Sam Ford Fiord— Baffin Island

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WEEK BEFORE WE LEFT, I called a friend in Iqaluit and he advised, "This is the worst ice year in several decades. I don't know how you are going to get into Sam Ford Fiord. You should have come last year. Or maybe try next year." But there was no turning back. Conrad Anker and I had received a Shipton-Tilman grant from Gore to explore and climb in a remote region of Baffin Island's east coast. We had already shipped our kayaks and bought non-refundable tickets.

The Arctic coast is ruled by ice. You can travel over the ice before breakup or on the water after breakup. But the ocean is nearly impassable in between, when it is a maze of floating pans too small to walk on and too thick to float through. A logistic nightmare arises because the climbing season is three months long and breakup can vary by three months from one year to the next.

Much of the rock climbing on Baffin Island is concentrated in the Weasel Valley in Auyuittuq National Park, near Pangnirtung. However, the granite batholith that forms Mounts Thor and Asgard also extends along the entire eastern border of Baffin Island, the world's fifth largest. There are tens of fiords and thousands of kilometers of rock walls. I became interested in Sam Ford Fiord, north of Clyde River, during a winter dog-sled trip in 1984. There are six published accounts of climbing expeditions, but no one had attempted technical big wall climbs.* Steve Sherrif, Gray Thompson and I traveled to Clyde River in 1989 but were barred from Sam Ford Fiord by bad ice. We swung south and completed two fine climbs in Inugsuin Fiord. (See AAJ, 1991, page 187.)

Conrad and I had planned to fly north in mid July, after breakup, and hire an Inuit to ferry us to Sam Ford Fiord by speedboat. We dreamt of a luxurious Base Camp from which we could travel around the fiord by kayak. But the ocean was

^{*}J.M. Wordie, "An Expedition to Melville Bay and Northeast Baffin Island," *Geographical Journal*, 86, 1935, p. 279.

P.D. Baird et al, "Baffin Island Expedition, 1950: A Preliminary Report," *Arctic*, 3, 1950, p. 131. E. Whalley et al, "Baffin Island, 1973," *Canadian Alpine Journal*, 57, 1974, p. 23.

K. O'Connell and E. Whalley, "Baffin '77," Canadian Alpine Journal, 61, 1978 p. 51.

K. O'Connell, "Midnight Sun Mountaineering," Summit, April/May, 1979, p. 16.

E. Whalley et al, "Baffin Island ACC Alpine Climbing Camp," Canadian Alpine Journal, 63, 1980, p. 29.



still ice-covered when we arrived on July 16. A local hunter, Sam Palituq, suggested we travel part way by snow machine. Numerous open-water leads posed problems, but he told us, "We jump them . . . until they get too wide. Then you continue on your own by kayak."

We couldn't fit all our gear into the kayaks, so we left behind two large duffels containing most of the pitons, a large haul bag, water jugs, ice-climbing gear and hammocks. We left town on July 18 with two snow machines, one driven by Sam and the other by his friend Amos. Our kayaks were lashed to a long wooden sled called a *komatik*, pulled behind Amos' skidoo; we rode on a second one pulled by Sam. When we came to a lead, we disconnected the komatiks and pushed them across while our guides backed up, revved full throttle, hit the water like a flat skipping stone and drove over the gap. Any hesitation and the machine would have sunk to the bottom of the ocean. The first leads were half a komatik length across, about ten feet. They grew to a full komatik length as we proceeded up the coast. We kept going.

Amos hooked a ski on a chunk of pressure ice and it broke. The skidoo careened to a halt and the komatik plowed in from behind, puncturing the gas tank. I stood aghast, sure the two men would return to town. But no! Amos pushed the komatik out of the way, leaned back over the leaking gas tank and lit a cigarette to think our problems over. I stepped back. Conrad ventured some advice, "You don't think you'll blow us all up with that cigarette?"

Sam assured us, "You guys worry too much. Gas tanks only blow up in the movies."

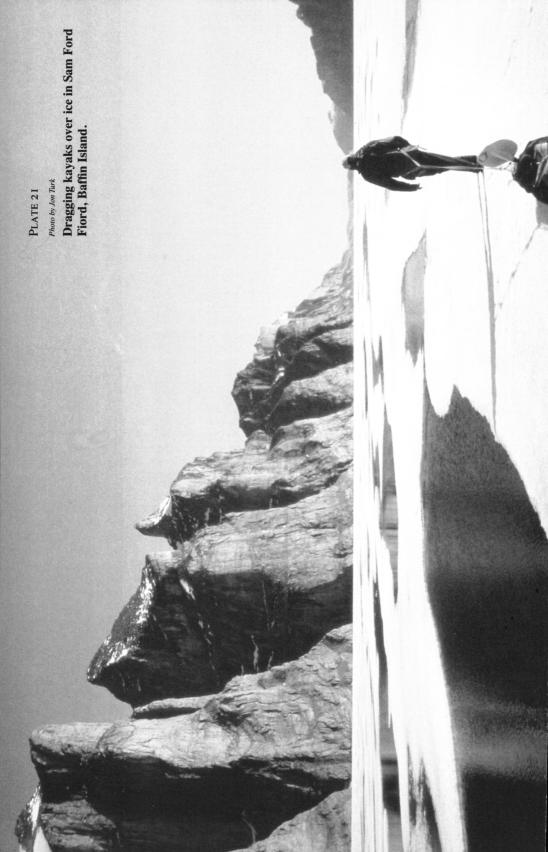
Amos unbolted the wear bars from the good ski to patch the broken one. Since no one had a drill, Sam shot holes in the ski with his rifle and passed bolts through the holes to fasten the splice. A few hours later, we reached a lead nearly two komatik lengths across, too wide to jump. Sam and Amos drove to the shore, pried a few smaller floes loose and herded them into the lead. Then they jumped their skidoos from the solid ice across the floating floes and over open water again to the other side. Conrad and I followed with the komatiks. Finally, at a large opening near the entrance to Sam Ford Fiord, Sam shook his head. "Too wide!" So we unloaded and parted company.

We paddled across the leads and dragged the boats over the ice. We were alone in the Arctic. No ground-based transportation could follow us, and the nearest rescue aircraft was far away.

Snow fell that night, changing to rain by morning. We pulled the heavily-laden kayaks through thick slush in a cold drizzle. By evening, we had covered four miles. Fortunately, conditions improved. We dragged 35 miles to our Base Camp in Swiss Bay in four days. Only the last mile was open water. Rolling hills dominated the outer fiord, but the inner sanctum was walled with granite.

A prominent buttress loomed across the valley from Kigut Peak and so we called it Kigut Buttress. We climbed an obvious chimney/crack system just north of the prow. After four pitches of lower fifth-class slabs, the rock steepened. The remaining eleven pitches were mainly 5.8 to 5.10 with a few short stretches of easy ground. We completed the round-trip from camp in a continuous 20-hour





push. Much of the route was clean rock climbing, but a few wet, ugly chimney pitches detracted.

Originally, I had planned this expedition with Mugs Stump, but those dreams ended with his tragic death on Mount McKinley in May. Conrad and I wanted to do a Mugs Stump Memorial Climb, one that was aesthetic enough to remember our friend by. While we were proud of Kigut Buttress, a 5.10, Grade V, we weren't ready to go home yet.

Within a few days, the ice melted in the narrow neck of the fiord near our Base. We paddled northwest into Walker Arm. The first good campsite there was dominated by a 4500-foot-high, free-standing pinnacle. The lower slabs were icy and wet, but a valley curved around to a high saddle and from there a nearly vertical prow led to the summit. We scrambled up a scree gully from the saddle and climbed three pitches of relatively easy broken rock. Conrad then led a 5.11 finger crack and I flailed along as second. That pitch and the next four were clean, airy climbing on steep rock. We had found what we were looking for. The final three pitches were more moderate, over steps and ledges. The route went free except for one short pendulum. We named it Stump Spire.

On our rest day, we began to get the fly-in-the-bottle feeling. The Ice God had given us passage into the interior of Sam Ford Fiord, but as the season progressed, the large floes broke into smaller mobile chunks, and we feared that they would block the exit passage. The Ice God seemed to take the form of a mischievous little boy who watched us crawl into the bottle and now gleefully inserted the cork to trap us. With two good climbs behind us, uncertainty ahead and low pressure moving in, we started our retreat.

Think of our exit passage as a checkerboard with 64 squares. The ice had broken apart and only a small amount had melted or beached on the shore. Therefore, there was enough ice to fill 63 squares. When we paddled out of Walker Arm, a south wind blew the ice northward, leaving the only open space in front of us. We rode out a scary squall and pulled to shore at the first available camp. Thick ice barred passage onward.

"Oh boy!" I told Rad. "We're going to be here for a week." But that night the wind shifted and moved enough ice southward to leave one square of open water in front of us again. We continued until we were again stopped by an impenetrable, dangerous mass of dense floes. The next beach lay less than a mile away, but we couldn't move even another hundred yards. We camped on a small rock ledge. Although I admitted that I had been wrong the day before, I assured Rad that this time we were really stuck for a week. But a wind from the north made me a liar again as it pushed another six miles of ice out of the way.

Our route home led north, south and east as we followed the convoluted coastline. Each day we faced odds of 63 to 1 in favor of being blocked by ice. But each evening the wind changed direction and cleared a passage in front of us. Some days we traveled only a few miles, but we always made some progress. This incredible luck held for nine days until we reached the outer coast beyond. Here the sea ice was crisscrossed with leads but not broken apart. We dragged on good ice and paddled in the leads. When the ice was too thin to walk on but too



thick to paddle through, we straddled the kayaks and waddled with them between our legs. When we broke through, we merely dropped into the cockpit. Sometimes we sat in the boats and pushed along with our hands, like paraplegic beggars in New Delhi. But every day we made progress and returned to Clyde River on August 13, after four-and-a-half weeks on the land.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Sam Ford Fiord, East Coast of Baffin Island, Canada.

FIRST ASCENTS: Kigut Buttress, Grade V, 5.10, July 26 and 27, 1992.

STUMP SPIRE, Grade V, 5.11, 11 pitches, July 30 and 31, 1992.

Personnel: Conrad Anker, Jonathan Turk.

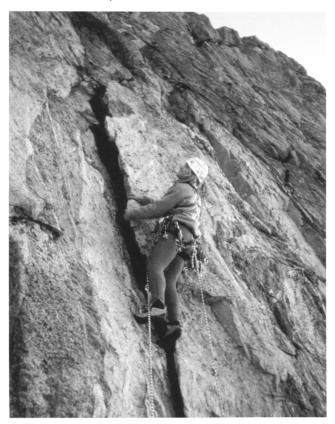


PLATE 23

Photo by Jon Turk

Anker climbing on STUMP SPIRE above Sam Ford Fiord, Baffin Island.