

SWAN SONG?

A Tilman expedition – Sail and Climb Rev Bob Shepton

(The redoubtable 'Rev Bob' and his equally redoubtable 33ft Westerly Discus, Dodo's Delight, will be known to all members except perhaps a very few recent joiners – who are recommended to read Bob's autobiography, Addicted to Adventure, without delay. Will this be his Swan Song? I somehow doubt it...)

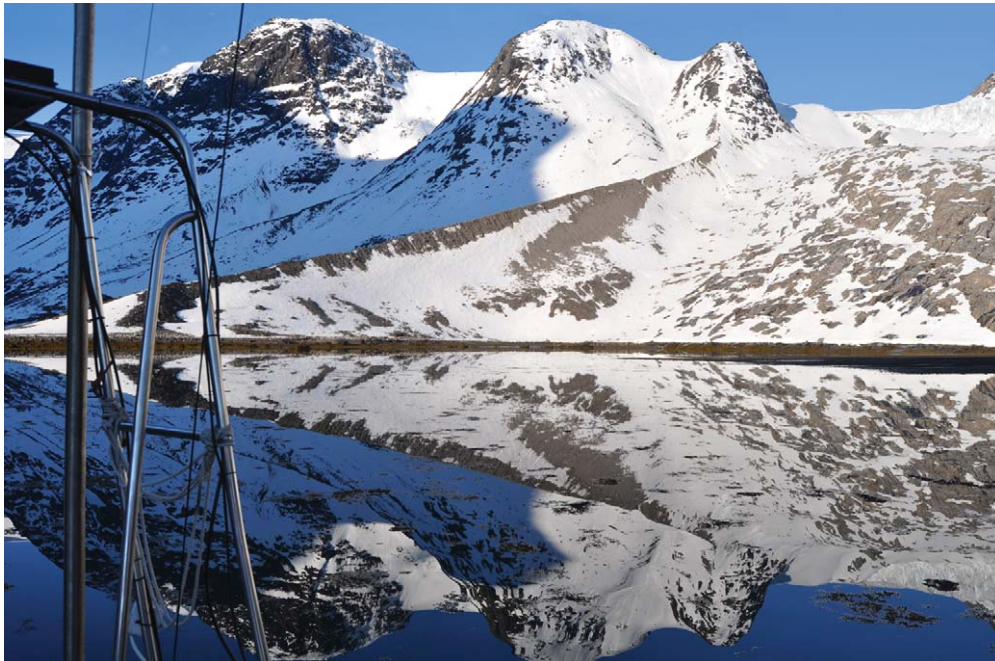
Every expedition has its ups and downs, and this was no exception.

The first down this year must be when I fell off the two oil drums I was standing on to clean *Dodo's Delight's* topsides after the boat had wintered ashore in the small but friendly boatyard in Sisimiut, west Greenland. The oil drums went one way and I went the other, falling on my side onto some loose rails lying on the ground. Bruised most certainly, but I was lucky not to break anything. The second down was when I had to buy two new heavy-duty batteries to make sure the engine started, at Danish prices (the equivalent of £230 each), but then some ups might be that there was now plenty of power to run auxiliaries and electronics on board, and that we launched safely with a coat of antifouling on the hull after three years without in the Arctic, where we relied on the cold water to keep her clean.

Patrick and Trystan arrived in early June, and after some preliminary sail training in the fjord outside – they had not sailed before – and necessary bunkering with food, water and diesel we set sail for Evighedsfjord to the south. Again, an up must be that after days of no wind at all in Sisimiut we had a following wind, and the skipper, to the relief of the crew, was on watch when it blew up to 28–30 knots. We charged south under mainsail alone.

Dodo's Delight wintering ashore in Sisimiut





Early morning in Evighedsfjord

Another positive was that, putting in for a rest, we discovered a more convenient anchorage behind Cruncher Island at the start of Kangerlussuaq fjord than that described in the excellent *Arctic and Northern Waters Pilot*. Boats, including Willy Ker (OCC) in *Assent*, have threaded this 50 mile-long fjord in the past to put down or pick up crew at the airport at the far end, but sometimes you must wait for the tide to abate first. On the other hand, when we reached the dramatic fjord of Evighedsfjord with its Alpine-type mountains we became aware of a definite negative. We had expected to be rock climbing at this time of year in Greenland, but it became increasingly obvious that it was still winter here, with snow right down to shore level. It was the same when we reached the Hamborgerland/Maniitsoq area further south with its tremendous potential for climbing, and it was summed up by the manager of the Maniitsoq hotel: 'This year in Greenland winter has lasted later than for the previous 47 years'.

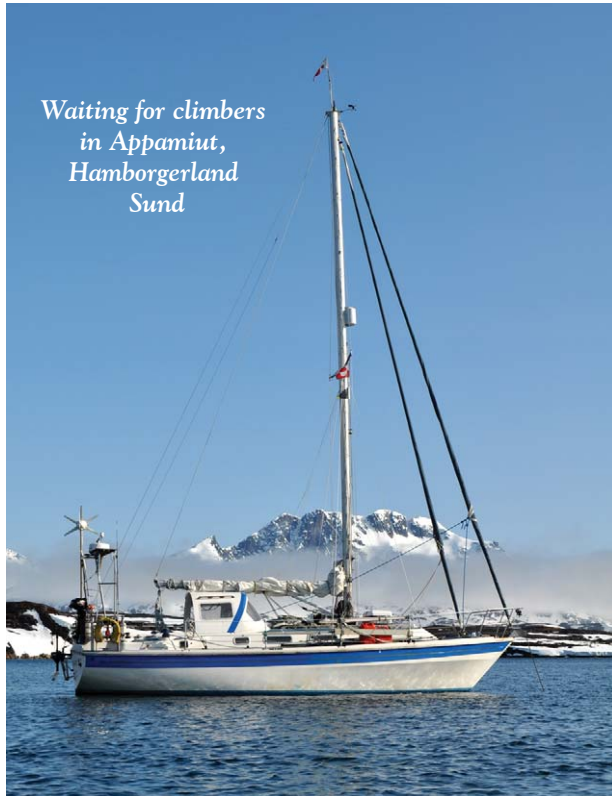
In Evighedsfjord we put into Tilman's anchorage of Tassiussaq, and were surprised to find a luxury motor superyacht from Bermuda, with attendant helicopter parked ashore. This was a first for me in Greenland. The glacier debouching into the fjord further on was as dramatic as expected, and still further into this 25 mile-long fjord I re-learned another valuable lesson. At the head of these fjords there are often huge, hidden silt banks from past glacial activity which uncover at low water. Fine, so you lay your anchor accordingly, but when the wind goes round you can suddenly find yourself on the silt bank. It is important to lay another anchor astern before you are caught out. Meanwhile Patrick and Trystan toiled 3km up the edge of a glacier to make the first new route of the expedition on a rock buttress at the far end, *The Rocky Route to New York* – strange names climbers give to their routes these days!

We went further south to Maniitsoq, where Mark and Rob joined us. Soon afterwards there was a somewhat disgraceful incident when a large quantity of wine was consumed

in the cockpit, followed by some of the skipper's scarce and precious whisky, while he slept fitfully below; we will pass hastily over that! We returned northwards to Hamborgerland Sund and put into the pleasant anchorage of Appamiut. Nearby, in spite of the late winter, the lads made a number of first ascents of rock climbs on a low-lying crag we named Starter Walls – there were two of them. Expecting the usual summer conditions we had only brought rock climbing gear and had little alpine equipment with us, but many of the walls and crags lay up glaciers with possibly snow-covered crevasses. So, after some further unsuccessful prospecting and subsequent discussion, we went 30 miles south to what looked like a possible crag on the rather inadequate Saga maps (for mountaineering) but which turned out to be an impressive looking mountain ridge.

There was a rather dramatic incident when we anchored for the night in the fjord below. We put our anchor down to leeward of an island – I knew it was probably on rock, but all seemed well. I woke up at 0500 to find the wind had again gone completely round

*Waiting for climbers
in Appamiut,
Hamborgerland
Sund*



*Dancing on ice – why?
Photo Rob Beddow*





Anchored in sand near the Finnefjeld ridge, with plenty of cod in the bay ...



– these fjords make their own weather – and we were facing in the opposite direction, the wind was strong, and our stern was quite close to the rocky island. But somehow the anchor was holding, and we were not drifting back, fast, into the island. The crew were all sleeping peacefully so I kept an anxious anchor watch myself, not wanting to try and shift the anchor in that wind in any case while we were stable. Later we picked up the anchor by motoring over the top of it. I thought it a merciful deliverance!

The lads set off with enthusiasm to climb the ridge, but once again it was guarded by a huge snow field and they lacked the proper

*.. so the skipper
takes to fishing...
Photo Rob Beddow*

... with some success.
Photo Rob Beddow

equipment so they aborted. Initially I was disappointed, but when I saw the pictures later I understood why! So the Finnefeld Ridge remains inviolate, to my knowledge. Meantime I had found a picturesque and safe anchorage in sand further south, where you could hook out sea cod on a line every few minutes. Over the brow of the enclosing arm there was an intriguing fresh water lochan, undisturbed by tide and so still it remained ice-covered. On the way back to Maniitsoq we discovered another enclosed haven off the channel, but only after hitting an uncharted rock in the next door cove where the depth went from 4m to 'bang' in a moment.

Having returned to Maniitsoq we went straight to a feature I had named the Shark's Fin, a 360m mount with a sheer east face, officially named Lin of Sal – a curiously English name on the Danish maps and charts, we never did discover why. The Greenlandic name means 'Great Heart', which didn't really help either. But here

On the pontoons at Maniitsoq, in company with a much larger French yacht. Photo Mark McKellar





*Trystan near the top of one of the climbs, Midnight Sun on the Shark's Fin.
Sailing and climbing go so well together. Photo Rob Beddow*

the lads put up two superb high standard routes, really stretching themselves beyond their usual standard – both routes were E4, 6a, 280m. They also put up two shorter routes 'on the best rock so far' round the back on the west side of the second summit. Strangely, the best anchorage with the least disturbance from wind and currents was in the middle of a channel between islands.

One day the forecast, which I was still getting by e-mail from the redoubtable Peter Semiotuk in Yellow Knife, showed a limited period of northerly winds, so I radioed the team ashore and we left the Shark's Fin in a hurry, heading southward for Nuuk with a following wind. We sailed for a while but eventually had to motor. At Nuuk, instead of going to the town we went straight round to the fjords to the north and east, on the way discovering a well-protected inlet immediately to the north of the town, a pleasing way to escape the hurly burly of the capital city. We explored the fjords, and I have to confess I was a little disappointed that my team did not really seem to want to leave their comfort zone and attempt to climb these big, attractive walls. On the other hand, two of them did traverse a high standard alpine type ridge which included a peak of 1180m and which took 25 hours from boat to boat. It was probably the second ascent, some Norwegians having done it before. We also spent a pleasant time with *Arctic Monkey* and *Suilven* (OCC) anchored in Itissoq fjord below, where the water was so clear you could choose which fish you wanted to catch, and then they all fought to get onto your lure and hook. As it can be complicated taking on water in Nuuk, we filled our tank from the clear chuckling mountain stream ashore.

Crew logistics had been a nightmare in the initial planning, but it all worked out well in the end. Mark and Rob had joined us in Maniitsoq, and when Rob later returned home from Nuuk, Martin joined us. Martin is an arctic research scientist and so was a

mine of information on arctic ice. Furthermore Patrick had now voluntarily taken over all the cooking on board – a welcome first for this boat, to have a full time cook. In this connection yet another first was that Patrick and Trystan became masters at raiding the skips in the settlements late at night and purloining quantities of food – bread, chocolate, bananas, pizzas, you name it – thrown out that day by the supermarkets. We ate it all with relish and without mishap; that must have something to say about waste and westernised society. Though as somebody commented on Facebook, maybe this is the new face of cruising...

All this time I had been doing some pilotage, recording new and checking old anchorages, for the supplement to the excellent *Arctic and Northern Waters Pilot*. Perhaps of special significance in these fjords were Qarasuk, the site of an old settlement, where anchorages for nearly all wind directions apart from south are available inside the line of two outlying islands; and the dual islands of Qeqertaq, where protection can be found from any wind direction around the two islands or in the channel between. *Dodo's Delight* did in fact ride out strong southerlies for several hours, anchored in sand or silt in the bay on the north side of the western island. We also checked out anchorages already recorded, and hopefully added one or two helpful points.

Leaving Nuuk we had to motor, and continued on into the night. There was darkness by now, so somewhat stressful pilotage was required through the islands and rocks in the dusky night to reach another fjord with yet another glacier, named Sermilik, to look for climbing possibilities. We anchored offshore short of the fjord and continued on next day in daylight, but on returning we found where we should have anchored – a perfect bay with sand and a line of huge sand dunes forming the shore, obviously some sort of ancient outflow. And if the wind was onshore this side you could go round the headland of Marraq and anchor in sand the other side with the sand dunes above.

The passage from Nuuk to Paamiuth proved somewhat difficult, and varied. At one stage we hove-to as the wind was strong from the south where we wanted to go, and

Filling with water from a mountain stream near Nuuk



that night, when it had moderated somewhat, we closed the shore and invented an intriguing anchorage between the islands close in. Fortunately the ice floes brought in by the tidal currents during the night kept close to the shores. Next day we made our way to Paamiut in a strong northerly following wind and a boisterous sea.

Paamiut may not be everybody's favourite settlement, though it does have a conveniently long hose from the jetty for filling with diesel. We filled up and re-stocked and looked around, but some establishments only opened three times a week and we could not get wifi for less than 100 Danish krone (about £10) for four hours, with nothing less allowed. So quite soon we put out to search the long fjord to the east for climbing possibilities. It was ironic that, the climbers having found some cliffs above a lake system off an adjacent fjord which they liked, the mist stayed obstinately over the area even when it was clear further to the west. We had to return to Paamiut as we found we had only one loo roll left, but when we came back the mist still hung relentlessly over the climbing area. We decided to give up.

I used to be able to say, half humorously, 'if you see another sailing boat in Greenland, it's been a busy summer'. Not anymore – but you do meet a lot of nice people! In addition to *Arctic Monkey* and *Suilven* already mentioned, in Paamiut *Lady Dana 44*, a Polish yacht, moored up alongside and kindly asked us aboard. I was slightly surprised at the vast quantities of vodka consumed by some of my crew – 'it was very weak stuff' they said later – but in spite of some language difficulties it was a convivial and pleasant evening. Then when we returned to Paamiut there was *Nomad* with a young Austrian couple just in from Labrador, with news of old friends from the Northwest Passage in *Vagabondelle*, whilst *Empiricus*, also old friends from the Northwest Passage, were pursuing us south having wintered the boat in Aasiaat. Of course it was not always thus – there was a large Swiss boat behind us in Nuuk whose crew played music loudly through speakers until 0300!

There was a convenient hose for diesel in Paamiut





*Ice with everything, Nunarssuit.
Photo Martin Doble*

We had previously found a hurricane hole down a short fjord with a right-angled offshoot, protected from all winds. We passed this now on our way south through the inner passage, before putting out to sea and motoring the 100 miles south, in no wind and Greenlandic fog, to Kap Desolation on the large island of Nunarssuit, with its scenic peaks, reindeer herds and sea eagles, plus excellent hiking and potential for climbing. We found a unique protected channel with an anchorage in its northwest corner, strengthened by a line ashore, between the cliff of Kap Thorvaldsen and the enclosing line of islands at its foot. An added bonus was that the numerous icebergs which tend to ground in this area had found it difficult to get in, though one did sail up and down in threatening mode on the tide inside. The lads climbed a couple of new routes on a wall round the back of Kap Thorvaldsen, and we continued to investigate a number of pleasing anchorages on this island, recording them for the supplement. There cannot be many places where you can anchor with a pair of sea eagles circling above you, a reindeer sighted ashore, and you awake to scenic mountains to starboard and big icebergs in the fjord to port.

*A reindeer posing on Nunarssuit.
Photo Martin Doble*





Not a bad team
photo! Photo
Martin
Doble

After some days exploring we made our way in lovely sunshine but no wind to the town of Qaqortoq. The Seamen's Mission regrettably has now closed, but a long walk to the other side of town found us showers, clothes washing facilities and

Enjoying the thermal springs at Unartoq, with refreshments...



A sea eagle circling above the boat at Nunarssuit, not happy to be disturbed. Photo Martin Doble



wifi, though later a Danish warship did move us from our berth because they wanted it! From Qaqortoq we did the tourist thing, visiting the well preserved 14th century Norse church at Hvalsey, soaking in the hot thermal springs at Unartoq where the lads went back for another session in the night, and then riding out stormy

winds in the circular fjord of Tasiussaq off Tasermit with its magnificent panorama of mountains all around, and a spectacular display of the northern lights covering the whole night sky. Yet another stormy night sheltering on the way back, with the wind

howling over the boat but the anchor holding, took us to Nanortalik for final stores and bunkering.

Aurora borealis at Tasiussaq. Photo Martin Doble



Sailing home entailed the usual difficult Atlantic passage in these northern latitudes, the notorious Cape Farewell joining in the act. As we turned south to get into the Atlantic the wind went from 5 knots to 25 knots in seconds, and an already nasty sea became even more bouncy. We reefed down

and set the inner staysail and clawed our way south to get away from the Cape.

The weather charts we were getting by e-mail from 'my man in Scotland' showed that a depression to the south of Iceland had thrown out a huge spider's web of isobars stretching right across the Atlantic from Greenland to Scotland and beyond. Our plan was to work south around these, hoping to pick up westerlies to the south. Later we hove-to for 26 hours in big winds, during which the base plate of the boom vang burst off the mast foot – we could only effect a repair to re-attach the boom vang to the mast with shackles later. Then we were almost becalmed, before big winds and seas again – the isobars were tighter at the back (west side) of the depression. A wave hit me in the chest and threw me across the cockpit, which did my back no good for a while; then the fresh water system stopped working and only recovered when we bypassed the filter system – at least we had water to drink if we boiled it first.

We were in those big, long, Atlantic rollers now, and one of them hit the boat like a slab of concrete, bursting open a repair I had done two years previously on some damage sustained when the boat was wintering in the water in Aasiaat. Water spurted in a jet across the saloon below and soaked Martin's bunk – he was understandably not amused. This necessitated doing a repair in mid-Atlantic as soon as it calmed down, pushing fibreglass filler into the cracks and holes as best we could. Thankfully it held for the rest of the trip.

More winds, more calms, more big rollers. The salt water taps started to play up, the loo seat began to crack, threatening to lose its vacuum (disaster loomed), and the wind instruments gave up altogether, in spite of the lads climbing the pirouetting mast twice to check the anemometer at the masthead. They had to learn to sail by the feel of the wind – no bad thing, no doubt. Then for the last few days we picked up

The real thing, mid-Atlantic



All we could do was stuff in fibreglass paste – mid-Atlantic. Photo Martin Doble

constant wind from the west which sped us towards Ireland, though it was sometimes difficult to choose the right sail plan and course, broad-reaching or running before with following wind and big seas. The wind miraculously lasted through the final night in spite of a contrary forecast, into and up the Firth of Lorne. We put into Oban to collect fuel – to be met with a notice 'Sorry, no fuel' – then sailed and motored in heavy rain showers past Castle Stalker and through the narrows into Dallens Bay, to tie up at the pontoon shattered but thankful.

It had been 1645 miles in 14½ days, the first Atlantic crossing for the crew and the 15th for me, to celebrate my 80th year. Lucky it wasn't easy then....?!

And now the grandchildren want to go sailing – now there is a challenge.

We are immensely grateful to the Gino Watkins Memorial Fund for their generous support once again, and also, this year, to the British Mountaineering Council.

