Tysfjord and Lofoten

RUPERT HOARE

(*Plates* 68, 87–89)

The Arctic Highway south-west of Narvik passes through a relatively low-lying and uninteresting area beyond Ballangen; then suddenly, on rounding a corner, the whole dramatic profile of the Tysfjord mountains is revealed. These stark ice-sculpted granitic peaks rise so abruptly that they look quite unreal, as if part of a fantasy landscape. The road passes between the precipices of Stortinden to the north and Huglehornet to the south. Here John Evans and I left the bus: our long journey was at an end.

We had both decided that we needed a change from the Alps for our summer holiday in 1986. Eventally we chose to travel to Norway and spend one week in Tysfjord and one week in Lofoten. I had been to Arctic Norway 12 years earlier and had always wanted to visit the Lofoten Islands since having seen their jagged profile in the distance from a mountain near Narvik. Our journey was via Stockholm, with 21 hours on the train to Narvik. By the time we stepped out of the bus we certainly felt a long way from home. Indeed, John remarked that it had taken considerably less time to reach Kashmir!

Our first objective was the E ridge of Huglehornet. The foot of the ridge is reached by walking easily up an extraordinary slab of granite gneiss set at an angle of about 25 degrees. This single slab must be half a kilometre long and several hundred metres wide, and is a unique feature.

At the foot of the ridge, 'the party' fell noticeably silent. The narrow rock ridge rose at a steep angle to a huge capping overhang, with massive slabs dropping away almost vertically on each side. Had we not known in advance that the technical grade is only V Diff/Severe, I expect that we might well have made an excuse to find an easier-looking objective. As it was, the climb was highly enjoyable and the summit was a tremendous viewpoint. The weather was perfect and all around were fiords, islands and fine peaks. There is a special magic about the combination of mountains and sea. In the distance we could see the Lofoten Islands and nearer at hand to the south-east was the unmistakable profile of Stetind.

Stetind (the 'Anvil Peak') is one of the most distinctive mountains in Norway. It has the shape of a very steep-sided triangular pyramid with a flat top. Described by Priestman as 'probably the most remarkable and at the same time the ugliest mountain in Arctic Norway', and by no less an authority than W C Slingsby as 'a grim monolith', it nevertheless looked highly attractive to us and immediately became the next feature of the 'sports plan'.

The first problem was how to approach the peak, which has a remote location at the head of Stetfjord. The obvious answer was to try to charter a boat. The next day, after a hot and rather tedious walk from Skardberget to Lysvold with heavy packs, it proved surprisingly easy to arrange for a local



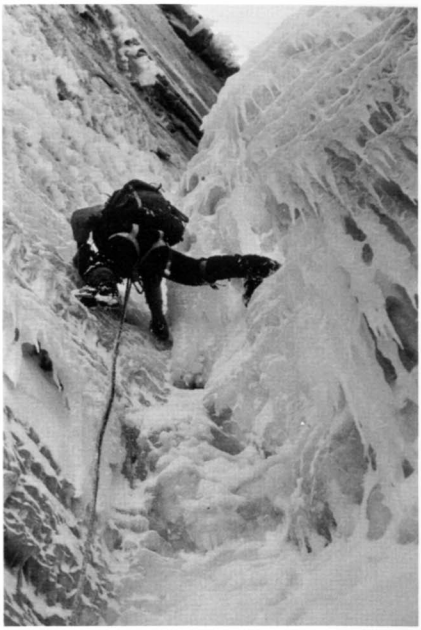
67. *Roger Payne and Julie-Ann Clyma on the summit of Mt McKinley. Mt Hunter L, Mt Foraker R.* (p 201)



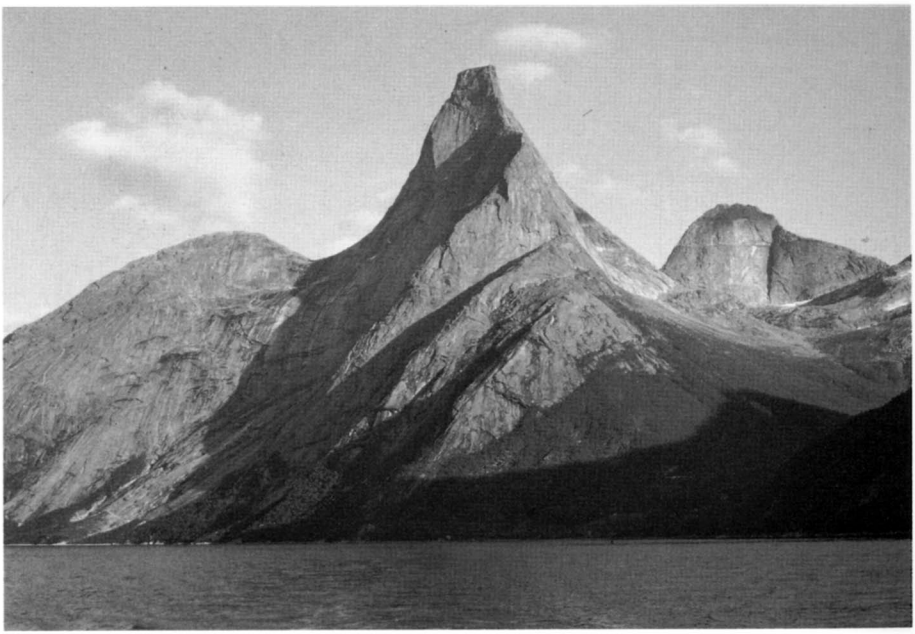
68. *Lofoten: Ostpollen Fiord from Geitgaljartind.* (p 197)



85. An early SMC party in the Centre Gully of Ben Lui. (p 190)



86. First winter ascent of Harrison's Direct on Ben Nevis, February 1976. Climber: Chris Gilmore. (p 190)



87. Stetind. (p 197)

fishing-boat to take us about 12km to the head of the fiord. As we chugged up the fiord with Stetind growing ever closer, we looked at the impossible terrain on either side and realized that we had definitely made a good decision to approach by sea!

That evening we pitched the tent on a patch of grass beside a stream near the shore and boiled up some fresh fish, kindly given to us by a local fisherman, in a billy of salt water. Long after we lost the sun, it continued to light the granitic slabs which soared up to the summit of Stetind high above.

The ordinary route leads round the back (south) of Stetind and over a subsidiary peak called Hall's Fortopp, and then up the S ridge (Sydpillaren). This is the route on which a strong Alpine Club party consisting of Collie, W C and A M Slingsby failed in bad weather in 1904. The route was first climbed by a Norwegian party the following year.

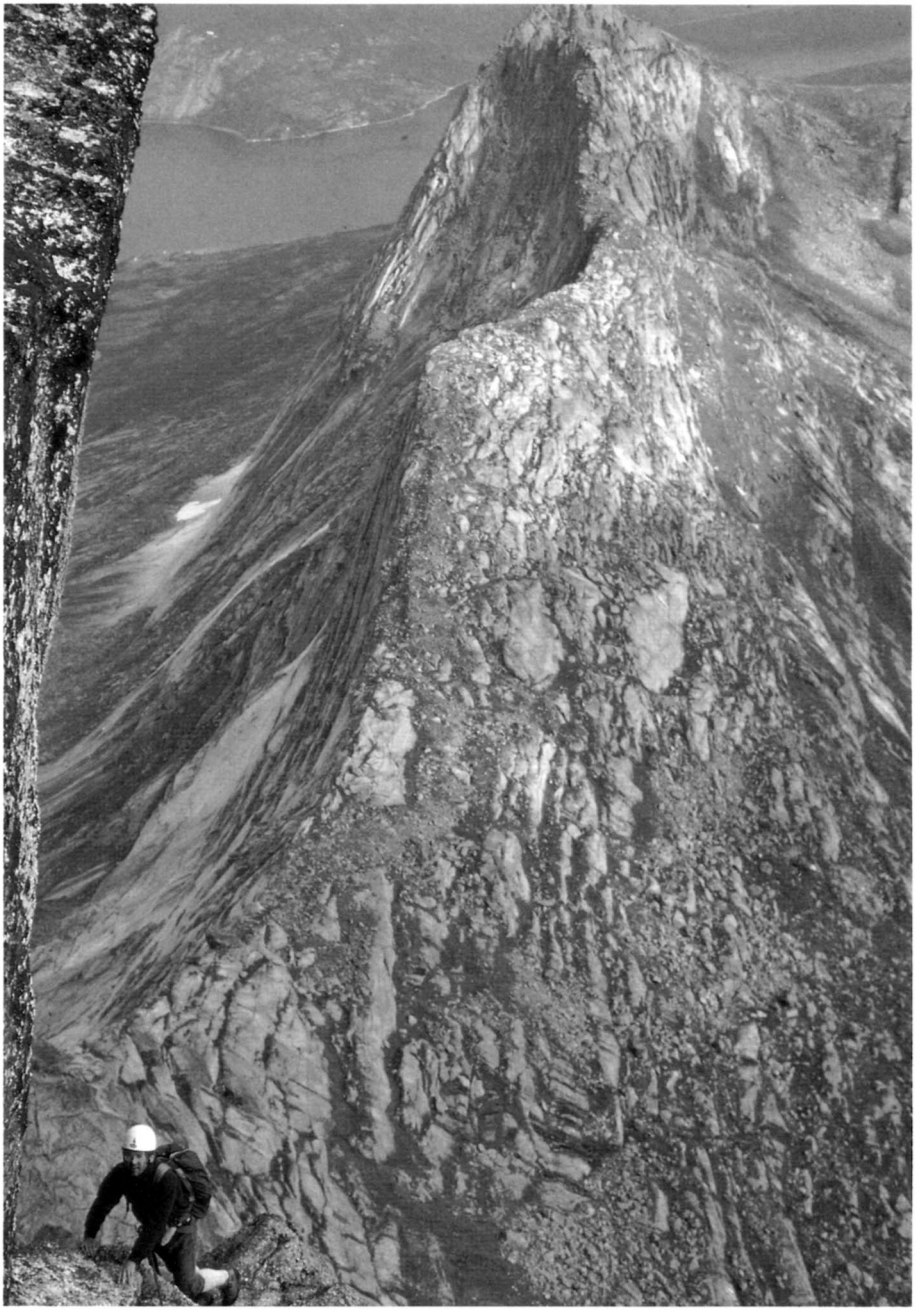
From our camp, a path led through birchwoods beside a stream, then gradually it gained height passing over bilberry slopes until it reached a small lake at 700m. It was an exhilarating morning with perfect sunny weather and good views back to the fiord. From the lake the route led over large scree up to a col below Prestind, and then it continued north-west mostly up easy-angled scree. We began to wonder if it was just a walk to the top of Stetind until having at last reached the top of Hall's Fortopp, we gained a view of the final ridge: the rope and gear would certainly be needed after all!

The crux pitch of the ridge was a very exposed but well-protected hand traverse; on the descent we avoided it by an abseil. The summit was a curiously flat bouldery area about the size of a football pitch: a most unsummit-like summit. Needless to say, the views were marvellous.

After Stetind, I was naïvely concerned that the Lofoten Islands might be an anticlimax, but I needn't have worried. The peaks are completely different from those of the Tysfjord area but are no less spectacular. We chose to visit Austvågøy, and just the crossing from Narvik to Svolvaer is a memorable experience. The ferry has been replaced by a jet-boat which weaves between the rocky islands at 30 knots. We made the three-hour trip on a fine evening, and the fantastic beauty of the mountains and fiords in the low sun was one of the highlights of our holiday.

From Svolvaer we travelled north to camp in a secluded spot at the head of Ostpollen Fiord. We were saddened to find a lot of rubbish lying around close to our camp-site, especially when we discovered that it was obviously British and must have been left by a large group.

The peaks in Lofoten are extremely steep. What looks at a distance like grass is really a tangle of birch scrub, bilberry and ferns hiding ankle-breaking scree. Because of the steepness and the difficult vegetation the lower slopes take an incredible effort to climb. The rock above looks superb from a distance, but in fact it is covered in lichen which can make even simple moves feel very insecure. The extreme steepness means that particular care is necessary whilst scrambling, especially in places where the rocks are only held together by moss. The rock peaks of Austvågøy have been likened to the Chamonix Aiguilles, but I was more reminded of a bigger, steeper and rockier version of the Cuillins. The detailed topography of most of the peaks is



88. John Evans climbing on Huglehornet. (p 197)

extremely complex, and it would take weeks if not years to become familiar with the area.

Having made these excuses, I have to admit that our own climbing was not notably successful. On the first day we failed to pass a gendarme on the N ridge of Rorhoptinden. Later we saw that the whole section of ridge could have been avoided. Next we tried to climb Geitgaljartind, a most impressive rock peak, by a new route from the south-east. After a nerve-racking day we ended up on top of a pinnacle with a huge drop between us and the final peak. Norman Collie's pronouncement that 'these precipices are entirely unclimbable' was quite true – for us at least.

On the final day, desperate to reach a summit, we climbed Geitgaljartind by the NE ridge, the route taken by the first ascensionists, Collie, Hastings, Priestman and Woolley, in 1901. The summit views were as magnificent as any I have seen.

Before leaving Lofoten we climbed 'The Goat', a rock pinnacle situated, it seemed vertically, above the Svolvaer town cemetery. Climbing on clean rock without a rucksack made a pleasant change. The top consists of two horns; the lower horn is reached by an airy jump through space from the upper horn. I was never keen on jumping, and the look on my face after I had successfully made the leap was enough to make John burst out in hysterical laughter!

We were lucky to have almost perfect weather and very few mosquitoes throughout our two-week period in Arctic Norway. It was a great pleasure to sit outside the tent by a camp-fire watching the sunset each evening. On our final night in Lofoten the cloud-base came right down and it started to rain, just to show us what might have been, but by then we were already on the boat, starting our long journey home.

Fact Sheet

Travel There are many alternatives. We went by Apex return to Stockholm and train to Narvik. An obvious, but longer, option is to travel via Bodø and coastal steamer to Narvik. A more expensive option is to fly to Narvik. The boat between Narvik and Svolvaer goes daily.

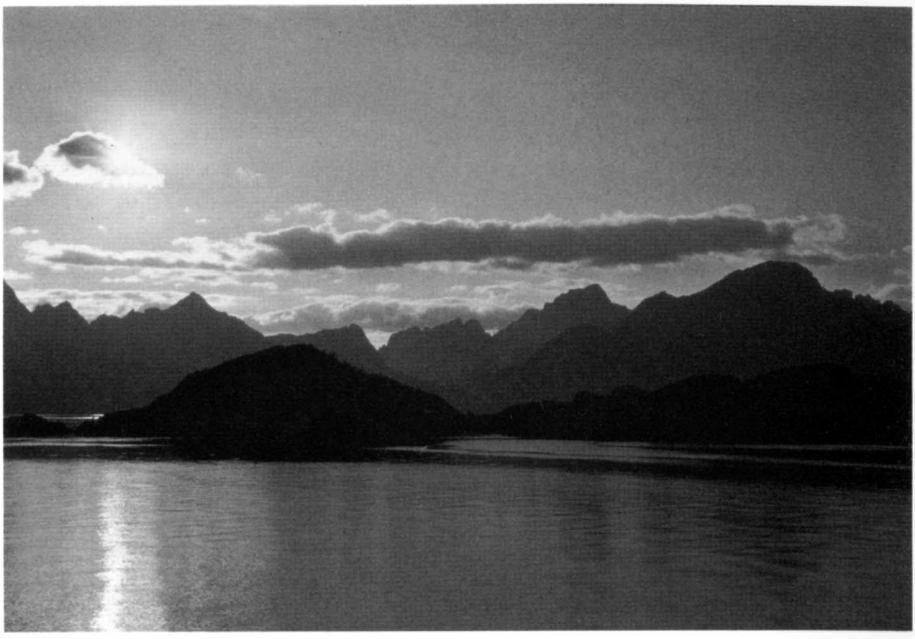
Both Narvik and Svolvaer have tourist information offices. Try to avoid the official camp-site in Narvik: it has no grass! The youth hostel offers very good value B & B, but gets full at peak holiday periods.

Weather There is 24-hour daylight from mid-May to mid-July. Out of the sun, the air temperature is quite cold and warm clothing is necessary. Insect repellent can be necessary on warm windless evenings, and a tent with a mosquito net is a great bonus.

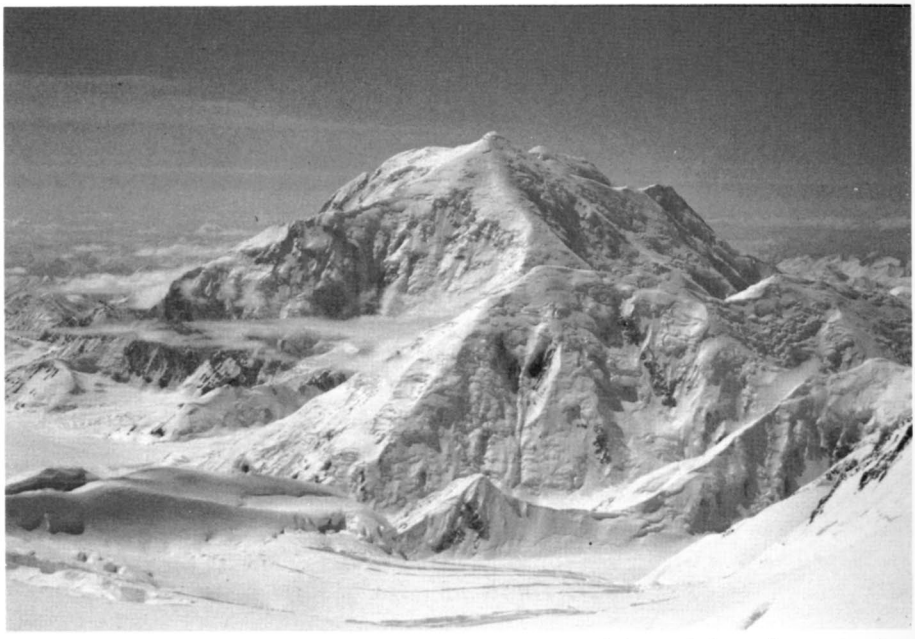
Maps

Joint Operations Graphic	1:250,000 SERIES	34–10 (Svolvaer) 34–11 (Narvik)
Army Map Services M711	1:50,000 series	1331–111 (Tysfjord) 1131–1 (Oddvaer)

(Available at good UK map shops and in Narvik.)



89. *The Lofoten Islands from the sea.* (p 197)



90. *Mt Foraker seen from the NE. Mt Crosson and the Kahiltna glacier in the foreground.* (p 201)

REFERENCES

Rock Climbs in Norway. Norway Travel Association, 1953.
T Weir, *Camps and Climbs in Arctic Norway*. Cassel, 1953.
Royal Navy & Royal Marines Mountaineering Club Nordland Expedition, 1978.
'Huglehornet.' *Climber and Rambler*, September 1978.
J Norman Collie, 'Lofoten.' *AJ22*, 3–15, 1905.
Dick Turnbull, 'Northern Norway – a personal view.' *AJ87*, 46–53, 1982.