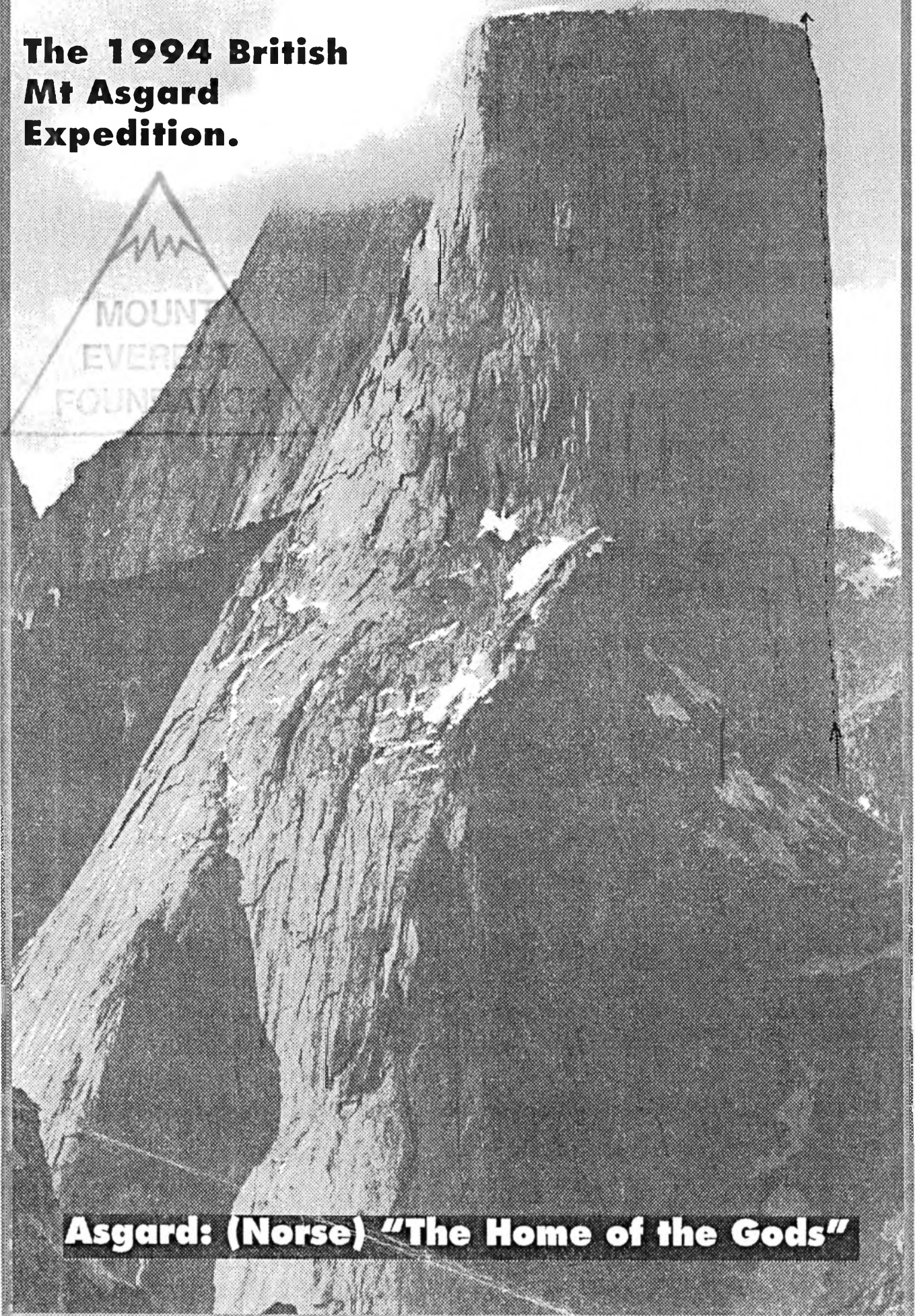


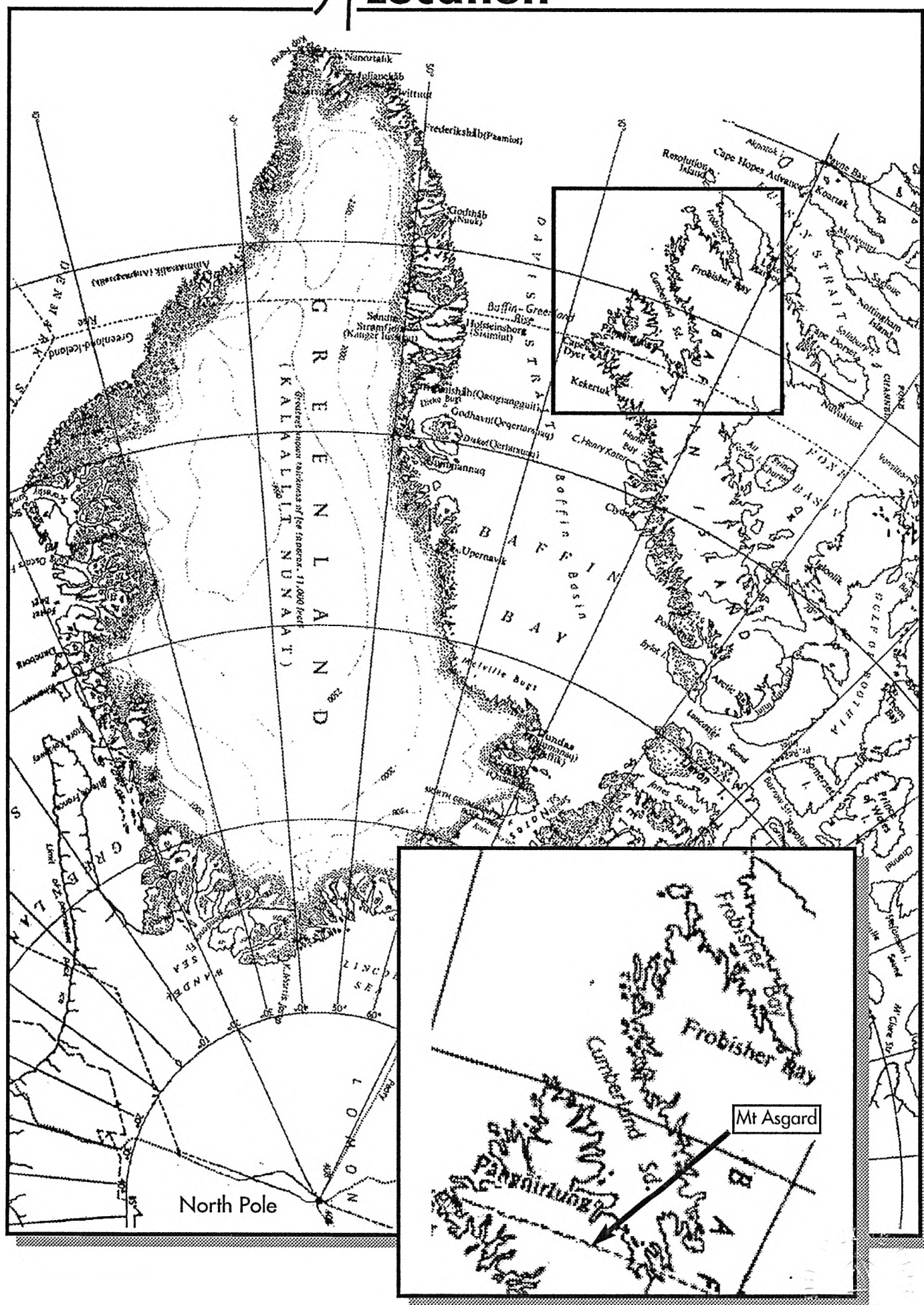
# Asgard:

**The 1994 British  
Mt Asgard  
Expedition.**



**Asgard: (Norse) "The Home of the Gods"**

## Location



## **WEST FACE OF MOUNT ASGARD BAFFIN ISLAND**

**Expedition report May 29 - July 15 1994**

The unclimbed west face of mount Asgard had first come to our attention through the photographs in Doug Scotts Big Wall Climbing book. We were inspired by its dramatic discription and amazed by its unlikely profile. Rumour suggested that it it may be one of the largest pieces of steep unclimbed granite around and we felt that we had at least to get a proper look at it!

The team, Simon Yates, Keith Jones, Paul Pritchard, Steve Quinlan and myself left Britain at the end of May 1994. In typical style communication between the team was difficult, as two were big wall climbing in the USA and three others scattered throughout the British Isles. Fortunately we managed to get ourselves, our equipement and food together in Pangnirtung, the small settlement situated at the mouth of the Pangnirtung Fyord. In one direction the Fyord led out to the cumberland Sound and in the other direction up to the start of the infamous Weasel Valley.

The flights over from Iqualliuit (the largest settlement on Baffin Island) had been our first good views of the arctic, we were of one opinion, it looked worryingly cold. The tundra in spring conditions was reminiscent of scotland in winter, this impression was rapidly changed by our first view of the frozen sea. Although forwarned our first site of this phenomena was startling. The occassional ice berg reflecting off the evening sunlight added to the surreal impression.

Pangnirtung provided the last minute requirements; two large supermarkets, startlingly incongruous amongst the traditional aspects of Inuit life. Our impression of the community were mixed. The community itself a facet of government policy had to our superficial view inherited much of the least rewarding aspects ofwestern existence e.g. cable T.V., pollution and unemployment. The ties with the land which undoubtably gave pride and an important sense of self identity had amoungst many of the younger generation been lost. We passed throug touched by the warmth of some of the people we had contact with and confused by the cultural clashes and changes that were apparent.

From Pangnirtung we hired a skidoo and skilled driver (one skidoo pulled 5 people and

all our gear) for the 20 mile ride to the start of the Weasal Valley. We were fortunate to be some of the first into the national park. The park monitored by Parks Canada covered a large area, stretching from Pangnirtung in the south west to Broughton Island in the North West and encompassing a vast area of true wilderness to either side of the Weasal valley.

The walk in started on the 30th of May. Its duration outlasted all our expectations! Access to Mount Asgard was to be first up the Weasal Valley for just under 30 miles and then the Caribou Glacier for 3 miles and the Turner Glacier for another 2-3 miles. We assumed about a week. Sadly, we had underestimated the loads involved; the entire walk would have to be completed 3 times.

All was not against us; wonderful scenery, beauty on the huge and the small scale, bearable weather, good company and the thought of Mount Asgard at the end turned a grinding amount of work into a fascinating and inspiring but still grinding amount of work. Sacks were loaded until bursting and then added to.

The 'hike' was divided into 5 sections, each section bar the final one being returnable in one day. On one occasion we managed two trips in one day - just. Food became an ever-present concern. The vast amount of calories consumed in lugging 80-100 lb sacks was not met by the modest intake of breakfast oats and evening lentils and rice. This is a common problem of extended trips in very remote areas; no porters and no tea-shacks meant that the amount of food we could carry was limited - fixed ropes and portaledge took the place of added chocolate.

The glacier was finally reached on the 9th May and the snow shoes and skis came out. The weather was unfortunately turning for the worse. The wind became colder and the snow flurries more frequent and the 11th June sees us camped on a col overlooking the Turner Glacier. During the 'night', now a figure of speech in the land of 24-hour daylight, the weather deteriorated and we found ourselves pinned down for 24 hours in high winds and extreme cold. Doubts about climbing this early in the season were starting to creep in. The morning of the 12th cheered us up, glorious sunshine and a cold wind base camp was within our grasp. Thirteen days of effort and our first sight of the mountain.

Base Camp was a small hole in the snow; a tarpaulin stretched across the top provided a roof, and boulders a degree of wind protection. The furnishings were basic, but the view magnificent. One mile away across the flat glacier, the twin peaks of Asgard and

the wonderful Northwest face appeared out of drifting clouds, occasionally catching errant rays of sunshine. It looked large, and in our naive enthusiasm, climbable. We studied the face with binoculars, quickly dismissing the very blank sections and loose-looking sections, with hopeful comments and unbased optimism.

The base of the wall was guarded by a 500metre snow gully. Our previous experiences with Baffin snow had left us somewhat wary of such features and the next day, this concern was found to be accurate. We kicked, dug and waded our way up a third of the gully before a brief conference quickly decided that to go on would be foolish and would only invite an avalanche. Two hours later we were back at Base camp, huddled together in our snow hole, which unfortunately, as snow drifted in seemed to shrink.

Two days of continuous snow and wind convinced us that the gully was going to be out of the question for a while. We took stock of our situation. The food was disappearing at an alarming rate; despite our reduced rations and attempts at self-control it wasn't going to last indefinitely. Simon and Keith, both committed for work reasons to return to Britain towards the end of June, were beginning to doubt whether they would actually set foot on the mountain. On the third day, the weather cleared. Paul and Keith approached the gully on reconnaissance. On reaching the previous high point, they found the snow even deeper, even more dangerous. Down was the only option. A communal decision was quickly reached - back to Pangnirtung for more food and supplies; a healthy 85-mile round trip. For Simon and Keith, it was sadly the end of their trip. The weather dictated the pace, no climbing was going to be possible for at least a week, by which time their departure date would be worryingly close.

A bedraggled and hungry team packed up Base camp, stashed the kitchen and headed back to civilisation. Two days later after a frantic walk we arrived at the fjord head, only to find the ice was breaking up and we would have to continue to Pangnirtung on foot. We hadn't taken this into account, and as we were eating a bare minimum on the retreat (leaving as much food at Base camp as possible), the final twenty miles were hungry. As is often the way, our hunger and exhaustion was repaid with a beautiful period of walking, the ice alongside the fjord offered a reasonable surface for progress and for a few hours we walked alongside still water surrounded by red clouds and peaks catching the two a.m. alpenglow. The peace interrupted by the haunting sound of Canada geese.

In Pangnirtung we ate and ate again, said farewell to Simon and Keith and attempted to recover. Our numbers now diminished to three, we gained one more climber in the

form of Geordie Tosa, a Catalanian climber who we had encountered and walked with for the best part of ten days on the walk in. His objective was a solo attempt on Mount Fria; unfortunately all his hardware and ropes had disappeared from below the face in an avalanche. His request to join us was responded to positively. He was strong, obvious from the walk-in, and most importantly, a very likeable fellow.

On the 21st June the four of us took a boat, weaving through the ever-changing pack ice, back up the fjord. The walk in this time was accompanied by huge rain storms, the character of the valley was rapidly changing, but our spirits were buoyed by the thought of sacks full of food. By the 27th, we were established at Base camp. The gully had slid in places and although still highly unpleasant, was at least climbable or swimable. We fixed the top 400 metres to the base and over a couple of days established a 'comfortable' snow hole Advance Base Camp below the base of the wall.

The line was complicated; features would have to be connected and the climbing was obviously going to be very difficult. On July 8th we started the first pitch. Over two days we managed two pitches, returning each day to Base Camp to bring up the remaining provisions.

The third day of climbing took us a further 80 feet up the face and established en masse at ABC. The few ensuing days of climbing saw a mixed bag of weather, snow and sunshine alternated. We adopted a shift system and attempted to have a pair climbing at every possible break in the weather. The 24-hour daylight and very difficult and frequently frightening aid climbing ensured our body clocks became confused; skyhooking above poor blades, rps and copperheads at midnight added a somewhat surreal aspect to the experience. The climbing was magnificent; features connected themselves in unlikely sequences to give outrageous pitches in positions of awesome exposure. Our first major feature and target for the first week was a prominent groove system at about half height. Jumarring continuously overhanging pitches gave an exciting start to each day.

Eventually the groove was reached and a portaledge camp established. Once all present and correct, life took on an added complication. It was necessary to haul a huge blue bucket containing water; being so steep the wall collected little snow. Cooking was a slight problem, as due to an initial oversight, the Markhill Stormy hanging stove was in the UK or US - none of us was quite sure. An improvised hanging stove was made out of a small food bucket. A mishap (for which I must take sole blame) had added a large and drooping air hole in one side, which unfortunately affected the stability of the

whole affair. Each meal became a major achievement. A system of pulley lines were arranged between portaledges allowing brews and food to be passed between them.

Steve, the most experienced wall climber, emphasised the epitomy of togetherness; he slept warm and sound, piss bottle at one hand and a water jug at the other. Geordie, no doubt toughened by many cold Alpine bivouacs, accepted the conditions happily. Paul and myself on the double bivouac provided the entertainment. The portledge, a home-made affair, was half the problem; once settled in one's pit, the creature would come to life and 'potato chip', sending us in opposite, gravity driven directions. By adopting counterbalancing moves, we persuaded the thing to adopt a position of tolerable instability; movement was limited, and as expected, everything was out of reach.

These conditions were not to last too long, as after a particularly trying lead on hooks, heads, poor blades and the wonderful bird beaks from Steve, some dramatically ineffectual pendulums to sky hooks from myself, some stoic leading from Paul and a big effort from Geordie, we found ourselves 200 metres above our portledge. One very long and hard pitch remained to an easing of the angle (we could see nothing beyond this point). A quick decision was made; we would do this pitch and then go Alpine style for the top.

Sleep had by now become a distant memory, snatched moments on belays, broken 'nights' on portaledges combined to trick the brain into continuing its focus on the mountain. The steep pitch was hard and at 7.30 a.m. we found ourselves poised on the lip of a roof looking straight down 2500 overhanging feet to the snow slope and up for what looked about 900 feet to a final skyline that was hoped was the summit.

The feeling of freedom was wonderful; the weather, apart from some high cirrus, looked settled, we felt positive but tired. Slowly the sun crept towards us. We followed its progress eagerly anxious for its warmth. The climbing remained challenging. Ice-choked cracks guarded a fine featured buttress. Straightforward but cold aid saw Paul to the start of the clean rock; he released a constant stream of ice, snow and muffled sound as he ascended a water-worn groove leading to a fine but small ledge. The next two pitches gave exciting free climbing, hard enough to be interesting but eminently climbable. A small ledge gave us a welcome seat in the first rays of the sun. The sudden warmth brought waves of weariness in us all; the urge to collapse and sleep for a while hanging in slings warmed by the sun was strong. The summit, however, was now getting nearer. It looked as if it would be two more

pitches, although endless Alpine finishes "a number of rope lengths lead to the top " had made me wary of such occasions. A steep clean aid pitch led Paul up a vertical wall to an airy perch close to our horizon.

We joined him - it was close, maybe half a pitch to the top. The final chimney soaked me in meltwater and moss filled my clothing and face - such thoughts were soon forgotten and the final bulge led to a beautiful ledge 30 feet below the summit. The others came up in their own unique styles. A final snow bash and we were there. The horizon expanded in a surge of wonderful views. Peaks, walls, glaciers floated in the evening rays of sun. Valleys dark and mysterious led between them. We were overawed, moved to tears by the sight. Quietly we wondered in our own thoughts in a realm of incredible beauty. Photos and food brought us together. Our emotions were deep and positive. As ever, the need to get down in one piece added its own contribution to our thoughts and after one last moment to lap up the beauty and peace, we made for the abseil.

The next day and a half were spent descending the face, stripping down the ropes and portaledge camps. Hard and mentally demanding we constantly watched for mistakes. By now we were so accustomed to the overhanging environment, the danger of making a mistake through being too relaxed was alluded to. ABC was reached at about midnight, a meaningless moment in our deranged sense of time. We bundled up the remaining equipment and lowered and lobbed it down the snow slope. Base camp was a weary plod across the glacier. Exhausted we collapsed into our tents at 2.30 am.

The next few days of evacuation, chased and caught by a huge storm were desperate work. The glacier was hazardous and frightening and the rain hit us as soon as we reached the Owl Valley. Food became a major problem, undernourished as we were after twelve days on the wall and many more before. We attempted with mixed success to scrounge off trekkers who were now appearing up the valley. The stagger home reached a worrying stage as both myself and Paul reached the passout point. Finally the fjord, now water. From the summit to the sea, we had moved continuously, the sense of the peace and joy at the whole experience was overwhelming.

My final memories of the trip are of an interesting and warm few days amongst the Inuit community. Our limited contacts gave us much food for thought. The welcome we received and the conversations enjoyed opened many questions. We left feeling that return was inevitable.

## **Useful information:**

### **National Park**

Visitor service officier  
National Park reserve  
Pangnirtung N.W.T.  
OXA ORO

Telephone 819 473 8828

Fax 819 473 8812

The park authorities can provide up to date information on Skidoo/boat hire, ice conditions etc. It is important to contact them and operate through them.

### **Air travel**

From montreal it is possible to fly with either **Canadiair** or **First Air**, flights go via Iqaluit (formaly Frobisher bay) to Pangnirtung. These tickets can be purchased in the UK (with luck!) or failing that at Montreal airport.

### **Supplies**

A wide range of food is available in Pangnirtung, it is however very expensive.

## **Summary**

May 29 Pangnirtung

May 30 Skidoos to the start of the Weasal valley

June 9 Reach Caribou glacier

June 12 Reach Turner glacier, set up Base camp, storms

June 17 - 19 Back to Pangnirtung for more food supplies  
Simon and Kieth have to depart

June 21 Return to Weasal valley

June 27 Base camp

June 29 Start climbing and prepare ABC

July 8 Portaledge camp established

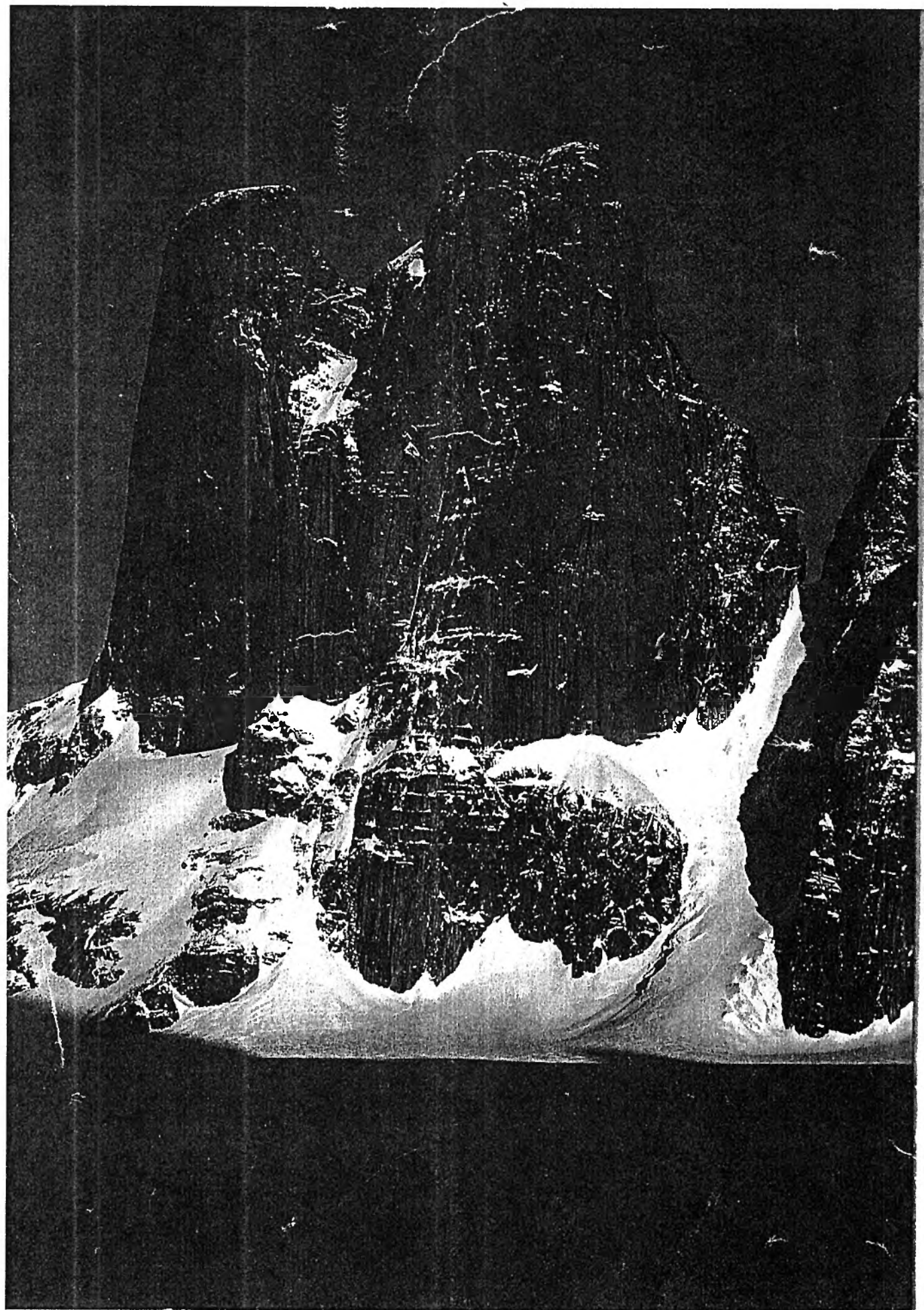
July 10 Summit and start descent

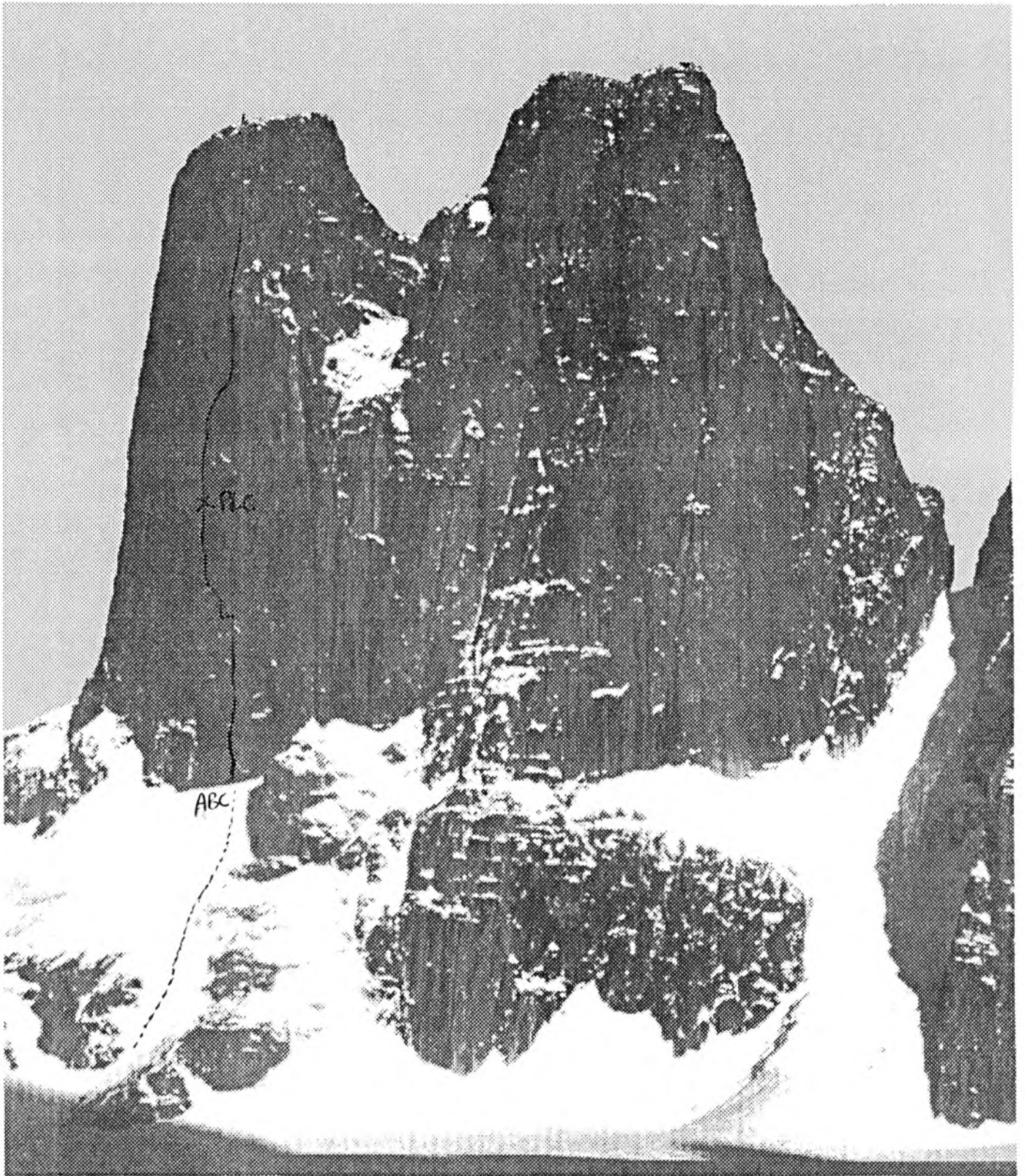
July 11 Portaledge camp

July 12 Strip mountain and down to BC

July 13 Retreat in storm from BC

July 15 Pangnirtung





Approximate line of 'Hyperborea' (the mythical land of milk and honey north of the Arctic, first alluded by the Greek philosophers) on the North west face of Mt Asgard.

PLC - Portaledge camp

12 days on wall

ABO sup A4, E3 6a

## BUDGET

INCOME		EXPENDITURE	
MEF Grant	£1200	Air Flights (5)	£4075
BMC Grant	£1000	Transport on Baffin	£300
Foundation Sports		Food/ Supplies	£800
Arts Grant	£1500	Equipment	£500
Personal Contributions	£2475	Insurance	£500
TOTAL	£6175	TOTAL	£ 6175

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Karakoram Experience Ltd.  
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The Anglemarik Centre, Pangnirtung.

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