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DEREK FORDHAM

## Greenland 2004

*These notes are less comprehensive than the author would wish because of a lack of responses from many expeditions. The response rate for traverses of the inland ice was particularly low. Those who visit this region or have information on other expeditions are strongly encouraged to make contact.*

### Inland Ice

The lure of the Inland Ice seemed to diminish in 2004, only 21 of the 35 sporting expedition permits issued being for traverses, all but one by what is now the trade route between Ammassalik and Kangerdlugssuaq. Five of these planned to travel west to east and 16 east to west with one group following the shorter, more southerly, original Nansen route.

The first trans-Greenland expedition to start, on 2 April, was the Estonian Greenland Expedition of Rain Lond and Marko Kalve who starting from Isortoq reached Kangerdlugssuaq on 3 May (32 days). This first Estonian expedition to tackle the Inland Ice had to endure strong winds on the east coast and lost a total of 5 days to bad weather. Snow conditions were poor on the eastern flank of the ice cap and limited progress in temperatures that bottomed at  $-32^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

Gurkha Extreme (UK) was a project by ten members of the Brigade of Gurkhas to complete a series of extreme challenges. These included running six marathons in 6 days, completing the Devizes to London canoe course, and finishing with a crossing of the Inland Ice. Starting from a helicopter drop on the Hahn glacier on 16 April, thus avoiding the access problems often encountered by parties starting from sea level, the group reached the Russell glacier on 15 May (29 days). This achievement is perhaps remarkable in that five of the team had never skied until a month before the expedition began. The team carried out a number of scientific projects in the areas of human metabolism and psychological coping strategies. They also reported that conditions were unusually cold and that of nine expeditions on the Inland Ice at the same time only three successfully completed their crossings, showing that the lessons that should have been learned from the series of rescues last year have not been fully assimilated by the authorities or many expedition planners.

The Scottish Trans-Greenland Expedition consisting of Alistair Simpson and Patrick Lewtas (UK) started on 23 May also from the Hahn glacier and reached Pt 660m on the Russell glacier on 4 July (41 days). Their first major problem was a ski binding which repeatedly detached itself from the ski and was finally positioned by an arrangement of which Heath Robinson



110. Paddy Lewtas with 30-35kg pulk, near Pt 660m at the end of the expedition. We walked for 15 kilometres like this over broken fissured ice. (*Alistair Simpson*)

would have been proud. The second major problem was the supra-glacial drainage system which establishes itself every year in early summer over an extensive area on the steep and broken Russell glacier and which presents a daunting finish to expeditions that choose this route. Both team members fell through the ice into melt pools and, due to the broken and fissured ice which was engulfing the remains of the ice road to the car test facility, as they neared Pt 660m were forced to relay their equipment off the ice.

It is perhaps worth noting that the Russell glacier is a truly appalling place to choose to access or exit the Inland Ice and that it is used by the majority of crossing parties only because it leads directly to or from the airfield at Kangerdlugssuaq. There are many other places where access

onto and off the Inland Ice is much easier, and even pleasant, but their use requires a little bit of extra effort to establish a transport link between Kangerdlugssuak and the chosen location.

On 23 June, three members of the Karlsen family led by Finn Yngve Karlsen (Norway) set off from Umivik to follow the route Nansen used when he made the first crossing of Greenland in 1888. They made a difficult 250km boat journey down the east coast from Kulusuk but were able to ski onto the Inland Ice immediately from sea level. In 6 days of excellent weather they passed most of the marginal crevassing to reach 2000m, but once they reached the central area of the Inland Ice at 2800m the weather deteriorated, the temperature dropped to  $-35^{\circ}\text{C}$  and the group lost 5 days. At 2300m the weather improved and a favourable wind allowed the use of ski sails until crevassing and melt water near the west coast presented the inevitable problems and forced the abandonment of some equipment. From the Inland Ice the expedition walked 40km to Ameralik Fjord and camped at Nansen's tent place on the fjord. Unlike Nansen and Sverdrup they did not build their own boat, but instead walked a further 12 hours to an Inuit settlement where they were able to organise a boat to Godthab.

The 4-man Imperial College Trans-Greenland Expedition under the leadership of Daniel Carrivick (UK) made a late start from Isortoq on 11 August and reached the western edge of the Inland Ice on 9 September (29 days). Starting with pulk weights of 70-100kg according to each individual's perceived pulling ability, they made good early progress in favourable weather. Up to day 15 they achieved a daily average of 20-22km, after which their progress was slowed by increasing cloud and fresh snow. Progress was stopped entirely on day 18 by strengthening winds that reached 125km/h. The following day the wind dropped and allowed good progress to be made on the now wind-hardened surface, although this gain was somewhat cancelled out by one member having to ski on one ski due to a broken binding. Softer snow reached after a few days allowed the re-attached binding to function and the expedition achieved its daily distance record of 28km just before reaching the abandoned ice road. Unable to use the road as an easy exit as planned, the expedition had to ferry their equipment to the ice edge, meeting the same problems as earlier parties. By this late in the season most of the melt water was frozen and presented little problem. The expedition claim to have eaten 4500 calories per day and encountered temperatures ranging from  $0^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

### **Watkins Mountains**

There was considerable activity in the Watkins Mountains, mainly centred on the easily accessible (by aircraft!) area near **Gunnbjørnsfeld**.

The first reported expedition was a 5-person group arranged by Tangent Expeditions (UK) and led by Phil Poole who flew in towards the end of April. In generally good weather they climbed Gunnbjørnsfeld (3693m), Dome (Qaqqaq Kershaw, 3682m), Cone (Qaqqaq Johnson, 3669m),



111. Per Ove Oppedal on Istind. A first ascent on the last day of climbing for the Norwegian G4 Expedition. The view is south to south-east. (*Jan-Frode Myklebust*)



Outpost and two unnamed peaks near Gunnbjørnsfjeld. One team member suffered suspected appendicitis at 3000m near Dome, but fortunately it cleared sufficiently that he only had to be hospitalised on the return to Iceland.

On 15 May the 6-man G4 Expedition (Norway) flew in to the glacier below Gunnbjørnsfjeld and from there made ascents of Gunnbjørnsfjeld, Dome and Cone. Per Ove Oppedal and Torstein Skage carried skis to all three summits and made the first ski descents of Gunnbjørnsfjeld and Dome. They also made the second ski descent of Cone, having been beaten to the first descent by a team of their countrymen from Tromsø who were just one day ahead of them. In a long day from their base camp the team then climbed a twin-horned peak they referred to as Styggehorn (3503m) overlooking the Christian IV glacier which they believed to be the highest unclimbed mountain in Greenland. They then moved to the east to the Bergen gletscher area and set up a new base from where they made claimed first ascents of peaks named as Anita Fjeld (2466m), Ebeth (2628m), Snefjeld (2650m) and Istind (2667m) with ski descents of the first two. In the early part of the trip they experienced temperatures of  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$  to  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ , but towards the end of May it warmed to  $-5^{\circ}\text{C}$  -  $+5^{\circ}\text{C}$ .

Jim Hall, Bob Kerr, Rae Pritchard and Ros Murray from The Rucksack Club (UK) were the next group to visit the area in late May. They made ascents of Gunnbjørnsfjeld and Dome as well as the claimed first ascents of two peaks of 3020m and 2908m around the head of a tributary of the Woolley glacier. They also made attempts on a 2775m peak at the head of the Woolley glacier and on Julia (3455m), the 7th highest in Greenland, both unsuccessful due to cold feet described as 'literal and metaphorical'.

## East Coast

Further north on the east coast and running the risk more of wet feet than cold feet was the 7-man Greenland White Sea Expedition (UK) who sailed their own boat (skipper Ron Newton) from Portsmouth to **Kangerdlugssuaq**. They left the UK on 19 May and, despite a broken boom off Iceland, reached Kangerdlugssuaq on 2 August. Access to the inner fjord was thwarted by a combination of a heavy swell and extensive pack ice, so they adopted plan B and established a camp at sea level at the head of Mikis Fjord. From here, they made several excursions into the coastal mountains of up to 1200m. The limited window of opportunity such a sailing dependent expedition has available meant that the expedition had to sail on 10 August, reaching Iceland on 12 August where the boat was left for the winter.

Perhaps more suitable Arctic vessels were used by the 3-man Greenland East Coast Kayak Expedition led by Martin Rickard (UK) who starting on 16 July kayaked from Kulusuk northwards to **Lake Fjord** and back to Ammassalik. Lake Fjord is where Gino Watkins drowned while kayaking in 1932 and one of the expedition's objectives was to re-erect the cross left

there in his memory. This was duly done and the return journey to Ammassalik was completed on 29 July where the team continued their work with the local kayak club that they had helped establish some years previously.

In the interior of **Scoresbysund** a 3-man party led by Hugh Mackay (UK) was helicoptered on 3 July to the watershed of the Korridoren glacier where they established a base camp. During a couple of weeks at this site the group made five ski-mountaineering first ascents of peaks ranging from 1513m to 2065m in perfect weather.

Also in the same area of Milne Land, from 21 July to 9 August were the 29 (!) members of the West Lancashire Scouts East Greenland Expedition (UK) under the leadership of Dick Griffiths. During their stay in the area they made ascents of over 20 peaks (19 thought to be first ascents) in addition to carrying out botanical investigations of Arctic willow.

The weather experienced was more changeable than it had been for the earlier expedition with 10 'bad' days during two of which snow fell.

Further north in the 'Arctic Riviera' Hans Laptun (Norway) and 2 companions, starting from Nathorstfjord, continued his expeditions tracing the travels and huts of his father who had been a trapper in the area before WW2. The weather was not as it should have been on the 'Riviera' and they encountered much rain, wind and mist.

The Nanok group who every year carries out a programme of restoring the old trappers' huts was active again in the region between Germania Land and Shannon. On Shannon they worked on restoring the Alabama hut erected in 1910 from the wreck of the expedition ship 'Alabama'. This is where Ejnar Mikkelsen and Iver Iversen spent an enforced 2 years alone after returning from a long sledging expedition to find their shipwrecked companions had been picked up by a passing sealer.

## South Greenland

The 7-person British 2004 **Torssukatak Fjord** Expedition led by Leanne Callaghan (UK) was in the field between 26 July and 25 August. The weather was good for all but 4 days, and they climbed six new routes of considerable difficulty on The Baron and The Baronet, the main twin peaks dominating the island of Pamiagdluk. Tim Riley was injured in a rock fall 9 days into the expedition and suffered chest injuries that required his evacuation. The expedition members lowered him from the mountain and got him to base camp but it was 5 days before a passing boat saw the group's signals from the shore, their satellite telephone having been damaged on arrival at base. Tim has made a good recovery.

The Karabiner Mountain Club (UK) also mounted an expedition to **Kangerdluarssuaq Fjord** on Pamiagdluk Island where they experienced poor weather but managed to establish a number of mountain routes of up to AD+ and rock routes to E3.

## West Coast

Bob Shepton, leader of The Greenland Arctic Challenge (UK), sailed his boat across the Atlantic in June/July and in poor weather made his first mountaineering stop at **Kangerdluarssugssuaq** north of Nuuk (Godthab). A long mountain day resulted in him and his companion finding a 'dirty great cairn' on Pt 1650m, their chosen summit! Sailing on to the Akuliarusinguaq peninsula, his team had as their objectives four 2000m+ peaks that Bob's earlier expeditions had opted to leave. This was for good reason it seems, since the peaks did not entirely submit to this year's onslaught either! Various groups also made a number of small sorties at different points on the peninsula. On 13 August Bob made a solo ascent of Solo Snow Dome (2065m), and in the following days the crew in various combinations made first ascents of 4 peaks on the Qeqertarsuaq peninsula.

After various crew changes the boat sailed north to Etah, and following that probably established a furthest north record for a fibreglass boat at 78°32' in Smith Sound – at the same time noting 'attractive ski-mountaineering possibilities' in NW Greenland. On the return south Polly Murray and Tash Wright made a ski traverse along the length of Herbert Island before the expedition pressed on to Upernivik where the boat and Bob were to spend the winter to await the second stage of the expedition due to take place in 2005. Bob spent his 70th birthday on the boat frozen into the ice of Upernavik harbour but, sadly, during the over-wintering, while he was re-fuelling the boat, it caught fire and was totally destroyed.

These notes started with a statement that the lure of traversing the Inland Ice had perhaps begun to diminish. It is interesting, therefore, to end with the contrast posed by an expedition whose leader Kasuo Kojima (Japan) had as his goal a traverse of the Inland Ice. Nothing surprising in that except that this expedition started in Irkutsk in Siberia in 1997 and its leader was lured by that goal for all the intervening years. Kasuo wanted to trace the route followed by the prehistoric Mongoloid people as they expanded from central Asia into the Arctic, and his original plan was to cover some 22,000 km by dog sledge in 4 years. However, many delays arose or were created to impede his progress (he was imprisoned by the Russians for 35 days). It was not until 30 June 2004 that he reached Ammassalik. His route with his dogs had taken him through Siberia, across the Bering Strait, through the Canadian Arctic islands, and then from Grise Fjord on Ellesmere Island across Smith Sound to Siorapaluk in NW Greenland. From there he travelled by dog sledge, with one re-supply, southwards down the Inland Ice to finish at Ammassalik after a total distance covered of 28,000km. Beat that!