

## The second ascent of Gunnbjorn's Fjeld, East Greenland.

David Matthews

Summary of a talk given to the Scottish Arctic Club annual meeting in Dundee; November 2010.

The second attempt by Alastair Allen in 1971 to gain access to this "honeypot peak" (first climbed in 1935) in what was, at the time, a relatively inaccessible part of East Greenland, involved a small anglo-danish group of five individuals (there were to have been six, but the doctor dropped out) and the idea of an approach by sea from the south. Earlier interest in 1969 and 1970 had centred on approaches from Scoresbysund to the north and had failed partly because of very poor conditions in both years. Alastair Allen spent a month in whiteout before escaping down into Gaase Fjord and Ross got into trouble in inflatable boats off the coast and had to be rescued, leading to the Danish authorities imposing a compulsory insurance condition for all groups in 1971 and thereafter.

The 1971 expedition was fairly typical for its time in having a patron (Col. Andrew Croft) a UK agent (Derek Fordham, at that time just returned from his icecap crossing) and a fund-raising programme approaching many firms and individuals. It was unusual in having Ebbe Munk as a danish sponsor, one of the original 1935 expedition and, in 1971, an official in the retinue of the danish royal family who took an interest in us. We were given a high profile send-off with a lunch at the danish embassy in London.



A commercial flight to Reykjavik in pursuit of our heavy gear, sent earlier by ship direct to Angmagssalik, was followed by the charter of a Beech twin engined plane (no twin Otters in Iceland in those days), which took us on a simple flight to Kulusuk - once we had got off the ground in a heavily over-loaded plane at the old Reykjavik city airport - and thence by local boat to Angmagssalik (now Tasilaq).

After a week in town, we managed to arrange a charter of the old coastal supply boat Einar Mikkelsen to take us up the coast, and a rather vague undertaking that a supply boat would also be around at the end of the summer to collect us. Captain Neils Underbjerg on the Einar Mikkelsen was as good as his word and



took us as far as Kangerdklugssuak Fjord before meeting heavy pack. A brief visit to the radio station at Aputiteq was a highlight, and allowed time for the pack to shift a little. Even so, we were unable to reach our target landing at the snout of Rosenberg Glacier and had to unload onto the pack ice in nearby Kivioqs Fjord. This meant working like crazy to drag our gear and supplies to



the safety of land before the pack ice carried us all out into the Denmark Strait. Our landing point was at the foot of impressive and totally impassable 1000 metre-high cliffs with constant rock falls, but a small glacier to one side suggested that





there might be a way of escaping from this seeming trap, and so it turned out. With some heavy back-packing and sledge hauling, we were able to cross a low but steep pass and arrive down on the Rosenberg Glacier at a point just above the heavily crevassed lower section where it fell away into the sea. It was a lucky break.

Sledging up the Rosenberg was a doddle apart from some melt streams, but five men pulling a single heavily loaded Nansen type sledge for five days was hard work and a lot less agreeable than the individual freedom

afforded by modern one-man pulkas; anglo-danish relations and language underwent their first real test.

At the head of the Rosenberg, surrounded by immense basalt cliffs some 2000 metres high, we established a base camp, realising by this time that we were in the lucky position of enjoying an exceptionally fine spell of summer weather. It was an idyllic spot but it held a

threat of difficult things to come in that our proposed route to GBF (Gunnbjorns Fjeld) lay

up an icefall which, at close range, looked exceptionally broken and fast-moving. As the only mountaineer in the party I did not like the look of it, but we prepared an attempt and set out with skis, back packs and about a week's supplies, in the early hours of the morning when things were frozen up.

My fears proved justified. About two thirds of the way up (around 600 metres), the situation was becoming increasingly precarious with collapsing seracs and extremely broken ice, and with the top section still invisible to us but likely to present us with massive crevasse

problems for which we had no bridging or other equipment. After some grumbling, my recommendation of retreat was grudgingly accepted and we found a tiny and very precarious level space on a crevasse bridge to prop up a tent, have a brew and sit out the heat of the day while all around us the icefall heaved and groaned and

crashed in most spectacular fashion. Escape downhill in the cool of the next night left us all feeling more than a little relieved.

Back at base camp, there was much head scratching and a recce was made over to the west to see if there were possibilities on that side; actually the side from which the original successful first ascent had been made in 1935 across the huge Christian IV Glacier. We didn't intend to tangle with that glacier with its extensive melt and slush lakes, but reckoned that there was a possibility of making progress along a small side glacier called Korridorren. The main snag with this plan was that our old maps were fairly inadequate and our ERTS satellite photos (the first available at that time) were very small scale, so it was difficult to see exactly where GBF was. We decided we could spare a week from the expedition timetable to make an attempt so, after sledging up to an advance base camp, we shouldered a week's supplies and, by skiing at night to



avoid the very intense daytime sun, made our way easily along Korridoren to where we guessed we should turn right and start an ascent. We were correct, luckily, though the route involved us in some straightforward ice climbing, and we emerged on the western shoulder of what was recognisably GBF with only a short narrow ridge leading up to the summit - we hoped. We bivvied there but the cloud came in below us for the first and only time that summer so that the ascent next day was made without distant landmarks for reference.

After ascending an easy but slightly exposed ridge, we emerged on top - or did we. Nearby we could see two more summits at almost the same height, unknown and unmapped. With no horizon for reference it was clear that they were at least contenders for the honour of highest point within the arctic circle. We didn't have time to climb them or to explore the area further, but eventually convinced ourselves that we were in fact on the highest point and so we named the other two tops Cone and Dome, with great originality, after their obvious shapes. {In fact the resulting controversy rumbled on for some years, at



one stage a Swedish team claiming that they had made the first ascents of Cone and Dome and that they were higher than GBF, but the dispute was eventually settled by a survey expedition led by Derek Fordham some years later which confirmed our claims and put the height of GBF at 3693 metres and the other two tops at 10 and 25 metres lower}.

Our descent was simple enough, retracing our steps down the ridge to another very cold bivouac, eventually regaining our base camp on Rosenberg Glacier several days later, by which time the hot sunny weather had returned.

With some funds allocated to scientific work, we did our best to fulfill this part of the expedition programme while

sledging back down the Rosenberg. First of all a geological study which eventually resulted in a short paper on the peculiarities of our base camp area and the possibility that it may be the roof zone of an as yet unknown Tertiary igneous intrusion. Then there was a lot of botanical collecting to do for Dr Halliday at



Lancaster University, there being plenty of plant material growing in the basalt scree and soils below the lava cliffs. Finally, at the lower end of the Rosenberg



opposite our access pass, there was the massive Lilloise Bjerge, originally sighted from a ship in the 1930s and known to be almost certainly another Tertiary intrusion. We were able to gain access to the massif for the first time, though only with considerable difficulty, and collect enough rock to confirm the essential nature of some of the intrusion. {I visited it again in 1974 with a follow-up expedition which was able to make a slightly more detailed study, but the extremely steep cliffs and the technically difficult nature of the terrain, means that even

today this massif is relatively unexplored and is ripe for what I am convinced could be an extremely exciting and rewarding study - not to mention an impressive first ascent}.

The return over our pass and down to the coast was hampered only by the relative lack of snow so that our old sledge was just about wrecked by being dragged over moraines. Down at the beach depot, all was in order though our booby traps had fired and there were bear prints all around; luckily the inflatable boats were undamaged as they were our only means of escape. We had, a few days previously, made radio contact with Aputiteq and learnt that m/v Polarbjørn would be in their area in about one week so we had no time for dawdling and soon had all the gear packed into the two Gemini inflatables along with two large drums of petrol for the outboards perched on top of the load, ready to set out on the 250 odd miles back to Kangerdlugssuak Fjord.



The pack ice was thinner and further out to sea than at the beginning of the season, leaving us with

easier progress, but meaning that there was a long swell to deal with which made landings very difficult. In fact, each night we had to boat a long way into the nearest fjord in order to be able to land and make a camp. Toilet arrangements on the boats I will leave to the reader's imagination! We had one or two difficult moments during the voyage, not toilet related, such as when we were trapped by an extensive patch of heavier pack and so hauled the boats up onto a large floe for a rest, only to find that it was already occupied by an impressive female and two cub polar bears, or when we experienced one day of quite large swells meaning that our heavily loaded boats were moving around a lot. It was frequently impossible for one boat to see the other if either was in a trough between two large waves. However, we managed to stay together and after five days, reach Kangerdlugssuak where we were given a great welcome



by a traditional Inuit hunting family in residence there and where, the next day, m/v Polarbjørn arrived on schedule and took us on board. It was a far from luxurious voyage home in this famous but ancient Norwegian sealer, but a fitting end to a successful and most enjoyable eight week trip.



{Expedition members; Alastair Allen, leader; David Matthews, geologist; Torben Eriksen, ex Sirius Patrol; Vagn Bjerre Christensen, market gardener; Steen Mørup, physicist}