

Arctic 2012 – Tilman Again

So after a remarkably benign Atlantic crossing across what is usually 'the meanest Atlantic crossing of them all' - from Scotland to Greenland - we traversed two thirds of the way up this incredibly long coast line of west Greenland to the Upernavik area. Here this year's team of South African star climbers completed three new extreme rock climbs in the Sortehul area by Upernavik, one of which was another major undertaking similar to and close by the Belgian/American route of the 2010 team on Impossible Wall. This they named 'Improbability Drive', 850 metres of hard technical climbing, E6 in British grading, which took them nine days, sleeping occasionally on portaledges suspended on the face. Thus is big wall climbing. I meanwhile took the boat to Upernavik to try and get the anchor winch repaired - successfully - and the electrics and batteries sorted - partially so. The boat was therefore torn apart and in chaos and it was somewhat embarrassing to be visited by friends from some of the several boats which assembled in Upernavik this year, a number destined to attempt the North West Passage like us.

After collecting the team from the climb, we departed for the four day crossing to arctic Canada, where the team put up a pioneering route in an area of completely unclimbed compact difficult rock in the fjord area forty miles south west of Pond Inlet. We discovered some new anchorages into the bargain. We were then held up in Pond Inlet for several days by ice in Navy Board Inlet and a peculiar huge tongue of ice reaching right out into Baffin Bay from the north east side of Bylot Island. And herewith starts a long story.

Suffice it to say that eventually Navy Board Inlet cleared sufficiently to allow us through, we filled up with water from a glacial stream at the entrance to Tay Bay carrying the rifle ashore in case of polar bears, we visited Dundas Harbour, made our way along Lancaster Sound against westerlies to Terror and Erebus Bay where we visited the three graves from Franklin's expedition wintering here. We picked up fuel at Resolute in a rather intriguing fashion bringing the hose from the lorry across the water in the dinghy, we traversed the Bellot Strait twice 'for the fun of it' whilst waiting for ice to clear further south. In the Tasmanian Islands we stood by and sought to help Nordwind who had lost their bower anchor and 90 metres of chain in a storm and also had developed prop shaft trouble, but then were very unusually able to cross via Victoria Strait rather than go round via Gjoa Havn - and so to Cambridge Bay for refuelling. A crew member managed to run us hard into a rock in shallow water close in by Lady Franklin Point, but on close inspection at Bernard Harbour later all seemed to be well. We were held up in Tuktoyaktuk for over a week with two other boats, waiting for strong gales to pass, we had a nasty day butting into a strong westerly before eventually reaching Barrow Point where we anchored in Elson Lagoon with only 1.1 metres under the keel to wait for an east wind - there were a number of firsts on this voyage! Rounding Barrow Point we had officially completed the Passage, or so I believed, but then ran before a northerly gale on bare poles in a big sea for a day and a night in the Chuckchi Sea, and again encountered nasty seas in shallower water approaching the Bering Strait, where the mainsail split a fair way across below the second reef in an involuntary gybe in roly seas when brought up short by the preventer; the Strait itself proved comparatively easy to

pass through by contrast, to our surprise. Finally we enjoyed a pleasant day's sailing, with sunshine at last, to reach Nome on the evening of September 20.

Eventually I hauled out to lay up ashore after waiting a further week for a south wind to bring the water back into the harbour, to give sufficient depth to float the boat between the arms of the trailer. But after 6059nms since leaving the pontoon in Scotland in early June in our small overloaded GRP boat, I really did want to get home! And of course the South Africans had sensibly already left, some to get climbing again as quickly as possible. Two of them had never sailed before; I suppose an Atlantic crossing and the North West Passage is not a bad way to start...