

liggende helt til 9. mai før vi ble hentet. Vi hadde nødrasjoner for tolv dager og fyring på sparebluss for 20 dager ved ankomst Nordpolen. Med US Navy i ryggen led vi

derfor ingen nød. Likevel var det en lettelse å endelig se flyet lande. Og hvem andre enn Geir jumpet ut for å ta imot oss! Bedre mottagelse enn det kunne vi neppe ha fått.



Fig. 2. Nordpolen 9. maj 1990. Børge Ousland, Erling Kagge og Geir Randby.

Fig. 2. The North Pole May 9th 1990. Børge Ousland, Erling Kagge and Geir Randby.

The 1990 Norwegian North Pole Expedition

(The Team - Geir Randby, Erling Kagge and Børge Ousland)

Børge Ousland

To reach the North Pole without the aid of sledge hounds, transit air depots or supplies, has long been the dream of many arctic expeditions.

After two years of careful preparation, we were at last ready to make the attempt. We left Norway on 8th February and travelled to Iqatuit on Baffin Island, where there was an enormous amount of pack-ice due to the large tidal range. We remained there for three weeks, trying out our equipment, making adjustments where necessary, and fortifying our own physical and mental condition. A temperature as low as -48°C and a biting wind offered us every

opportunity of testing and selecting routines under very difficult conditions. We also had a chance to experience at first hand the capricious nature of pack-ice.

Thereafter, we travelled on to Resolute Bay, which is the starting point of most North Pole expeditions. All the equipment was weighed to the minutest detail, before being packed onto one of three sledges. Food, fuel and equipment were kept to a minimum. All the same, the sledges weighed 120 kilograms each, but this was nothing compared to the weight of several previous expeditions.

On 8th March the plane dropped us on the ice to the east

of Ward Hunt Island on the coast of Ellesmere. The temperature here was as low as -52°C , and the sea-ice looked treacherous with unusually large stretches of open water.

We chose a combination of old and new equipment. The former consisted of: cotton anoraks, homespun thick woolly trousers, and Indian footwear. The latter consisted of: a nylon tent, Gore-tex overalls and a satellite navigator.

On the ninth day, something happened that was to change the whole course of the expedition. Geir was injured when his sledge slid into a crevasse. The pulling force of a 120 kg sledge disappearing down the crevasse dislocated one of his vertebrae. He had to be flown out. Fortunately we found an acceptable landing spot in the terrain not far from the site of the accident.

We had a unique communication system that no other previous expedition had used, (and which nobody thought would work!) Keeping the weight light was essential. Therefore, instead of taking a 10 kg HF radio, we took a light-weight VHF radio. Through an agreement with S.A.S., we were allowed to communicate with pilots on flights connecting Japan and Anchorage. This was normally supposed to occur every Thursday, although they were instructed to contact us during each flight. All together this became five times a week. We were additionally equipped with an Argos transmitter that reported our position via satellite. We had nine codes at our disposal that could report different conditions, for example, "Fetch us as soon as possible!"

We had no base camp in Canada, but Trond Skaare, at our office at Padi Norway, checked all S.A.S. and Argos messages daily. It was he, who contacted Bradley Air at Resolute Bay in order to get Geir flown home. Unfortunately, bad weather at the fuelling depot at Eureka Weather Station prevented him being collected for four days. All this time we were drifting backwards, further south!

Those four days were probably the worst of the expedition. Geir was the decision-maker and the one who had done most to organize and get the expedition going. However, Erling and I decided to continue. We had food rations for sixty days, 5,750 kcal per day, being the same food each day. We had fuel for sixty days, 0.6 litre per day for three men. To avoid being disqualified for having taken advantage of extra help and assistance, Geir was obliged to take all his equipment and provisions home. We were therefore down to 0.4 litre fuel per day. This was too little at first, due to the severe cold at the start of the expedition. We began by burning 0.5 litre daily during the first month and had to resort to just 0.3 litre daily at the end of the expedition. It was an absolute minimum, but we managed, thanks to our own home-made cooking apparatus, that redirected all the heat onto the cooking pot.

Fuel was never used to heat the tent. It was, however, required to melt ice to water.

We were subjected to particularly bad weather throughout the expedition. Three days of unbroken sunshine was the longest reprieve. Otherwise, we were the victims of prevailing low pressure systems and the accompanying drifting snow. Restricted visibility was a real hindrance, as it was so important to be able to discern a way through the irregular pack-ice. All the same, we dared not linger. We persevered. The very thought of being confined to our tents, eating our remaining rations and drifting southwards, backwards, was enough to spur us onward, in spite of the wind. The greatest southerly drift that we experienced in one day was 18 km.

At the start of the expedition, we achieved between 5-10 km daily. We used skis each day, even though it was necessary to remove them when testing the pack-ice. Skis were of invaluable help, particularly when crossing thin ice, as they distribute body weight across a larger surface area.

As we progressed, we were delighted to observe that the obstacles presented by the rucked pack-ice were becoming fewer. Furthermore, north of 85°N , the consistency of the ice had become firmer. Some days, this allowed us to travel without having to wear skis. Nevertheless, almost invincible pack-ice formations confronted us daily. There was never a dull moment. Each day presented new challenges and surprises.

However, the rucked pack-ice was easier to overcome than the crevasses and breaks of open water. These breaks hindered us the most. A network of channels would form in an east-west orientation if the wind prevailed from the south. Some of the gaps were so wide, that we could not discern the far side. These we had to circumvent, often taking hours at a time, until the ice closed again, or until we found a narrower stretch that we could paddle across. We could cross stretches narrower than 120 metres. The sledges had been made especially broad and high in order to be used as boats. We fastened them together by binding the skis crosswise, forming a stable, sturdy, catamaran. Traversing the stretches of thinner ice or open water was slow progress, taking as long as a couple of hours.

Where other expeditions had been forced to wait for days until the water refroze, we were able to continue. As far as we know, our method had never been tried before.

Crossing these gaps, often on thin ice, was one of the most nerve-racking experiences of the expedition. We needed to be doubly sure. We checked the ice of each gap before venturing out. The thickness often varied across the expanse of one gap. We tested the ice with our ski sticks. If the ice gave after one thrust, it was too thin. If it gave after two thrusts, we were in doubt, but danger could be avoided by progressing non-stop. If the thickness of the ice survived three thrusts, it was thick enough to traverse.

Even so, we still slipped through the ice eight times, although we were prepared for this as we had checked the ice beforehand. After being unceremoniously ducked into the sea, the water soaking our clothes froze stiff and solid on contact with the air.

At the end of one harrowing day, with 14 gruelling hours behind us, we set up camp at 88° 19' N, when we were suddenly surprised by a polar bear. We had just finished changing into warm clothes, when the bear suddenly appeared at a distance of 30 metres. It took its "bearings", sniffing the air and inspecting us. Then it began to approach us. It failed to heed our warning shot. When it had come to within 8 metres of our tent, we were forced to kill it. We shot it three times in the chest with a 44 magnum calibre revolver.

Some people would claim that it would have been cheating to eat an animal shot during the expedition. The expedition would no longer be operating "unsupported", as the extra rations had not been part of the overall plan. Therefore, we refused to eat any of the bear meat that day, but carved several steaks out of the animal to eat as part of our celebration on reaching the North Pole a little later.

In fact, wild life is rare at these high latitudes. The day after meeting the bear, a seal popped its head up out of the gap that we were crossing. We saw fox tracks on several

occasions, as far north as 89°N. Close to the North Pole, we observed a small pile of pale shrimps.

The day after arriving at the North Pole, we crawled out of our tent and celebrated our victory by eating the polar bear steaks. It was then time to prepare a landing strip for the Twin Otter. All of a sudden, a large aeroplane roared above us. It was the U.S. Navy on a routine patrol, monitoring any submarine activity. We managed to contact them via our VHF radio.

"Do you need any food and reading material?" they asked. "Yes", we cried in chorus.

Sure enough, little by little, small parcels of food dropped down from the heavens. That was truly a fine ending to an exhausting, yet very successful journey.

Due to adverse weather conditions at our tent site, and at the two fuelling stations on the ten hour flight route to Resolute Bay, we were forced to wait until 9th May before being fetched. However, we had emergency supplies for 12 days, fuel reserves for 20 days, plus the supplies dropped by the U.S. Navy. We were able to manage comfortably. All the same, it was a great relief, when the plane arrived to collect us. None other than the unfortunate Geir himself jumped out to greet us. A better reception could never have been anticipated!

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