
JIM GREGSON

Probing the Pourquoi-Pas

Karabiner Mountaineering Club Greenland Expedition 1994

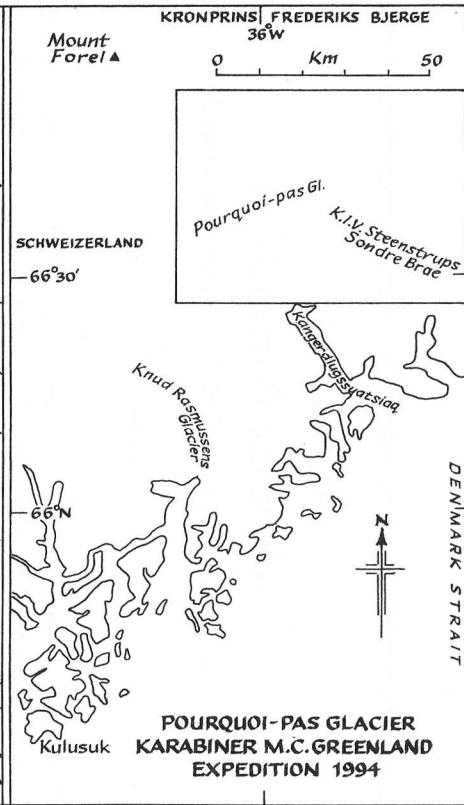
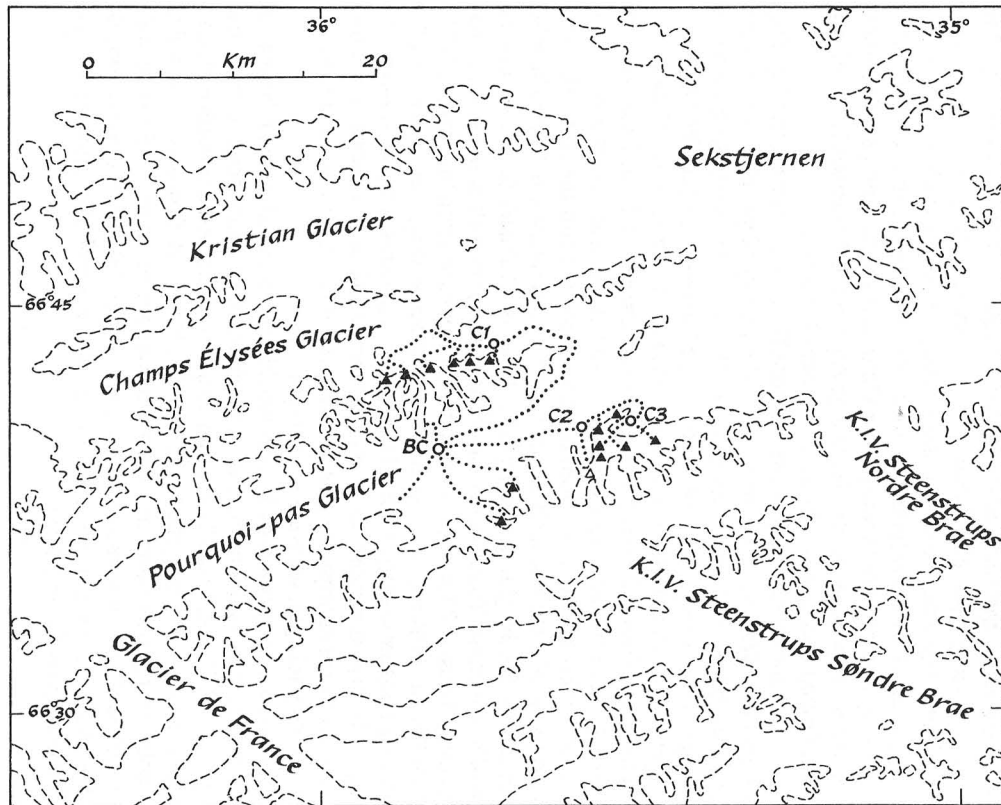
(Plates 72, 73)

Ideas for a return visit to Greenland were already in mind as I travelled home from my first trip to this exquisite Arctic playground. As my local club, the Manchester-based Karabiner Mountaineering Club, would reach its 50th year during 1994, it seemed fitting that a more unusual form of celebration of this anniversary should be undertaken – hence for a group of us a Greenland expedition. Moreover, Greenland would be especially appropriate because John Hunt, our Patron and past President, had led an expedition to the Staunings Alps in NE Greenland in 1960 and had climbed and named a peak in honour of the club.

Approximately mid-way between Mont Forel and Lake Fjord (Tugtilik), where Gino Watkins was lost in 1932, the Pourquoi-pas glacier flows east and west between Sekstjernen and the Glacier de France in latitude 66°N. Intrigued by its querying name we planned to base our expedition there.

Our eight-person team, six men and two women, were flown from Iceland and into the Pourquoi-pas using a chartered Twin Otter aircraft. This charter was the major expense of the expedition, but the very spectacular flights into and out from the glacier were worth the cost. The little aeroplane was stuffed with all our gear plus ourselves before skimming across the fjords, glaciers and peaks north of Kulusuk island on Greenland's east coast. Touch-down on the ice was gentler than many a runway landing. Thus on 23 July 1994 we arrived at our base camp location, 66°40'N, 35°49'W (as indicated on the aircraft GPS apparatus), just 30 hours after leaving Heathrow airport. Our flight out was scheduled for 15 August, giving us 22 days to explore the area on skis and climb such peaks as we could. After a day spent unpacking and sorting our equipment and food from the freighted packages, we were keen to get started.

In the very early hours of 25 July we skied to the south side of the glacier for a couple of hours to attempt a double-topped snow peak to open our account. This went readily enough by an ice slope and a scramble along a rocky crest to an untouched summit of c1500m. A first ascent for a first climb was a good beginning. From this vantage point we tried to orientate ourselves. The maps we had, at a scale of 1:250 000, showed some remarkable inaccuracies and we relied more on the aerial photographs we had obtained from Copenhagen.



There were many attractive mountains all around us, and we laid plans to visit some of them by using additional camps. Accordingly, we loaded our pulks with supplies for eight days, storing the rest in a depot to leave behind. In the evening we pulled out of base, towing the pulks eastwards up the Pourquoi-pas *en route* for the next, higher-level glacier paralleling it to the north. From this time onwards we intended to adopt a 'night-for day' routine, skiing and climbing in the colder night-time hours and using the warmth of the days for cooking, eating and sleeping. There is, of course, no danger of benightment beyond the Arctic Circle at this time of the year. We were able to dispense with ropes for travel on the wide main glaciers throughout the period of the expedition, as the mostly level surfaces were generously snow-covered, so we avoided the hassles involved in trying to ski at a synchronised pace.

By midnight on this first journey we had pulled from the Pourquoi-pas over a broad saddle and headed down in the direction of Sekstjernen, a huge glacier basin lying to the east. In another 30 minutes we turned the toe of the last mountain ridge separating us from the steeper, higher glacier where we intended to place our camp. By 3am we decided that we had come far enough and on 27 July we set up our second camp ringed by inviting mountains. This site, at c1700m, was towards the southern side of a glacier rising to a watershed giving over to the Champs Elysées glacier.

In the following nights and days, we made climbs on seven more peaks and tops, all of them apparently first ascents. These varied in altitude between 2000m and 2200m, and were climbed by a mixture of ridge and face routes offering typical Alpine terrain. The best looking of these peaks lay directly above our camp, so we did not need to ski to it. During the ascent, by its fine NE ridge, we were temporarily held up by a broken crampon which was repaired with a length of prusik cord to enable a cold-footed continuation by its owner.

On 31 July five of us climbed one of the peaks by two different routes, one a ridge and the other an ice face. At the same time, the other three members made an exploratory ski tour across the glacier to its northern edge to view down onto the Kristian glacier. From there they skied south-west, then south for some kilometres, climbing two snow summits as firsts, before returning to camp while the rest of us descended our mountain. All these summits lay on the crest line overlooking the Pourquoi-pas to the south. They all gave extensive views, from Schweizerland in the west, to Mont Forel and the ice cap in the north-west, then along other ranges running across the northern skyline to Sekstjernen with glimpses beyond into the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge. South and east, past the Pourquoi-pas glacier, stretched the KIV Steenstrup Braeer systems feeding out into the iceberg-studded Denmark Strait.

We had hoped to complete this phase of the expedition by making a traverse of the high snow arêtes of P.2300 on the opposite edge of the glacier. However, the ski-touring party reported a major sérac dislocation in the

far end of the ridge, invisible from our camp, which would be a great obstacle to a possible descent. Perhaps we could try an out-and-return attempt? In the event, on the night in question the weather signs did not look promising, with heavy grey cloud piling up in the southern and western skies. We had had a very good opening week and had run down our rations of food, so we opted to return to base to re-stock and rest.

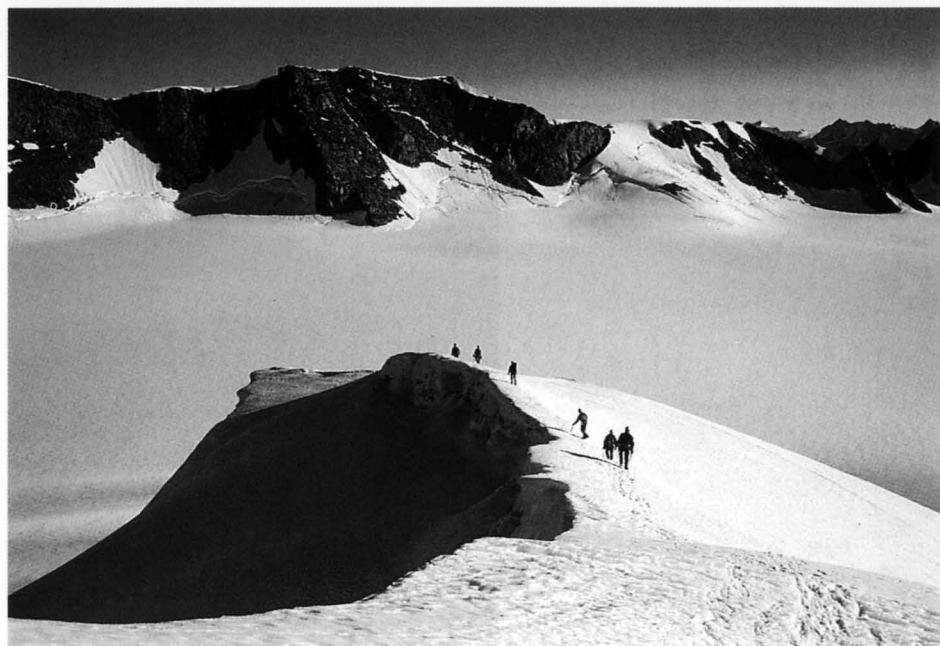
Very early on 1st August we skied away downhill to the east and by 3.30am had located the marker pole left on our supply depot down on the Pourquoipas. We re-set our camp and rested while talking over our future plans. The pulks were reloaded for an intended move in the pre-dawn hours of 2 August. At 1am the sky was leaden and down to the west the mountains were swathed in thick cloud. By 3am snow began to fall and we decided to stay put: this was just as well as the storm intensified. It snowed or rained for the whole of 2 and 3 August, and half 4 August, confining us to our tents and sleeping-bags. Our decision to move back to base had been vindicated, allowing us access to food and fuel.

The long depressing hours were spent asleep or reading, but we longed for a return to activity. In the afternoon of the 4th, the cloud broke up and the sun reappeared. The camp was visited by a group of strikingly white Ivory Gulls. Everyone was busy, drying damp belongings and gathering together what we needed for further climbing.

Our earlier climbs had shown us a group of impressive higher mountains at the eastern end of the Pourquoipas. Two of them in particular looked very appealing objectives, the higher being a great fin of ice and rock over a high col and the other a fine white pyramid. We had thought to circumnavigate this massif, climbing where we could. Close study of the aerial photographs showed some potentially time-consuming crevassed zones on our proposed route, so we chose instead to make a return journey that would involve two new camps.

We added to our loads supplies to last for 12 days. In the evening of 4 August we stepped into our ski-bindings and hauled the pulks towards a distant nunatak projecting from the ice of the upper glacier. By midnight we had selected a camp site in the mouth of a side bay of the glacier and quickly had all the tents up.

Frustrated by the enforced idleness of the storm, two of us set off almost immediately to climb the nearest peak. This took about 2½ hours via a ridge of moss-decked rocks, then steepening ice slopes, leading to a snow dome. We followed a corniced edge to the highest point. Just beyond, on a rock shelf, sat a small cairn. On investigation, the cairn contained an aluminium canister holding a note left by the 'Schweizer Grønland Expedition 1966', dated 9 August 1966, with two names. We added a note of our own before replacing the canister inside the cairn. At 3.30am the sun rose as a bright red disc from behind the high mountains at the far edge of Sekstjernen, restoring colour to the landscape.



72. Karabiner MC Greenland Expedition 1994. Descending from P. 2100m (Peak 3) after making the first ascent. (*Jim Gregson*) (p183)



73. Looking NW over the Pourquoi-pas glacier. First ascents of six summits along the ridge beyond the glacier were made by KMC team members. (*Jim Gregson*) (p183)

From the summit of 'Schneekuppe', so dubbed by the Swiss, we were able to scout access routes to the two high peaks we hoped to ascend. The approach to them would involve glacier complications and detours of which the map made no hint. We also spied a suitable area in which to site our next camp.

The following night and morning, the whole group of eight were thwarted in an attempt on a big snowy mountain two kilometres south of the camp. The impasse lay in the form of a very deep and wide crevasse cutting the slope for hundreds of metres with no possibility of forcing a crossing. We traversed the mountain flank for a half-kilometre or more, looking for alternative access, but conditions forced us to give it best. We descended, with some disappointment. Later in the day the weather dealt us another blow with rain out of the west. This rain became snow driven by strong wind which lasted through 6 August and on into the morning of the 7th – not the most conducive situation for team morale.

When the snow abated, the sun reasserted itself, producing a beautiful bow in the airborne ice crystals as it burned through the ground-mist. We held a 'conference', with some frank but amiable exchange of views. The outcome was a decision to move to a new camp from where the more experienced team members would attempt the two higher peaks, while others would seek less taxing objectives.

In beautiful evening light we hauled the pulks along the glacier, below a subsidiary ridge of small tops and icefalls, to a point some kilometres further east where we turned uphill to go back west onto the higher glacier shelf where we needed our camp. Just after midnight, as 8 August ushered itself in, we set up the tents at c1520m and slept soundly. This camp was blessed with a sweeping outlook across the whole of the huge Sekstjernen basin and further onto the fringes of the inland ice. Unfortunately, and significantly, it also caught the wind.

Cruelly, rain fell from 7pm onwards and stopped us from setting out. During 9 August the rain continued until a fall in temperature changed it to snow which, after 24 hours, lay as a deep cloak of powder. It was getting difficult to sustain our night-for-day regime.

On 10 August the Gregsons rose at 6am, tempted by the prospect of a good ski run in the now sunlit powder, and skinned uphill to find a suitable slope. We cut some passable linked telemark turns into the pristine snow, but a steeper gradient would have helped. To allow the snow to settle we chose to make a climb on one of the small triangular rock peaks on the nearby subsidiary ridge. Within a couple of hours six of us had climbed loose ledges onto a ramp line crossing the S face of the closest mountain and crowded onto its summit. It was another first ascent and we enjoyed our resumption of activity.

The next day we set out to try to climb the highest peak. Six of us were to form two ropes of three, while Alan Jones and Graham Harkness went

off as an independent pair to look at another two summits further west. We wished them well, cautioning them to be wary of crevasses after the recent snowfall. In the course of the morning they had the satisfaction of making two first ascents, one of them a fine promontory over a drop to the Steenstrup Braeer [glaciers].

Meanwhile, in very cold conditions causing us to wear jackets and extra gloves, the remaining six of us were engaged in tackling the high fin of our chosen mountain. From the upper col, which took two hours to reach, this fin rose in a steep ice slope cut by an obvious crevasse, giving onto a ridge punctuated by projecting rocks. Three rope lengths on the 50° ice got us to the ridge where we used rock belay points for two pitches to the topmost blocks at c2400m, the highest summit in the vicinity. On a jutting ledge there stood a cairn. Nevertheless we had made a good climb and were rewarded with views from ocean to ice cap over range upon range of mountains stretching away in every direction.

The descent went well and back at camp we all shared in each other's sense of achievement. Alan and Graham had done splendidly and their pleasure was justly earned. Now the big white pyramid peak beckoned strongly; it lay before us all the time, asking to be climbed. If we could get up it, we would be happy to go back to base with a good 'tick list'.

At 11pm on 11 August, the starting time we had set, there was a fierce wind from the west. A shouted inter-tent conversation about wind-chill factors led to a postponement. By 4am on 12 August, when the sun ought to have shone, the tents were being blasted with spindrift with big drifts burying the pulks. We needed an estimated window of six hours to make an attempt. For my own part, I was willing to try in the less-than-ideal conditions, and Sandy agreed to come with me.

At 8.30am the wind still blew and the sky was overcast. No new snow appeared to have fallen – just redistribution of the spindrift. I discussed the proposed climb with the others. Only Andrew Howick seemed keen, but lacked a partner. I preferred to climb just as a pair with Sandy; our long-term Alpine partnership would allow us the best chance of success. John Starbuck wavered over his decision and, anxious to be away, I set a 15 minute deadline time before going back to my own tent to put on extra clothing.

John opted against going, so Sandy and I hurried to set off. The others would wait for us, although we all realised that we would soon need to start our return journey to Pourquoi-pas base. After only 15 minutes the two of us reached the lee of the mountainside behind the camp, and from then on we were in calm air for the rest of the outing. The wind at the tents had been a very localised phenomenon.

We skied as far as we could, then continued on foot in deep snow, making one long detour to bypass a massive crevasse. Our aim was to get onto the N ridge of the mountain, a narrow arête firing directly to the pyramid apex. We stopped to put on crampons before passing through a hollow

filled with knee-deep powder to seek a crossing of the bergschrund arcing along the slope. By a deep blue gap there was a solid-looking bridge which we could use. We cut a knee-step in the upper lip to gain a lodging on the firmer ice above to reach the ridge. Here we placed an ice piton and left a marker sling for our return. Fondly, we had thought the ridge might permit more rapid progress, but to our dismay it was loaded with windslab. This caused our crampons to ball up dreadfully, making balance precarious. After going over a corniced hump we reached a broader section of ridge, but the going was so arduous that we actually took off our crampons. Higher up the arête narrowed down, so we put them back on again. We left our sacks where the terminal crest began.

We climbed first on the left side, then crossed to the right. The exposure became more and more apparent. To the left the NE face plunged down icy buttresses for six or seven hundred metres. On the right the W flank was a sheer sweep of steep ice below our feet. We progressed on a short rope, with axe and hammer shafts driven into the very crest of the ridge, while kicking hard through the soft top layer to get our points into the ice beneath. As this arête was not corniced we were constantly looking directly down the inhospitable NE face. Gradually we approached the top, the ridge easing slightly, until at 2pm we arrived at the summit, almost four hours out from camp. We yelled to the others below who, on seeing our arrival, fired off a mini-flare. Neither signal was heard or seen by those for whom it was intended! There was a cairn (any climber would be drawn towards such a peak) – but we were too concerned over the coming descent to be disappointed.

Going down called on all our experience of Alpine terrain. Security lay more in mutual trust than anything else. Having kicked good footings into the ridge flank, the first narrow section was not too bad, apart from breaking steps where a couple of transverse crevasses cut through the crest. After we had picked up our sacks things got more wearing. Every so often the snow settled with sickening creaks, and we struggled with our balled-up crampons. Minor slides broke away from our feet causing heart-in-mouth moments. I think that if we had set off one big break-away on the way up we would have retreated. Re-crossing the corniced hump was very nerve-racking and we were both in a state of high tension by the time we got back to the ice peg above the bergschrund crossing. The peg was loose and the marker sling had thawed into the ice, so we repositioned them together with a back-up screw. Sandy went down to prod the snow-bridge and belay once back over it. I followed down in turn, treading lightly onto its softened folds, before stepping across onto safer, easier ground.

We were heartily relieved to be off the hazardous snow of the arête, having taken two hours to come down from the top. Taking off our crampons we plodded through the wet afternoon snow to our skis and pushed them slowly downhill towards the tents and the congratulations of our friends. They had kindly prepared drinks and a meal for us. We were very tired and wanted

to sleep for a while before continuing, with the others, through the night to get back to base to prepare for our flight out. This journey was interrupted by one mishap: skiing down very difficult snow in which only step turns would work, I took a heavy, twisting fall after catching an edge. The impact caused my pulk's tow-bar to break free from its mounting, allowing the heavily-laden pulk to career off down the mountain on its own, leaving me in a bruised heap on the ice. After about half a kilometre the pulk slid to a halt without finding any crevasses. Our two engineers, John Starbuck and Graham Harkness, effected a repair and the journey was resumed.

With increasing weariness we covered the last kilometres back to base camp, reaching it at about 2.30am on 13 August. Most of us were sated for now, but Andrew Howick and John Starbuck made one more climb in an eight-hour round trip in the very early morning hours of 14 August, while Alan Jones and Graham Harkness made a final tour in search of flowers and rock samples.

The flight out was an impressive finale to our expedition, and by 16 August we were all cleaned up and celebrating in Reykjavik. We felt it had been a successful and rewarding trip – between us we had climbed fourteen peaks and tops of which ten had been first ascents. But the problem with 'once-in-a-lifetime' experiences is that they can become addictive, so already some of us are thinking 'Why not go back again?'

Summary: Karabiner Mountaineering Club Greenland Expedition 1994, 22 July – 18 August.

Team members:

Jim Gregson (leader), Sandra Gregson, Alan Jones, Graham Harkness, Andrew Howick, John Starbuck, Lucy Walker, Paul Walker.

Peaks climbed:

Peak 1 (25.7.94)	66°37'N, 35°43'W,	c1500m	1st ascent (E ridge)
Peak 2 (28.7.94)	66°42'30"N, 35°50'W,	c2200m	1st ascent (NW ridge)
Peak 3 (29.7.94)	66°43'N, 35°46'W,	c2100m	1st ascent (N ridge)
Peak 4 (30.7.94)	66°43'N, 35°44'W	c2180m	1st ascent (NE ridge)
Peak 5 (31.7.94)	66°43'N, 35°47'W	c2080m	1st ascent (E face)
Peak 6 (31.7.94)	66°42'30"N, 35°53'W	c2000m	1st ascent (N flank)
Peak 7 (31.7.94)	66°42'30"N, 35°52'W	c2000m	1st ascent (N flank)

Peak 8 (5.8.94)	66°40'N, 35°34'W	c2090m	1st British ascent (Note in cairn)
Peak 9 (10.8.94)	66°41'N, 35°32'W	c1650m	1st ascent (W ridge/S face)
Peak 10 (11.8.94)	66°40'N, 35°31'W	c2400m	Probably 1st British ascent (Cairn) (W flank/NE ridge)
Peak 11 (11.8.94)	66°39'N, 35°34'30"W	c2000m	1st ascent (NE flank)
Peak 12 (11.8.94)	66°39'30"N, 35°34'30"W	c1990m	1st ascent (E flank)
Peak 13 (12.8.94)	66°40'N, 35°28'W	c2370m	Probably 1st British ascent (Cairn) (N ridge)
Peak 14 (14.8.94)	66°38'N, 35°42'W	c1800m	Probably 1st British ascent (Cairn) (N ridge)

Note: All positions are approximated from maps at a scale of 1:250 000. Heights were taken from readings by Thommen altimeter or were based on estimates.

Maps: 66 Ø.1 Steenstrup Braeer and 66 Ø.2 Schweizerland in Grønland, 1:250 000 Series (Geodaetisk Institut, Danmark)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- F Spencer Chapman, *Watkins' Last Expedition*. Chatto and Windus, 1934.
 Noel Dilly, 'East Greenland: Kristians glacier area, 1968' in *AJ74*, 276-281, 1969.
 Derek Fordham, 'East Greenland: Kangerdlugssuatsiaq fjord area, 1968' in *AJ74*, 282-284, 1969.
 Derek Fordham, 'Kristians glacier area' in *AJ75*, 240-242, 1970.
 Erik Hoff, 'Mountaineering in Greenland 1870-1966' in *Mountain World 1966/67*. The Swiss Foundation for Alpine Research, 1968.
 Erik Hoff, 'Mountaineering in Greenland' in *American Alpine Journal 22*, Issue 53, 1979.
 J M Scott, *Gino Watkins*. Hodder, 1935.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The expedition team would like to acknowledge with thanks the support of our patron The Lord Hunt of Llanfairwaterdine. We are also grateful for support and grant aid provided by the Mount Everest Foundation, the British Mountaineering Council and the Gino Watkins Memorial Fund.

