A Greenland Adventure

CHRIS BONINGTON

(*Plates 17–19*)

The sea was grey-black, flecked with the white of breaking waves that merged on the horizon into a grey, cloud-filled sky. It was our third day out in the Atlantic and I wondered just what I had let myself in for. It was a strange unfamiliar environment: six of us crammed into this tiny 32ft ketch, without privacy, without the space to escape. To think I could have been climbing in the Tien Shan in Russia rather than being tossed around in this small boat. I would never learn which rope to pull when putting up the sails or even master the helm.

'Come on Bonington, stop feeling sorry for yourself,' I told myself and volunteered to cook supper. At least I knew how to make a good spaghetti bolognese. I dug out some onions and green peppers and passed them up onto the deck for someone to chop. At this point Robin announced 'happy hour' and asked for drink orders. Soon, with a beaker of vodka and tonic in my hand, the bolognese sauce hissing in the pressure cooker and the spaghetti boiling, my malaise vanished as I warmed to this little group with whom I'd been thrown in such close proximity, as the result of a single phone call some nine months earlier.

I was in New Zealand at the time, had rung home and my wife, Wendy, told me that Robin Knox-Johnston had just phoned to ask whether I was interested in sailing to Greenland with him and then taking him up a climb. We had done something similar some ten years ago, when we had sailed from Oban to Skye and I had taken him up onto the main Cuillin Ridge. Greenland, of course, was on an altogether larger scale. But I was immediately intrigued; it was different; there seemed to be an element of fundamental adventure in sailing a small boat from Britain all the way to Greenland and then tackling an unclimbed peak. It would be very much in the footsteps of Tilman who, I quickly discovered, had lost a boat in the ice off the E coast of Greenland.

And so I abandoned my plans to go climbing in the Tien Shan and started researching a suitable objective, making a start with back numbers of the *Alpine Journal* and the *American Alpine Journal*, and then phoning up the people who had submitted the notes. It was through this process that I stumbled upon Jim Lowther, a climber living locally, near Penrith, who had fallen in love with Greenland. It was Jim who recommended our objective, a mountain called the Cathedral (2660m), a few degrees north of the Arctic circle off a deep-cut fjord called Kangerdlugssuaq. Only two expeditions had been in the area before, the first in 1932 when the geologist and Everest climber L R Wager explored the Frederiksborg glacier for the first time, discovering at its head a dramatic range of granite mountains, which he named the Lemon mountains. The only other visit was in 1975, when Stan Woolley, another Greenland veteran, walked up

the Frederiksborg glacier, climbed Mitivagkat, an elegant outlying peak, and made a thorough photographic coverage of the area.

It became increasingly obvious that the climbing was only one of the challenges. We first had to penetrate the ice floes that usually guard the coast of East Greenland; we would then have to find our way through the ice-packed Kangerdlugssuaq and Watkins Fjord to make the closest possible landfall; and, after that, travel some 13km up glaciers to the foot of the mountain. It seemed to make good sense to have someone in the team who had experience of Greenland and since Jim Lowther had identified our objective, lived locally and knew his Greenland, I invited him to join us.

Robin also wanted to strengthen the team with a two-man crew of experienced sailors both to help with the sailing across the Atlantic and then to look after the boat in Greenland whilst he was climbing. On the leg from Whitehaven to Reykjavik we were joined by John Dunn of the BBC Radio 2 John Dunn Show, and for the trip into Greenland by a two-man camera crew who were to make a film of our adventures for television.

And so there we were in mid-July slowly sailing across the North Atlantic. The *Suhaili*, the yacht in which Robin had been the first man to sail single-handed round the world non-stop, was a mixture of rugged traditional and high-tec, and yet had a homely, practical quality that is very much part of Robin's character. It was packed not only with provisions for the voyage, but also with five sledges, five sets of skis, climbing and film gear and all the other paraphernalia for a climbing expedition. There was hardly an inch of unfilled space.

It took us ten days to cross the North Atlantic and reach Reykjavik and in that period I became more attuned to the rhythm of being at sea and even began to enjoy it. At the helm, I could keep a consistent course, and I began to sense the feel of the wind across the sails and even revelled in being in control when the seas were running at Force 8, with big angry breakers chasing the boat, at times giving a sense of surfing on their crests, and the white gleam of spray sparkling out of the dark. I came to love the dawn watch with the sky slowly lightening, wild cloudscapes and the sun, a red orb, creeping through the layered clouds.

We had also become a close team, knowing and tolerating each other's foibles. Perry Crickmere, an ex-Merchant Navy officer, was my watch mate. Quiet, diffident and yet with a twinkling sense of humour and an unflappable quality, he taught me a great deal in the long hours of the night watches. James Burdett was the third member of the crew. At 21, the youngest member of the team, he was a law student but a keen sailor from a sailing family. He was very laid back yet had a sharp, though kindly sense of humour.

After two welcome days in Reykjavik we were ready for the final and critical stage of the voyage across the Denmark Strait. The Danish authorities had initially refused us permission to land on Greenland because they did not consider the *Suhaili* iceworthy. Robin had fired a few broadsides and fortunately the Danes had relented. In three windless days we motored north and west towards Kangerdlugssuaq, the nights getting ever shorter until the sun barely vanished below the northern horizon before climbing once again. The first iceberg was sighted, then more great ice ships and floating islands, and a



17. Greenland: Robin Knox-Johnston (foreground) and Jim Lowther pulling pulks up Sidegletscher. Unnamed, unclimbed peaks in the background. (*Chris Bonington*) (p27)



18. Robin Knox-Johnston and Chris Bonington with the Cathedral, 2660m, in the background. Their route went up the left ice gully to the col and then followed the skyline. (*Chris Bonington*) (p27)

distant jagged coastline of black serrated peaks. As we came closer to the coast, we climbed a rope ladder hung from the top spreader of the mainmast, so that we could pick a route through the clustered bergs and growlers that guarded the approach to Kangerdlugssuaq. It was one of the most exciting approaches I have ever made to a mountain region. The feeling of emptiness, the lack of people, the clarity of atmosphere, the knowledge that very few of the jagged peaks we could see had ever been climbed or even explored, all contributed to this feeling.

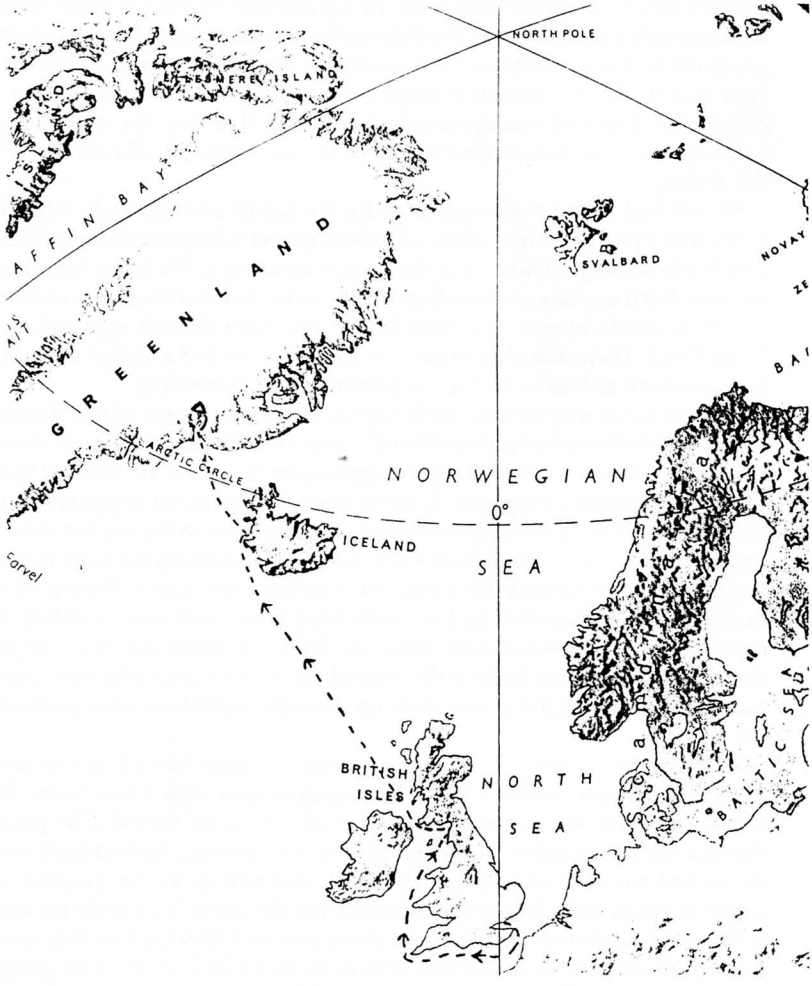
We still had to find a safe anchorage for the *Suhaili* and then make a landfall in Watkins Fjord at the foot of the subsidiary glacier (Sidegletscher) which leads into Frederiksborg Gletcher and the Lemon mountains. We knew from aerial pictures that it was always densely packed with ice and that if we were unable to sail in we would have a very much longer and more difficult approach from Mikis Fjord. There was also a sense of urgency for we had a limited amount of time, since we all had to be back in Britain by mid-September.

We nosed our way into the little bay on the south-eastern side of Kraemer Island, which Robin had picked from the map as being safe anchorage. Having checked it out we set sail up Kangerdlugssuaq for the mouth of Watkins Fjord. The icebergs became progressively more dense, some the size of gigantic ocean liners, others little more than rounded boulders bobbing in the sea, but even the smallest posed a threat to *Suhaili*'s teak hull. With Robin up the main mast on the top spreader conning the boat, Perry at the helm, James Burdett at the throttle, and Jim Lowther and me with boat hooks and oars prodding and pushing the ice growlers away from the hull, we nosed our way forward through ever narrower leads in the massed ice. It was a painfully slow, nerve-racking progress. Had the wind built up we could easily have been crushed in the ice.

At last, at 10.30 on the evening of 3 August, we crept into a little bay to the side of our glacier. It was a bleak but beautiful spot with a low rocky shelf running into the sea and craggy peaks of about 800m beyond. The glacier, shielded by the moraine, beckoned us into the interior. Against high odds, Robin had got us to our chosen landfall. It was now up to Jim Lowther and myself to get us to the foot of the mountain and then up it. That night Jim and I, with our two-man film crew, slept on shore and the following morning started sorting out the gear we would take with us to the Cathedral. We were going to use sledges, or 'pulks' as they are known. The pulk is made from plastic or fibreglass, is hauled individually with a rigid frame hinged onto the sledge itself. I was amazed and slightly incredulous to be assured that we could each haul up to 130 kilos by this means. We had food and fuel for 21 days, climbing equipment and film gear.

But we couldn't start hauling straight away – even at sea-level there were patches of snow, but not enough for sledging. We were going to have to relay our loads up onto the glacier to a point where we could start hauling. That morning the four of us got our under-used muscles going, while Robin accompanied Perry and James in the *Suhaili*, back to the anchorage. He planned to use a small boat to return through the ice to our landfall.

Carrying a six-foot-long pulk, Nordic skis and some 20 kilos of gear over



Our route from the UK to Cathedral Peak, 2660m


Narren
Courtauld Gletscher
Læbæltet
Gaffelen
Mitivagkat
FREDERIKSBORG GLETSCHER
Courtauld Fjord
Mejslen
KANGERDLUGSSUAQ
Kartografvig
Nordre Syenitgletscher
Mudderbugt
Sydegletscher
Spækpynten
Watkins Fjord
(Torssukátak)
Søndre Syenitgletscher
Geologvig
Amdrup Fjord
(Agterteq)
Kraemer
Ultental Sund
Gabbrofjeld
Bagnæsset
Jagtlejren
Kvadderbugt
Forbindelsesgl.
Reisehuse
Bredretoppen
Admiraltinden
Amdrups Pynt
Kobbernuhatak
Hammer
Skillenuhatak
Mikis Fjord
Sortskær
Skærgårdshalvøen
Hængefjeld
Kap Hammer
Kap Deichmann

rough terrain is hard work, but none the less I revelled in being on land in a familiar environment once again. It was a joy just stumping along, panting, shoulders aching, but with a sense of freedom, feeling the texture of the ground underfoot, stimulated by an ever-changing view both of the peaks in the distance and the detail of rock and gravel close to. There was a surprising amount of flora – a fragile creeper-like plant that clung to sheltered hollows, the Arctic willow, a tree that never grows higher than five inches above the ground, multi-hued mosses and little purple saxifrage to delight the eye.

It took us just over an hour to reach a point on the glacier where it had become sufficiently smooth to start sledging. We dumped the loads and wandered back to the shore to be rejoined that evening by Robin, transported in the small boat by Perry and James. Our little shore team was now complete. The following day we managed two ferries and settled into our camp on the glacier about two miles above its snout in Watkins Fjord. We now had a good long rest for we planned to go onto night shift, travelling through the twilight of the August night, when the snow would be firmer and the snow bridges safer. It gave us time to savour the peaks around us. Not one of them had been climbed but they presented a climber's paradise; walls and buttresses of well-weathered granite between 650m and 1000m high, which would have given routes of every standard of difficulty. I could happily have stayed in Sidegletscher for the fortnight just bagging rock routes.

We set out on our journey at about 11pm on 6 August. I was immediately amazed at how easy it was to haul about 100 kilos of gear over the bare rough ice. After a couple of hours, at a bend in the glacier, we reached the snow and were able to put on skis which made it even easier – that is, if you knew how to ski! Robin had last been skiing some 20 years earlier on his honeymoon. He was now confronted, not only with the challenge of learning how to cross-country ski, but with having to haul a heavy pulk at the same time.

That night we reached a point just short of the col at the head of Sidegletscher and the following night had a short run down to the edge of the Frederiksborg which curved like a gigantic motorway up towards the ice cap. At first glance it seemed an easy run, but in Greenland glaciers are very different from those of the Himalaya. Not only are they bigger but there is also more surface water flowing down them. These fast-flowing glacier streams present formidable barriers and we were constantly forced off route as we followed their serpentine course to a point where they could be crossed. This meant making a frightening leap with pulk in tow threatening to haul you back into the icy waters. In the middle of the glacier was a morass of watery slush, but just beyond this point we were rewarded with our first glimpse of our objective, a towering wedge-shaped peak that dominated everything around it. It was similar to the picture we had been given by Stan Woolley and surely must be the Cathedral.

Back at the camp we took a closer look at the map and slowly the realisation came that the mountain we, and for that matter Stan Woolley, had perceived to be the Cathedral, was another nameless peak and that the Cathedral was a big chunky rock peak sitting between two glacier forks at the end of the valley. The Cathedral of the map was certainly a lot easier to reach. It was also the highest point of the range, provided, of course, the map was accurate. We decided to go



19. The second attempt: Chris Bonington soloing on the upper part of the Cathedral. (*Jim Lowther*) (p27)

for it and the following night hauled our pulks to the rocky cirque immediately below our objective.

There seemed to be a reasonable route, up a broad ice gully to a col and then up the skyline ridge over broken rocks to the summit. We spent the rest of the day preparing for the climb and giving Robin the training we had omitted to carry out whilst we were back in Britain. A quick session at the foot of an ice gully with a few exercises in self-arrest, front-pointing and abseiling had to suffice. Robin, slightly bemused, went along with it all.

Then, at 6am on 11 August, we started the climb. I pitched it, running out the full length of the rope and then bringing Robin up while Jim remained unroped, climbing alongside Robin, advising him on the more subtle aspects of ice climbing. It was 12 pitches to the top of the couloir and the sun reached us when we were nearly up, dislodging the odd stone that came bounding down from the rocks above. Robin, for a complete beginner, did amazingly well. We reached the col at around 9am, stripped off some clothes, left axes and crampons behind and started up the rock ridge. At first it was quite straightforward, over broken rocks and scree. I had Robin on a short rope and we were climbing together, while Jim ranged on ahead, seeking out the best line. The rock was good and there was the occasional little step that made me think and Robin struggle. But progress was slow and we had a long way to go before reaching the top. I couldn't help worrying about our situation. Should the weather break or the climbing get very much harder, it could get serious. This was no ground for a complete beginner, even though Robin made up for lack of experience with a supreme steadiness and cheerfulness.

At 4pm we reached a shoulder just below a large pinnacle we had picked out from the bottom. We had two choices – go over it, hoping there was an easy way down the other side, or abseil into the gully and climb that to the col behind the pinnacle, but we couldn't see into it and if it was icy we would have problems without any crampons. There was no real choice. We would have to go over the top.

It was steeper and more awkward than anything so far. I led one pitch up a nasty off-width crack, thrutching and struggling, my rucksack getting in the way, and Jim led the next up a steep corner that was obviously hard. When Robin came to second it, he was painfully aware of the giddy drop into the gully. Jim patiently talked him up it, while I had time to review the situation and the route. I couldn't help wondering if it would have been easier to carry on up a scoop just behind me. Finally, bored and getting cold, I unroped and scrambled up to discover that we had missed an easy line. In a few minutes I was on top of the pinnacle, peering down at Jim below me, still bringing Robin up.

The pinnacle was almost a minor peak in itself, but a good 200m below the summit with what looked like a sheer drop of around 100m down to the col leading to the main peak. It was 6pm; we had been on the go for over 12 hours, with a long way to go to the top. I turned to Jim: 'You know, I'm beginning to think we're getting a bit out of our depth. This is no place for a beginner.' 'I've been thinking that for the last two hours,' was his reply. I turned to Robin: 'I'm sorry mate, it just isn't on. It would take us another eight hours at least to get to the top, quite apart from getting back down. I don't like the look of the weather either. I really think it's time to start down.'

A grey skim of clouds had spread over the sky and there were a few snowflakes in the air. Even though he desperately wanted to get to the top, had placed his trust totally in us, he equally accepted the decision. We flew his vice admiral's pennant on what we called Robin's Peak, and then started the long way down. It was even slower than going up, abseiling down the steeper section, down climbing the rest. We reached the col at 2am, just as the light dimmed to a dark gloom. We put Robin in the middle of the rope and climbed down the ice, alternating the leads.

It was 6am, just over 24 hours after we had started, when we got back to the tents. We were now very short of time, for we were due back on the coast in only six days but we wanted to make a second attempt. We decided, therefore, that while Robin and the film crew started back for the coast, we should set out again for the summit.

We started at 4am on 15 August. I was still feeling tired from our first effort, but fatigue dropped away as we front-pointed up the gully. Climbing solo was not only faster but also less stressful – no one else to worry about and it was possible to build up a steady rhythm. By 7pm we were on the shoulder just below the pinnacle, close to our previous high point. This time we abseiled down into the gully, first down a slope of snow-covered ice, then a short scrambly traverse, until it was possible to reach the gully's bed by another short abseil. I couldn't help worrying about the return, for the walls of the gully were steep, the cracks and grooves gummed with ice. You could only see the top of the gully once you had committed yourself to it. It reared up into a rocky headwall – not the easy run-out I had hoped for.

I edged my way up the gully. There was ice at first but then it steepened and turned to a basalt dyke of smooth, crackless rock with few places to place any protection. I reached a broken pinnacle, belayed and brought up Jim. The next pitch looked harder, the dyke ending in a bulging smear of ice. I crept my way up fearfully. It was like a Grade V Scottish gully, but I was uncomfortably aware of how vulnerable we were. The others had left and we were on our own. Even a minor injury would have been serious.

I had reached the ice bulge, which pushed me out of balance; there were no cracks for rock pitons, and all the holds were sloping. I was stuck; Jim shouted 'Can't you turn round and use the ice?' I hadn't thought of that. I eased myself round. I was even more out of balance but got a placement with my ice-tool. I could put in an ice screw. Once it was in I felt more secure, kicked in the front points of my crampon, bridged out on the holds and heaved myself up. A few more feet and I was on the little col between the pinnacle and the summit mass. It had taken four hours and we were still lower than the top of the shoulder from which we had abseiled.

A groove led up behind us. It didn't look too difficult and we took off the rope. A couple of hundred feet of good progress took us onto a wide talus slope which led to the next barrier – a steep wall broken by overhanging, ice-filled chimneys. We tried to work our way round but there was no easy way. Some steep climbing round a down-hanging flake of crumbling granite seemed the easiest option. I hammered in a rock peg and straddled out onto a sloping ledge. The rock crumbled and I very nearly came off. A few more feet of hard climbing

– it was around hard VS, but in double boots with rucksack on my back – and I was up. Another boulder-strewn slope, and then what surely must be the final rampart. I got half-way up a steep groove, couldn't see if it led anywhere, and so asked Jim to take off his belay and scramble out to the end of the arête to where he might be able to see all the way to the top. Perched on a little pinnacle, he called out 'Do you want the good news or the bad news?' I chose the good. 'You can get up where you're going, but I'm afraid it doesn't lead to the top – there are some more pinnacles to go.'

I continued climbing, brushing fresh snow from the holds until I was able to pull out over a big cap stone. I was just below the top, brought Jim up and motioned for him to go on round the corner to the top. When I joined him, I saw what he meant. We were on top of one of the pinnacles of the summit mass, but there was a slightly higher one beyond, another beyond that and the highest of all some 100m away. Once again there was a skim of high grey cloud, augur for a change in the weather. It was 6pm and already becoming chilly. We had been on the go without rest for 14 hours. 'I think we should call it a day,' said Jim.

I looked at that elusive pinnacle some 20m higher than we were. We could get there all right, but it would be a slow, time-consuming business. We had focused all our energy, all our determination to reach this point and although we had half expected that this would not be the summit, it was still difficult to accept. It was a long, long way down and we still had to climb up out of the gully. 'OK, I think you're right. Let's go down.'

Long abseils, carefully placed abseil points, a struggle up the ice-gummed walls of the gully and then front-pointing in steep hard flaky ice to the crest of the shoulder below the big pinnacle. It was by now 1am in the gloom of the Arctic night and too dark to pick our way easily down the rocks. We stopped and shivered for a couple of hours. I became hypothermic, teeth chattering uncontrollably, when at last we started moving again. We were now on familiar ground, with the abseil points from our previous attempt in place, and we made fast progress. Then down the long ice gully, rope-length after rope-length, until at last we were at the bottom. We stumbled to the tent and rolled into sleeping-bags. We had been on the go 28 hours.

After 12 hours' sleep it was time to pack up; but now, going down hill, moving swiftly on our skis, it was a delight. We took just two days to reach the coast, the latter part drenched in a steady downpour of rain, and we found the dump of food left by the others. A wait of a few hours snuggled in damp sleeping-bags and the *Suhaili* arrived, coaxed by Robin through ice even denser than on our arrival. It had taken him 12 hours to cover a distance of about four miles. We were bundled into the boat, loaded the pulks and gear onto the deck and crawled into bunks to sleep while Robin and the crew edged their way back through the ice.

The big difference between our adventure and a conventional modern expedition which flies into Greenland, was that we still had a long way to go home. It was to take us four weeks to get back to the Thames, after being caught by a series of storms off Iceland that drove us back on four separate occasions into little fishing ports. We had some of the tensest and perhaps most dangerous moments of the entire expedition during this period. At last a window in the

weather opened and we had a fast, easy passage from the SE tip of Iceland, through the Pentland Firth and down the North Sea. It was on 17 September, eight weeks after leaving Whitehaven, that we at last sailed into St Katharine's Haven, the *Suhaili*'s home berth, to receive a wonderfully warm welcome from friends and relatives.

Although we hadn't quite made it to the top of the Cathedral, we had achieved a great deal, getting through the ice of Kangerdlugssuaq and Watkins Fjord, thanks to Robin's superb seamanship, travelling into the mountains and then very nearly reaching the top in a very tight time schedule. Most important of all, we had not only enjoyed ourselves, but in the entire course of the expedition there hadn't been a single angry word. It had certainly been a great adventure in the fullest sense.

Summary: Between July and September 1991, Chris Bonington and Robin Knox-Johnston, with Jim Lowther, a two-man crew Perry Crickmere and James Burdett, and a two-man film unit, sailed in *Suhaili* to East Greenland, where they negotiated the ice of Kangerdlugssuaq and Watkins Fjord before reaching landfall, continuing on skis and hauling pulks. Two attempts were made on Cathedral Peak (2660m). First, Bonington, Knox-Johnston and Lowther reached 'Robin's Peak', a pinnacle about 200m below the summit. In a second attempt, Bonington and Lowther ran out of time some 100m from the summit.