

Unfinished Business
A kayak journey to the BAARE base site
2018
Final Report.



Submitted by

Martin Rickard – Vogan – Vidlin – Shetland.

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A sea kayak journey to the BAARE base site at Nativit East Greenland.

Final Report

Team Members –

James Pigdon, Donna McCready, Sonja Esergailis, Martin Rickard.

Preparations went well and everything came into place ready for this summer's expedition. The kayaks arrived in time, even after going via Nuuk, although one received some serious damage to the front deck which required a days work to fix, but all in all nothing too stressful.

The only major disappointment was the fact the Stephen Spencer Chapman was unable to join the team.

Stephen is a Captain in the Parachute Regiment and was called away on tour at the last minute. It would have been a real honour for us to have taken F S Chapman's grandson into the site – but who knows what the future might bring.

News of our plans had got round and we were approached by Nic Watkins who asked if we could do some filming on his behalf. Although I didn't have space to take his film camera out with all my other kit, a copy of our footage will be supplied to him once everything is edited.

The team became a group of four as Sonja, James and myself were then joined by Donna McCready from the USA. Donna had been one of the team who had paddled into Lake Fjord with me and James in 2016. Once she got wind of our plans for this summer there was little stopping her – not that we would have wanted to.

The sea ice had moved out from the coast early this season and although this meant there was the potential of greater sea swells (sea ice suppresses ocean swell as it reaches the coast) off the exposed headlands, conditions remained calm and settled.

We had all been to the Angmassalik area many times before and knew the coast well.

However from Nativit on the west side of Sermilik we were on new and unexplored ground. Nativit is the site of an old Inuit settlement and comprises of a number of turf houses, several of which (probably during the time of Watkins) were remodelled to have a wooden house inside the walled structure. This remote settlement is mentioned in the Northern Lights book and we were keen to stop there and see if there was anything recognisable left.



After what had turned into a long day we were pleased to discover a very small modern day hunters cabin in the channel between Nativit and the outer island. This was a real bonus as it saved us having to do a bear watch that night.

We had, had a bear encounter a few days before (neither party came to any harm) on the west side of Sermilik fjord, which although justified all our previous night watches meant bears were definitely in the area. By now we were on our guard and each doing two hour shifts at night as well as setting trip lines around our camp.

Trip lines are, I feel, of limited use and unreliable and a generally don't use them. However as it was now getting pretty dark between the hours of 1 and 2 in the morning they offered an additional back up to our failing eye sight, as well as peace of mind during the day when in camp.

Nativit was in its day a sizeable settlement – established on the only sheltered site in the area and comprised of over a dozen large turf houses, which would each have housed an extended family.



While exploring that evening and much of the following day we discovered two substantial wooden posts that had been placed vertically in the ground and about 6 meters apart. Although I can't be certain, I would strongly suspect these were used as the vertical supports for Inuit rope training / kayak agility training / games, so often referred to in historic and kayak books. None of us had ever seen anything similar before, but all agreed due to their location in the settlement that there would have been very little other explanation for their purpose.



Also of interest was the thought that several of the old wooden huts may well have been built using materials scavenged from the BAARE site when Gino and the team abandoned it in 1931.



A late start saw us paddling the final 14 km into the fjord to locate the BAARE base site. The outer coast had been pretty free of ice bergs, however from here on in the fjord was packed with them.

These were some of the largest and most impressive bergs I have ever encountered, and quite why they were here remains a bit of a mystery to us, as conditions and tide didn't account for their presence.



Dog Island was easy to identify and we landed on the smooth rock slabs where the Quest would have unloaded her cargo in 1930.

After an initial recce, and as we intended base camping for several days, we decided to lug all our kit up to the hut site and establish our camp next to the original base.

It was interesting to see that the original hut had been built in a wind funnel and would have been very exposed to gales coming off the ice cap. This might account for the fact that there

is pretty much nothing left of the hut here, where as at Lake Fjord which is much more sheltered there remains a large quantity of timbers and refuse.

Presumably for Watkins the ease of access from the sea and relatively flat area of land for the hut to be built on outweighed the potential wind issue.

It was a strange feeling, walking up and down the smooth flat rocks from our kayaks to our camp, thinking of all the times this route would have been trodden in the past. There is a wide uniform band of smooth black rock which is just like a paved path and your eye always goes to it and you end up walking this line, whether you want to or not. After all this time we could still see bits of coal that had escaped from a burst or overfull sack and had lain hidden in a rock crevice, unobserved or thought about for over 90 yrs.

That evening we set up our trip line round the tents – if walked through a taught line would pull and activate an audible alarm, this was to give us a heads up, rather than scare any bear away. It's a system I have developed myself, is easy and lightweight to carry in the kayaks, simple reliable and works well. So far!



The next few days were spent soaking up the atmosphere, everyone pretty much did their own thing, mooching about and looking for artefacts. As I have mentioned there is very little left to see, however once you trained your eye in the outline of the hut was very clear. Donna had brought out her copy of the “Northern Lights” book and we all got a lot of pleasure from identifying the exact spot from which all the original photo’s was taken from.



All the locations were identified, and it brought us a smile to realise that several of the shots were very staged and taken from the rocks at the landing site. Understandable I suppose given the heavy camera gear they were using at that time. The back drop to these photos is unchanged and was easy to identify.

There is only one good fresh water source and unbeknown to us we had already found it on our paddle from Nativit into Dog Island. Again it was strange to think of folk inevitably walking the same route we did to get drinking water.



Donna was a real sleuth with her book, even finding the remains of the post (snapped off but still embedded) which held up their original washing line and the metal rings used to anchor the radio mast.



The site is very littered with broken bits and pieces, these included :- live rifle rounds, spent ammo, paper shot gun cartridges, broken beer bottles, medicine bottles, roofing felt, wood, hinges, the remains of the stove, lots of window glass, coal, pottery, wire, electric cable, battery plates from the cells, bits of big earthen wear storage jars, dog harness buckles, shoe / boot soles, a bracket from a Seagull outboard motor, various unidentifiable bits of metal work, what looked to be radio parts and most exciting of all bits of broken gramophone records.

Everything was photographed and left on site, apart from the bits of gramophone record which I will try and find someone to identify for me.



Just behind the base site is a gentle slope leading up to a rounded bank. This is all part of the wind funnel and it was very noticeable how the growth of any plant life testified to the extreme conditions regularly experienced there.

NW is a rocky hill which gives great views in all directions, including out to sea – in the day this was undoubtedly a well visited summit, as it still is by local hunters. Watkins would be checking out conditions, looking for returning boats, planes or sled teams. For us this was a great site to observe and photograph the ice cap, icebergs in the fjord, and locate our route up onto the ice.





One day we paddled into the head of the fjord to check out the original routes used to access the ice.

It was an amazing feeling looking up from the beach at the “gully route” and scree which was their start to any trip inland. However for us at least the way up “Bugbear bank” is now impassable, as the ice has receded so much, leaving a huge rock moraine and boulder field.

As a result the following day we paddled over to the far side of the fjord to investigate an area we thought might be more promising. Negotiating the colossal icebergs on route was a daunting prospect as we had previously witnessed huge collapses and seen the effect the resulting waves had had on other small bergs in the area – it was certainly not a place to linger.

Interestingly though, these very significant waves didn’t affect the landing site, and our kayaks, like Watkins boats and planes were safely sheltered by the buffer of rocks at dog island..

Reaching the far side we managed to locate a gently sloping tongue of ice which gave us good access from a sandy beach onto the ice cap. We brought the kayaks up to a safe position and secured them with lines before changing from kayak to mountaineering gear. It was good to explore the area, view and photograph it from the ice and although we didn’t gain any significant height in mountaineering terms it was a fantastic experience for several of the team who had never worn crampons before.

There were several significant bits of windblown plastic on the icecap – no doubt as a result of winter gales moving refuse from one area to another.

However our plan to investigate water born plastic along the coast was put on hold. Swansea University were very keen on this project but wanted us to do a more detailed study than we were initially going to do for them.

As a result they are now designing a system of mesh bags, which can be towed behind a kayak to collect samples. The size of the mesh and the speed of tow are still to be calibrated, so until this is done we are on standby. However their commitment is there and we were only unsuccessful this season due to the time constraints in getting a credible study in place. In future their equipment should produce a reliable system / model which can then be used in any marine environment, by any suitable craft, and so has implications for much wider research.

So that's a good outcome and I will use it another year.

What's not such a good outcome was my inability this summer to enthuse any local youngsters sufficiently to have a go at kayaking.

It would appear that the motor boat is all they are interested in and even for a bit of recreational fun, it would seem they are unwilling to have a go.... preferring to do donuts in the bay late at night with their pals.

The youngsters in Tasiilaq are either invisible or in fact quite the opposite, those, tending to immerge at night and largely do what feral kids do at home.

Finding the "invisible" ones will remain on my list for the future.

Although Stephen Spencer Chapman was unfortunately unable to join the expedition, the family did provide us with a very unobtrusive plaque. After much debate, we chose a good location overlooking the base site and protected from the elements and secured it to a flat, vertical piece of bed rock.

We did not build a cairn as this was unnecessary. In fact any rock or boulder shelters a tiny plant or even a ground hugging tree, such as arctic willow. Removing these to build a cairn would have been very damaging to this fragile environment.



Our time spent during the days of pottering about and taking photos, highlighted that the base site is now on a direct transatlantic air route – with several high altitude flights going overhead every day.



While at the base site we were visited by 3 or 4 local families who were all out hunting together in their motor boats. They stopped at the rock slabs for lunch, inviting us to join them for a meal of cooked seal meat and blubber.

This was another first for several of the team and quite a highlight too.

It was very obvious that these folk held us in high regard, being in such a remote place and travelling by kayak – And although they used the rocky look out to check on conditions and look for seals, they were completely unaware of the fact that a base site was there.

Freddy S Chapman's account of the BAARE is called Northern Lights, so it was a fitting finale that we experienced several great displays of these phenomena, not least on the final night before we paddled out.



PS

Very few people know about these guys from the 30's

In the past I have guided several teams into Lake Fjord – kayaking in and out.

However – I know of only 4 Europeans who have ever paddled the routes, both in and out of the BAARE site and out from Lake Fjord.

F S Chapman - James Pigdon - Donna McCready and myself.



Report by Martin Rickard – Vogán – Vidlin – Shetland.