
IVAR ERIK TOLLEFSEN

On the North-West Wall of Ulvetanna

Translated by Roland Huntford

(Plates 2–5)

Antarctica is the fifth largest continent in the world – more than double the size of Australia. It is an island continent, covered by an ice cap so huge that the sheer figures are hard to grasp: thirty million cubic kilometres of blue ice, holding more than two-thirds of the world's fresh water, and weighing so much that the underlying land is forced down beneath sea level. If all the ice were to melt, the oceans of the world would rise by sixty metres.

Antarctica is also unquestionably the world's highest, most arid, wind-swept and coldest continent, with a barely credible low temperature record of 89.2°C below zero. At the South Pole itself, there is sunshine for one half of the year and darkness for the other half – just one sunrise and one sunset during the whole year.

To the adventurer and explorer, Antarctica has an even more enticing record: it is the least known and most inaccessible of all the continents. It is, in fact, the only continent free from regular traffic, and the only one where there literally remain large blanks upon the map. But even in this continent of inaccessibility and unexplored terrain, Queen Maud Land, Norway's Antarctic dependency, stands out as one of the least-known areas. My journey to Queen Maud Land was the attainment of a long-held ambition to set my foot where none had been before. I wanted to see wild and untouched country in the last continent.

On Christmas Eve, 1993, I left Cape Town, the leader of an expedition of thirteen men, bound for the coast of Queen Maud Land. Fenriskjeften, the massif of which Ulvetanna, the Wolf's Fang, is the highest peak, richly deserves its name: the Fenris Jaw. When the shadows are long, we see petrified animals and shapes in the mountains around us. Fear, superstition and dreams creep to the surface on the frigid and inhospitable North-West Wall of Ulvetanna. We are the first men on this mountain, the existence of which the world is scarcely aware.

Even amongst the kilometre-high crags and pinnacles of Fenriskjeften, Ulvetanna is in a class of its own. At 2931m above sea level, it is steep, broken, cold and dangerous. Inaccessible from all sides, its three colossal one-thousand-metre walls are separated by intimidating, razor-sharp ridges: beautiful, frigid, virginal.



2. Storm clouds on Ulvetanna, 2931m, Queen Maud Land's highest peak.
(Ivar Erik Tollefsen) (p13)

Sjur Nesheim and I are sharing a portaledge, but only Sjur has been sleeping. My thoughts are giving me no peace. Doubt is gnawing at me. Do we have enough food to continue, or will we have to go down in order to fetch more? How much longer will the storm continue? How many more days before there is another storm? How serious is Robert's and Sjur's frostbite? The questions are many and there are no easy answers.

Robert Caspersen is lying two metres above us, alone, in the other portaledge. He has with him food and white gas for another six days' climbing under normal conditions. But earlier today, Base Camp reported squalls of hurricane force, and no signs that the wind was about to ease. Drifting snow is insinuating itself through tiny holes in the tent cloth. But in spite of the raging storm, we are surprisingly comfortable where we are hanging, sheltered from the worst of the squalls, rocking pleasantly to and fro. What luck that the storm blew up during the night, and not a day later. Our original plan had been to move the portaledges to the top of the ropes today, and to sleep on the lowest part of the vertical headwall. Without shelter from the wind, I doubt whether we would have survived wind speeds of 30-35 metres per second.

I don't want to turn back now. If we go down, I'm afraid it will be goodbye to the summit. We have been talking things over the whole livelong day. How far is it to the top? How difficult is the climbing? For how many days can we eke out the food? Today, because we are standing still, there are 9 biscuits each: 3 for breakfast, 3 for lunch and 3 for dinner. Robert gulped all three meals at one go. Sjur and I are spreading things out – only 2 biscuits for breakfast, 7 to go.

I led the last pitch yesterday evening, and am the one who has been highest. Sjur asks yet again how many ropelengths I think there are to the top. I believe there are only four; five at the most. Sjur disagrees – at least six, perhaps eight. How many days' climbing do 6-8 ropelengths mean on an unknown mountain? Even with long working days, we have hitherto only managed two ropelengths a day, and the rest of the route to the summit is much steeper than the climbing has been so far. From my last stance, the mountain sweeps vertically up to the final, steep icewall just under the summit itself. The headwall seems a little firmer and more inviting than the rotten pitches below us. But given today's blizzard, it will be several days before we can hope to climb unhindered. Sjur considers our margins of safety too small. Even at two ropelengths per day, we have only just enough food. The return will be complicated, and it will take at least a couple of days. We have no safety margin ...

Next morning Ulvetanna, fearful of losing her suitors, displayed her most charming aspect. The sun broke through, and by the time we had finished packing, she had removed all traces of her previous outburst. But clear weather brought cold in its train. Sjur lost all feeling in his toes before he was even out of his sleeping-bag, and he had to sit with his feet thawing out on my chest while he gulped down a hurried breakfast. The ropes were still

buried in loose snow when we started off, but with Sjur as snow-plough and rope-shaker, we made good progress towards the headwall. At regular intervals, small snow slides swept past us. Whether the jumars would grip the rope or not was the question of the day. Clogged with snow and ice, they slid as often as they gripped. It was rather like moving carefully over fragile snow crust, except that it was farther down to terra firma.

It was the middle of the night before we had finally rigged two portaledges side by side on top of an icefield sloping 70° to the horizontal. The headwall rose vertically above us. Between the portaledges, we hacked out a 30cm-wide niche where we could cook. The view was breathtaking. The midnight sun was in the south, just above the horizon, with blood-red expanses of snow as far as the eye could see. Lovely and peaceful. To the west we could see Trollslottet, Jøkulkyrkja and Gessnertind. Almost a kilometre below us lay Fenristunga with jagged, nameless fangs, and the cold white tip of its tongue to the north. There was still a whole Eiffel Tower before the summit.

It was far colder up here than down below at the foot of the mountain, and the night was our coldest so far: about -35°C and no morning sun. Sjur and Robert had great difficulties with fingers and toes, and even after a session of thorough warming up, they barely achieved more than a sensation of numbed pins and needles before they started the day's climbing. It was my turn to have a rest day, and I lay, dozing all the time, under two extra sleeping-bags. Robert had left his diary behind, and I read how he had led the hardest ropelength on the day before the storm:

Sjur's having a well deserved rest day. Yesterday we reached the start of the headwall. Behind us lies 500m of climbing – not desperately difficult, but hard enough. Except for one blank, slabby pitch, which I had to lead in friction boots, all the climbing has been mixed, with crampons, sometimes with ice axe in one hand, sometimes with both hands free. And always gripping with crampons on doubtful flakes and crystals or small patches of thin ice. The rock is like corn-flakes, a real challenge in finding safe holds. Until now Sjur has done most of the leading, thanks to his unrivalled experience in tricky, low-angled mixed climbing.

The 400m headwall is looming above us, and today I know that the pressure is on me. Because it is steeper, with less snow and ice than we have had before, Sjur and Ivar will be expecting me to carry the can. I really want to, but I am feeling nervous, as I always do when I follow on too many pitches without going up in front. You become defensive, more easily scared, and begin to doubt your own ability.

Even after jumaring 100m of fixed rope I'm still freezing. It's around -30°C and we're still in the shade. We don't have time to wait for the sun to reach us. It will be ages before the rock warms up, and anyway it will never reach the temperature I like. Plastic or friction boots?

The first 15 metres follow a perfect hand/finger crack, and should go nicely, free. But what about the overhang and the next 15 metres? A wide, cruel-looking

crack, possibly an off-width, doesn't look too appealing, with our biggest piece being a No 4 Friend, except for one doubtful-looking Big Bros. I decide on the friction boots. 15 metres of 5.10. Later I hang shivering from a good piece at the start of the overhang. I'm pressing my numbed fingers against my bare neck, trying to get some warmth into them. OK HERE IT COMES! I try to ignore the agony of aching fingernails, knowing that a burning sensation will soon follow with revived circulation. I'M READY! I reach out as far as I can, trying to place the wobbling Big Bros. I try hanging on to it. It twists and turns, crushing the treacherous crystals, threatening to pop!

'This pitch is a joke!'

'It's the only way, Rob! You're our only hope! You're strong, handsome, and the coming man. Who else can do it?'

'Pretend you're on the crag in Oslo, and that Big Bros there is a bomber Long Life bolt!'

It was easy to see through Ivar's pretty talk. But flattery works, however blatant. Some desperate free moves later, at least desperate to me, I was above the roof, and found myself in off-width land, longing for protection. It looked bad. The only comfort was the adrenalin coursing through my veins. The crack looked narrower higher up. I was too desperate to understand that this was only a trick of perspective. It was my only hope. Surely it will take a No 4 Friend.

Slipping and sliding, partly stemming, partly jamming, I slowly gained height. Of course the No 4 Friend was far too small. I had played for high stakes – and lost. What was left of my strength was ebbing fast. Six metres below was the Big Bros and way below that a tensed Ivar and a waiting slab. The next ten metres looked the same: off-width and unprotectable. I panicked, the adrenalin hitting a new high. I quickly realised I wouldn't be able to climb down, and, having no choice, the instinct of self-preservation drove me on.

Self-control reappeared and took me by the hand. Ten metres later I could finally place a good piece, and my exhausted but happy voice rang out:

'On belay Ivar!'

The diary didn't reveal Robert's condition when we swapped leads – climbing in the shadow for more than an hour had caused severe frostbite to his toes. He was trying not to make too much fuss about it, but I knew he was afraid of the consequences.

Robert and Sjur returned in the middle of the night. One long ropelength and two short ones were not bad at all, but there was still far to go, much farther than I had estimated a couple of days earlier. Having burned my fingers, I kept quiet when once more we discussed the alternatives. Robert was also reserved. We both left the decision to Sjur. In the cold winter world of Ulvetanna, he was the master. He it was who led nearly all the ropelengths. Sjur found security where there was none, and Sjur chose the safest and most effective route to the top. Robert and I felt safe together with Sjur.

'Base Camp to alpine team, Base Camp to alpine team, come in. Over.'



3. Ulvetanna, 2931m: Sjur Nesheim leading up a snow-covered crack. (Ivar Erik Tollefsen) (p13)



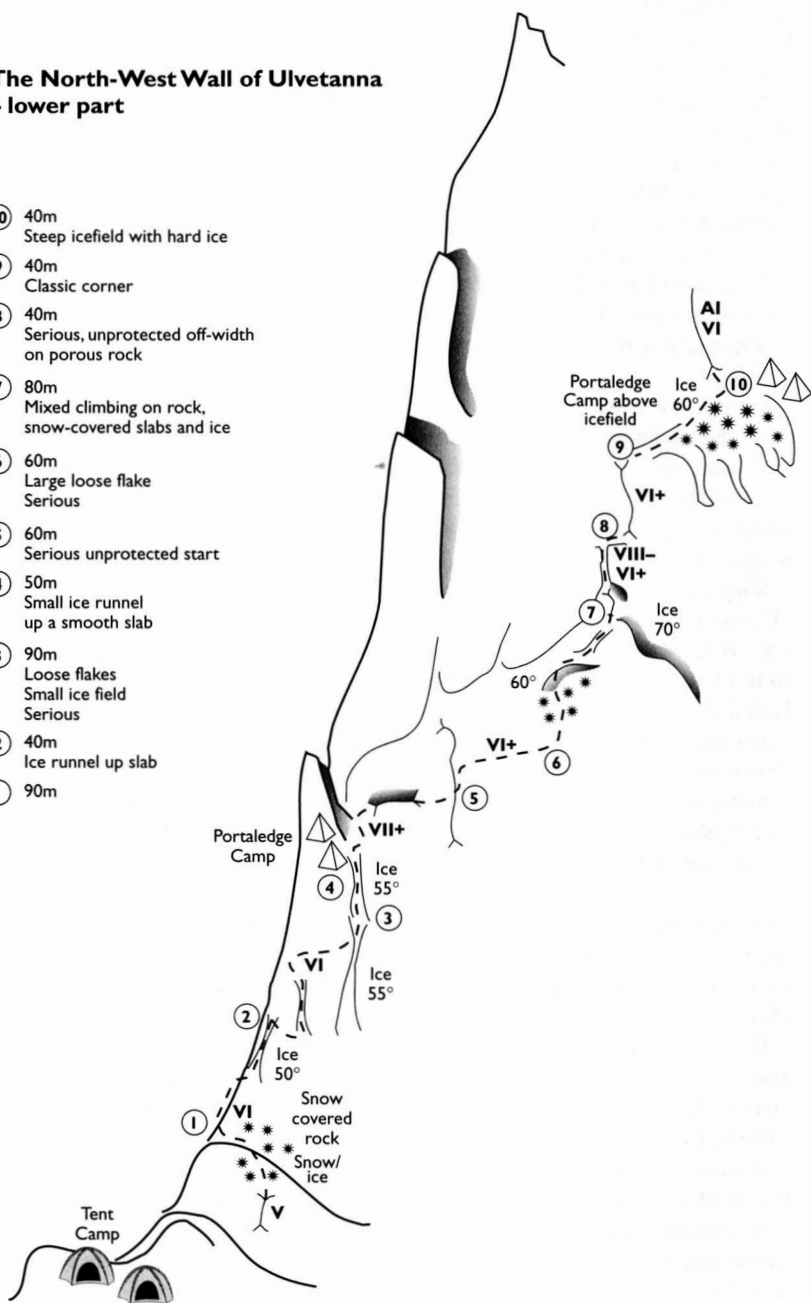
4. Ivar Erik Tollefsen jumaring on Ulvetanna. (Sjur Nesheim) (p13)



5. A portaledge bivouac over the abyss. Ivar Erik Tollefsen and Robert Casperson on the NW wall of Ulvetanna. (Sjur Nesheim) (p13)

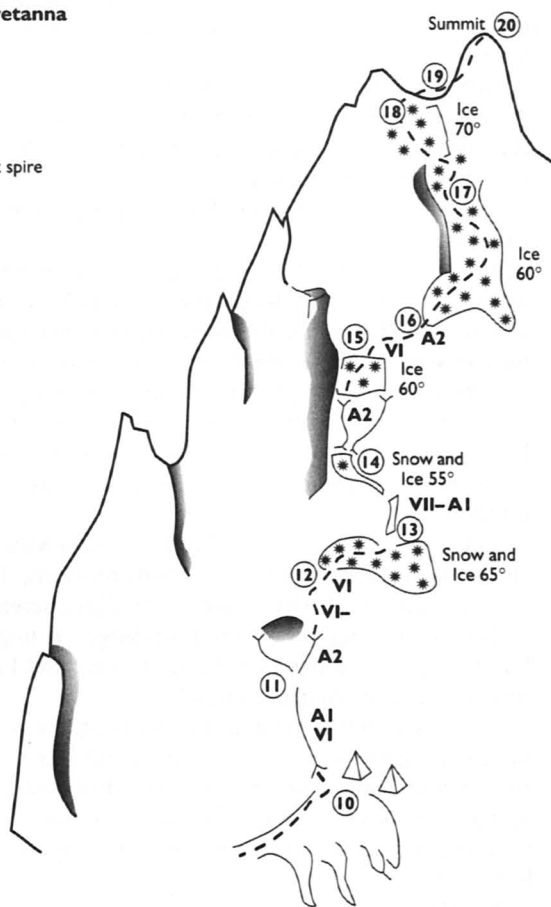
The North-West Wall of Ulvetanna - lower part

- ⑩ 40m
Steep icefield with hard ice
- ⑨ 40m
Classic corner
- ⑧ 40m
Serious, unprotected off-width
on porous rock
- ⑦ 80m
Mixed climbing on rock,
snow-covered slabs and ice
- ⑥ 60m
Large loose flake
Serious
- ⑤ 60m
Serious unprotected start
- ④ 50m
Small ice runnel
up a smooth slab
- ③ 90m
Loose flakes
Small ice field
Serious
- ② 40m
Ice runnel up slab
- ① 90m



The North-West Wall of Ulvetanna - upper part

- ⑳ 30m
Easy up to the exposed summit spire
- ⑑ 10m
Exotic tunnel
- ⑒ 40m
Steel hard ice
- ⑓ 60m
Varying snow over hard ice
- ⑔ 30m
Rock traverse
Short aid section
- ⑕ 40m
Classic crack up headwall
Steep ice
- ⑖ 50m
Fine rock formations
followed by an ice gully
- ⑗ 40m
Exposed, steep rock/snow
traverse
- ⑘ 40m
Overhanging corner
followed by loose,
fractured rock
- ⑙ 60m
Large corner with
free and aid mixed



The radio crackled, and Jan Åge broke into our conversation.

'Alpine team here. We hear you loud and clear. Over.'

'We have had radio contact with the Russians. You will probably have another storm in the course of the next 24-28 hours, with snow and wind between storm force and hurricane. Hope you're bivouacked safe and sound. Over.'

'We're not safe at all, and we haven't enough food to sit out a storm up here. The previous camp lay in a huge crack, but now we're hanging on the headwall itself, completely unsheltered. It's difficult to say if our rig can stand such strong winds. Over.'

'What are your chances if you try early tomorrow? Over.' Jan Åge sounded worried.

'Difficult to say. The climbing is steep, but the rock is comparatively firm. Our biggest problem is that we only have one spare rope left, and far too little food to move the portaledges to the top of the fixed ropes. The only possibility therefore is to make a push for the top, and hope that we are strong enough to get right up and down again in one go. Over.'

'Whether you go up or down, we'll be behind you. All of us down here hope that you manage. Good luck! Over and out.'

To save the batteries, we switched off the radio. Sjur looked at me, and I nodded.

'Let's try early tomorrow. We won't turn back now. Not when we have struggled so much to get here.' Next morning, Robert and Sjur left early, and after an hour I was awakened by Sjur's screaming voice.

'Ivar, get the hell out of the portledge. A huge boulder's come loose a hundred metres above your head. Robert and I are balancing it on a narrow ledge. *Can you heeeer meeee?*'

Sjur was shouting with all his might and main. I heaved myself out of my sleeping-bag and gathered boots and jacket. My rucksack was ready packed and heavy. I was nearly crying from exhaustion as I fought my way along the ropes by jumars. The rucksack was throwing me off balance. I was constantly leaning backwards. I already had cramp in my upper arms, but terror drove me on.

'STONE!'

Fear hit me like a clenched fist. The adrenalin was pumping out into my veins, I bent my body forwards, my head between my shoulders, and waited. Nothing happened – just the sound of a few pebbles rushing by.

'Goddamit you scared me out of my wits!'

I was frightened and angry, realising that the warning had not been for the big one, but I heaved myself up on the jumars again. Another few metres, and I was in safety on the stance. When I arrived, only Sjur was there. The loose boulder was securely lashed, and Robert was already at the top of the ropes, ready to lead the first ropelength of the day.

Four ropelengths later, 24 hours after we had left the portaledges, we were immediately beneath the summit. Climbing so far had been difficult

and time-consuming. Sjur had taken a long fall at the beginning of the third ropelength, but was not injured. All three of us froze horribly. It is impossible to keep warm when one is hanging motionless for hours at a time in the middle of the night, and the temperature is creeping down towards 30 degrees below zero.

'Bloody hell, I don't think we'll get up. It's only another 20-30 metres to the top, but the last few metres look absolutely polished. The only possibility is to drill our way to the top and that's going to take a long, long time. We won't survive another day up here without bivouac gear and food.'

Sjur sounded desperate as he hung on his ice axe just under the top of the almost vertical icefield. After an eternity, or perhaps just a few minutes, we again heard the sound of ice axe and crampon on firm ice. The rope slid slowly, so slowly between Robert's fingers, but suddenly something happened. The rope began moving much faster. We called out, but received no answer, and assumed that Sjur must have found a ledge onto which he had climbed. Soon after, there were three strong pulls on the rope. It was the signal to follow. Robert went first until he too disappeared from view.

A few metres below the top of the icefield, I still could not understand where Sjur and Robert had gone. Right above me, the dark wall rose vertically, and still I saw no sign of a ledge. I kicked my crampons into the ice and hauled myself further up the rope. Suddenly I was blinded by sunlight, and glimpsed the mountains north of Base Camp. Crazy! Unbelievable! A tunnel right through Ulvetanna. What an unbelievable ending! On the further side, Sjur and Robert were sitting barefoot and smiling on a big ledge. The time was only 6am, but the sun was truly warm. Only a few minutes earlier, I was freezing in every corner of my body, and here were those guys, sitting barefoot, with the summit only a few metres behind them. We smiled and embraced each other with tears in our eyes, and inexpressible happiness at having reached the summif of Fenriskjefte's majestic queen.

Returning from the summit involved 48 hours of continuous struggle, with almost no food. After spending two hours in glorious sunshine just below the summit, we crawled back through the tunnel and began an endless succession of abseils. Worn out and starving, it took only a few minutes before our bodies were once more in the grip of the cold.

'Down again and still alive!' Robert was smiling from ear to ear while the snow pelted down.

'Bugger me, this is the hardest thing I've ever done!' Sjur said. After countless winter climbs over the past twenty years this was quite a claim, but both Robert and I knew that it was only the simple truth.

Summary: Between December 1993 and January 1994 Ivar Erik Tollefsen led an expedition of 13 men to Queen Maud Land, Antarctica, where Tollefsen, with Sjur Nesheim and Robert Caspersen, climbed the highest peak in the Fenriskjefte massif, Ulvetanna, 2931m, by the NW wall.