

MERGING EMERGENCIES

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In the UK, the management of an emergency such as a climbing accident in summer, rarely lasts for more than 24 hours. What follows are the entries in my diary for 10 days in August 1983.

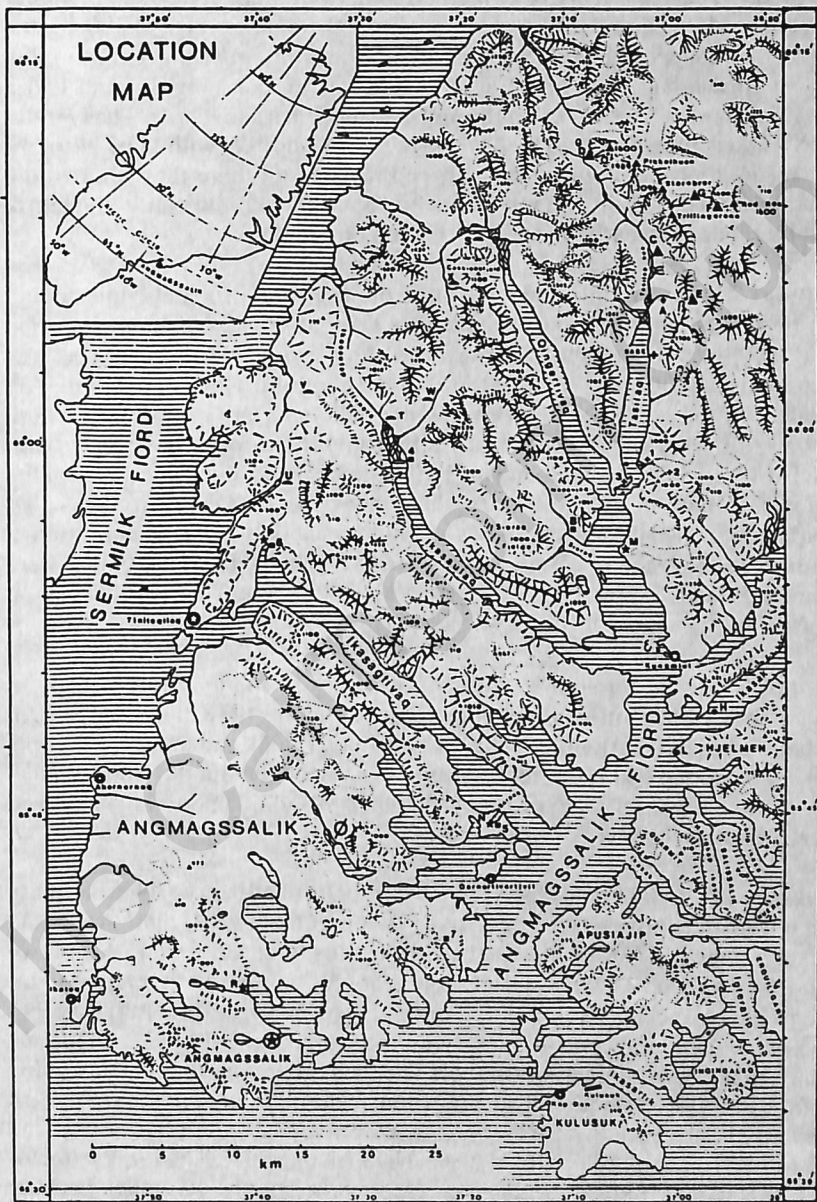
The third phase of the 50th Anniversary Expedition of the British Schools Exploring Society to East Greenland in the summer of 1983, had a base camp at the head of Tasilaq, the east arm of Angmagssalik Fiord, just south of the Arctic Circle at 66°10'N. The 100 members of the expedition had flown to Keklavik in Iceland, then on to Kulusuk in East Greenland in 10-seater turbo jets. This was dependent of good weather as airports here do not have radar approach systems. Travel to base camp to meet the advance party and the six-week supply of stores shipped out in April, was by boat – sea ice permitting. Sea ice did not permit, so half the party overflew the obstruction by helicopter. The others arrived by boat after the wind changed from south to north and removed the blockage.

Tuesday 16: Four weeks into the expedition and only two more to go. Adventure groups left at different times and in various states of readiness and composure. By early afternoon only the two Royal Marines who were the crews of the Gemini inflatables; the chief science leader; Mike, the base camp manager; Sharon, a young explorer with torn shoulder muscles, and I were left at base. 21.00 hours: "One of our climbers is missing." A twilight search drew blank, but the second sweep early on Wednesday morning, found the lost soul on the wrong side of the river, sound asleep in his bivouack bag at 08.00 hours.

Wednesday 17: The Marines and Sharon left in two inflatables to dump food and equipment at a rendezvous near Tiniteqilaq. 18.00 hours: Four ski-tourers came back to base for the Bell stretcher. "Oliver Crispin lost control crossing a snow gully and has a suspected broken ankle." The casualty was carried from the bottom of the gully to the head of Tasilaq, whence a Greenlander who was camped nearby, took the stretcher on his boat to arrive in base camp at 23.00 hours. Dr Valerie Pollard was with this group and had the injury in plaster by 24.00 hours.

Thursday 18: Essential equipment, which should have gone with the Marines the day before, was found while clearing store tents. The Greenlander who ferried the stretcher was hired to take Mike to the village of Kungmiut where he was able to hire another boat to take himself and the equipment to the rendezvous at Tiniteqilaq.

Friday 19: The inventory of remaining stores was completed, and Oliver tested his mobility using paddles for crutches.



Saturday 20: Spare tents were pitched to dry out then repacked. At supper time the Marines and Mike returned from the rendezvous. 22.00 hours: Richard Madders and Mark Young arrived from climbing camp to report that Hazel Brown had been hit by a large boulder in a snow gully and had a fractured femur. She had spent the night sedated, in a snow hole. The Gemini was readied in the dark, and the Marines left for Kungmiut with Mark as torch-bearer in the bows, looking out for ice brash. From there they phoned the emergency services in Angmagssalik and arranged a radio call with Henrik Nielsen, our contact there, for 01.30 hours on Sunday.

Sunday 21: Henrik informed us that if the fog lifted, the helicopter could arrive as early as 04.00 hours. The next radio contact at 04.00 hours reported that the fog at Angmagssalik prevented any flying, but a clearance was expected at 08.00 hours. By this time we had clear skies but could see the fog blanket to the south. At 09.00 hours the helicopter arrived at base camp, collected Dr Val who had been called in from the ski-touring group to base, Richard and Mark as guides and the Bell stretcher and went to the scene of the accident. On its return journey, the helicopter collected Oliver from base. Dr Val accompanied the two casualties to Angmagssalik Hospital. Radio contact with her at 16.00 and 22.30 hours informed us that both Hazel and Oliver were comfortable in hospital and that Dr Val would return to base camp on Tuesday.

Monday 22: 07.45 hours: Radio contact was made with Henrik in Angmagssalik to confirm arrangements for evacuating the expedition. Freight to be shipped out to Angmagssalik on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. People to be transported from base to the airport at Kulusuk on Sunday and Monday of next week. The kayak expedition and others in Angmagssalik to be moved to Kulusuk on Tuesday of next week.

Tuesday 23: 16.00 hours: Two French climbers, members of the Chambéry Club who were also in the area, arrived to report that two of their group had fallen in Oliver's Gully, and one had broken his tibia and femur. Would we send for a helicopter? The Marines left again for Kungmiut to telephone for assistance, but met the fishing boat, Timmik, with Dr Val and the Bell stretcher aboard, at the entrance to Tasilaq. Timmik is equipped with radio telephone which made communication simpler. The helicopter would not be available before dark. 18.00 hours: The two French climbers and I took the Bell stretcher to the casualty, since no evacuation was possible that night, and protection could not be provided where he lay in the gully. The French doctor and Dr Val made him comfortable on the stretcher and he was taken back up the gully and cared for in a tent overnight.

Wednesday 24: At first light both expeditions combined to carry the casualty down the glacier to the head of Tasilaq. The stretcher was placed on the

Gemini for transfer to Timmik, thence to a rendezvous with the hospital ship, which has a regular run, weather permitting, round the isolated communities in this area.

Thursday 25 and Friday 26: Groups returned to base, stores were packed and shipped. The emergencies had stopped merging.

Two Cairngorm Club members were part of this expedition. Alastair Matthewson was involved in the second evacuation, while Jean Downie, sensible lady, had returned to Scotland before these incidents occurred.

