

Exploring Greenland's Lemon Bjerge

CHRISTIAN BONINGTON

THE GROOVE SOARED ABOVE ME, bristling in small overhangs. It faded into an overlapping curtain of smooth rock with no guarantee of a route beyond it. Each move was taxing. From below, it looked impossible, and yet somehow the holds materialized. Poised under the final overhang, some forty meters above Graham Little, I'd run out of holds. My arms ached and my fingers were going into involuntary cramps, curling into a rigid claw that I could only straighten out with my teeth.

There was a rounded foothold on the crest of the prow out to my left. I pulled on the edge of the prow above the foothold and balanced across to it. There was another small finger scrape just above. I now arched back, unstable, panting, with fingers weakening. But the angle lessened onto a kind of gangway that rose up to the left. I eased myself over the bulge. Another rounded scrape to pull on, to step up, and I was on the gangway, in balance at last, but without any positive holds, no cracks to slot in a nut.

It was an abrupt transition from ferociously strenuous climbing to padding up a holdless slab. I reached the corner to find there were no placements for a secure belay. By this time, the rope, clipped through a dozen runners and rubbing over rocky edges, was dragging me back. Graham was no longer in sight and an overhanging V-chimney loomed above. I edged my way into it, miraculously could still make upward progress and, at last, at the full stretch of the rope, reached a tiny ledge with a good belay point.

I yelled and whooped with a sense of euphoria. It was the most challenging, exciting, yet aesthetically pleasing rock pitch I had climbed for years. Continuously 5c English standard (would this be 5.10?), I had felt stretched, had been unsure whether I could make it to the top or whether there was any way at all, and yet, as I made each move, had felt in control. Our isolation and the fact that we were on a sheer, unclimbed peak at the edge of the Greenland Icecap, nearly 300 miles from the nearest human being, other than the two climbing partners at camp on the glacier below, made the sensation all the stronger.

There were four of us: Graham Little, belaying fifty meters below me, with whom I had made the first ascent of the west ridge of Panch Chuli II in the Kumaon Himalaya the previous year, the two encamped below, Jim Lowther and Rob Ferguson, both experienced Greenland hands, and I.

We were exploring the peaks around this isolated glacier on the east coast of Greenland, just above the Arctic Circle. The Lemon Bjerger have some of the steepest rock peaks in Greenland. Gino Watkins' 1930/1 expedition surveyed parts of the coast from Kangerdlugssuaq Fjord in the north to Cape Farewell on the southern tip of Greenland. They discovered two very striking ranges. The higher of them became known as the Watkins Mountains, and the smaller but more spectacular, as the Lemon Mountains, named for their airplane pilot, Sir Percy Lemon. The latter range has some of the steepest rock peaks in Greenland. It had been visited on only four previous occasions, the first time in 1931 when Lawrence Wager, who was to reach 27,800 feet on Everest two years later, sledged up the Frederiksborg Glacier. The next visit was in 1974 by a party led by Stan Woolley, who made the first ascent of a peak they named Mitivangkat.

The range was then left alone until 1991 when Jim Lowther and I sailed with Robin Knox-Johnson in the *Suhaili*, the boat in which he was the first to circumnavigate the world non-stop and single-handed. We had to thread our way through the ice that guards the east coast to make a landing at Watkins Fjord, then sledge inland up the Frederiksborg Glacier to attempt the Cathedral, the highest in the range. We attempted the peak marked on the map as the Cathedral, only to find that the map was incorrect and another peak was higher. (*AAJ*, 1992, pages 150-1.) The following year, 1992, another British expedition flew in, landed on the icecap above the Cathedral and climbed it and several other peaks. (*AAJ*, 1993, page 169.)

This year, we chartered a twin-engined Otter to land on the Chisel Glacier, a tributary of the Frederiksborg just to the south of the Cathedral. It had never been explored and appeared to have some of the steepest and most challenging peaks of the range around it. We had with us a hand-held GPS (global positioning system) with which we could set positional and altitude fixes both on the summits we reached and on other features to check the accuracy of the map and where necessary to redraw it. This gave our expedition an extra dimension. Our means of transport were nordic skis and pulks, plastic sledges with alloy shafts that allowed us to haul loads of a hundred kilos with amazingly little effort.

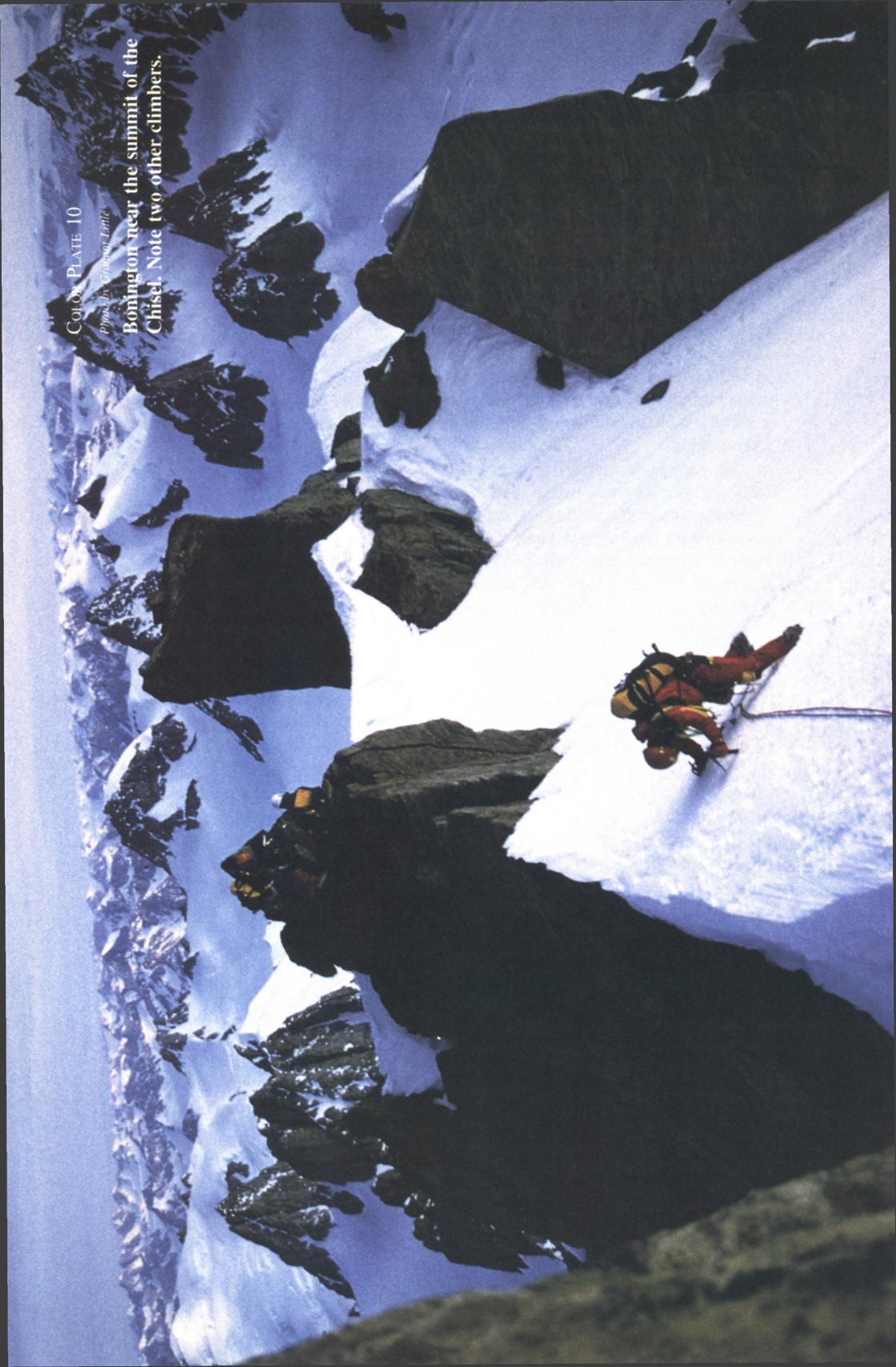
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As the plane vanished over the immensity of the Frederiksborg Glacier, it was difficult to believe that it was only 30 hours since we had been in the busy departure lounge of Glasgow Airport on our way to Iceland. A scheduled flight from Keflavik Airport had taken us to Akureyri, a small seaport on the north coast of Iceland. From there, we flew by charter to Constable Point off Scoreby Sound to be picked up by a twin-engined Otter fitted with skis that took us down to the Lemon Mountains. We pointed out to the pilot where we wanted to land. The plane did a circuit to check out the carpet of snow for hidden crevasses and then swept in for a smooth landing.

COLOR PLATE 10

Photos by Jonathan Zaritz

**Bonington near the summit of the
Chisel. Note two other climbers.**



There can be few wild places in the world that are so accessible and yet so remote and unspoilt. Once the plane had vanished, there was absolute silence, no sound of wind or running water. We were to have three weeks to climb and explore this amazing array of mountains and glaciers. Immediately opposite was Mejslen (Chisel). It was well named, soaring to a sharp chisel-like rock summit from a plinth of complex icefalls and hanging glaciers divided by rocky walls. It had caught our imagination when we had sledged past it in 1991. Phil Bartlett and Luke Hughes had attempted it from the other side in 1992, and we now resolved to make it our first objective.

There was no obvious route to the summit. That first afternoon, having pitched our tents, we skied up the glacier to try to spy an easy line but could see none. We finally decided on a tortuous route up a series of linked snow gullies, gangways and ledges through its complex rocky defenses.

It was alpine in scale. Although only 2320 meters above sea level, with our camp at 1170 meters this meant a height gain of 1150 meters to the summit. Having 24 hours of daylight each day made the decision about when to start our climb more, rather than less, difficult. We wanted the snow to be as hard as possible, which entailed working out the times when the face would be in the shade. We finally decided to set out at one o'clock in the afternoon of the following day, since the face went into the shade in the late morning and came into the sun again around the middle of the night.

A short walk up to the bergschrund and then a series of snow slopes and ridges, alternating with stretches of bare ice, led to the rocky wall we had to cross to reach the next large snow patch. Time to put on the rope. Graham and I were out in front, alternating leads as we picked our way through the rocky maze across a series of veins of snow and up the open slopes of a hanging glacier that clung to the upper part of the north face.

There was one more rocky barrier between us and the summit, but this was also broken by a tenuous snow line. We reached its foot at around seven that evening. We had been on the go for six hours and it seemed high time for a tea break. We had brought a gas stove with us. We melted some ice and brewed up. Having 24 hours of daylight removes some of the time constraint, but it has its hazards since there is a temptation to keep going on for as long as the climb lasts without any rest. Stopping for an hour to eat and drink made all the difference. We set out again refreshed, climbing sugary, unsubstantial snow lying on hard ice, weaving our way once again through the easiest line between bulging granite walls until a final snow slope, stretching up into steep ice, led towards the summit ridge. I was relieved that it was Graham's turn to lead, as he cramponed confidently upwards. Another rope-length and we were on top, a dramatic little rock spire with barely enough room for the four of us to cling to. It was just after midnight and the sun, lying low on the horizon to the north, still lit the sky. It was a superb viewpoint. We could see the Cathedral, our objective in 1991, about 15 miles to the north. We could also see the coxcombed rock peak we had mistaken for the Cathedral. Beyond, lay the great white sweep

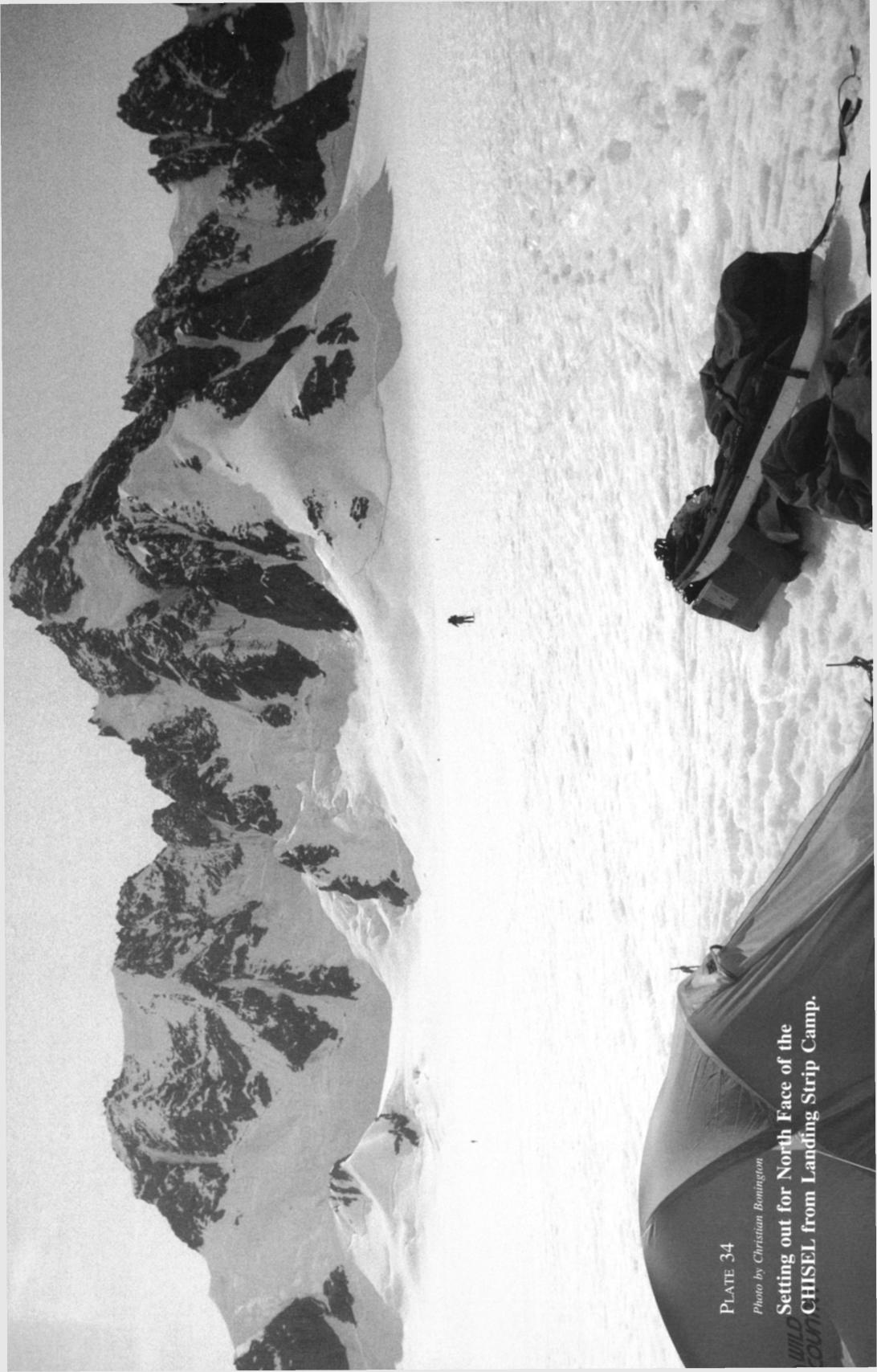


PLATE 34

Photo by Christian Bomington

Setting out for North Face of the
CHISEL from Landing Strip Camp.

WILD
TOUR

of the icecap and below us the huge expanse of the Frederiksborg Glacier, reaching down to the ocean on the eastern horizon.

It took us longer to get down than it had for the ascent. We rested for several hours on the way, lying in the sun, while we waited for the snow slope to come into the shade. We had been away from our camp for 30 hours when we finally got back to the tents.

It had been a good start. The next day we pulled our pulks and set out on skis for a new base at the head of the glacier. We wanted to have a look at the intriguing array of jagged peaks that ringed the top of the Chisel Glacier. I sat out the next climb with a bad cold and anyway I was tired. The other three climbed a peak they called Beacon while I went on a gentle exploration of the glacier just above our camp, spying out an elegant blade of rock that we eventually called the Ivory Tower after the ivory gulls that we assumed had their home somewhere on its flanks. These mysterious birds nest high on peaks of Greenland's interior. It is difficult to conceive what they live on or how they feed their young.

We now had three days of bad weather. We were able to make some short ski tours to explore the neighboring glaciers and to settle down for some serious bridge. Graham is a keen player and taught us the mysteries of the game, which quickly became our main leisure activity. Once the weather improved, we returned to the fray, with three successful ascents and four attempts on the peaks around the glacier basin. Lowther and Ferguson made a challenging first ascent of a rock-and-ice peak they called the Trident, whilst Graham and I turned our attention to the spectacular rock spires that are such a feature of these mountains. We travelled light, wearing rock shoes rather than boots, and were able to reach the top of the Ivory Tower in 12 hours of superb rock climbing.

The focus of our attention was a magnificent peak we called the Needle. It reminded me of the famous southwest pillar of the Petit Dru above Chamonix in the Alps, about 700 meters of soaring granite with hardly a snow patch on it. Graham and I spent an afternoon running out three of our ropes, the top rope-length being the superb pitch I have already described, before abseiling and then skiing back down to our camp.

We returned the following morning, quickly jumaring up the ropes we had left in place. The rock now became more broken with a loose section that led to a shoulder on the crest of the pillar. A fault line we had picked out from the bottom stretched up towards a deep-cut chimney capped with an arch of snow. Our route lay through the eye of the needle. I sat belayed to the rock while Graham led the next pitch and I wondered at the fragile life that existed in this harsh environment. Green tendrils of dwarf willow reached over the ledge, purple saxifrage clung to a sheltered cranny. A little yellow butterfly flitted past. How long did it have to live? A cry from above; the rope ran out, pulled up by Graham. It was time to move again. Overhanging chimneys and smooth slabs took us onto the north side of the Needle. We were now faced with snow-covered ledges and snow-jammed grooves that we hadn't been able to see from below. The sugary snow barely held my weight and my rock shoes, getting



COLOR PLATE II

Photo by Christian Bonington

**Graham Little on first pitch of the
NEEDLE.**

wetter and colder by the minute, skidded on the ice underneath. I was thankful I had brought my ice hammer for the security of its pick. Graham led through, slipped on the snow-covered ice and only just saved himself. A steep groove, running with melt water, rounded holds and few nut placements followed.

My turn. We had been on the go for 15 hours. An awkward bottomless chimney with icicles festooned inside it led through a bulging wall. I pulled out over the top and at last the summit block was in sight. I belayed Graham as he pulled over the final wall to complete one of the finest rock routes I have ever climbed. We enjoyed a superb view in the midnight sun and finished the descent that was more nerve-racking than the ascent. On the more broken pitches it was impossible to abseil and we had no choice but to climb down the steep and difficult sections.

We had been on the go for almost 23 hours and on our return to camp, tired and fulfilled, found the other pair waiting for us. They had had more than their share of adventure. Rob and Jim had been attempting the highest peak of the cirque. We had named it Citadel. It was a massive, fortress-like mountain of about 2500 meters. They had made fast initial progress, climbing a series of snow ramps and gullies to just below the summit ridge when Lowther was hit by a falling stone, breaking his collar bone. Fortunately, helped by Ferguson, he was able to descend. It brought home how potentially dangerous is the climbing in the Lemon Mountains. Had he fractured his skull or been unable to move, the situation would have been very serious. We had a radio alarm beacon which we could have activated, but there was no means of knowing if any passing aircraft would pick up the signal or how long help would be in coming. We should have had to get Lowther down off the mountain without further help, anyway.

We still had to sledge out from the mountains to the coast. Seven days of hard work, the last four spent backpacking loads over a shoulder at the foot of the Frederiksborg Glacier to the airstrip at Sødalen. Our plane arrived within minutes of the arranged time and we were carried back to civilization.

It had been a profoundly satisfying expedition. Between us, we had completed five challenging first ascents and had explored and remapped an untouched glacier basin in a period of only four weeks. There are still many more superb unclimbed summits of rock and ice awaiting ascents. The climbing is technically challenging, demanding a reasonable level of mountaineering expertise, but the area also offers the mountain traveller great scope for exploration over untouched glaciers and passes.

PLATE 35

Photo by Christian Bonington

**The Southwest Buttress of the
NEEDLE.**



Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Lemon Bjerge, above Kangerdlugssuaq Fjord, East Greenland.

FIRST ASCENTS: Mejslen (Chisel), 68°27'N, 31°49'W, 2320 meters, 7579 feet, via north face, June 22 and 23, 1993 (whole party).

The Beacon, 68°28'N, 32°01'W, 2262 meters, 7421 feet, via south face and ridge, June 25, 1993 (Little, Lowther, Ferguson).

The Ivory Tower, 68°29'N, 31°59'W, 2100 meters, 6890 feet, via northeast face, July 3, 1993 (Bonington, Little).

Trident, 68°28'N, 32°02'W, 2350 meters, 7710 feet, via north face, July 4, 1993 (Lowther, Ferguson).

Needle, 68°29'N, 31°53'W, 1945 meters, via southwest pillar, July 8, 1993 (Bonington, Little).

ATTEMPTS: The Pulpit, 68°31'N, 31°55'W, c.2200 meters, 7218 feet, via south face. Attempt ended in loose rock halfway up the face, July 2, 1993 (Ferguson, Lowther).

Citadel, 68°31'N, 31°58'W, c.2500 meters, 8202 feet, via southwest face. Attempt ended when Lowther was struck by a falling stone and suffered a broken collar bone while 250 meters from the summit, July 8, 1993 (Ferguson, Lowther).

Steeple, 68°29'N, 32°00'W, 2400 meters, 7874 feet, via northeast face. Attempt failed on July 7 on ice ramp with rotten ice and bad weather (Bonington, Little) and on July 11 with rotten ice in the upper ice chimney (Ferguson, Little).

PERSONNEL: James Lowther, leader, Christian Bonington, Robert Ferguson, *English*, Graham Little, *Scot*.