Lanchester Greenland 2001

As we sat in the departure lounge at Stansted, the flight for Ibiza was called. After 18 months of hard preparation and planning, we were really tempted by the idea of sun, sea and showers, but no - we were aspiring polar explorers, and Greenland was our chosen destination.

Most of our food and equipment was already there: deposited some three weeks before by a Twin-Otter ski-plane operating out of Iceland. We'd put in too much money and too many late nights to reconsider. Training had been received in such diverse skills as free-heel skiing, morphine injection and short range heavy rifle firing (in case of polar bears). With only the airline's reluctance to carry distress flares (i.e. explosives) as a possible hurdle, we departed.

A day was spent in Reykjavik en route, enabling us to pick up the cheese, salami, lard and butter that was missing from our rations. Owing to the restrictions on exports from the UK in light of the Foot and Mouth epidemic, we were forced to buy certain items at Icelandic prices. Thankfully, we'd managed to freight our sponsored chocolate biscuits and chocolate bars through in the midst of a disagreement between four government departments about which dairy products were permitted.

First thing the following morning we caught an internal flight to Akureyri on the northern coast of Iceland, to rendezvous with the Twin-Otter we'd chartered to take us to Greenland. Our objective was to explore the northern reaches of the Lindbergh Mountains - an area of about 1000 square km into which no-one had ever set foot - and scale some of the dozens of unclimbed peaks in the region. The Lindberghs are at 69 N 31 W, about 100 km inland on the edge of the Icecap - over 350 km away from the nearest inhabited place. Remote, to put it mildly.

We had chosen to make the flight directly from Iceland. This pushed the Twin-Otter some way past it's usual range, so some modifications were required. To lighten the plane, the carpets and most of the seats were removed, and replaced by a supplementary fuel tank (connected to the fuel line by some rubber hose and a jubilee clip!). With the no-smoking signs firmly lit, we flew to Isafjordur for refuelling, and then headed North.

Having flown for about an hour, the pack-ice came into sight below. We gazed at this strange, mottled surface beneath us, but soon had another stunning vista to tempt us: as land came into view. Steep 'alpine' peaks as far as the eye could see, interspersed with broad glaciated valleys calving icebergs into the frozen Denmark Straights.

The Arctic was everything we'd expected and more. Turning inland we crossed range after range, skimming the top of Gunnbjorn's Fjeld (the highest mountain in the Arctic), before dropping between the peaks to locate the glacier that was to be our home for the next 23 days.

A cheer went up as our kit dump came into view through the cockpit windscreen, and within a few seconds we'd made the heart-stopping landing on the soft snow of the glacier. You could tell by the grins from the pilots that they didn't do this every day.

With one engine still running, we rapidly offloaded the kit, shook hands with the pilots, and within a couple of minutes they were gone. As the plane disappeared from sight, the sensation of being extremely alone really sank in.

With the temperature at -8 C and dropping, there was no time to stand around in wonder, so the 2 days of hard graft setting up basecamp was started. Tents were dug in (including the frameless group tent); food and fuel stores built; and latrines and water harvesting areas established.

These two 32 hour days of preparation also served to flip our body-clocks through 12 hours. We did this to enable us to climb when the snow is at it's coldest: hardening the crust and reducing avalanche risk. The down side of this is that you climb in temperatures that (allowing for windchill) can drop below -30 C, and then try to sleep in a tent acting as a solar oven that can rise above +30 C.

All such talk of day and night is largely academic from the point of view of light. That far north at mid-summer sees the sun circling overhead, sometimes dropping low enough to pass behind the higher peaks, but it is never darker than an overcast day in the UK. We didn't take torches - they couldn't be justified in our ridiculously tight weight limits. Neither did we take complete changes of clothing; emergency rations; or virtually any spare technical kit: all were eliminated as being too heavy.

So, with light rucksacks, we set about climbing some mountains - our primary reason for being there. As an unexplored area, there was minimal information on our objectives. We had a 1:150,000 aerial photo taken in 1981; and some very sketchy maps we'd "acquired" from a foreign military source, dated 1968 and repeatedly printed with the disclaimer "relief data incomplete". There were no terrestrial photos, and there are no guidebooks.

Generally, the done thing was to look at a peak from a few miles away, pick the easiest line, and go for it. During the ascent you could then note how most turned out to be much bigger, steeper, and harder than they'd appeared. As a rule, we avoided the rock, as it varied between small and very loose to large and very loose. Snow faces and gullies were used, and wherever possible ridges were preferred due to the reduction in objective danger (i.e. nothing to fall on you, even though the exposure is much greater).

There is an exception to every rule, which Ian admirably demonstrated when he fell through a cornice, and landed astride the rock ridge beneath. A close call, as had he been 3 feet to the right, he could have fallen 3000 feet to the glacier below - probably dragging Dominic with him.

After a week of climbing those summits within a day's striking distance of basecamp, we embarked upon various ski-tours to adjoining glaciers. Skiing was virtually essential, as the skis give one sufficient bearing to travel on the snow without sinking through the crust. Walking in heavy boots (as we did on climbs) through 12 inches of loose snow with the crust breaking almost every step, is a miserable alternative.

In groups of 2 or 3, we took tents, stoves, and all the kit to establish advance camps. To aid our travel, we had taken three pulk sledges. These made glacier travel much easier, and enabled us to take much heavier loads than we could carry on our backs. One does, however, have to take particular care on downhill stretches, as the pulks can suddenly provide a significant impetus from the rear. Controlling this un-braked "trailer" can be a bruising skill to master, particularly when free-heel skiing in lace-up boots!

Nevertheless, we made over a dozen remote camps on tours of up to 4 days from basecamp: exploring most of the Lindbergh range, and traversing the crest of the Icecap. This enabled us to make a number of further ascents, and photograph the range from all angles. The touring, coupled with only 4 days of bad weather, assisted us in making ascents of 25 virgin peaks - fairly prolific for a team of 6 with effectively 16 days of climbing and skiing.

During our trip, we also aimed to make some demonstrable statements about how we felt mountaineering expeditions should operate in the wilds. You will no-doubt have read about the ecological disaster areas that accompany many of the worlds more popular mountain destinations. Waste, equipment, and in some cases bodies, litter places which were (and should remain) pure and largely inert.

To that end, we undertook to remove all of our waste and equipment. The latter may seem obvious, but in places such as the polar regions: with extortionate transportation costs, it can be cheaper to ditch kit and replace it, than to fly it home.

Don't read the next bit over dinner!

Our commitment to waste repatriation also extended to all solid human waste. When in basecamp, we "went" directly into a freight barrel, and whilst not in use, a chimney was erected (made from cardboard and gaffer-tape) to enable the faeces to dehydrate, yet prevent the ingress of snow. On the ski-tours, we "went" in the snow, left it to freeze,

and then placed the offending items in zip-seal freezer bags. We then carried them in the pulks back to base where they were transferred to the barrel.

At the time of writing, our "barrel of joy" is festering in an aircraft hangar in northern Iceland. Barring any troubles with Customs, it will be freighted back to us in the UK, and divested to a licenced waste disposal firm. There are obviously cost implications of repatriating waste, but as a team we were unanimous in wishing to leave a previously unvisited area as clean as possible.

Alas, all too soon the day came when we had to depart. We waited for hours with our kit packed, playing cards and scrabble, and listening for the plane. In the Arctic, things change - primarily due to the weather, and our pick-up time was far from certain. We were due to be collected on "Sunday or Monday", so there was every chance that we'd have to unpack the tents and stay another night. However, the purr of engines was heard about 3 pm, and the Twin-Otter landed with its wing over our pile of kit. We loaded quickly. Bad weather was forecast, and if we hadn't got out fast, we would have been stuck for 4 days, plane and all.

The Twin-Otter flew us via the Watkins Mountains back to Isafjordur, where our re-introduction to civilisation was phased in gently. Taking our first showers for 24 days was an event welcomed by both ourselves and the locals alike!

We had a few days to kill in Iceland on our return (the weather window), so tried our best to be proper tourists, visiting places like Geysir and the Blue Lagoon. Then it was on to the UK, and back to work with a bump: trying to survive not only being indoors, but in +30 C heat. Harsh.

Still lots to do by way of reports, lectures, etc. - enough to keep us busy till Christmas. That said, the ideas are already floating for the next trip. All we need to do is save up enough leave, and another £30,000!

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PATRONS: Derek Walker - President, British Mountaineering Council and David Garbett - formerly of the Scott Polar Research Institute.
Supported by: The UK Sports Council; The BMC; The Mount Everest Foundation; The Arctic Club; The Gino Watkins Memorial Fund and The Eagle Ski Club.
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