

Long wait in



Dr Philip Gribbon
(photographs by Ian Walton)

The smooth powerful climb of the Boeing 727 jet took us through the cloud-layers into the sunshine. The hills of Scotland were lost in the murk. The cracked and cratered lava plains of Iceland were one-and-a-half hours ahead over the Atlantic Ocean. It was June 23 and the St Andrews Cape Farewell Expedition was under way.

We walked out of the warm comfort of the airfield terminal buildings at the NATO base of Keflavik into the clean, wide freedom of the northlands. On the mossy tundra, behind windbreak walls, we slept as the sun moved round over our shoulders, with the Arctic terns hovering overhead, and the golden plovers piping suspiciously at the perimeter of our overnight campsite.

The big pickup truck bumped over the ground. The two tough policemen descended, hitched their thumbs in their belts and twirled their nightsticks.



Nanortalik



Above: Summit of Snow Maiden — the only snow summit we climbed. Biggar and Young standing with an attempted but unclimbed peak behind.

Above Left: The Fang was one of the most prominent peaks we climbed. After the ascent by the right skyline, we had bad weather and had to abandon our camp close by.

Left: Basecamp in mid-August after the first snows of the winter on the mountains. The main tent and piled teachests of the kitchen are shown with the author standing in the centre.

"You can't sleep here! But . . . we can't see the hell why not!" They grinned uncertainly, mounted their truck, and bumped away again. We slept on . . .

The sweep upward took our plane over the aquamarine sea, shadowed by cloud puffs. The flight towards the hazy fringe of the pack ice, the snow-covered hills dipping into the frozen sea,

was a race ahead of the sun. Southward, over the inland ice, we saw the jumbled profiled hills towards Cape Farewell. Dipping in a wide falling turn over a hilltop, the aircraft swooped abruptly towards the tarmac airstrip at Norsorssuaq. We had arrived in Greenland in the clear blue sparkling warmth of midsummer's Arctic day.

We sailed in an 80 ton coastal vessel *Taterak* towards the outer coast. *En route*, we called at the scattered farms of Brattahlid, their green fields surrounding the tenth-century church ruins of Erik the Red's first Viking settlement in Greenland, and from the ledges of granite cliff we collected a large school party returning from a summer camp. We neared the coast and we entered a chill shroud of fog; we threaded our way through some bleak islets to the main settlement at Julienhaab. There we spent a comfortable night adjusting our metabolic processes to the change in time zones. Our luck was beginning to grow. After being evicted from the

saloon of the *Taterak* on the quayside, we waited, negotiated and crossed our fingers hopefully. Our reward was a new dormitory in the school, provided with hot showers, cooking plates and luxurious downie bunk beds.

Through the Pack Ice

We reboarded the *Taterak*. It was to attempt its first journey through the mid-summer density of pack ice to Nanortalik. It had been several weeks since the last attempt had been tried by a fishing boat, but this had ended when a windblown crush of drifting ice had lifted the boat bodily on to a large ice floe and the crew had been rescued by a helicopter. Our whole attempt was to be a gamble. It is well known that a great barrier of pack ice builds up for many miles offshore during the early summer from May to August. Once the winter ice from the fjords and shores of the east coast of Greenland and the distant Arctic Ocean had been torn by wind and tide into the Denmark Strait,

it drifts southward and swings round Cape Farewell into the waters off its southwest coast of Greenland. There it builds up into a high-impenetrable barrier, moving slowly at the whim of the on-shore and off-shore winds. Under the right conditions, a narrow channel of open water may grow between the land and the off-shore pack ice barrier. Through this passage, a small boat may succeed in travelling between the isolated villages, dotted along the coast. The *Taterak* was on trial.

We sailed into the dispersing mist, spreading a long undulating wake into the still sea with its reflections of the blue sky. The ice floes thickened in the inter-island channels, but the *Taterak* pressed consistently, if erratically, onwards, bumping through the floes, and guided by the imperturbable captain standing alone high in the crow's nest on the masthead. Sometimes, the *Taterak* ground to a halt, reversed its engines, twisting and levering its way between the ice, damp under the drizzling mists.

We cleared the mist into a bright afternoon. Our chances of reaching Nanortalik on time were improving. We sailed from village to village in the sun, the scenery shifting into the spectacular silhouettes of the spires of Sermersok Island. The wake waves glimmered golden in the lowering sun. The captain re climbed the mast to hunt for the open leads in a fresh jumble of ice.

The mountains, long familiar from our aerial photos, began to show above the intervening ridges. We were within sight of our objectives. First, the stolid square tower of Kirkespiret sitting astride a gentle ridge, its blank faces thrust up from the Tundra, and behind we saw the vertical walls guarding the flat summits of the mountains attempted by our St Andrews predecessors in 1960. Over all, we saw the gray conical cap of Pingasiut, more than 2,000 metres of virgin rock waiting for someone, sometime.

At 9 pm, the *Taterak* drew in towards an unbroken line of waiting figures, who had gathered to welcome the boat by the quay at Nanortalik. The moment of truth was about to be revealed to us.

Equipment Delayed

It had so happened that shortly before we left Scotland, we had received a cable from our shipping company, KGH, in Copenhagen, to say that our equipment had not been sent on schedule, but it was expected that it might be on its way a few days after we had left Scotland. No explanation was given, no promises were made, nothing was certain. It was decided that it would be better to keep to our original plans, and fly to Greenland on schedule. The future could look after itself, once we were on Arctic ground. This was the moment we had been waiting for.

"We were temporarily at a dead end", wrote Peter Biggar. "The Danish



official who welcomed us at the quayside was courteous but seemed to entertain doubts as to whether we really existed or not.

'You stay in hotel?' he said.

'No money!' we said.

'Ah! But you have tents!'

'No! They're on the boat in Copenhagen.'

'No money and no tents?' He smiled nervously.

'No!'

'You have brought food with you, I suppose?'

'No! It's on the boat too.'

He laughed still more nervously at this and said, 'You have nowhere to sleep, no equipment, no food . . . I get chief!'

In the deepening dusk he found the chief. The negotiations went on to a satisfactory conclusion. We were taken to a new hostel that was used by the summer labour force of technicians and artisans brought in from Denmark to assist in the constructional work in the village. We toasted our good fortune with a suppertime dram of malt whisky.

We awoke to the first of our many cloudless days in Nanortalik. We began to explore the village and its surroundings. It was a typical Greenland settlement, growing rapidly outwards from a small harbour, with its pastel-painted Scandinavian houses and its wooden church, through the dusty main thoroughfare with its administrative huts, the supermarkets and the general bustle, into the scattered homes and the apartment blocks, the glass-littered grass and the garbage-dumped

gardens. At its outer limit the settlement merged into the gravel and sand pits, the town's water supply and the swimming hole, the helicopter pad and the football fields. Beyond this was tundra, abloom with summer flowers, and rising upwards to the barren hills of the island. We were to get to know it intimately in the next few days.

We found out what had happened to our equipment in distant Denmark. We had packed all our crates and chests, and shipped them from Leith in early May in time to catch the second sailing of the season to Nanortalik. However, unknown to us, the first sailing had been rather protracted because the first cargo vessel had taken 25 days to penetrate the barrier of ice off Cape Farewell. This meant that one ship was effectively out of service. The second sailing was cancelled, or rather, postponed, so that the scheduled third sailing became the reconstituted second sailing and was only due to leave four days after we had come to Nanortalik. We had plenty of time on hand.

Permanent Fixtures

We were given our own 'wee house'. On first appearance, it was not very prepossessing with its broken windows, its lockless door and the absence of furniture, a toilet, water or cooker, but it did have a wood-burning stove, some snug rooms and a solid roof. With brushes, we cleared and cleaned, with putty and nails, we replaced broken window panes, with piton hammer, saw and nails, we fabricated benches and stools from some driftwood, with well directed blows, we broke wood for the stove. We were ready to live in the way that the locals lived their leisured existence.

We worked for hard cash in short shifts. We entered the local labour market as unskilled workers in the construction business. An additional water supply was to be tapped from a stream coming down from the hills, and a pipeline was to carry the water over the seabed of a small inlet. The pipeline had to be protected from the icebergs drifting into the inlet. The suggestion was to protect it with a barrier of concrete-teethed blocks, although no one really believed that this would be in any way an effective defence against the relentless pressure of the ice. Our uncalloused hands and untested muscles were to provide the manpower to shift the production line of sand and cement into the concrete mixer. Thus, two at a time, we shoved the dusty mixture into the hopper, returning to the sleeping household for breakfast or to its quiet kitchen for afternoon tea. We were earning enough to be able to eat in some style once a day.

We feasted once a day in the new canteen. Everything was the best that could be provided in the clean, refined, photo-montaged, sound-tracked and scenic diner. It was a first-class *smørgasbrod* for the indiscriminating plate-pilers: wieners, ham, salami, fish,

pâté, roe, pickles, tomatoes, fruit salad, strawberry cordial and coffee. It was not surprising that we were in unfair competition with the regular workers, and we were making inroads into the dwindling food resources of a beleaguered village. Eventually we were shifted to the mid-day meal, much to the expedition members' regret but to the relief of the cook. The canteen also provided table tennis, billiards, showers and a steaming sauna, all of which were enjoyed to the full.

We also had our civilised breath of Danish home life. Little Lise was the secretary in the hospital, and she held open house for coffee in the evening in her apartment. Behind the tomato plants growing in pots on the window sill, on comfortable chairs, we drank her real coffee and discussed the world. Lief was one of the doctors, and he laid on a farewell dinner party of unforgettable proportions before we sailed for Tasermiut. Grilled fresh trout washed down with liberal libations preceded a night of song, dance and philosophy. Our debt to such hospitality was impossible to repay: it certainly contributed to the enjoyment of our long wait in Nanortalik.

We soon became acknowledged fixtures on the local landscape. The Greenlanders began to nod friendly greetings, and the children to accept our presence as something other than a free circus show. We attended the local functions and the same supermarkets. We sent a regular contingent to the mid-week or Sunday evening film show, and fielded a football team on which the enthusiastic inhabitants could practice their skills. We got involved with strange incidents in peculiar places, and we were about to drag the unsuspecting Irish expedition into our involvement.

Local Activity

It was on the eleventh day after our arrival that the weekly helicopter flight brought eleven members of the 1971 Irish Greenland expedition to Nanortalik. Out of the clear, blue sky into the chill wind blowing off the ice in the fjord they came, and totally unprepared for their welcome. They had flown from Narsarsuaq in order to avoid their previous 1968 ten day boat journey from Julienhaab to Nanortalik. Now they too were to be halted while their equipment mixed with our equipment made the long-delayed ship journey from Denmark. We entertained them to tea in our house; they were tired and travel-weary after their two-day journey from Dublin, but we had an evening's entertainment arranged for them. The Four Nation Knockout Five-a-Side Football Summer League competition was to kick off at 18.00 hours GMT.

The result was predictable. The visitors were no match for the local teams. At the halfway stage Scotland and Ireland had seen both their teams, A and B, eliminated in some startling

Left: The party going up into the mountains, back-packing supplies.

Below: Mike Jacobs on the lower rock slopes.



displays. The main interest was the 'needle' match between the Scottish A Team and our Danish rivals in the canteen-eating business. We fielded Mutch, Shaw, Young, Biggar and Shade against the giant electrician 'Rubberguts' and his surly associates. It was a hard-fought and more than semi-skilled battle, refereed by 'I-get-chief', the KGH second-in-command, with complete impartiality. It ended in a scoreless draw; the greatest cheer from the spectators going to the head-on collision between Young and 'Rubberguts', in which both contestants crashed to the gravel but with the difference that the big Dane sat there with a pained look of amazement on his face, while the little Young bounced upright like a sprung jack-in-the-box. On the deciding goal kicks, we failed to meet our opponents' score, and the honours went to the Danish team. This pleased their egos, with the result that our relations with our opponents became more cordial during the rest of our mealtimes in their canteen. It was a good evening's sport, but the Irish expedition were finding the life in Greenland a bit strenuous.

One of the big events during our stay was 250th anniversary of Hans Egede's arrival in Greenland. He was the Danish missionary who re-established Europe's contact with Greenland after the centuries of isolation that followed the original Viking settlement and its disappearance in the fourteenth century. The anniversary day was celebrated by a parade, a church service, a kayak race, a free coffee and painting book handout at the supermarket, a football match between Nanortalik and the surrounding village teams fought to a spectacularly acrobatic 9-9 draw, an inferior bonfire, a feeble firework display, and a hot, hectic and overcrowded dance.

Often we went outside the settlement to first explore and then revisit the furthest corners of our island. The scope was a bit limited on a barren island, only six miles in length and two miles in width. Some dashed over the three hills in one day, while some spread this pleasure into three days in order to conserve something fresh for each of the long days waiting. For simplicity, we labelled the nameless or unpronounceable hills as Hills One, Two and Three, and then found more minor intermediate bumps to be designated Hill One Point Five, and so on down to Hill One Point Nine-Five a few metres above sea level on promontory opposite the neighbouring Sermersok Island. Each hill had its qualities; Hill One had its slabby walls for the rock enthusiasts, its scrambling without the ship-incarcerated ropes, its meadows of Lady's Mantle, its after dinner strolls; Hill Two astride the island, had its conversational cairn, at which parties converged to lie in the sun to scan the white barrier of ice that reached to the horizon; and Hill Three, the highest Point at 1,700 feet above the southern sea, with its unseen cliffs plunging

towards the scree, their heights being judged only by the time of free fall under gravity of flung boulder and being open to a wide margin of error depending on whether a fast-counted fall took seven seconds or an idle slow-counted fall took ten seconds.

The lower levels of the island's shoreline also had their enthusiasts. Southward beyond the buttercups and violets the shore led to the grass-banked ramparts of the old buried walls of the original settlement of Nanortalik, with its midden of old bones and shells and its grave cairns on the exposed rock slabs. At the southernmost tip of the island, the contorted rock structure filled our tame geologist, Mutch, with orogenic enthusiasm, and drove our athletes to nimble icefloe skipping from islet to islet. This was a coastline of the inimitable drifting icebergs, the whistling guillemots scurrying across the open water leads, the high pierced calls of the peregrines on the big cliff, the massive boulders blocking the path along the western shore. It gave a one-night bivouac party an objective, but when they returned to snuggle below the overhanging roof of an extra large boulder, they found that the sea mist was to creep in and join them, spreading a damp chilliness into the innermost depths of their sleeping bags.

Some members stirred restlessly, and looked further afield. Biggar and Shaw were speed-boated across to Sermersok Island to live with the mosquitoes under a sheltering stone and walk up the nearest hills. Stevenson and Walton chose an overnight climb on a ridge of the mainland. The others stayed at home and absorbed the environment. In our house, the air filled with dust, the evenings reverberated to the scrape of knives and the chop of hammers as the studio master, Jacob, and his young apprentice, carved out their *ménagerie* of concrete animals, the mascot owl statue and the elephant footstool. The tape recorder ground down to a slow grind, when the dust permeated into its innermost electric workings.

Last Minute Difficulty

One evening, the big MV *Britannia* tied up at the pier. Our equipment had reached Greenland at last. We carried on our city life, unmindful of the imminent need to depart for Tasermit. We didn't need to rush, because our last item was to be unloaded days later from the bottom of the last hold of the ship. It was our biggest crate, full of ice axes, paddles and other indispensable oddments. In addition, we ran up against a major problem: the bureaucratic system of authorities compounded with our *laissez-faire* approach to the far corners of the world.

It happened to be a difficult year for visitors to Greenland. The increase in interest and in the number of expeditions wishing to visit Greenland had raised some problems for the Danish authorities. The more people that entered the inaccessible terrain, the

greater the risk that the authorities would be asked to assist in emergency situations with which a given expedition would be unable to cope satisfactorily. While such help would have been given freely by the Danes, it also imposed a strain on their transport services and removed them from their normal duties. In order to impress the problems of visiting parties, the Danish Government requested that all expeditions must have adequate insurance cover, not only for incidental medical expenses, but also for nebulous search-and-rescue operations. This raised severe financial obligations on many expeditions, and threw insurance companies into deep water outside their ken. The St Andrews expedition followed its normal procedure to deal within its own ranks with all untoward difficulties, barring the impossible: the total complement of ten members enabled two parties to operate confidently and independently in the hills, the four canoes linked the expedition with nearby settlements, and the members were insured for hospital services. We were our own Search and our own half-Rescue operation. We could only go so far.

Our problem arose from a technical omission. Our Nanortalik policeman, on the authority of the police chief at Godthaab, wanted proof in black and white of our insurance credentials. This involved a three way cable correspondence between Nanortalik, St Andrews and Copenhagen, a veritable recipe for misunderstanding, but nevertheless carried out to a successful conclusion. During this time, we waited in our wee house, our equipment waited in the warehouse and at the bottom of the hold of the *Britannia*, and the Irish Greenland Expedition packed their bags into a fishing boat and sailed into the drizzling mist bound for the head of Tasermit. We were in danger of becoming a permanent feature of the Nanortalik scene.

We carried on normally to the very moment of our departure. We bargained and arranged for a fishing boat to transport us and our crates, we began to move our crates on borrowed fork lift truck to the fishing quay, to fill the plastic cans with paraffin and petrol, to gather the beer. Gradually, the hired boat began to lean over under the added weight, and little bits fell off the mast as our unskilled cranesman swung a vigorous load of boxes to the deck. One hard afternoon's labour and we were ready to sail in the morning. At least, nine-tenths of the party were free to leave; the leader alone was to remain as a surety until the insurance problem was resolved.

The last evening at Nanortalik was spent at the cinema 'supporting your local sheriff', and in repaying some of Lise's coffee hospitality by having her to our home for drinks, Cremola Foam, dried apricots, coffee and brandy, and a Christmas pudding. Our clearance came through, the mountains of Tasermit awaited us on the morrow.