The Wolf’s Fang

I1 days on the northwest wall of Ulvetanna

by IVAR ERIK TOLLEFSEN

translated by ROLAND HUNTFORD

Antarctica is the fifth largest continent in the world, an island east of the sun, west of the moon and south of everything else. It is covered by an ice cap so huge that the sheer figures are hard to grasp: 30 million cubic kilometers of blue ice hold more than two-thirds of the world's fresh water, and weigh so much that the underlying land is forced down beneath sea level. If all the ice were to melt, the oceans of the world would rise 60 meters. It is also unquestionably the world's highest, most arid, windswept and coldest continent; it has a recorded low temperature of 89.2°C below zero. At the South Pole itself, the sun rises and sets once during the year — sunshine one half of the year, darkness the other.

To the adventurer and explorer, Antarctica has an even more enticing record: It is the least known and most inaccessible of all the continents. It is, in fact, the only continent free from regular traffic, and the only one where there literally remain large blanks upon the map. But even in this continent of inaccessibility and unexplored terrain, Queen Maud Land, Norway's Antarctic dependency, stands out as one of the least-known areas. My journey to Queen Maud Land was the attainment of an old dream of setting my foot where none had been before. I wanted to see wild and untouched country in the last continent. On Christmas Eve, 1993, I left Cape Town, the leader of an expedition of 13 men, bound for the coast of Queen Maud Land.

I'm running, running... a pack of wolves is snapping at my heels. The icy wilderness runs on flat, so everlastingly flat. The heat from rough animal breath... tearing teeth... pain in the flesh.... Images of the family race jerkily across the mind. It's all over....

Sjur awoke, drenched in sweat. Nightmare was written all over his emaciated, bearded, dark-tanned face. The previous evening, we had talked about Old Norse mythology, about the Fenris Wolf that bit off the god Tyr's hand and swallowed the sun. While the sun was hidden, the Fimbul winter reigned; three years, it was, without summer, and horribly cold. In Queen Maud Land, Fenriskjeften, or The Fenris Jaw massif, is steep, broken, cold and dangerous, and Ulvetanna, The Wolfs Fang, is the highest peak in the Fenriskjeften. When the shadows were long, we saw petrified animals and shapes in the mountains around us. Fear, superstition and dreams crept to the surface on the frigid and inhospitable northwest wall of Ulvetanna. We were the first men on this mountain, the existence of which the world is scarcely aware.

Even amongst the kilometer-high crags and pinnacles of Fenriskjeften, Ulvetanna is in a class of its own. At 2931 meters above sea level, it is steep and inaccessible from all sides. Three colossal 1000-meter walls rise up from the icy floor, separated by intimidating, razor-sharp ridges. It is beautiful, frigid, virginal.

Sjur Nesheim and I were sharing a portaledge, but only Sjur had been sleeping. My thoughts were giving me no peace. Doubt gnawed at me. Do we have enough food to continue, or will we have to go down in order to fetch more? How much longer will the storm continue? How many more days before there is another storm? How serious
is Sjur's frostbite? The questions were many and there were no easy answers.

Robert Caspersen lay two meters above us, alone, in the other portaledge. He had with him food and white gas for another six days' climbing under normal conditions. Earlier in the day, Base Camp had reported squalls with no signs that the wind was about to ease. Drifting snow insinuated itself through tiny holes in the tent cloth. But sheltered from the worst of the squalls, we were surprisingly comfortable where we were hanging, rocking pleasantly to and fro. What luck that the storm blew up during the night, and not a day later. Our original plan had been to move the portaledges to the top of the ropes today, and to sleep on the lowest part of the vertical headwall. Without shelter, I doubted whether we would have survived the 100 mile-per-hour winds.

_I don't want to turn back now. If we go down, I'm afraid it will be goodbye to the summit._

We had been talking things over the whole livelong day. How far is it to the top? How difficult is the climbing? For how many days can we eke out the food? On this day, because we were standing still, there were nine biscuits each: three for breakfast, three for lunch and three for dinner. Robert gulped all three meals at once. Sjur and I spread things out — only two biscuits for breakfast, seven to go.

I had led the last pitch yesterday evening, and was the one who had been highest. Sjur asked yet again how many ropelengths I thought there were to the top. I believed there were only four — five at the most. Sjur disagreed: at least six, perhaps eight. How many days' climbing do six or eight ropelengths mean on an unknown mountain? Even with long working days, we had hitherto only managed two ropelengths daily, and the rest of the route to the summit was much steeper than the climb so far. From my last stance, the mountain swept vertically up to the final, steep ice wall just under the summit itself. The headwall seemed a little firmer and more inviting than the rotten pitches below us. But given the day's blizzard, it would be several days before we could hope to climb unhindered. Sjur considered our margins of safety too small. Even at two ropelengths per day, we had only just enough food. The return would be complicated, and it would take at least a couple of days. We had no safety margin….

The next morning Ulvetanna, fearful of losing her suitors, displayed her most charming aspect. The sun broke through, and by the time we finished packing, she had removed all traces of her previous outburst. But clear weather brought cold in its train. Sjur had lost all feeling in his toes before he was even out of his sleeping bag, and he had to sit with his feet thawing out on my chest while he gulped down a hurried breakfast. The ropes were still buried in loose snow when we started off, but with Sjur as snowplow and rope-shaker, we made good progress toward the headwall. At regular intervals, small snowslides swept past us. Whether the Jümars would grip the rope or not was the question of the day. Clogged with snow and ice, they slid as often as they gripped. It was rather like moving carefully over a fragile snow crust, except that it was farther down to terra firma.

It was the middle of the night before we finally rigged two portaledges side by side on top of a 70° ice field. The headwall rose vertically above us. Between the portaledges, we hacked out a 30-centimeter niche where we could cook. The midnight sun was in the south, just above the horizon, with blood-red expanses of snow as far as the eye could see. Lovely and peaceful. To the west we saw Trollslottet, Jökulkjyrkja
and Gessnertind. Almost a kilometer below us lay Fenristunga with jagged, nameless fangs, and the cold white tip of its tongue to the north. There was still a whole Eiffel Tower before the summit.

It was far colder up here than down at the foot of the mountain, and the night was our coldest so far. The following morning Sjur and Robert had great difficulties with fingers and toes; even after a session of thorough warming up, they barely achieved more than a sensation of numbed pins and needles before they started the day’s climbing. It was my turn to have a rest day, and I lay, dozing all the time, under two extra sleeping bags. Robert had left his diary behind, and I read how he had led the hardest rope-length the day before the storm:

Yesterday we reached the start of the headwall. Behind us lies 500 meters of climbing — not desperately difficult, but hard enough. Except for one blank, slabby pitch, which I had to lead in friction boots, all the climbing has been mixed, sometimes with an ice axe in one hand, sometimes with both hands free. And always gripping with crampons on doubtful flakes and crystals or small patches of thin ice. The rock is like cornflakes; it is a real challenge to find safe holds. Until now Sjur, thanks to his unrivalled experience in tricky, low-angled mixed climbing, has done most of the leading.

The 400-meter headwall looms above us, and today I know that the pressure is on me. Because it is steeper, with less snow and ice than we have had before, Sjur and Ivar will be expecting me to carry the can. I really want to, but I feel nervous, as I always do when I follow on too many pitches without going up in front. You become defensive, more easily scared, and begin to doubt your own ability.

Even after jümarining 100 meters of fixed rope I'm still freezing. It's around -30°C and we're still in the shade. We don't have time to wait for the sun to reach us. It will be ages before the rock warms up, and anyway it will never reach the temperature I like. Plastic or friction boots? The first 15 meters follow a perfect hand/finger crack, and should go nicely free. But what about the overhang and the next 15 meters? A wide, cruel-looking crack, possibly an off-width, doesn't look too appealing; except for one doubtful-looking Big Bro, our biggest piece is a number four Friend. I decide on the friction boots.

15 meters of 5.10 later, I hang shivering from a good piece at the start of the overhang. I press my numbed fingers against my bare neck, trying to get some warmth into them. OK, HERE IT COMES! I try to ignore the agony of aching fingernails, knowing that a burning sensation will soon follow with revived circulation.

I'm ready. I reach out as far as I can, trying to place the wobbling Big Bro. I try hanging on to it. It twists and turns, crushing the treacherous crystals, threatening to pop.

“Fuck, Ivar — this pitch is a joke! ”

“It’s the only way, Rob! You’re our only hope! You’re strong, handsome — and who else can do it? Pretend you’re on the crag in Oslo, and the Big Bro there is a bomber Long Life bolt! ”

It is easy to see through Ivar’s pretty talk. But flattery works, however blatant. Some desperate (at least to me) free moves later, I am above the roof and find myself in off-width land, longing for protection. It looks bad. The only comfort is the adrenaline
coursing through my veins. The crack looks narrower higher up. I am too desperate to understand that this is only a trick of perspective. It is my only hope. Surely it will take a number four Friend.

Slipping and sliding, partly stemming, partly jamming, I slowly gain height. Of course the Friend is far too small. I played for high stakes — and lost. What is left of my strength is ebbing fast. Six meters below is the Big Bro and way below that a tensed Ivar and a waiting slab. The next 10 meters look the same: off-width and unprotectable. I panic, the adrenaline hitting a new high. I quickly realize I won't be able to climb down, and, with no other choice, the instinct of self-preservation drives me on.

Self-control reappears and takes me by the hand. Ten meters later I can finally place a good piece, and my exhausted but happy voice rings out: “Off belay, Ivar!”

The diary didn't reveal Robert's condition when we swapped leads: climbing in the shadow for more than an hour had caused severe frostbite to his toes. He had tried not to make a fuss about it, but I knew he was afraid of the consequences.

Robert and Sjur returned in the middle of the night. One long ropelength and two short ones was not a bad day's work at all, but there was still far to go, much farther than I had estimated a couple of days earlier. Having burned my fingers, I kept quiet when once more we discussed the alternatives. Robert was also reserved. We both left the decision to Sjur. In the cold winter world of Ulvetanna, he was the master. It was he who had led nearly all the ropelengths. Sjur had found security where there was none, and Sjur had chosen the safest and most effective route to the top. Robert and I felt safe together with him.

“Base Camp to alpine team, Base Camp to alpine team. Come in. Over.” The radio crackled, and Jan Age broke into our conversation.

“Alpine team here. We hear you loud and clear. Over.”

“We have had radio contact with the Russians. You will probably have another storm in the course of the next 24 to 48 hours, with snow and wind between storm force and hurricane. Hope you're bivouacked safe and sound. Over.”

“We're not safe at all, and we haven't enough food to sit out a storm up here. The previous camp lay in a huge crack, but now we're hanging on the headwall itself, completely unsheltered. It's difficult to say if our rig can stand such strong winds. Over.”

“What are your chances if you try early tomorrow? Over.” Jan Åge sounded worried.

“Difficult to say. The climbing is steep, but the rock is comparatively firm. Our biggest problem is that we only have one spare rope left, and far too little food to move the portaledges to the top of the fixed ropes. The only possibility is to make a push for the top, and hope that we are strong enough to get right up and down again in one go. Over.”

“Whether you go up or down, we'll be behind you. All of us down here hope that you manage. Good luck! Over and out.”

To save the batteries, we switched off the radio. Sjur looked at me, and I nodded.

“Let's try early tomorrow. We won't turn back now. Not when we have struggled so much to get here.”
Next morning, Robert and Sjur left early. After an hour I was awakened by Sjur’s screaming voice.

“IVAR, GET THE HELL OUT OF THE PORTALEDGE! A HUGE BOULDER’S COME LOOSE A HUNDRED METERS ABOVE YOUR HEAD. ROBERT AND I ARE BALANCING IT ON A NARROW LEDGE CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

Sjur was shouting with all his might. I heaved myself out of my sleeping bag and gathered boots and jacket. My rucksack was ready, packed and heavy. I was nearly crying from exhaustion as I fought my way up the ropes. The rucksack threw me off balance. I was constantly leaning backward. I had cramps in my upper arms, but terror drove me on.

“Rock!”

Fear hit me like a clenched fist. The adrenaline pumped out into my veins; I bent my body forward, my head between my shoulders, and waited. Nothing happened — just the sound of a few pebbles rushing by.

“Goddamnit, you scared me out of my wits!”

I was frightened and angry, but heaved myself up on the Jümars again. Another few meters and I was safely on the stance. When I arrived, only Sjur was there. The loose boulder was securely lashed, and Robert was already at the top of the ropes, ready to lead the first ropelength of the day.

Four ropelengths later, 24 hours after leaving the portaledges, we were immediately beneath the summit. Sjur had taken a long fall at the beginning of the third ropelength, but was uninjured. All three of us were horribly frozen. It is impossible to keep warm when one is hanging motionless for hours at a time in the middle of the night, and the temperature is creeping down toward 30° below zero.

“Bloody hell, I don’t think we’ll get up. It’s only another 20 or 30 meters to the top, but the last few meters look absolutely polished. The only possibility is to drill our way to the top and that’s going to take a long, long time. We won’t survive another day up here without bivouac gear and food.”

Sjur sounded desperate as he hung on his ice axe just under the top of the almost vertical ice field. After an eternity (or was it just a few minutes?) we again heard the sound of ice axe and crampons on firm ice. The rope slid slowly, so slowly, between Robert’s fingers, but suddenly something happened. The rope began moving much faster. We called out, but received no answer, and assumed that Sjur must have found a ledge. Soon after, there were three strong pulls on the rope — the signal to follow. Robert jümared first until he too disappeared from view.

A few meters below the top of the ice field, I still could not understand where Sjur and Robert had gone. Right above me, the dark wall rose vertically, and still I saw no sign of a ledge. I kicked my crampons into the ice and hauled myself farther up the rope. Suddenly I was blinded by sunlight, and glimpsed the mountains north of Base Camp. Crazy! Unbelievable! A tunnel right through Ulvetanna! What an unbelievable ending. On the farther side, Sjur and Robert sat barefoot and smiling on a big ledge. It was only 6 a.m., but the sun was truly warm. Only a few minutes earlier, I had been freezing in every corner of my body, and here were these guys, sitting barefoot, with the summit only a few meters behind them. We smiled and embraced each other with tears in our eyes, inexpressibly happy at having reached the summit of Fenriskjeften's
majestic queen.

Returning from the summit was a 48-hour continuous struggle, with almost no food. After spending two hours in glorious sunshine just below the summit, we crawled back through the tunnel and began an endless succession of abseils. Worn out and starving, it took only a few minutes before our bodies were once more in the grip of the cold.

"Down again and still alive!" Robert smiled from ear to ear while the snow pelted down.

"Bugger me, this is the hardest thing I've ever done," Sjur said. After countless winter climbs over the past 20 years this was quite a claim, but both Robert and I knew that it was only the simple truth.

Summary of Statistics:
AREA: Queen Maud Land, Antarctica.
NEW ROUTES: Ulvetanna (2931 meters, highest peak in the Fenriskjeften massif) via the northwest wall, January-February 1994 (Ivar Erik Tollefsen, Sjur Nesheim, Robert Caspersen).