clock slipped. The first full day on the island was spent exploring our surroundings. Anne and Henry went north. Mike and I went up a hill of 388m (the first 'first ascent' of the expedition), whilst Margaret, John and Chris went south—this involved two river crossings to get out of the flood-plane. That evening we discussed our findings and formed a plan. For the next six days we would go on a backpacking trip to the area south seen by Margaret, John and Chris.

We left our Base Camp at 11am. Two river crossings within the first hour, then off towards the Charcotgletscher. The boulder-strewn terrain was not too difficult with our heavy packs, although the lateral moraine leading us on to the glacier needed care to negotiate. At this time of year the Charcotgletscher is dry, hence route finding through the crevassed areas was not a problem. It was a clear and sunny day, so setting off up a glacier at 6pm did not worry us. Crossing one particularly wide and deep water-channel caused Margaret some problems when her foothold gave way. Henry hauled her out quickly but the neckstrap of her camera broke, letting it fall into the icy water, to be carried off to sea. Fortunately, within the party we had another camera which Margaret could borrow for the rest of the trip. Our proposed camp-site turned out to be



Photo: Malcolm Sales

73 Korridoren from the slopes of Pt 1247m.

unsuitable, so at 11pm we camped just off the glacier, but still on snow and ice. At 1.30am I took the last photograph of the day and turned in.

Later that morning we moved on again and found ourselves a superior camp-site after another 3½ hours' walking. We remained at this site for three nights and enjoyed perfect weather. From here we climbed four summits, two of which (1310m and 1520m) are, we believe, first ascents. The other two, 960m and Bays Fjelde (1028m), had cairns upon their summits.

Our return to Base Camp was via undulating sandstone hills and then across the snout of the Charcotgletscher. Still over 1km of glacier travel, but no mishaps. The party split into two after the glacier crossing, with Anne, Henry, Mike and myself camping by a lake, inhabited by a pair of Great Northern Divers with their chick. Margaret, John and Chris pushed on back to the Base Camp and its stock of rich fruit-cake.

The party was reunited at Base Camp the next day. Our primus stove was on all day producing hot water for brews and washes. The only time it was not purring away was when it was being refuelled.

Two nights were spent at Base Camp. On the intervening day we went up a mountain marked on the map as 1247m. All four altimeters in the party indicated that this summit is nearer to 1270m. Spectacular views of the interior of our island from this summit. Glaciers, rock-spires, rock-walls, fjords, icebergs. We could see why we had come.

Back at Base Camp, we became plagued by mosquitoes. Always a nuisance, today they were insufferable. Although (or because?) it was a warm and dry evening I was walking around in my full Goretex waterproofs, an excellent barrier against these pests. People retired early into the safety of their tents.

Another six-day backpacking trip was the plan. This time, north along the coast, towards an area which we believed offered scope for some more first ascents. Leaving Base Camp with its mosquitoes was a relief. Not even a river-crossing this time. Our day was picturesque, with a constant panorama of huge icebergs floating past us in Scoresby Sound. We passed two groups of Musk Ox and were startled by a single bull who, fortunately, ran away from us.

Our camp-site was idyllic. Picturesque views, babbling brook, and only a few mosquitoes. All night long we could hear the icebergs collapsing. Very entertaining! Day two of this trip was cooler, cloudy and took us over very rough terrain. Boulders the size of our tents were commonplace. The proposed camp-site turned out to be a boulder field so we pushed on 'until a suitable site is found'. A river-crossing followed by a snow-field (ice-axe and crampons at sea level came as a novelty) led to us ascending a horribly loose lateral moraine. We called a conference to reassess our position. Every move required care and balance. To our right a steep drop into the sea close to the snout of a glacier. To our left an equally steep rock-wall. Ahead was more of the same, only worse. It was the end of the day, we were getting tired and our packs were heavy. So it was back down the moraine, across the snow-field, repeat the river-crossing and camp where we can.

An inversion layer made the morning view look like a backdrop for a Tolkien novel. Anne and Henry and later Margaret, John and Chris went back to the previous camp-site along the coast, by the way we came. Mike and I took a



Photo: Malcolm Sales

74 *Backdrop to a Tolkien novel? View from our northernmost camp-site.*

higher route along a 300m high plateau that offered better views and easier walking. The weather, gradually improving throughout the day, became warm and pleasant by the time we had pitched our tents once more at this idyllic site. Just right for lazing around for the afternoon. We would stay here for three nights.

Overnight frost made for slow stoves and consequently a slow start (6.30am instead of 6). Our objective was a snow-summit which our maps indicated to be about 1000m high. Once again, the views were spectacular and, as before, our altimeters were at variance with the maps. This time we made our height 1120m. Back at camp high mackerel cloud indicated a change in the weather.

Enthusiasm, like the morning, was dull. Margaret, John and Chris decided to return to Base Camp. Anne, Henry, Mike and I would follow on tomorrow. Today, however, was devoted to hunting and photographing the abundant wild life.

Another dull morning. Even some drizzle. Walking back to Base Camp, we disturbed three bull Musk Ox sparring. An interesting spectator sport! Mosquitoes were less of a pest but still evident. Plans for the remainder of our stay were discussed. However, the evening cloud looked ominous, so we went to bed in a mood of 'see what the morning brings'.

It brought rain. All day. And the next. We had achieved everything within a day's walk of Base Camp, so, whilst the rain was no more than one would expect in North Wales, the mood of the party was: stay in bed, read, write and listen to the icebergs in the bay.

The third day in Base Camp started like the previous two: it was raining. Late in the afternoon normal sunny Greenland weather returned. All being well, the Twin Otter will arrive tomorrow. John and I went out on to the floodplane to find and mark out a suitable runway.

Our last planned day in Greenland started with a thick layer of sea-mist. We considered that it would soon clear, so by midday everybody had packed and moved all our gear to the runway.

The mist did clear and we waited. And waited. It was always possible that the Twin Otter would not arrive on the planned date. Before the pilot took off from Iceland, he had to be convinced that the weather in Greenland was good enough to make a landing. So we waited. Four hours later than expected the Twin Otter flew over the horizon to land on first sight on our marked runway.

In conclusion, Milne Island turned out to be the perfect place for middle-grade mountaineers to test themselves in an unexplored area, without having to perform to the same standards as the sport's 'super stars'. An excellent place for safe but real adventure.