

By Vera Quinlan

It was another beautiful crisp, clear December morning and as we made our way up Carrot ridge my thoughts began to wander again. Already, I was thinking of the summer that lay ahead and the days in Connemara were inspiring me, Greenland was demanding my attention. A friend was looking for a partner -- was I interested? I had turned it down almost immediately with some feeble excuse. I had read little on Greenland, those being the stories of ferocious weather, loose rock, unknown mountain ranges, and generally the stuff of which major epics are made. I had decided to put it on the back burner for a while and build on my experience a little more. However, I was drawn by the remoteness of the place, the sense of adventure, and the lure of her unclimbed peaks. Maybe I could just find out a little more on the feasibility of this project? Needless to say 6 months later....

Every morning for three days we made our way with eager anticipation towards the domestic airport terminal in Reykjavik to await the flight to Kulusuk in Greenland. The weather was already playing up, "third time lucky" I told myself, as we plodded yet again with all our gear into the airport buildings. Finally, the call came over the tannoy that we could now board the plane. We all rushed for the window seats, took off, the adventure had begun. After a couple of hours we descended through the clouds catching tantalising glimpses of ice capped mountains and rocky spires on the horizon. Suddenly my heart skipped a beat, there it was; the east coast of Greenland in all its glory. Monstrous glaciers licked the shoreline, icefloe littered the fjords and immense icebergs lined the whole coast. A magical land of whiteness opened up below us.

Over the next couple of days we busied ourselves sorting out all the food, climbing and ski equipment we had freighted out to Greenland that spring. There was also some time to explore the minor peaks around Kulusuk and to visit the local Inuit village, 4km from where we camped. I remember walking there on the first day, the excitement of not knowing quite what to expect. Different sounds, and new sights appeared with every step. I walked further into the fascinating world of a new culture. Colourful houses dotted the shoreline, dead seals hung with contorted faces from the pier. The huskies whined and yelped in the cold breeze and the melting icefloe cracked in the distance.

The weather was miserable and showed no sign of change. The following day we were to fly into the mountains. I was both nervous and excited. For most of the night I listened to the rain drum on the flysheet. I woke to the same sounds and peered out of the tent. Low dark clouds and persistent rain obscured the view. There was little hope of us flying this morning. As the day wore on it brightened from the North, and at 2 O'clock Paul, our expedition leader, ran excitedly into camp with news of our impending departure. The twin otter had taken advantage of the small break in the weather and was on her way from Iceland to touch down in Kulusuk and take us into the Ice cap that evening. Camp was a buzz of excitement as everyone packed up and headed to the airport. It was a strange experience standing there on the tarmac, mountaineers from all walks of life and nationalities united by a tense wait. The French puffed

nervously at their cigarettes. The visibility had deteriorated rapidly in the last hour, all we could do was hope. Finally we heard the engines of the aircraft above, circling three times, waiting for a break in the cloud to land. She was down, Paul walked over to the pilots to discuss the situation, we all stood motionless waiting for the signal to load the plane, trying desperately to ignore the negative body language. Already we knew the outcome.

With every days delay, the frustration level rose and tempers frayed. On the seventh days delay we had another small weather window, but the forecast showed another low due to pass in the afternoon and again the plane could not fly. With time rapidly running out this seriously put the whole expedition in jeopardy, we had yet to fly into the mountains and already the trip was looking like a non-starter. It was all too much and the effect it had on me was considerable, I was distraught. The thought of returning home to friends and family without having even made it into the mountains was one I had difficulty coming to terms with. Dealing with setbacks on a mountain route was something I could relate to, but to be denied the chance of even attempting a route was something I had no experience of.

Time was rapidly running out and to achieve anything worth while we would have to get in very soon. The twin otter had to leave for west Greenland to fulfill another contract and would return in five days to try again.

We all agreed that to wait another five days was not an option. Other plans would need to be discussed. The French were overheard saying "the rules of commerce apply", promptly produced a mobile phone, rang their sponsors, and produced six thousand pounds at the airport. Two hours later they were in a chopper on their way to Mount Forel to attempt the first French ascent of the mountain.

The following days weather was the worst yet. High winds and horizontal rain swept through the camp site. This was the day we left for the Champs Elysees glacier. Paul had successfully managed to persuade the twin Otter company to sub contract our flight to a helicopter company at no extra cost! We were elated. Suddenly the black cloud of doom which hung over the camp was lifted. As we battled with the weather to break camp, I tried not to think about what it was going to be like when we got to the Ice cap. All my gear was soaking wet, and I was a little concerned about the effects the cold would have on it when we reached the Interior. This was our only chance and I certainly wasn't going to start having doubts now! As we took off the vulnerability of the chopper was very evident. It was a frightening experience flying below the storm clouds only 50 metres above the twisting glacial system.

Our expedition comprised of seven members, five males and two females all British except myself. The aim was to fly in on a twin otter ski plane to 66°44' 33"N / 36°00' 35"W establish base camp at that point and climb to virgin summits. We planned to concentrate our efforts on the area surrounding the Champs Elysees glacier 150 km N/W of Kulusuk. Almost insignificant in relation to the vast expanse of this area of Greenland

For the next four days we battled against the weather unable to make any possible attempts on the peaks that surrounded us. However we did make good use of the time. We dug a large snow hole into which the whole team could fit should the ferocious winds decide to take our tents, ferried all our gear to base camp from the chopper dump and made short ski trips during lulls in the weather to try and identify possible routes.

On Sunday 3rd August my diary records:

We had the worst storm so far last night. Horrendous winds lashed us. I was so glad I re-aligned the tent, I think it made a difference. It was also reassuring to have dug a decent snow hole should any of the tents decide to take off. The spindrift is making everything so difficult. Re-built the wall sealing the flysheet. Snow valances on my tent would have made life a lot easier!! So much snow dumped last night. Slightly worrying - what state are these routes going to be in if we ever get on them?

Got up at 9:30 and started to get the brews on down the hole. Soon joined by Colin and the rest of the gang. Long faces all round. Sat around most of the day reading. Just after lunch Nigel left the hole and seconds later we heard a huge commotion outside. We looked at one another wondering if he was the first one of us to finally crack ... but no they were cries of excitement and joy for as we had been sitting around under ground the weather was clearing rapidly above. We all rushed out and did our best to calm Nigel.

In less than an hour we were granted the most stupendous panorama of awe inspiring summits as far as the eye could see. Motionless the seven of us stood, shell shocked, simply trying to cope with the sheer vastness and beauty of this wondrous land. A world of exploration, new routes and adventure opened up before us. It really looked like this could be it, the front was clearly moving away to the south and all that followed were clear blue skies. Plans were formulated immediately, there wasn't a minute to lose. By 5pm we had our gear packed and skies on ... at last we could climb.

After the large falls of snow at the start of the expedition there followed eight consecutive days of blue skies with little or no wind. In that period we attempted no less than twelve summits and were successful on ten. Six were first ascents. All our ascents were made during the night when the snow was firmer, however with 24 hours of day light at this time of the year (July) this posed no problems. All summits ranged between 2100m and 2500m. I was involved in four first ascents graded Scottish 1/11 (AD), 11 (AD), 11/111 (AD), and 111 (AD+).