

ARCTIC CLUB AWARD 2006

OXFORD UNIVERSITY GREENLAND EXPEDITION

During August the Oxford University Greenland Expedition explored and climbed in an area to the north of the Watkins Mountains in East Greenland. The three members, Hauke Engel, Ben Spencer and Chris Abbott, all undergraduates on their first expedition, made twelve first ascents of unclimbed peaks, and travelled 90km through largely unexplored terrain.

Flying in from Iceland by Twin Otter at the beginning of August, we established a base-camp on the vast Gronland Styrelsens Gletscher, at the northern edge of the Gronau Nunatakker. Martin Lindsay and his team passed through this region in 1934, but the area has seen very few expeditions since. The first climb of the expedition was also one of our finest achievements - a 28-hour ascent of a peak we named Mount Currahee (2613m), which involved steep ice, an interesting bergschrund, and an unplanned bivvy just below the summit! A somewhat extreme introduction to the Arctic!

After a day of recuperation and equipment maintenance we set off the following night, hauling our pulks up and onto the Greenland icecap. Crevasse fields provided for interesting breaks during rather monotonous pulk-hauling, but were navigated without incident. Over the next three weeks we travelled 90km across the southern edge of the Knud Rasmussen Land icecap, frequently venturing into the mountains that form its border. The good snow and ice made for fantastic Alpine-style climbing (as long as the basalt was avoided!), and we put up routes ranging in difficulty from *facile* to *assez difficile*. Our most notable ascents were established in an unexplored range we named the Oxford Nunatakker, just to the west of the huge Christian IV glacier. We climbed six of the seven peaks in this group, small nunatakker at *facile* and *petit difficile* standard, retreating off the seventh mountain after several hours climbing hard and steep ice slightly outside our comfort zone.

After crossing the 12km-wide Christian IV glacier, we were kept in the tent for a day due to zero visibility. We were rather bemused to see the thermometer reach +7 degrees celcius during our confinement. With down sleeping bags rated to -25 degrees, we were in serious danger of over-heating! To make matters worse, it began to rain! Finally the clouds cleared, an ascent of a nearby peak gave us a good look-out on the route ahead, and again we dragged our sledges up onto the icecap. After three more days of travelling, a peak and a speedy descent off the icecap thrown in for variety, we reached our pick-up area. Snowfall kept us in the tent for two days, and when the sun was out again we achieved another ascent with some pretty tricky route-finding, and then negotiated the last crevasse-field to reach our pick-up point. The last few days of the expedition saw the thermometer plummet to around -20 degrees, with some heavy wind taking the effective temperature down further. An attempt on a prominent nearby mountain had to be aborted less than 100m from the summit due to biting cold and extremely strong winds.

On 28th August the wind died down and the sun shone brightly for the first time for a few days - perfect conditions for the Twin Otter landing. After 13 months of planning, preparation, training, and above all, fundraising, we were in agreement that the expedition had been everything we had dreamt of and more. We are extremely grateful to the Arctic Club for their generous grant, which enabled such a successful expedition to come into existence, and has spawned many plans for the future!