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Ingolfsfjeld: The First Ascent of the Southwest Face

Greenland, East Greenland, Kangertitivatsiaq Fjord

The following article, previously unpublished, provides historical context for attempts on Ingolfsfjeld and a detailed account of the first ascent of the southwest face in 1975. See also the summary article published in AAJ 2023 by senior editor Lindsay Griffin.

Ingolfsfjeld: The First Ascent of the Southwest Face

By Steve Chadwick, U.K.

In 1966 and 1967, two expeditions from Imperial College, London, visited the Forel area and took photos of Ingolfsfjeld (2,232m). (Earlier, in 1963, a Swiss expedition led by Sigi Angerers reached the Glacier de France and climbed a mountain northeast of Ingolfsfjeld.) The photos inspired Derek Fordham (U.K.) to mount an expedition in 1968 to make the first ascent of Ingolfsfjeld, which is 120km northeast of Tasillaq in the Kangertittivatsiaq Fjord.

British climbers John Coote and Mike Esten found a route up to the northeast ridge, from which they retreated in bad weather, leaving some equipment for an attempt the following day. This never happened. Instead, they were cut off from the main party by a change in weather that blew pack ice against the shore, preventing the Zodiac from picking them up for a week. Dense pack ice also thwarted a Spanish expedition to Ingolfsfjeld, their boat never able to penetrate the fjord.

In 1971, Croatian climbers Marijan Čepelak and Nenad Čulić reached the summit via the northeast ridge, placing four camps. That same summer, a second team, from London University Graduates Mountaineering Club, but with two guests, Tony Mercer and me, arrived after a sea journey in a converted fishing trawler. We attempted an ascent of the southwest face by a rising line from its right side.

Over four days, ropes were fixed on straightforward slabs to reach a rib that forms the right-hand side of Ingolfsfjeld's huge central depression/couloir. After a night high on the mountain, sleeping on a small ledge with a huge drop beneath, Tony and I ascended the right side of a 150m-high vertical flake, but were then faced with 190m of sheer wall with no apparent weaknesses, followed by 900m of unknown ridge climbing to summit.

Time was running out and there was pressure to sail our converted trawler further up the coast, into Watkins Fjord and beyond, to explore and climb untouched summits. We rappelled from our high point, cleaning as we went.

The seed had been sown, not only in my mind but also the mind of Croatian Dolfi Rotnovik from the 1971 expedition. Dolfi got his act together quicker. Together with Erik Jansen, Peter Christensen, N.O. Coops Olsen, Kaj Olesen, Tom Rishøj, and Peter Søndergaard (Danish), and Tony Howard and Bill Tweedale (U.K.), he camped beneath the wall in the summer of 1973 and appraised a line on the face. The route they decided to follow was bold. It took a chimney rising steeply just to the right of the bottom of the huge central couloir, then planned to cross the couloir onto the central pillar. They spent two weeks on the face, mostly in bad conditions, with frequent snowstorms of two to three

days' duration.

After climbing the surprisingly benign chimney for some 350m, the team attempted to cross left over the outfall of the massive central couloir to reach the central pillar. Difficult slab climbing with some tension traverses took a pair of climbers toward the center of the couloir's outfall. Tony and Bill were about to cross the fixed ropes, carrying more climbing equipment, when a large tower near the top of the central pillar collapsed. A massive rock and ice avalanche swept down the couloir, and the British pair were lucky to escape with only cuts, bruises, and a torn rucksack.

That route was out, so the team decided to continue up the rib to the right of the couloir, climbing delightful slabs reamed with accommodating cracks, until reaching a bivouac ledge around 1,000m up the face.

Then the arctic weather turned up the ante and delivered a series of snowstorms lasting several days. Finally, the team ran out of time and its date with the Inuits, who would be arriving to pick them up from the remote fjord far below.

The team had not managed to reach the 1971 high point, though the direct route they had used was of a higher standard. The weather experienced by the 1973 team was unfortunately savage.

The 1975 Expedition

In 1975, I put together a U.K. team consisting of my long-time climbing partner Keith Myhill and Tony Mercer of the 1971 attempt. We were further strengthened by the inclusion of Henry Mares, Jim Davenport, and Keith McDowell.

In July of that year, we hired a small Inuit fishing boat in what is now Tasiilaq to ferry us up the coast. The pack ice was reasonable, and a full day of motor-sailing saw the vessel making its way past huge icebergs, calved off from the giant Glacier de France, into Kangertivatsiaq Fjord (the Fjord without Fish).

After unloading food and equipment, we spent the next week carrying supplies on the five-hour hike to base camp, situated below the snout of the Ingolfssjeld Glacier. We had learned from the 1973 attempt and were determined to forge a more direct line up the 75°–80° lower wall to the base of the central pillar.

The group split into three teams of two, with Keith Myhill and I taking the first day shift. We fixed three pitches above the bergschrund, which was filled with rubble—evidence that the central couloir's avalanches reached that far. We always covered the last few hundred meters of the glacier to the rock face quickly! We also always approached the wall in the small hours, when the face was in twilight shadow and at its coldest. This was arctic summer, with 24-hour daylight.

Over the next two days, the other two pairs dispatched a further five pitches of difficult climbing, requiring four skyhook moves, tension traverses, and long runouts. Shredded nerves at last forced the placement of a bolt for protection.

Jim and Keith forced another difficult two pitches to deliver the fixed rope just short of an overhang, which seemed to bar access to a further 50m wall leading to what looked like a terrace. Progress was slow, but the climbing was V to VI, with several dead ends.

For our next shift, Keith and I climbed a 45m V A2 pitch around the overhang, using four bolts and four pegs. We then climbed another 45m grade VI to an easier 20m slab, which took us to the terrace. With the key to the lower wall cracked, we rappelled and returned to base camp.

The First Push

A snowstorm then settled over Ingolfssjeld for the next few days, until on July 25 the cloud level lifted. Carrying food for five days, our plan now was to move together with no more fixed ropes. The lead climber would fix a belay and hang a trail rope. The following climber would prusik to the anchor point and then hold the rope of the lead climber, while the remaining four climbed the trail rope.

The first six pitches above the terrace were climbed in this fashion, with grades of between IV and V+. We left the best anchors at each belay to facilitate a retreat. Progress was slow, both due to the high level of difficulty and the cumbersome system of six climbers moving up the face.

At the top of the sixth pitch, we found a good bivouac site we named Eldon Towers. The cloud descended and we decided to sit out the night and see how the weather developed. By midnight the wind was howling, bringing with it driven snow. Not having sufficient food to sit out a prolonged storm, we made the decision to go down, after which 350m of rappels, through the dim arctic night and wind-driven snow, took us to the glacier.

The Second Push

Back at base camp, we chilled until the storm ended around late afternoon. We then decided to prusik back up to the terrace and spend the night there, with the aim of pushing on up the face the next day. As we ascended the fixed ropes, we replaced a short, frayed section around an overhang. It was always with relief when this section of prusiking was complete.

By 5 a.m. on the following day, Henry, Keith McDowell, Jim, and Tony were retracing our route to Eldon Towers. I tidied up our bivouac spot and then caught the last trail rope to join the team in time to have breakfast in brilliant sunshine.

At this point the climbing passed through an increasingly unstable area of rock, with some stretches of very friable granite and ledges heaped with rubble. The leader had to contend both with difficult climbing on suspect rock, and with the added responsibility of taking care not to disturb rock onto those beneath him. We began to realize that there were too many of us trying to move too fast over dangerous terrain. Henry led a long diagonal traverse, from where Keith Myhill led a difficult grade VI pitch up the right wall of a chimney. It was at this point that Keith McDowell was hit on the helmet by a sizable stone. The objective dangers were getting a little out of control, and it seemed only a matter of time before someone was seriously injured.

One more pitch took us to the crest of the central pillar, from where the upper section of the face came into view. Here we took stock. We had been unnerved by the danger of rockfall. In the event of bad weather or injury, a retreat from higher up the face, reversing the several traverses, would be difficult. We considered injury very possible, and we had already experienced several bad snowstorms.

We had also anticipated easier sections above, but the pillar reared up in several towers that were obviously going to be tough to climb. Above the first buttress rose the upper tower, a superb 300m pillar of granite leading to a further 650m of climbing to gain the final headwall. These facts destroyed any thoughts of an easy top section and dealt a severe psychological blow to the team. Our lead climbers were also frayed by the continuous difficulties and the responsibility for climbers below.

Keith Myhill and Henry decided they could not go on if the face continued its present standard of difficulty and looseness. As lead climbers, I valued their judgment, and as leader of the expedition I bore the responsibility for the decision to go down. We descended, removing ropes.

During the next few days in base camp, we relaxed in a period of snowstorms and weather respites. It

was a good opportunity to think about the mistakes made on our second attempt. If a third and last try were to be made, it must be with a smaller party.

The make-up of the team wasn't difficult. Tony was determined to finally scratch his Ingolfsfjeld itch, Keith Myhill was already studying lines on the upper face, and Jim, the strong man of the expedition, made up the third. Keith McDowell, Henry, and I would act as support.

The Third Push

Along with the reduced size of the team had to come a change in mental attitude. This wasn't going to be a face that could be climbed in two or three days. The lead group must take one obstacle at a time and not burn themselves out by pushing too fast.

All realized that this would be the last chance. The face team sorted out the gear they wanted, while Henry and I made the best of what was left for an attempt on the Croatian northeast ridge.

In the early morning, six of us made our way through the avalanche debris to the foot of the face, the support three carrying all the face team's equipment and supplies, to keep them as fresh as possible. There were handshakes and words of goodbye and good luck. The support three hoped we would see them on the other side.

At least the route was known, and that day the first four pitches on the lower wall were fixed in good order. The face team descended and prepared to go for it the next day. After an early start they prusiked the ropes, climbed to the terrace, and then continued the remaining 350m to Eldon Towers, where they spent their first night out.

Two pitches above lay the unknown. There followed a 250m section of grooves and cracks, which Keith Myhill led, fixing good anchors for the trail rope that Tony and Jim prusiked.

The climbing again raised its standard, with steep crack and bridging moves. A large rock became detached and plummeted down. By this time the team had, to some extent, gotten used to falling rocks and the smell of cordite, as debris bounced off rock walls. They had gotten used to making themselves as small as possible, while also making sure their rucksacks protected them as much as possible. This rock, however, bounced off a protrusion and smashed into Jim's hip.

There was a shout of pain followed by expletives. Tony roped back down to Jim, who was slumped in a state of semi-consciousness. Tony couldn't be sure; it looked as though there was no break, just severe contusions. A painkiller was injected, and Jim painfully jumared up to the belay ledge.

The team might have been able to rope down, but this had its own difficulties, given the loose rock and traverses. Jim opted to go on, despite the pain.

A further 180m saw the team in a position to survey the upper section. The team traversed again, this time right, to circumvent the towers, and they climbed on through the night.

The fourth day saw a breakfast site at a comfortable ledge, with a water supply trickling down a crack system. The next pitch was one of the toughest, with Keith leading through a tottering roof of hanging flakes, any one of which could have collapsed.

Five pitches later, the weather began to deteriorate, with thick cloud and falling snow. The team strung a line above a small ledge, pulled the bivouac tent over their heads, and hung on for the next

six hours in very uncomfortable conditions—just half a cheek each on the small ledge.

During this difficult period, the stove and a large part of their food supplies were dropped, leaving just a one-day emergency pack of food. Another difficult pitch was to come, with Keith tensioning into a chimney leading to a large recess with a flat floor. If only that had been reached the previous evening.

Near to the top, Ingolfsfjeld would just not give up. An attempt at an iced-up crack wouldn't go. A move right to another deep groove with less ice brought them, at last, to easier-angled rock and an exit chimney gaining the summit block, which was climbed by a 25m grade V crack. Now to get down....

The Northeast Ridge

The day after the face team set out, Henry and I set off for the northeast ridge, graded ED by the Croatians. It had taken them two days to ascend. Our goal was to check rappel points for the face team to assist their descent. We made our way round to the northeast ridge and spent the night at a col low on the ridge, first reached by the 1968 expedition. As bivouacs go, it wasn't too comfortable, but the scenery was magnificent. As the sun dipped on its low arctic trajectory, the mountain peaks were cast into shadow like fingers pointing out to sea. The ice flows turned to scarlet. Amid the beauty that only nature can give, I fell asleep with peace of mind. By 4 a.m., we were up and ready to go.

We didn't know much about the route except that the headwall was particularly hard. We moved off, mostly simul-climbing, trying to keep one item of protection between us. There were two grade VI grooves, but mostly the ascent was grade III to IV. The climbing was superb, and we made good time in sheer physical enjoyment.

As we climbed, the wind became colder and stronger until we reached the 210m headwall. Snow had now to be cleared from every hold. We were only equipped for a fast push; we were short of gear and had no ice climbing equipment. The top wall was reamed by a groove that was packed with ice. This had been clear during the Croatian ascent.

We climbed precariously some way up the groove, then chipped out ice to place rappel pegs. We began our descent some 100m below the summit.

On the way down we backed up rappel anchors for the descending face team. The only point of drama was when the moment came that all rappellers dread: The rope jammed 20m up in the air, below an overhang, and no amount of flicking or pulling would free it. The ledge we were on was small, and a fall from the rope would not have stopped for a long way. I knew if I thought about it, I would quake in fear, so I just got on with it: Fixing my two jumars to the single 9mm rope, I began to ascend, the second rope dangling some 20m above me. I was praying that the jammed rope would not suddenly free itself.

Up and up, closer and closer, until, with my heart in my mouth, I reached the other end and moved one jumar clamp onto it. I went on up and freed the rope, and the descent continued without incident.

After five days of climbing to reach the summit, the face team spent a day and a half descending the northeast ridge, and then contouring below the southeast face to reach the col on the south ridge, where we went to meet them. Though we had preplaced a food dump on the northeast col, which helped them, they were completely exhausted and emaciated, with Jim still in pain. At least we could now carry their sacks and help them down.

Ingolfsfjeld had one more throw of the dice. Descending to base camp from the south col, Keith fell 10 meters into a crevasse, and we had to initiate a crevasse rescue. Never lay your guard down in the

mountains.

About the Author: At the time of the above ascent, Steve Chadwick was part of a highly active group of climbers based in Sheffield, England. Later, he moved to the Northwest Highlands of Scotland, where he spent nearly 20 years on the mountain rescue team and climbed around 150 new routes. He now lives near Cape Town, South Africa, and has just published a guide to the Helderberg and Hottentots Holland Mountain Rim. He is a vigorous campaigner for access to the Cape mountains, and has become “a pain in the butt to local reserves that are trying to close access.”

Editor's Note: Since 1975, there appears to have been only one recorded attempt on the mountain: In 1986 an Italian team tried the unclimbed 1,500m north face, a mainly snow/ice route (60°–80°), which was abandoned in bad weather after around 1,000m, at the exit onto the summit ridge.

Download the pitch-by-pitch description of the 1975 route.

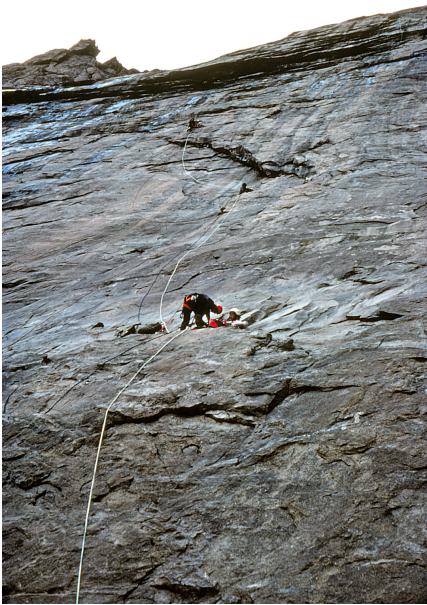
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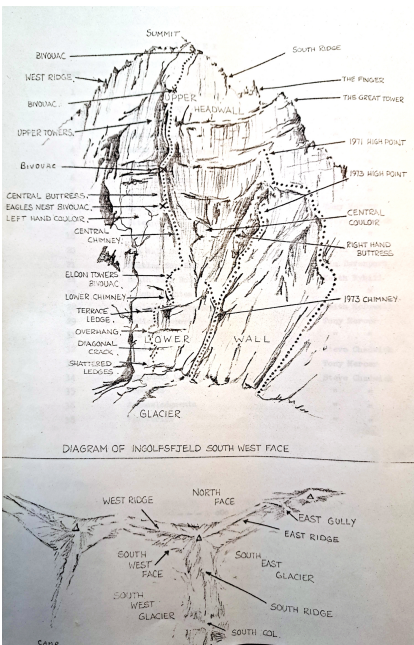
The enormous southwest face of Ingolfsfjeld after a storm, with the 63-pitch line of the 1975 route shown.



The Eldon Towers bivouac, approximately one third of the way up the southwest face of Ingolfsfjeld. From left to right: Steve Chadwick, Henry Mares, and Keith Myhill.



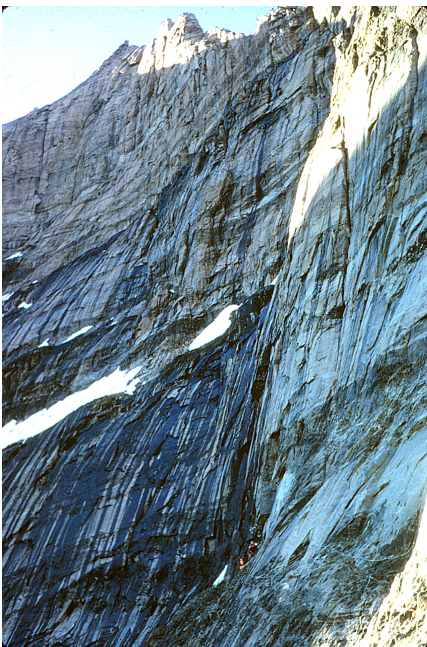
The initial wall on the southwest face of Ingolfsfjeld. The lower figures are at the top of the first pitch above the glacier.



Topo drawing of the southwest face of Ingolfsfjeld, showing the 1975 first ascent route and the 1971 and 1973 attempts to the right.



Steve Chadwick jumarining to the Eldon Towers bivouac at one third height on the southwest face of Ingolfsfjeld. Below is the approach valley. The distant peaks lie on the west side of the Kangertittivatsiaq Fjord.



The first attempt on the southwest face of Ingolfsfjeld in 1971. The climbers are on a narrow bivouac ledge, from which Steve Chadwick and Tony Mercer climbed to the top of the conspicuous flake above, the high point on this attempt.



Tony Mercer jumaring to the belay at the top of the first pitch above the Eldon Towers bivouac, approximately one third of the way up the southwest face of Ingolfsfjeld.



Keith Myhill following Henry Mares on the southwest face of Ingolfsfjeld, heading for the central chimney system.

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