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Greenland 1998

The Inland Ice

Once again traverses of the Inland Ice predominated in expedition applications to the Danish Polar Centre. Out of a total of 42 applications for expedition permits 19 were for ice cap crossings, 11 for general mountaineering and the remainder for other activities. This year very few expeditions planning to cross the Inland Ice chose to break away from the 560km 'trade' route between Isertok and Kangerdlugssuaq.

Thomas Elboth and Martin Skjervagen (Norway) made the earliest crossing, starting in mid-April from Isertok on the east coast. After 22 days they arrived at Kangerdlugssuaq, the west coast airfield, just as the rescue helicopter was setting out to search for an unidentified expedition which had requested assistance.

The next expedition to start was that of Bernard Muller (France) and three companions who started from Kangerdlugssuaq heading east on 23 April and reached Isertok on the east coast 28 days later having used a para-sail on eight of those days.

The first four Icelandic women to cross the ice cap started on 26 April under the leadership of Einar Torfi Finnsson and reached the west coast in 25 days having used para-sails for a couple of days. En route they stopped at the abandoned early warning station DYE 2 and were appalled at how, even on the vast emptiness of the Inland Ice, previous expeditions – and there cannot have been that many – had left the station in such a mess with absolutely no thought for expeditions that might follow and have need of the facilities left by the US.

Both Muller and Finnsson had made crossings in previous years, giving the lie to the words of Eigil Knuth, the Danish explorer and sculptor who said: 'You only cross the Greenland ice cap once in your life. More than anything else it is a mental experience!'

Peter Falkenstein (Germany) and two others made a crossing in 22 days from the east starting on 4 May and experienced good weather. They were quickly followed by a three-man team led by Alexandre Masselot (Switzerland). Like many other expeditions they used a helicopter to reach the upper Hahn Glacier at the start but, unlike many other expeditions, climbed down to sea level before commencing their traverse on 15 May. They reached the west coast in 19 days on one of which, using their para-sail, they travelled 100km. Even with this relatively early arrival at the west coast the party experienced problems getting off the ice due to large quantities of melt water.

Harald Ronneberg, together with Fridtjof Nansen's great grandson Nicolai Nansen (Norway), started from Isertok on 19 May, by which time the rescue helicopter had already been employed searching for four earlier expeditions. They headed NW to Uummannaq and reached the settlement of Uvkussigssat

after 850km and 39 days. Considerable problems were encountered crossing the last 30km between the ice edge and the settlement, requiring the abandonment of some equipment and the tiresome relaying of the remainder in order to complete this long and creditable traverse.

On 1 July Arne Steen and Sverre Sandvika (Norway) set off from Isertok and reached the west coast after 29 days, having travelled via DYE 2 which they also found in poor condition; a door left open had allowed snow to drift in – and freeze a case of Carlsberg. They camped outside in dismay!

Lars Ebbesen (Norway) and his party started on 7 August from Isertok and reached Kangerdlugssuaq after 23 days. From DYE 2 they were able to parasail a large part of the way to the west coast but, as might be expected with such a late start, they experienced lots of rain in the early stages and heavy snow and whiteout for 70% of travelling days. Together with Sjur Mørdre, his partner in the Norwegian adventure travel company Hvitserk A/S, Lars Ebbesen also organised two ski-sailing trips from DYE 2 to the west coast as well as their company's usual dog sledge expedition from east to west, followed by a return trip west to east.

The most noteworthy expedition to cross the Inland Ice by far was that led by Nic Nielsen (Greenland). It was noteworthy not only because it broke away from the trade route Isertok–Kangerdlugssuaq but also because it was the first Inuit expedition to cross the Inland Ice. Nic had attempted a two-man ski expedition in 1997 but was forced to abandon the attempt. This time, with three companions, he started from Qasigianniguit on Disko Bay and, following the 800km route used by Paul-Emil Victor and the Dane Eigil Knuth when they crossed with dogs in 1949, he reached Ammassalik in 25 days.

Another interesting Inuit-inspired project was that of Marius Olsen and Tore Sivertsen who, with a view to establishing a commercial programme of dog-sledge ice cap crossings from Sisimiut in West Greenland, took a trial trip via Kangerdlugssuaq to the abandoned early warning station DYE 2 and back to Kangerdlugssuaq. They started on the ice cap on 1 April and for the whole of the expedition encountered rather warm weather and difficult conditions at the ice edge. Their conclusion was that for such a traverse a start should be made no later than 1 March but currently the Greenland authorities do not permit traverses to start before 1 April.

The experiences of expeditions this year illustrate well the factors which should be taken into account by those planning such a traverse. By starting early in April a party can experience the advantages of colder snow surfaces, and less melt water on the west coast. At the same time they may encounter rather low day temperatures, down to -30°C and, as happened this year, the associated unseasonal mixed weather giving rise to storms which have kept expeditions tent-bound for several days. By July the melt water on the western margin of the ice cap can be extensive and can contribute enormously to the problem of getting off the ice. This year was warmer than usual and as a result this problem developed earlier. A start after mid-July leaves an expedition at the mercy of the August weather, which in this part of the world is getting

ready for winter. These comments are directed mainly at E-W crossings on the Isertok-Kangerdlugssuaq route but with allowance for latitude they are applicable elsewhere.

A rumour has emerged from Norway that Volkswagen are planning to build a road from the airfield at Kangerdlugssuaq to Pt. 660m, where most expeditions get off/on the ice. From there the rumour has it that an ice road is proposed for 20km across the ice to a vehicle test ground in a crevassed area. It sounds too absurd for words but it might be unwise totally to ignore such a potentially appalling threat to the environment. Interested parties are investigating in Norway and the author of these notes would appreciate hearing from anyone who can enlarge upon the above proposal.

East Coast

Paul Walker and his Tangent Expeditions operation started the season by flying a group into the Tasiilaq mountain hut in March. Temperatures were not as low as expected, only -20°C , and a number of easy ascents were made before the group skied out to the small Inuit settlement of Kuummiut.

A little further north two groups were active. Phil Bartlett, with an eight-strong team, flew in to the west side of Kangerdlugssuaq on 12 July and during a month climbed a total of 30 summits. The expedition flew to a camp to the north of **Redekammen** (2555m) and operated initially as three groups during which period Redekammen was climbed. After a period of bad weather the team set out in two groups on circular routes through new ground to the N and E and taking in the ascent of **Kangerdlugssuaq Tinde** (2200m). The expedition experienced unsettled weather and flew out on 15 August after waiting for the aircraft for four days of the best weather until then encountered. (See article 'Kangerdlugssuaq' in this volume.)

The nine-man Cumbria East Greenland Expedition led by Steve Brailey flew in to the southern part of the Lemon Bjerger on the east side of Kangerdlugssuaq on 16 July. A number of first ascents were made in the area around base camp at 960m despite unsettled weather, similar to that experienced by Bartlett's group, which produced rain on 12 of the days the expedition was in the field. In early August the team travelled down the Frederiksborg Gletscher to be collected from the airstrip at Sødalen.

Paul Walker also organised a seven-man team with the objective of climbing the highest peaks in the Watkins Mountains. On 24 May they flew into the landing site under **Gunnbjørnsfeld** (3693m)* which was climbed by the S ridge a couple of days later. In excellent weather during the following days they climbed **Dome** (3682m) and **Cone** (3669m) before moving to the Woolley Glacier at the head of which further ascents were made, including what is believed to be a first ascent of **Pt. 2848m**, before being picked up by aircraft.

* Following a number of recent multi-point GPS surveys of the principal peaks of the Watkins Mountains, a new Norwegian map of the group has been published and the heights used in these notes are based on the new map.

Whilst in the Gunnbjørnsfjeld area in early June the team met with an Austrian expedition led by Erwin Reinthaler and including Hans Christian Florian, a Dane. The Austrians had just climbed **Gunnbjørnsfjeld** twice, having since mid-May skied some 400km from Stewart Island further up the coast to the NE. Their first objective had been to make the second ascent of **Ejnar Mikkelsens Fjeld** (3325m), the first ascent having been made in 1970 by Andrew Ross and two companions. On reaching Ejnar Mikkelsens Fjeld, which the Austrians quite reasonably imagined had been undisturbed for 28 years, they were surprised to find ski tracks leading to and up the mountain! Reinthaler's expedition was stopped some 1000m below the summit by decaying and dangerous snow bridges in the narrow, broken glacier which is the only route to the summit ridge from the south. They had the frustrating experience of seeing the old ski tracks continuing up above them.

For some reason this expedition chose in a subsequent publication to claim that Andrew Ross had not reached the summit. However, his success is clearly confirmed by comparison of his photographs with those of the successful expedition which left the mysterious ski tracks. The tracks were those of a four-person Swiss expedition led by Roland Aeschmann. While flying into the Gunnbjørnsfjeld base in mid-April they had seen Ejnar Mikkelsens Fjeld and decided to add it to their agenda. Accordingly, having climbed Gunnbjørnsfjeld, they skied the 50km to the base of Ejnar Mikkelsens Fjeld where, on 30 April, after a period of bad weather they made a bold and forceful second ascent in a 21-hour push from camp at the foot of the narrow access glacier to the summit and back to camp; almost a month before the Austrian expedition arrived on the scene and were turned back. Todd Burleson of Alpine Ascents International was also in the Gunnbjørnsfjeld area with two Swiss clients.

Two separate groups, of three and four members, under the leadership of Mark Bailey and John Hulse, visited the Rignys Bjerg some 200km east of the Watkins Mountains. Using logistic support provided by Tangent Expeditions, the two groups flew into the area in early June and in three weeks, in largely good weather, climbed a total of 28 new peaks in an area previously unvisited by mountaineers. Both expeditions set up web sites and the one led by Mark Bailey relayed live images from Greenland.

In the Staunings Alps a strong SMC expedition organised by Colwyn Jones and Stephen Reid was flown into the Sefstroms Glacier on 6 May and spent three weeks in the area. Four of the group made an attempt on a peak above the Cantabrae glacier. A steep couloir led to a ridge where two of the group turned back and the remaining two went on to tackle a steep rock wall and make the first ascent of **Hecla** (2400m). Other previously unclimbed peaks between the Upper Sefstroms and Grantabrae glaciers were climbed and names proposed as follows: **Tillyrie** (2415m), **Seanearbhein** (2350m), **Rabsontinde** (1640m) and **Coltart** (2395m), as well as a rock pinnacle distinguished by a 'window' perforating it just below the summit. Poor weather set in on 12 May and after further heavy snowfalls in the next few days a planned attempt on the unclimbed S ridge of **Dansketinde** (2795m) was abandoned and an arduous

six-day ski journey through heavy new snow made to the airfield at Mestersvig.

Much further north, in Goodenoughs Land, a seven-man Belgian expedition led by Daniel Caisse flew into Kejser Franz Josefs Fjord on 1 April with the intention of climbing **Petermanns Bjerg** (2933m) and **Shackletons Bjerg** (2808m). Prevented from ascending **Knoekdalen** towards Petermanns Bjerg by poor snow conditions, they crossed the Fjord and attempted to approach the upper ice fields via the Agassiz Dal where again they were turned back by steep ice at the glacier front. They finally made a route up the Hisingers Gletscher but were then too far from their original objectives and made ascents of **Hamletbjerg** (2410m), **Vähfreude** (2420m) and **Verenahorn** (2400m) in excellent weather in temperatures between -7°C and -26°C . All expeditions to the NE Greenland National Park are required to take firearms. This expedition found out why when they encountered nine female polar bears with cubs, luckily not at close quarters!

The Belgians were followed in early June by an enterprising series of Tangent Expeditions groups organised by Paul Walker. The first flew in to land at a site north of Petermanns Bjerg and in the perfect weather of the ensuing three weeks made the 5th ascent of **Petermanns Bjerg** together with 34 other ascents in the Froenkls Land area, some 30 of which are believed to be first ascents.

Towards the end of June, as the weather changed, a second group under the leadership of Nigel Edwards, and including the author of these notes, flew in and made the 6th ascent of **Petermanns Bjerg** by the S ridge as well as an abortive attempt on the E ridge before starting to ski to **Shackletons Bjerg** via the previously untravelled Victor Madsen Glacier. Several beautiful lonely nunatak peaks were climbed en route before establishing a camp at 2030m on a tributary glacier above the upper Nordenskiöld Gletscher. Here the weather closed in for several days and delayed a move to Shackletons Bjerg. Finally a five-man group crossed the broken Nordenskiöld Gletscher and established a camp below the SW ridge. In deteriorating weather the team made an attempt on the summit but were beaten back by high winds and low temperatures just before it was necessary to leave for the rendezvous with the aircraft which, having dropped an expedition from the Derby Mountain Rescue Team close to **Shackletons Bjerg**, brought in yet another party!

The new group was led by Paul Walker and Nigel Edwards and experienced mixed weather but nevertheless made 18 ascents in the area including two of **Shackletons Bjerg** before moving to the head of the Passagegletscher where they made several ascents, including repeat ascents of the peaks climbed earlier in the year by the Belgian group, before being picked up by helicopter.

At the same time as the last group were in the field the Derby Mountain Rescue Team Expedition led by Steve Hilditch were based close to the foot of the SE face of **Shackletons Bjerg** and made the second ascent of the mountain by the SE face. (The mountain was first ascended in 1953 by a group of Swiss geologists led by John Haller while working for the Lauge Koch East Greenland Expeditions.) Subsequently the Derby team made the ascents of a further 20 peaks and tops in the area before being flown out.

At the very northern tip of Greenland Dennis Schmitt took the third of his Euro-American N Greenland Expeditions into the field in Peary Land in July. The expedition had a broad focus of archaeology, botany, ornithology and mountaineering as its objectives. First ascents of a peak west of Kap Morris Jessup, named **Ikiorti** (1000m) and the S Ridge of **Pt. 1310m**, together with the second ascent of **Birgit Koch Tinde** (1700m), were made and claimed as the most northerly mountains in the world.

Wordsworth wrote, 'Two voices are there, one of the sea and one of the mountains, each a mighty voice.' Greenland is no exception and has its followers of both voices amongst whom in 1998 were Bob Shepton and his five-person 'in the steps of Tilman' expedition. They sailed to W Greenland from Scotland in a Westerly 53' Discus Sloop which had a 'testing' passage to Nuuk from where the party sailed north to the Akuliarusinguaq peninsula and Qeqertarsuaq Island. Using the boat as a base numerous ascents were made, including five first ascents, before commencing the long voyage home.

Having flown to Narsarssuaq in early July Chris Bonington and Jerry Gore had a frustrating time making contact with Robin Knox Johnson who seems to have spent the entire summer moving his boat from one ice-locked harbour to another, just out of synchronisation with various parties of crew and climbers trying to catch up with him. Chris and Jerry finally got on board at Augpilatok and one good route was established up **Pt. 960m** behind the settlement. Other activity in the hills was constrained by the perpetual problem of having a boat in the Arctic; the need never to be too far away and always to be aware of the ice. The trip finished with a soccer match lost 7-1 to the locals before the ice relented enough to release the boat for its return to Iceland.

With rather smaller craft in mind Hugh and Myrtle Simpson and Roger and Maud Tuft flew into Mestersvig in early August hoping to make a kajak circumnavigation of Suess Land, just east of the **Petermanns Bjerg** and **Shackletons Bjerg** massifs. Having reached the head of Dicksons Fjord in 11 days a lengthy reconnaissance failed to locate a route around the lower section of the Hisingers Gletscher and thus to the head of Kjerulfs Fjord where the kayaking could continue. The party returned by the outward route to Mestersvig where they met John Hay and Iain Smart who had been frustrated in their plan to take a Zodiac inflatable from Mestersvig to Ittoqqortoormiit (Scoresbysund!) by heavy coastal pack ice.

It was recorded in last year's Greenland Notes that Arved Fuchs was wintering the boat the *Dagmar Aaen* in Ittoqqortoormiit before attempting to follow the route of the German North Polar Expedition led by Karl Koldewey in 1868-1870. A party of four set off in the spring on ski, leaving the *Dagmar Aaen* still frozen in, and reached the old winter harbour of Koldewey's ship *Germania* on Sabine Island. The party continued northwards along the coast and reached Koldewey's furthest north at lat. 77°N, near to Danmarkshavn weather station, after a journey of 800km in 60 days. The *Dagmar Aaen*, unlike Koldewey's *Hansa*, was able to break free from the ice later in the year and make a safe return to Hamburg in October.