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THE SOUTH EAST GREENLAND TRAVERSE 1991

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Approved by the Royal Geographical Society
Supported by the British Mountaineering Council

Patrons: Air Commodore HI Cozens CB AFC & Alfred Stephenson MBE
Members of the British Arctic Air Route Expedition 1930-31

our ref: mef

Received 21 Aug 91

Honorary Secretary
Mount Everest Foundation
Gowrie
Cardwell Close
Warton
Preston
PR4 1SH

Dear Bill,

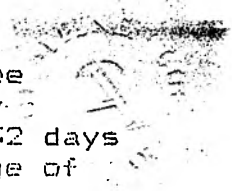
It is with very deep regret that I have to inform you of the curtailment of the South East Greenland Traverse 1991. The incidents leading up to the decision to abandon the expedition are described below.

On the morning of the 26th July, one week after landing on the shores of Sangmilleq fjord and after four days of sledging on the ice-cap, Jim Fisher broke down with physical and mental exhaustion. As a consequence the team struck camp to give him a full day's rest, but it soon became apparent that he was in no fit condition to continue any further. His state of fatigue was such that he was unable to pull his sledge and even had difficulty in ski-ing without a load. At this early stage of the expedition, the team had been making very good progress with the necessary mileage which would ensure the success of the expedition, but the physical effort and mental discipline required proved too much for Jim who broke down with the strain. As a result the team was faced with a serious crisis. The other three team members were in perfect health and high spirit, but the only safe and sensible option was to descend from the ice-cap into the settlement of Isertoq where Jim could get treatment for his exhaustion.

Jim was a replacement for Martin Dowson in April of this year. Due to work commitments, Martin's employers were unwilling to give him leave for seven weeks and reluctantly Martin had to withdraw. Jim was known to all four expedition members as he was a member of an expedition to South Greenland in 1989, being in the same fjord and we encountered their climbing parties on more than one occasion. Since 1989 Jim had been in touch with me and it became obvious that he was interested in returning to Greenland for greater challenges. He was offered the position of first reserve and when Martin had to withdraw, he accepted with delight the offer as full member of the expedition. It must be stated that Jim is a well experienced climber, trekker and caver and he has been very active with expeditions and trecks over the summer months every year since 1981.

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At the final camp Jim was given time to rest and the other three members discussed the continuity of the expedition. We had only covered some 44 miles of the actual traverse but we still had 32 days left to complete the remaining 400 miles, making a daily average of



12.5 miles. It was imperative to get Jim off the ice-cap but we could not use the radio distress beacon because we did not have an emergency situation. We could of course retrace our tracks back to Sangmilet fjord but the likelihood of encountering a boat was indeed remote. The only safe option left open to us was to take Jim to Isertoq, a small settlement on an island situated six miles from the edge of the ice-cap, however the edge was 30 miles of sledging from the last camp. Because of the convex nature of the ice-cap as it descends into the sea, we knew that we could experience crevasse difficulties on the descent and we confidently estimated the descent time to be three days.

To take Jim to the edge of the ice-cap near Isertoq and then to return to the last camp could take easily seven days. This would then mean that we had left approximately 25 days to complete the traverse, not discounting days of bad weather. This pushed the required daily mileage up to 16 miles which to me seemed unreachable. I reluctantly at this stage decided to descend the ice-cap with Jim and not continue the traverse. Brian on the other hand had no work commitments on his immediate return to Britain and Phil was willing to be seven days late for work so as to continue the traverse. It was decided; I would accompany Jim to Isertoq and then on to Angmagssalik to seek medical treatment, and Brian and Phil would continue the expedition after they had safely seen us off the ice-cap. Jim and I would carry 14 days each of food and fuel, whereas Brian and Phil would carry seven days each for their return journey, shared amongst two sledges. The excess food belonging to Jim and I would be dumped at the final camp, along with 40 days food each for Brian and Phil, 25 litres of paraffin and two sledges. A large cairn was built at this camp and the two sledges leaning against it so that the red covers could be seen from a greater distance. We confirmed our grid reference by taking a sun shot with the sextant to check miles covered on the sledge wheel on a given compass bearing. Also to aid Brian and Phil finding the cairn and ski tracks leading to it, additional ski tracks were laid two miles to the north and south perpendicular to our original tracks, so if they were slightly off their bearing, they should hit upon ski tracks leading to the cairn.

Initially we retraced our tracks and making very good mileage with two menbers to one vastly overladen sledge. We then altered our course for the main descent route, however in the early hours of the 28th July the cloud level lowered and we could not see more than 50 metres. It also meant that navigation through a worsening system of crevasses would be extremely difficult as there was no contrast to see the direction of a crevasse or its width. We decided to re-establish camp and at this stage it began to snow. It continued to snow with wind blowing for nearly three days; the tents were badly drifted up, our tracks had been completely covered and there seemed to be no end to this bad weather. However, it did stop snowing and the cloud level lifted slightly giving us a chance to get well below the cloud level if the bad weather returned. We were lucky; the storm abated and we could see the coastal mountains to the south. The distances covered on ski were now low as we were all roped together with sledges in a line of four, with the person in front to test the strength of crevasse bridges. Once out of the crevasse belt, we hit upon an area of morasses which was comparatively quite small. This led onto a much larger area of solid blue ice with deep runnels which caused excessive damage to both sledges.


The choice of descent route had been a good one and we made the final camp on the ice, close to a small tarn that flowed into the fjord. Isertoq was just six miles away, the descent had taken longer than

expected and Brian and Phil had an agonising decision to make. To find the cairn marking their sledges, food and fuel would be difficult in normal conditions, but to find it after all the snow had fallen would indeed be risky. Because of the undulating nature of the ice-cap near to the cairn, you could be half a mile away from it and yet still not see it. Snow had filled in the depressions caused by crevasses and Brian and Phil could only carry a limited amount of food for their return to the cairn. They were bitterly upset with making the final decision to abandon the expedition and to return with Jim and myself. It was a day I will never forget; to see the overwhelming sadness in their eyes and the look on their faces spoke volumes as I knew exactly how they felt. We hardly spoke for the remainder of the day as there was nothing else to say; we had discussed this possible outcome three days earlier but no words could alleviate our sense of defeat.

To have spent nearly two years planning the expedition and gaining considerable financial support, to have laboured and sweated hard during the first three days to get all equipment to the Sangmleq glacier, to have excellent weather conditions with good skiing conditions, to have favourable wind conditions for optimum use of the Upski parachutes and yet have a team member that broke under the psychological stress of what was to come fills me with bitterness and pity. Although Jim was always interested in the expedition before he was chosen, he obviously on this occasion bitten off more than he could chew and he agrees it was the worst decision he had ever made to accept our invitation. He has let us down in a major way, knowing that the other members had the drive and stamina to continue the traverse to Narssarssuaq. All four members have learnt a lot more than they had bargained for on this expedition and it has given some of us a greater urge to rise from the ashes of this expedition to plan for the sequel to SEGT 1991.

A similar letter will also be sent to the other grant awarding bodies that have supported the expedition. I would like to thank you again for the support of the Mount Everest Foundation and I only wish I could have sent you news of our success rather than of failure.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Les Turnbull', written in a cursive style.

Les Turnbull
Expedition Leader