

The Ice Dream Man

School chaplain-cum-yachtsman-cum-all-round adventurer Bob Shepton was a man with a mission: to follow in the footsteps of great post-War explorer Bill Tilman and conquer the towering peaks which fringe the majestic, desolate shoreline of western Greenland

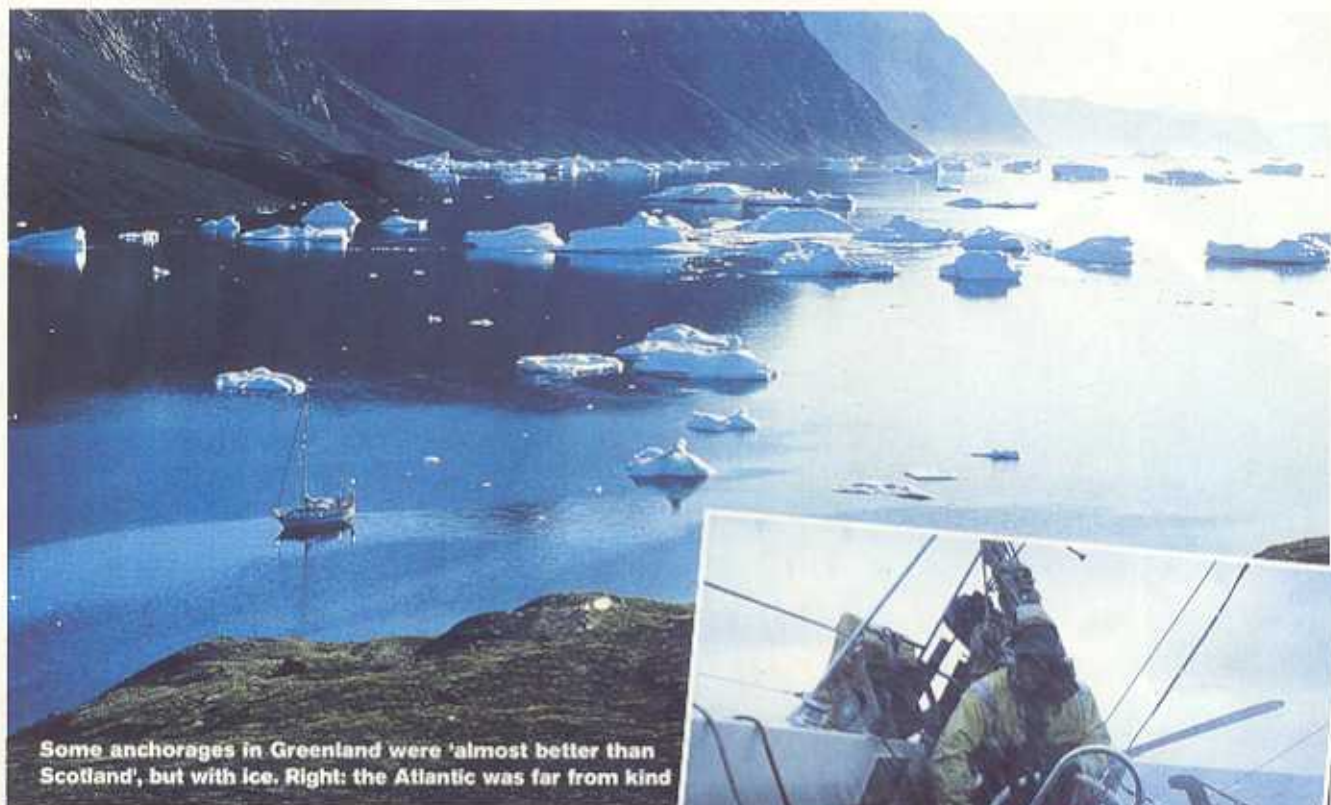
The cruise, alias expedition, was called 'Greenland 1998 - In the Steps of Tilman' and our aim was to sail round the west coast of Greenland and climb mountains from *Dodo's Delight*, a 33ft Westerly Discus, just as the explorer Bill Tilman had done from his boat. But first we had to get there.

The crew consisted of three hard climbers who had worked for the British Antarctic Survey - Steve Marshall, Brian Newham and Danuska Rycerz - Annie, an outdoor pursuits instructor and keen skier but not really a climber, and myself, a qualified mountaineering and ski instructor, but so old. While we felt we had a strong climbing team, only two of us were experienced sailors. One had done a little before but the other two had never been in a sailing boat. The North Atlantic was to prove a testing introduction.

Photo: Bob Shepton



Dodo's Delight looks a picture, framed by one of Greenland's spectacular natural ice sculptures. Inset: the author, Bob Shepton, at the summit of the peak he calls 'The Old Man'



Some anchorages in Greenland were 'almost better than Scotland', but with ice. Right: the Atlantic was far from kind



In this respect we were emulating our mentor, Tilman, who used to advertise in *The Times* and take what crew he could get, experienced or not. But in one important aspect we certainly differed from Tilman. As the Faroes Customs officer put it when we pulled in there some years ago: 'Oh, so you have *wimen* aboard...'

There were the usual last-minute preparations – Tilman has a nice line here: 'Since Noah's Ark, no boat has ever been ready on time' – and with the boat laden with stores for two months, ski and mountaineering equipment, charts, pilots, radio information, and the odd sail, we sailed out into the Atlantic via the Sound of Pabbay.

Progress was good for the first three days, sailing fast and laying a course for south of Cape Farewell, the southern tip of Greenland. But the wind increased to Force 7, then 8, touching 9, and strangely I was happy at last to be sailing hard again, after three years' enforced idleness doing up the boat after a previous circumnavigation. We tried the No 3 jib with triple-reefed main, but were soon down to close reaching on the No 3

alone on the removable inner forestay. This was the rig we had used rounding Cape Horn the wrong way. It works well on this boat. We were forced south, before the wind abated and we were able once again to lay the course. And so we continued, reefing and unreefing.

The next depression was huge. We went from zero wind to Force 7 in just a few minutes. We left the triple-reefed main hoisted to keep us from sagging away to leeward in the lulls. But the depression just grew bigger until the weatherfax showed it stretching from Scotland to Greenland, and right down to the Azores. We were in its grip for four days, crashing and banging, close reaching on the wind, making westing but being pushed too far south.

A day to remember

At last we came out of its western side, and the crew could relax on deck. I even had my first wash and the sun came out in celebration. It was an idyllic afternoon and was followed by supper on deck, with Steve playing his guitar to the setting sun, the 'wimen' breaking out the wine and the men having to follow suit. And all this in mid-Atlantic: a day to remember.

We motored for 32 hours as the wind died but at last it came back – on the beam for a change. Then we were broad reaching and when we were sailing at over 10 knots in Force 8/9 we handed the main and ran on an already poled-out, rolled jib. Not ideal but we were lazy, and it was a much more comfortable motion.

The wind increased further off Cape Farewell, that 'Cape of Storms' and by this time we were running before on bare poles. At least it was roughly in the right direction which is probably why we persisted with this method. And, curiously enough, it was after the worst was over that the knockdown occurred: a huge steep-fronted wave came up astern, picked the boat up and projected her out



Dodo's Delight anchored alongside the alluvial fan to land climbers. It looks idyllic, but ice was sometimes a problem

of control down the front of the wave to broach and crash down hard on her starboard side. Later we discovered some damage to the topsides, and that some internal joinery had been forced inwards and the bulkheads folded. But we still had a mast and nobody was injured.

Dodo's Delight is a standard production Westerly 33 Discus sloop with some modifications for extended ocean sailing. A GRP cuddy has been fitted in lieu of a sprayhood and there's a stainless-steel gantry at the stern for solar panels, antennae and to help support the wind generator.

Custard shampoo

There was a funny side to the knockdown. I was in the aft cabin about to eat my cake and custard and I was literally just saying: 'I really think it is...' when I was projected through the air to the far side of the cabin, landing on the fair Danuska in her bunk. Delightful as this might have seemed for me, she did not appreciate the gift of custard all over her hair and sleeping bag. And Tilman would certainly not have approved, though undoubtedly with his love of proverbs he would have parodied: 'Beware of skippers bearing gifts'. The boat rolled back up, shook herself and continued while I beat a hasty retreat.

A touch of excitement weaving through ice off the south coast of Greenland, and a northerly wind forcing us to tack up the Davis Strait, brought us to Nuuk. Here, the boat club round the corner seemed the place to go, and we lifted out for repairs to the hull. Everybody was very friendly and the only Dane in the Home Rule Parliament lent us his cradle. Denise Evans in *Dunlin of Wessex* had arrived in Nuuk the day after us with her crew of motley young climbers, so we enjoyed a mini-meet in Greenland.

Eventually we set sail again and made our way up to Sisimiut where we walked the local hills after all those sea miles. Then it was on past the dramatic icebergs of Disko Bay, through the Vaigat, and on round to the Ummanak area where we intended to climb mountains.



Our research showed that the island of Upernivik Ø and the three mainland peninsulas to the east of it had all been climbed out over the years, and it is always the aim of climbers to find new conquests. It seemed that Akuliarusinguaq to the north might still give some virgin peaks. So we set about exploring this peninsular, starting at the northern end and then moving round to the south. In all we climbed 11 summits, 10 on Akuliarusinguaq and one on Qeqertarsuaq just to the south. Six of these were over 2,000m high, and five, we believe, were first ascents.

We were rather pleased that four of the crew had stood together on the highest peak of the area at 2,180m, and it was strange to think that down the millennia nobody had stood there before. Certainly no Inuit would have bothered unless he could see a practical reason for making all that effort. For this was big country, a desolate, deserted, glacially shattered land. And the peaks were big, as we were starting from sea level.

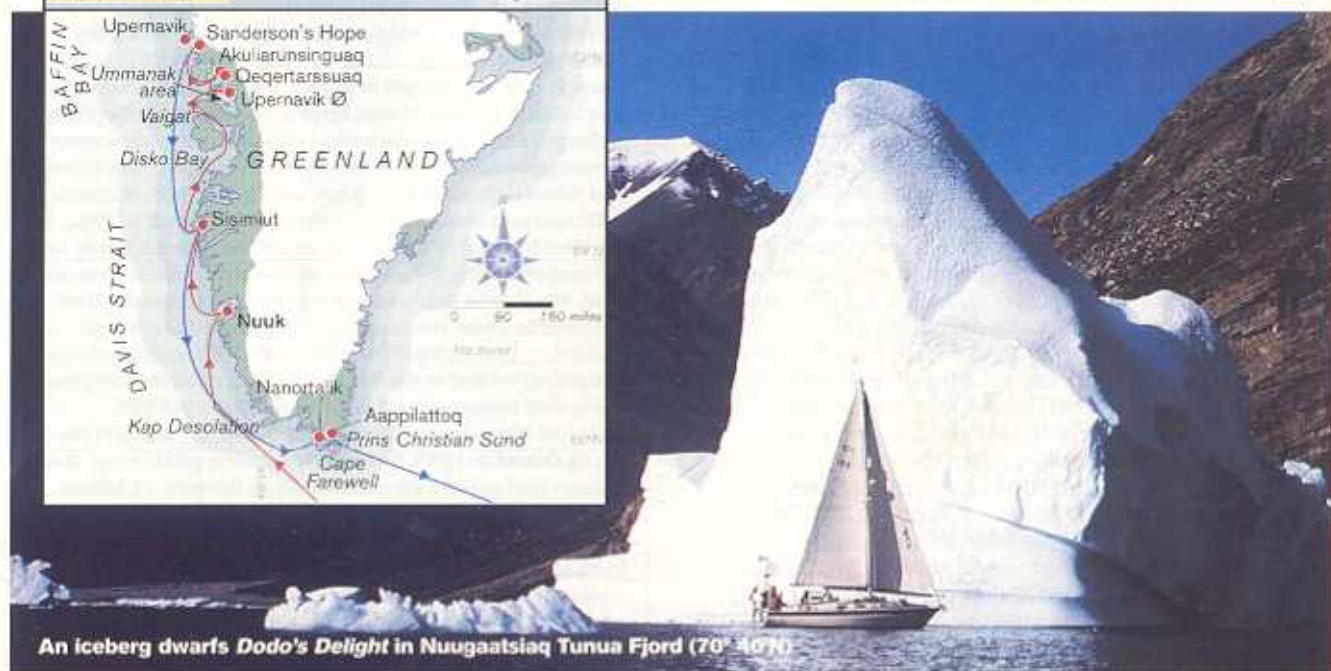
We dubbed one of them in the north 'The Old Man', a prominent trapezoid peak with a rock pinnacle atop a high snow ridge, reminiscent of Scottish sea stacks. It took me and Danuska 31 hours of protracted effort in the continuous daylight to complete it, with the odd brew and two minute cat naps on the way. She could have gone much faster of course.

Scotch on the 25,000-year-old rocks

We found some superb anchorages, many 'almost better than Scotland', despite ice. There were running mountain streams for replenishing water and washing clothes, not to mention people. Often we had to anchor close inshore to get any depth at all. And for landing climbing parties at the huge alluvial fans at the mouth of the glacial rivers, we had to adopt a rather novel anchoring technique. The echosounder refused to function in the heavily-silted water, so we drove the boat gingerly and gently until we hit the silt bank.



High and mighty: Danuska is all smiles as she stands 2,060m atop another peak



An iceberg dwarfs *Dodo's Delight* in Nuugaatsiaq Tunua Fjord (70° 40'N)

CREW AND CLIMBERS



Skipper the Rev Bob Shepton (far left) has been a Royal Marines officer, youth worker and chaplain of two schools. He took pupils climbing, skiing, windsurfing and sailing. A fanatical climber, Bob came to sailing relatively late in life. He has completed six Atlantic crossings and a circumnavigation via Antarctica, Cape Horn and the Cape of Good Hope. Pictured next to him (left to right) on *Dodo's Delight* are: Annie Wilson, Steve Marshall, Brian Newham and Danuska Rycerz

This gave an idea of depth. We then backed off a wee bit, and dropped the hook. The current then lay the boat alongside the gravel bank and the keel scraping along the side prevented it from riding over the top and grounding. Not textbook stuff, but it worked. It was pleasant for those left minding the boat to have the odd wee dram laced with 25,000-year-old glacier ice broken off passing 'growlers'. The air trapped all those thousands of years ago fizzed in the glass as you drank.

Our next aim was the headland of Sanderson's Hope, just south of Upernavik. Tilman makes much of this famous navigational landmark in his books, so it seemed a privilege to put the first two proper climbing routes up this huge headland, the first taking the obvious snow and ice gully splitting the main north face, and the second the bowed gully on its left flank. Both climbs were made direct from the boat, or at least the boat's dinghy, and indeed could not have been reached any other way.

Homeward bound

September was approaching and it was time to head home. We had to motor most of the way back to Sisimitut but we were fortunate then to pick up a northerly to carry us down the rest of the Davis Strait, even if it did turn into a rather vicious gale at the southern end. We hove-to one night and rigged a spotlight and doubled the watches another night for fear of growlers.

The next day it was flat calm as we motored across the southern end of Greenland in mist and sun. Having put into Nanortalik for fuel and water, we entered the fjord systems leading to the spectacular Prins Christian Sund. On the way we put into the delightful small harbour of Aappilattoq where the inhabitants traded cured seal skins at the post office for cash, presumably to be spent at the village store. We received fantastic hospitality from the Danes at the weather station at the far end of the Sund, and an added bonus was finding Tilman's signature in the visitor's book from his visit in *Sea Breeze*. Finally, after a huge Danish pastry, we departed for Scotland.

We expected the Atlantic to be kind, at least this time, but it proved just as capricious as the outward voyage. For four weary nights and three days we were forced south, before tacking north, unable to lay the course owing to gale-force easterlies. Then there was a calm spell when Steve was able to enjoy a birthday, with cake, candles and cards in the sun, as dolphins gambolled about us. But another depression followed and at one stage the cabin table pulled out its screws when bodies were thrown against it and had to be lashed to the cabin sole. And when we tried to stop the wind generator, it hopped straight off its pole and sank into the Atlantic.

At last we sailed out of the eastern side of the depression



Passing through Prins Christian Sund in the morning mist

and on the penultimate day we were sailing free in the sun when I remarked: 'Who would rather be anywhere else, sailing on a day like this?' For some reason all hands shot up. Strange that, after such a blissful passage!

But we hope we did enough to honour the memory of that extraordinary character and exceptional explorer, Bill Tilman. After all, this was the 21st anniversary of his sad loss at sea. ▲

THE BILL TILMAN STORY



Bill Tilman was the quintessential British explorer – brave, ambitious, singleminded and, some might say, slightly eccentric. Born on St Valentine's Day 1898 in Wallasey, Cheshire, Tilman fought in the First World War, when he was twice wounded, before buying plantation land in Kenya. He began climbing in Africa in 1930 and completed several Himalayan expeditions before the outbreak of Second World War when he rejoined the Army and served with distinction.

Tilman was in middle age when he first sailed in 1953, at the Welsh resort of Barmouth which became his home for the rest of his life. A year later he bought his most famous boat, *Mischief*, a Bristol Channel pilot cutter, in which he voyaged to Chile, crossing the Patagonian ice cap and circumnavigating South America. After other great voyages, around Africa and to the Southern Ocean, Tilman completed the first of many expeditions to Greenland in 1961.

He lost his beloved *Mischief* in Jan Mayen island in the Arctic Ocean in 1968. He bought a similar pilot cutter, *Sea Breeze*, and sailed four more times to Greenland, before she too was lost in 1972. He made his last trips north in his third pilot cutter, *Baroque*, but his sailing days were coming to an end. He was persuaded in 1977, aged 79, to sail with a young crew on an expedition to the South Shetlands in a converted tug, *En Avant*. No more was seen or heard of the vessel after she left Rio bound for the Falklands.