

# In the Land of the Inuit

*New routes and perceptions in Sam Ford Fjord*

by MARK SYNNOTT

For the past eight hours I had been tinkering with a thin calcite seam, using hooks, copperheads and rivets to create passage to the next real crack. The equivalent of a full day's work, I had covered hardly more than 100 feet in vertical gain. I was fed up with dealing with rope drag, my sore hips and the nearly blank rock. As often happens when the going gets grim, I lost my composure, cursing the granite monolith to which I was strapped. With my head resting against the wall in frustration, I looked between my legs and was surprised to find that my cries and hammer blows had attracted the attention of an Inuit hunter passing through Sam Ford Fjord.

A solitary figure was visible near the giant bloodstain on the ice where our guides Johannasie, Iqaqrialuq and Jushua had butchered seals almost two weeks ago. Perhaps it was one of them, checking up on us, as they said they would. At that moment I felt an intense kindred spirit with the Inuit man. My partners, Warren Hollinger and Jerry Gore, and I had traveled far from home to find an arena in which we could commit ourselves to total self-reliance. It was humbling to realize that the intensity and peak awareness for which we were searching on this wall is a reality of daily life for the Inuit.

The presence of the Inuit man had a reassuring effect on my morale, and soon I was hauling the bags to our third and final hanging camp on Baffin Island's Great Cross Pillar. Warren and I had been on the wall for nine days, but 600 feet of steep rock still remained to be climbed. Fortunately, our route now appeared to follow more obvious crack systems. Jerry had opted to retreat several days earlier when it became apparent that we had vastly underestimated our food supply.

From the open door of the portaledge I could stare straight up the next pitch, an overhanging knifeblade seam that split the crystalline blue-grey gneiss as far as I could see. Tomorrow, Warren would lead this classic fissure, but I was not jealous. Rope drag had turned my hips to mush, so I welcomed the chance to lounge as long as possible on the ledge.

We both led a pitch the next day, which finally put us in a position to make a lightweight push for the top. On June 2 we jumared two lines and Warren led a full 200-foot pitch to the base of a massive alcove. From this point on we would leave the fixed ropes and camp behind, effectively committing ourselves to reaching the summit. After so many days of servitude to our capsule-style ascent, it felt great to be near the top of this huge cliff with only a pack and the clothes on our backs. The weather was perfect, and as I emerged from the rime-encrusted depths of the alcove, I was rewarded with

The Great Cross Pillar.

*Mark Synnott*



spectacular views of the formations which had spent much of the past two weeks hidden in the foggy gloom. The Turret, Broad Peak, Polar Sun Spire and the Walker Citadel stood around us like chess pieces, each with its own unique design. In my mind, Polar Sun Spire was clearly the king, soaring into the sky to a height far above us. Already, Warren had been trying to psyche me up for this as our next objective.

Three more pitches went all free around 5.9, and then suddenly we were standing on top. Jerry was in the fjord below and, between the wind and our own hoots and hollers, we could just barely hear him yelling. A long ridge continued toward the summit of the formation, and we debated whether it was worth continuing. Already we were committed to six rappels in order to regain our hanging camp. If we continued, what would the ridge be like? After nearly two weeks on the wall, the chance to romp through talus was too good to pass up. We set off at a fast pace, hoping to reach the summit before the weather got worse. It was still mostly clear and we could now see out the Sam Ford Fjord to the open ocean — an endless sheet of blue ice, perfectly uniform save for the occasional iceberg.

The summit itself was uneventful, but the weather had deteriorated into a whiteout. As we carefully descended the sometimes knife-edged ridge, I found it hard to keep my footing on the icy surface with my rock shoes. Despite my efforts to stay upright, I slipped, cutting my hand quite deeply on a quartzite crystal. The accident was minor, but it helped to bring home exactly how committed we were. More than a mile from the start of 3,000 feet of overhanging rappels, we could not afford to become incapacitated. Our worst nightmare at the time was that somehow our hanging camp had been wiped out by rockfall. The apprehension kept us on edge until we finally reached the safe haven of our portaledge after a 24-hour summit push.

One day later, Warren and I were finally nearing the end of our rappels. Less than 700 feet from the ground, we started to argue about which route to follow. When the argument hit its peak, Warren cut me down hard. "I hate you," he said, with a dead-set look in his eyes. It felt really bad to have finally turned on each other after we had been through so much together. The reunion with Jerry in basecamp was exactly the kind of distraction we needed to help patch things up. Talking to him about our climb helped us both to realize what we had just accomplished. No sooner had Warren taken a few big pulls off the bottle than we were buddies again.

Jerry looked worn out. He told us how our basecamp tent had been destroyed in a violent windstorm several days prior. Luckily for him, Iqaqrialuq had come back to check up on us. Jerry accepted a ride from him to Clyde River, where he could dry out, eat some home-cooked food and talk to his wife and newborn daughter by phone. He was ready for Polar Sun Spire, and the idea of three people warmed me considerably to the idea. Still, I wanted to milk the rest at basecamp for as long as possible. If we had let him, Warren would have probably started hiking loads immediately.

Warren Hollinger on the Turret.

Mark Synnott

Some Spanish climbers arrived the next day, having crossed the three miles of ice between our basecamps. They too had been successful, completing a difficult 3,000-foot climb on the "Nose" of Kiguti. *Nirvana* (VI 5.10 A3) had taken them seven days, most of which was stormy and cold. Their next objective was the Fin, a 2,000-foot overhanging prow near the Chinese Wall. We wished them luck as they tromped back through the ankle-deep slush which now covered the fjord — a sure sign that the breakup of the ice was on its way.

Iqaqrialuq and Johannasie were the next to show up. We had arranged over the radio to have them move our basecamp across the fjord so we could be closer to Polar Sun Spire. As Iqaqrialuq shifted his load of seal and caribou to accommodate our sacks of equipment, I asked him what he had thought when he saw us up on the Great Cross Pillar. "Oh, I don't think nothing. I know you like to climb," he said. I felt that he would have more to say if I understood his language. We could only wonder at the meaning of the Inuktikut words he often shared with his nephew Johannasie.

Instead of returning to the village, the Inuit men headed deeper into the fjord to hunt. They had hunted together their entire lives, having grown up as nomads in the fjords. Johannasie supports 15 children; even by hunting six days a week he can barely put enough food on the table. Life is hard for these men — you could see it in Johannasie's face when he told you that people do indeed die of starvation here.

Once again on our own, we turned our attentions to the north face of Polar Sun Spire. In one long day Jerry and I climbed 700 feet of complete garbage. The rock was wet and loose, and from all indications it was going to stay that way. After one particularly huge rockfall, which narrowly missed crushing Jerry, we abandoned this intimidating 4,000-foot wall.

I was honestly a bit relieved, but still interested in climbing something a bit easier. The west face of the Turret seemed a logical, not overly ambitious choice. We figured that by fixing as many ropes as we had, we could then climb the 2,000-foot face in a single push. Unfortunately, the weather had gone sour, raining or snowing almost every day for the next two weeks. Our ledges were strung from boulders at the base of the wall where we lay for days, counting off the hours and getting deep into each other's problems. Warren and Jerry hit a raw nerve when they told me I couldn't deal with criticism. The psychological analysis that followed had me practically in tears. Those soggy days at the base of the Turret marked the low point of the trip for group morale. Finally, the weather cleared on June 20 and we blasted up our five fixed lines with two backpacks and the grim determination to make this our last climbing day of the trip. As it turned out, we ran a little over, completing the round-trip to the summit in just under 40 hours.

Back in basecamp, we danced a jig at the sight of our friends Johannasie and Iqaqrialuq emerging from the foggy gloom, exactly on time for the pick-up. The climbing in Sam Ford Fjord had been phenomenal, but we were all



relieved that it was over and we were finally going home. Pulling out on our loaded-down komotik, the huge sled the Inuit used to drag us around, we took a last look at the granite giants which had been our companions for the past six weeks. It was just beginning to drizzle, so we had to say a quick good-bye as the clouds descended to block them from view once again.

After a day and a half of pushing the sled through the mush and negotiating wobbly ice bridges across giant cracks in the ice, we finally neared the village and the end of our epic journey. Unexpectedly, Johannasie guided the snowmobile toward a large rock slab protruding several feet above the pack ice. "We stop here for Iqaqrialuq," he said matter-of-factly. "He live here." Sure enough, Iqaqrialuq walked to the center of the rock and began to roll out his tent on the smooth, water-polished surface. He had few belongings, and in minutes he was steaming a pot of seal, enjoying a cigarette.

Watching Iqaqrialuq on the barren rock he called home, it was easy to imagine back thousands of years, for the picture was essentially unchanged. His wrinkled and weatherbeaten face was hardly visible under his fur-lined pixie hat, but the twinkle in his dark eyes was unmistakable as he gazed into the distance. Iqaqrialuq was clearly at one with the land, partner in an intimate relationship which had enabled his people to thrive in this harsh arctic environment for nearly 4,500 years. Here was proof that the Inuit are one of the last places the genetic blueprint for survival remains intact.

Warren, Jerry and I had come to Baffin Island in search of adventure, but also for answers to our questions. We had not expected that the Inuit would help us to find both. Observing these hardened survivors in their native element had given us a refreshing look back in time, back to the roots of our own compulsion for making life hard. The Inuit still possess this primal instinct nearly forgotten in our species. Handed down since prehistoric times, now in 20th century man it has become diluted and misplaced. It was no coincidence then, that in our search for its essence we had been led into the lives of the Inuit people. They are the well-spring from which the magical lure of adventure will continue to trickle down to our safe and secure modern world.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Sam Ford Fjord, Baffin Island, Canada.

NEW ASCENTS: *Crossfire* (VI 5.10 A4, 19 pitches with 60-meter ropes, then a mile of ridge to the summit) on The Great Cross Pillar (5,500 feet), first ascent, May - June, 1995 (Warren Hollinger, Mark Synnott\*); *Nuvualik* (VI 5.10+ A3) on The Turret (2,000 feet), new route, second ascent of The Turret (first ascensionists unknown), June 1995 (Warren Hollinger, Jerry Gore, Mark Synnott\*).

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