
DAVID WILLIAMS

East of the Weasel

Baffin Island Ski Mountaineering Expedition 1998

(Plates 16, 17)

At first glance the idea of ski mountaineering in Baffin Island did not seem too clever, with images of the sheer walls of Thor, Asgard and the like coming to mind. Baffin has a number of areas with spectacular alpine landscapes, particularly on the Cumberland Peninsular, and whilst we knew that this area was suitable for ski travel amongst its many glaciers, we were looking for good ski descents as well and the few photos we found gave few hints. Then the name of Rick Sylvester was mentioned, the stunt man for Roger Moore's 007, skiing off the summit of Mt Asgard at the start of *The Spy Who Loved Me* with a Union Jack parachute on his back. Maybe there was hope after all and we certainly had an aspiring Sylvester in our team by way of Danny. We decided to go. Much later, as Danny and I found ourselves nervously edging into a 50-degree slope, poised on the lip of a large cliff having wrongly skied a dead end gully, it dawned on me just how strong an affinity my companion had to Mr Sylvester. Luckily parachutes were not on the gear list.

Situated mostly above the Arctic Circle, much of the land of the Cumberland Peninsular lies within the Auyuittuq – the 'land that never melts' – National Park Reserve and experiences extreme cold with an annual high of 10°C and a low of -45°C during the perpetual night of the arctic winter. The climate is that of a polar semi-desert with low precipitation, although fortunately for us we arrived in a year of exceptionally high snowfall. We planned a self-sufficient journey of twenty days, climbing and skiing suitable peaks en route using standard alpine ski-mountaineering equipment. It was to begin in mid-April to benefit from the stable spring conditions and rapidly increasing daylight, which extends to nearly twenty-four hours by May. There was much conflicting advice on the possible risks posed by polar bears, who occasionally make long journeys inland, and is best summed up by a local bear expert who had written to us: 'Bear spray is sometimes effective, but not always reliable in cold temperatures. You will have to weigh the possibility of a fine for having a gun in the park against the possibility of being eaten alive and make your own decision. Good luck on your trip.' In the end we borrowed a .22 rifle from our Inuit outfitter and carried two cans of pepper spray. As 90 per cent of our journey was outside the park, we felt justified in bending the rules by carrying a firearm

inside the park for such a short time. In the event we did not need either, but sadly saw little evidence of other wildlife during the entire journey.

On 16 April, after nearly eight hours of skidoo riding across the sea ice and up the Weasel Valley, we arrived, chilled to the bone, at Summit Lake, some 60km from Pangnirtung. We had flown in from a warm Ottawa spring to jump straight onto the waiting skidoos; the abruptness of the transition to Arctic winter was shocking. We had hoped to build a large igloo at this point but much to Ian's disappointment we were assured by our outfitters, apparently employed by British Rail, that it was definitely the wrong type of snow. Of course they were right, and the unconsolidated muck at that low altitude would give us some skiing trouble later.

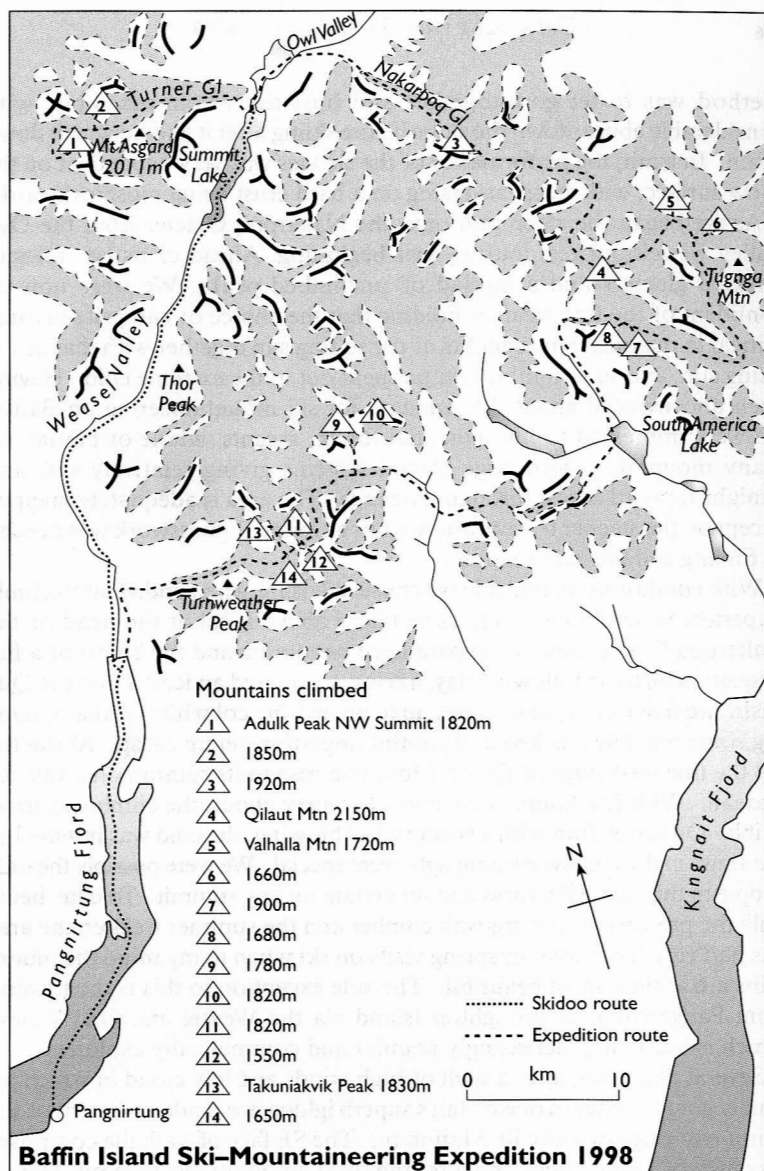
It was not until the buzz of the departing skidoos had finally faded that we were fully able to appreciate our new surroundings. Utterly alone in a white wilderness, with low cloud hanging just above the valley floor, it was hard to imagine that we were surrounded by some of the most spectacular mountains of the Arctic. A keen breeze soon brought an urgency to making camp and we began to worry about the weather. The area has a bad reputation, especially for high winds, as Paul Pritchard commented in his book *Deep Play*: 'Baffin was beginning to make Patagonia look like a holiday spot.' We were about to embark on a journey south-eastwards out of the national park into a little-explored area of this range of mountains and its outcome would depend to a large extent on the weather. On our first day, though, we climbed quickly through the clouds into brilliant sunshine and light winds, conditions that were to hold for almost the next three weeks, with only three days lost due to moderately poor weather.

There were seven of us, but then we had not bargained on my wife's fruit cake, a small luxury from home but an entirely different proposition at -30°C , as one of John's molars quickly discovered. With our excellent Dr Rodney – sadly not BDS – having only araldite or molegrips with which to treat the remains of his broken tooth, John sadly decided to leave us and descend the Weasel Valley back to Pangnirtung using a system of well-spaced emergency huts for shelter. For three days preceding this event we had made a side excursion up the Turner Glacier to make camp beneath the twin towers of Mt Asgard. To the west of us the beautiful north-east face of Adluk Peak looked a fine objective but dangerous lee slopes forced us into a long ski around to the west from where we could make a ski ascent of the north-west summit. A steep descent in excellent powder, with a hazy backdrop of immense glaciers and unclimbed walls, gave us our first real taste of Baffin.

Our main journey was beckoning, and returning to our food stash at Summit Lake we harnessed up our lightweight sledges for the first time. Based on a previous design, we used a plastic child's sledge with lashed stuff sack, towed from the rucksack waistbelt by shockcorded 4mm line held within a semi-rigid framework of plumber's overflow pipe. Our original intention had been to burn this all-plastic assembly once we could carry



16. Igloo built to escape high winds below Valhalla Mountain, Baffin Island, with a view of Tugnga Mountain through cloud behind the camp. (*David Williams*) (p103)



everything on our backs but we quickly appreciated the comfort of never carrying more 20kgs, with up to 30kgs on the sledge. We got used to the more troublesome aspects of steeper downhill skiing with a following sledge and so kept them to the very end. Breakages to the overflow pipe did occur regularly but were always easily repaired. Each of us developed our own special technique when skiing with the sledge. Mine was to hold the pipe framework halfway down its length in one hand, having unclipped it from the rucksack, turning the sledge into a sort of outrigger, whilst Charles's

method was to let go altogether and hurl the whole assembly, with considerable abuse, down the slope before skiing after it and hurling it down again. In truth, the performance of the sledges was very dependent on the snow surface, with steep traversing on a hard crust being most awkward.

As we began the steep pull onto the Nakarpoq Glacier from the Owl Valley we felt our real journey was beginning. Ahead of us lay miles of unskied glaciers and a myriad of unclimbed peaks. We were now so confident of the fine weather holding that the choice of campsite became critical to maximise the benefits of the setting sun together with that of the rising sun, and so to minimise time spent out in the extreme cold. Having been unconvinced about the potential for ski mountaineering on Baffin, we were impressed to find potential for ski ascents, whole or partial, on many mountains, with large glacial systems giving relatively safe and straight-forward access through the range. The area is adequately mapped except on the steeper terrain where a fair amount of guesswork was needed in finding suitable cols to cross.

With conditions on our side we chose at leisure when and what to climb. A perfect snow dome rising some 600m above a col at the head of the Nakarpoq Glacier gave an unparalleled panorama and the bonus of a fun descent; whilst the following day, having negotiated an icefall into the Qila basin, we fixed a couple of ropes up to an inviting col while Graham, nursing some horribly cracked and painful fingertips, set up camp. Above the col the fine west ridge of Qilaut Mountain rose to its summit on a vast icy plateau. With few hours of darkness to worry about, the climb was irresistible. On top at 7pm with a strong wind blowing, the cold was intense but the views in the mellow evening light were special. We were possibly the only people in this vast wilderness and for certain on any summit. To date, being only the preserve of the big-wall climber and the summer trekker, the area has had very few winter or spring visits on ski when to my mind the mountains are at their most beautiful. The sole exception to this is the traverse from Pangnirtung to Broughton Island via the Weasel and Owl Valleys which is becoming increasingly popular and commercially exploited.

Several days later, after a spell of high winds and low cloud in which we finally got to shelter in one of Ian's superb igloos, we made an ascent of the south-east ridge of Valhalla Mountain. The SE face of Valhalla comprises a system of steep gullies and after the third abseil off the summit, Danny and I exchanged crampons for skis and made a memorable descent of the most obvious line on some pretty gnarly snow. This was the forerunner to our foolish attempt on the dead-end gully that we thought we had spotted on an adjacent peak.

After descending the length of Ayunnamat Glacier, passing endless seasons of good climbing potential, we skinned up to a high camp at the head of the Masa Glacier from where a side trip to a plateau-topped peak gave us all a view of the valley containing our halfway point – an unnamed



17. Charles Turner on the summit plateau of Qilaut Mountain, Baffin Island.
(David Williams) (p103)



18. The end of 198 days of trekking along the length of the Himalaya. Left to right
Vineeta Muni, Jean Thomas, Sumita Roy and Malika Virdi. (Vineeta Muni) (p39)

lake sometimes termed 'South America' because of its shape. Danny and I continued from this peak around a cirque where the mixed climbing was a treat but made all the more precarious with skis strapped to our rucksacks. In a steep powder gully back to camp, though, they came into their own.

Down at the 400m level around South America Lake the skis could barely keep us afloat on a thick layer of depth hoar, with the trail-breaker sinking above his knees on every step. There was more of this muck as we worked our way through the steep gully walls and large boulders of the lateral moraine of our next glacier. Luckily light snowfall and whiteout conditions dictated an early stop and a welcome rest beneath some impressive 800m walls, raked continually by spindrift avalanche. Twenty-four hours later we were still tent-bound and it was only when Danny produced a spare kilo of chocolate that the day was lightened. Obviously we had not stretched him nearly enough. The second morning dawned clearer but by the time we had begun our descent westwards into the next major valley we had again lost visibility. As we lost height the snow-pack deteriorated alarmingly and we all fought in vain to keep upright. The real fight though was to get back up skiing again with the snow collapsing unpredictably. It was here that Charles's sledge technique came into its own.

By this point we were running ahead of schedule and the weather, having left us with a good foot of light powder, was improving again. We began peak-bagging and in the final three days climbed six more summits, while continuing with the last westerly leg of our journey along unnamed glaciers surrounding islands of unnamed peaks that were eventually to lead us down for a skidoo pick-up at the head of Pangnirtung Fjord. To our disappointment we found small cairns on two of the summits but they were great days with some superb skiing. As so often happens though, with the end in sight and spirits running high, Rodney, Danny and I made an error of judgement and narrowly missed being avalanched from high on a steep face that we could not resist skiing. Luck was with us and the resultant swept surface actually gave us a far better ski than we might otherwise have had.

The barometer was dropping as we made our final exit in an exhilarating but reckless ski through the moraine jungle down to the valley floor, with Charles arriving only moments behind his sledge. It was, as always, with very mixed feelings that we arrived back to a stormy Pangnirtung where the world of 'shaving and clean underwear' held only momentary pleasure over the dramatic land through which we had just travelled.

Summary: From 16 April to 6 May 1998 David Williams (leader), Rodney Franklin, Charles Turner (Can), Ian McKirdy (Can), Danny Baillie (NZ), Graham Rowe and John Kentish completed a 150km exploratory journey on ski through the mountains of the Cumberland Peninsular, to the east of the Weasel Valley and north of Kingnait Fjord. Fourteen peaks were climbed en route, of which half were possibly first ascents.