Chris Shorocks, ‘Greenland Adventure’ 20/6/19

Having joined the RAF as a National Serviceman for 2 years, Chris wanted to be a radio engineer. He was given a ‘medical relax’ for an eye condition and stayed 28 years!

Just before joining up Chris met a Mountain Rescue team whilst in Derbyshire. He told them he would shortly be going into the RAF and they suggested he sign up for Mountain Rescue. Chris, now a trained radio fitter, was posted to RAF Leuchars in Scotland which had a MR Team. He was then posted to Akrotiri in Cyprus where there was also a MR Team. By this time Chris was heading for commissioning; his first job was Adjutant, RAF Regiment Field Squadron which he really enjoyed.

In 1968 Chris heard about a proposal for a Joint Services Expedition to North Peary Land – the most northerly peninsula of Greenland and the most northerly land on Earth. He applied and was shortlisted from 193 applicants from the various Services. Chris was called for an interview at the Royal Geographical Soc. with Major John Peacock and a psychologist. Later, John told Chris that whenever you lead, you have the last word. Chris said he stuck to this advice.

JP asked Chris what he could offer to the expedition and Chris replied that he had some knowledge of photography and was keen on climbing and snowy conditions! He was also asked what he would expect to see in Peary Land. Chris replied “musk ox”, wolves etc. but wasn’t sure whether there were polar bears or penguins. Chris plumped for the right one! JP said Chris was one of the few who had taken the trouble to research the region.

Chris, along with the rest of the 12-man team chosen for the expedition, flew from RAF Lyneham in a Hercules to the Danish radio station Nord. The Hercules was unloaded before returning to Lyneham to collect supplies for the first of two air drops. Chris, quartermaster, had two days in which to sort stores and equipment into suitable loads for the Otter which was to take them to Cape Morris Jesup. There was also time for every member of the expedition to try his hand at driving the skidoos on snow.

The men divided into 3 teams of 4. Their first task was to survey the Northern Peninsula which involved a sledge journey of some 350 miles around the coastal sea-ice. The second part of the expedition was devoted to exploring inland, beginning in the eastern Roosevelt Range of mountains and later in the central and western parts of the Range. Journeys totalling some 400 miles were completed in this phase when most of the major summits were climbed.

Chris, now Flight Lieutenant, RAF Regiment, also had responsibility for still photography. Chris had great respect for Major John Peacock, leader of the expedition and an experienced climber. Flying Officer, Bruce Reid was Dep. Leader and Asst. Surveyor. Lieutenant Hugh May, Royal Navy, was Chief Surveyor & Hydrographer (deals with measurements and descriptions of physical features of oceans, seas, coastal areas as well as the prediction of their change over time). Chief Petty Officer Ian Cox, mechanic, was also in charge of the cine photography taking 16mm film. Although the content of the film was quite good, unfortunately the cans let in a lot of light and ITV said they could not be used. The average age of the team was 28.

Although it was summer and always daylight, the temperature in Peary Land was around -35° C so the men soon learned not to touch anything metal otherwise their skin would stick to the surface. Chris kept a diary but said it was difficult to judge whether it was day or night and as a result he lost a couple of days!

The snow was either hard or soft and the sledges would spin on ice. Ian was the first to spot a polar bear and Chris had a terrifying encounter with the animal when it lifted the flaps on his tent. It continued to follow the team which was, of course, potentially a very dangerous situation so the decision was made to kill the bear and this unpleasant task fell to Lieut. Tony Dalton, Asst. Surveyor. Chris said the incident then had to be reported to the Danes. Tony skinned and salted the animal and took it back to Harrods – it was worth £800.
One day the leader, John Peacock, assembled everyone together and said he did not want to hear the men swearing. Every time someone was caught, he had to forfeit a Dairy Milk bar from his own rations. Within a few days the swearing had stopped!

When the team reached Nordpasset – the neck of land that rises to 1000 ft. and connects the peninsula to the remainder of Greenland – the men were rather taken aback as there was little snow. They had to shovel it in places so that the sledges could drive over. They also had to unload and carry everything and pull the sledges themselves.

The team was late arriving at Frigg Fjord about half way round the traverse. JP decided to take a party through the mountains to receive a re-supply drop from the UK. He left with Simon, Rod and Chris Grant whilst Chris Shorrocks and the rest of the men, now two parties of four, continued on the traverse to survey etc. As they left the Fjord the conditions changed dramatically as the sea was melting very quickly. The journey was very unpleasant as they waded in knee-deep slush in canvas boots across Bliss Bay. They had a group meeting and agreed with Bruce that the sea ice could not be travelled on and decided they would walk back to Cape Morris Jesup some 30 miles away; the problem being the amount of kit each individual needed for the rest of the expedition. After a day of carrying about 100 lbs., they decided to carry half the kit for a few miles and dump it then go back and bring the rest. This increased their journey to 90 miles! The constant subject every day was food! Or the lack of it.

After a few days at CMJ, they were fully nourished again and moved up into the mountains to complete their exploration of the Roosevelt Range. At their camp on the glacier they listened as the Apollo module landed on the moon. Also, the victuallers from Botley sent a midsummer feast with delights – brown sauce, tinned ham, custard, sherry and much more. The feast more than made up for their time on half rations that they were forced to adopt on the traverse.

Time passed very quickly and they all made ascents of Helvetia Tinde, (Swiss Peak) the highest peak at 6500 feet and many more before it was time to walk out to Frigg Fjord where the twin Otter would collect them and take them to Bronlands Fjord, an ice-free landing site where an RAF Hercules could land. A group of extremely happy servicemen and two civilian geologists returned home from an expedition expertly led by Major John Peacock with memories that would last a lifetime.