

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WGM-21

The Summer in a Nutshell - I

Højsdal 12

Hareskov, Denmark

20 October 1967

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Dear Dick,

I have been away from Denmark three months out of the past six, traveling about the coasts of the northern North Atlantic Ocean. My next letters to you will record my impressions during the summer's wanderings. Most of the letters were written on the spot. Since my rucksack had no room for a typewriter and Institute stationery, the final typing, after smoothing the rough spots, is now being done at home by wifely skill.

It is perhaps best, before getting to the heart of things, to outline my peregrinations since June. This letter is part I of a three-part précis. With the accompanying map, it sets the stage for subsequent fuller treatment. I dislike drafting maps because they take inordinate amounts of time to complete, but maps are the essence of geography. They save words and, indeed, can be used where no words suffice.

Amid the rush of last-minute preparations for heading north, I was invited to lunch by Alexander Roganof, the man who arranged my visa at the Soviet consulate in Copenhagen. Our luncheon date was set for the 4th of July, the day before I flew to Oslo. Alexander was still hopeful I might be able to sail directly to Murmansk from Svalbard with one of the large Russian vessels servicing the coal town of Barentsburg. He gave me the names of the two vessels (one of which I was to visit later in Murmansk harbor) and asked me to call him upon my return from the Murmansk visit. We parted after "skåling" to friendship. No mention was made about it being the 4th of July; on the way home I realized I had missed the radio broadcast of Walter Cronkite's speech at the Danish-American festivities at Rebild. But there was little time to think about anything except the plane to Oslo early the next morning.

To do a full day's work in Oslo one has to get the early morning non-stop flight (or take an overnight boat). The jets take an hour, propeller-jobs one and a half hours. Only luck seems to get a confirmation on either flight (why are the planes always one-half filled?), so one is usually relegated to a propeller flight of nearly three hours with a stop in Göteborg in between.

I had a theory once that the SAS flights from København to Oslo were always fully booked at only half capacity because it was not possible for the stewardesses in a full plane to serve coffee and

weinerbrød and sell their perfume, cigarettes, and whiskey before landing in Oslo. Of course, the pilot could delay by circling the field (not unknown), but all this is academic now because the duty-free sales in the plane have been canceled for the intra-Scandinavian routes. Such thoughts are cast about in one's mind after getting up at 4 AM to catch a plane.

My day in Oslo began at the Norwegian Polar Institute (Norsk Polar-institutt) which has an impressive spread in a building belonging to the State Water Resources Board. The Institute carries out snow and ice observations in Norway, helping the water people to determine their run-off predictions. This very neat arrangement allowed the Polar Institute to move in 1964 from old and rather cramped quarters (but nostalgic nonetheless) to its present home. I spoke with the Institute's under-director Kaare Z. Lundquist, a hydrographer with many years experience in Svalbard. The Director, geologist Tore Gjelsvik, was then in Svalbard on an attempt to begin the field season before the winter snows had melted. Lack of funds canceled the normal helicopter support this year; Gjelsvik used snow scooters for getting about--and with good success. The trick is to plan the fieldwork for the period having enough snow to travel over but not so much that geological outcrops are buried. Good work, if you can do it.

I spent several hours looking through the Institute's clipping file, which is a great time saver. Then a ten-minute walk to Majorstua train station for the ride to downtown Oslo. It usually takes ten minutes to walk a stretch that the Norwegians say is "five minutes over there". But then again, few people charge ahead as do the Norwegians.

The flight to Tromsø, North Norway, the next morning was exhilarating. The only disappointment was the stewardess's announcement made after take-off: "We regret that use of cameras on this route is not allowed." Why? I do not know. Perhaps some obscure military regulation. The glaciers and peaks of the west coast of Norway were spectacular. I wondered if the same announcement is made on tourist-laden "Midnight Sun" flights. I cannot imagine American tourists flocking to jet across the Arctic Circle and back to Oslo without being able to snap pictures.

I did make a mistake in taking a photograph at Bodø airport. I didn't see the sign, but after taking the shot in the drizzling rain I did see the soldier with MP on his arm trying his best to scowl at me in a pleasant Norwegian sort of way. Flying time from Oslo to Bodø (in a Convair Metropolitan) was 2.5 hours. By chance I sat next to a member of parliament from the Narvik area. He was a young conservative (Høyre Party) sitting on the Industry Committee which is looking into Norwegian development in Svalbard. He seemed surprised, but also pleased, when I told him what I was studying. I had read most of the government reports he pulled out of his briefcase, so our discussion was detailed and profitable.

The main problem in Svalbard affairs is briefly this: Svalbard's old strategic importance in the air age has not diminished in today's missile era. The Svalbard archipelago, the northern cap of Scandinavia (Nordkalotten), and the seas between are of highest strategic significance today. To avoid a mere de jure situation, Norway, with sovereignty over Svalbard, must be there in economic pursuits as well as scientific investigations. The Russians are certainly there in force for these reasons. Norway and the Soviet Union are now the only nations with permanent activities in Svalbard, although many others in the past have attempted development there according to their rights under the Treaty of 1925.

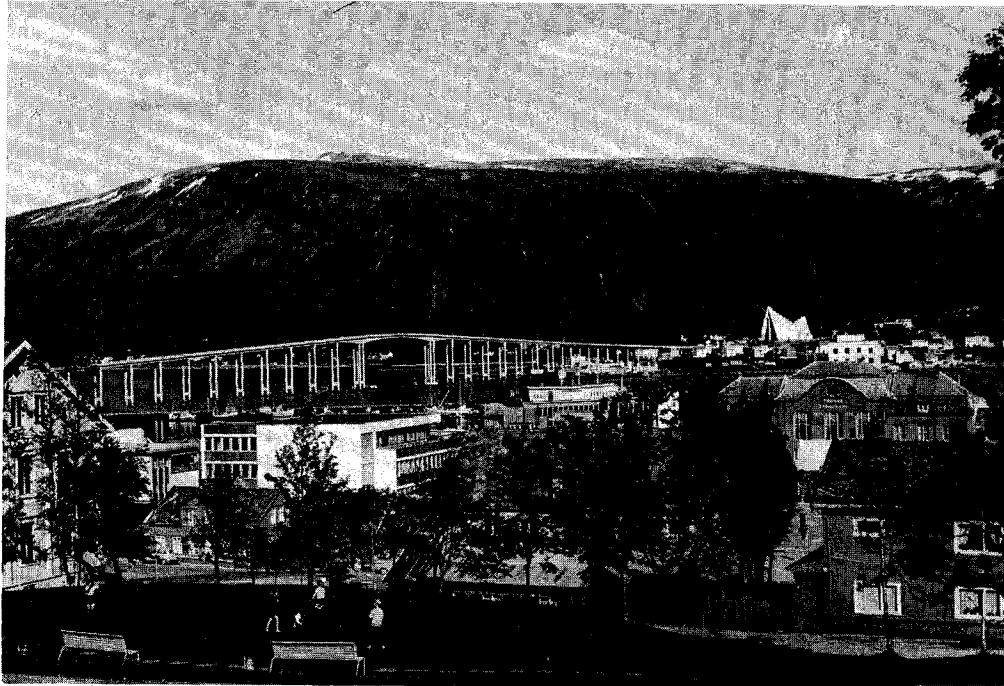
The main Norwegian activity is coal mining at Longyearbyen. The Russians have two coal mines--at Barentsburg and Pyramiden. Most of the Norwegian coal goes to the State-owned coking plant at Mo-i-Rana which supplies coke to the iron works at the same town. Both operations (the coking plant and the iron works) are in deep trouble; this, in turn, casts doubt on the future of Norwegian coal mining in Svalbard.

Since the coal mining company is privately-owned (Store Norske Spitsbergen Kulkompani A/S), the Norwegian government has a delicate political problem when trying to help out. Store Norske is Norway in Svalbard; the government must, therefore, do everything possible to keep the company operating. Arctic mining operations are risky and expensive. But given the political and strategic need for maintaining de facto sovereignty in Svalbard, the Norwegian coal mine will doubtless continue.

The other burning question in Svalbard is the need for an airfield. The terms of the treaty preclude building military installations there. The Russians have always held the rigid position that an airfield would be considered a military installation. They have, in short, always played Big Bear with Norway--blustery talk and shows of strength--so that poor, little Norway has had to tread with careful steps and slow. Practical and humanitarian grounds demand an all-weather airfield in Svalbard. Ship connections, cut off for half the year by ice, are just too slow for many purposes in our world of 1967.

These were some of the matters to delve into while visiting Svalbard. The member of parliament and I parted ways; he continued on to a local meeting by Otter floatplane, I climbed back in our SAS plane trying to avoid the soldier's eyes. The alpine scenery between Bodø and Andenes went unphotographed. Twenty minutes after leaving Andenes we landed at Tromsø. Most passengers had deplaned at Bodø or Andenes. Only ten of us continued on to Tromsø.

This capital of North Norway requires some space all its own in another letter. I walked about the town looking for the Tromsø Museum, photographed children playing in the park and a man cutting his lawn (at 69 degrees N.), and reflected on the many years that have passed since I was last in Tromsø. The good ship "Skule" docked late that afternoon. It was to take us north to Svalbard the next day.



Tromsø, Norway - A view toward the mainland

That night I couldn't help overhearing an American married couple in the restaurant of the Grand Hotel:

"All things are relative."

"George, you know how I hate clichés."

"But, Tromsø is the Paris of the North."

* * * * *

Some Paris. Some North.

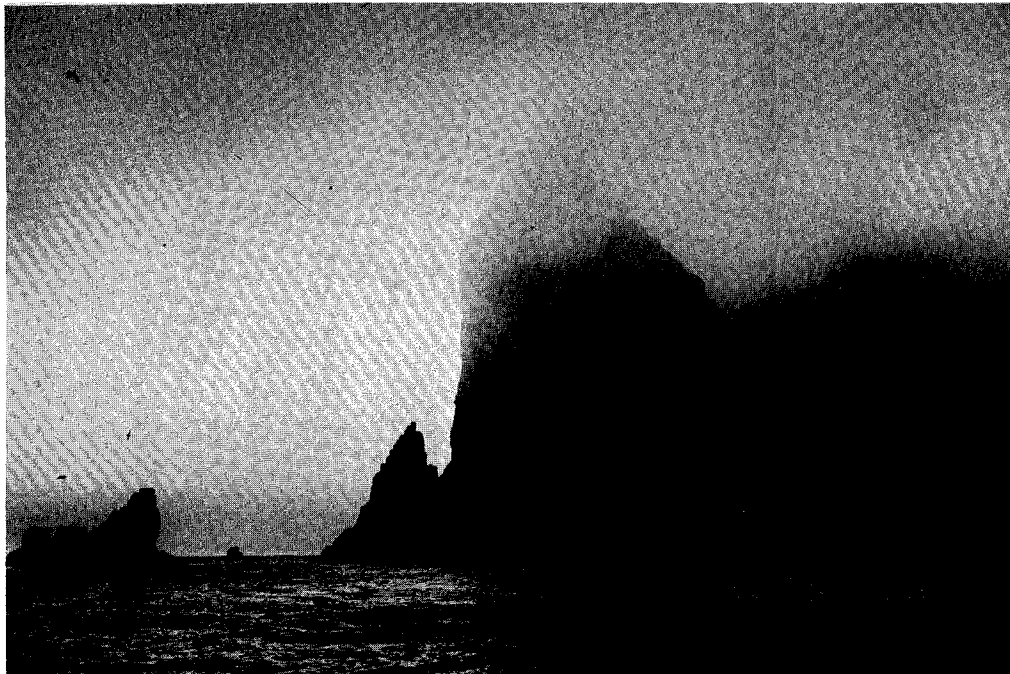
The cliché's Tromsø was not apparent on my first visit in 1953. A schoolroom floor and primus-cooked oatmeal for breakfast. The 1967 visit showed me that Tromsø had changed markedly, but what it had to do with Paris was still obscure. A beautiful bridge now joins the island to the mainland. Not far from its mainland side, an aerial tramway lofts up to a nearby peak. At the top of the cable car line, a family of tourist Lapps were camped in a large tent.

It was light when we sailed out of Tromsø harbor at 10 o'clock the following evening. Northern nights in summer must be experienced; they suffer in description.

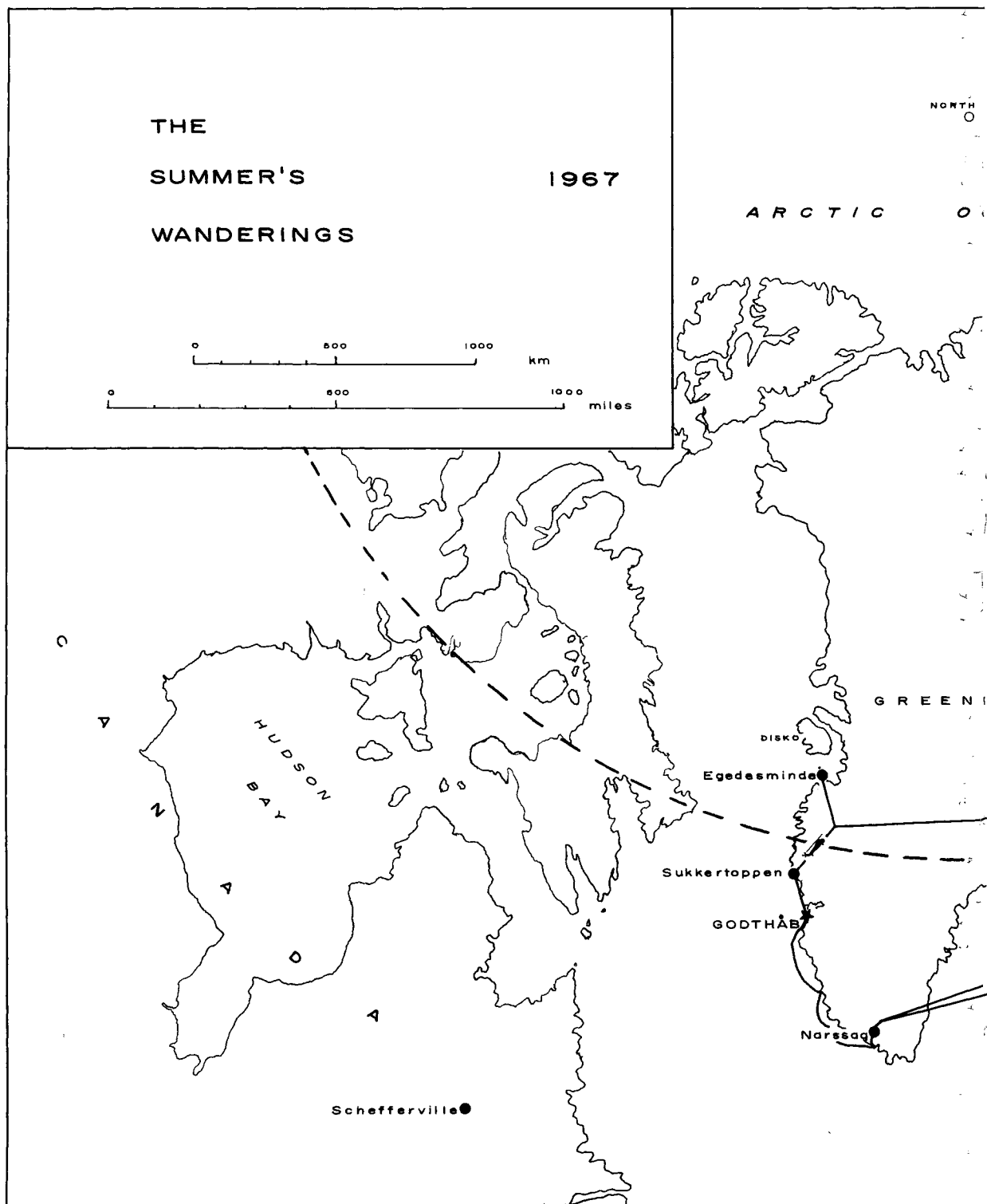
My three cabin mates aboard the tourist ship "Skule" were a Danish school teacher living in a town neighboring ours, an Italian mountain-climber, and a Norwegian glaciologist, Olav Orheim, working for Norsk Polarinstitut. About 50 passengers were on board. It was the fifth trip of the summer to Svalbard for "Skule". She would do eleven in this the last year such tours will be run. Next year Svalbard will presumably be worked into the Norwegian coastal steamer system (Hurtigruten) with sailings every 14 days. These will be for moving freight and mail. Tourists will not be catered to in any special way; many of the side trips to interesting places in Vest Spitsbergen will be a thing of the past.

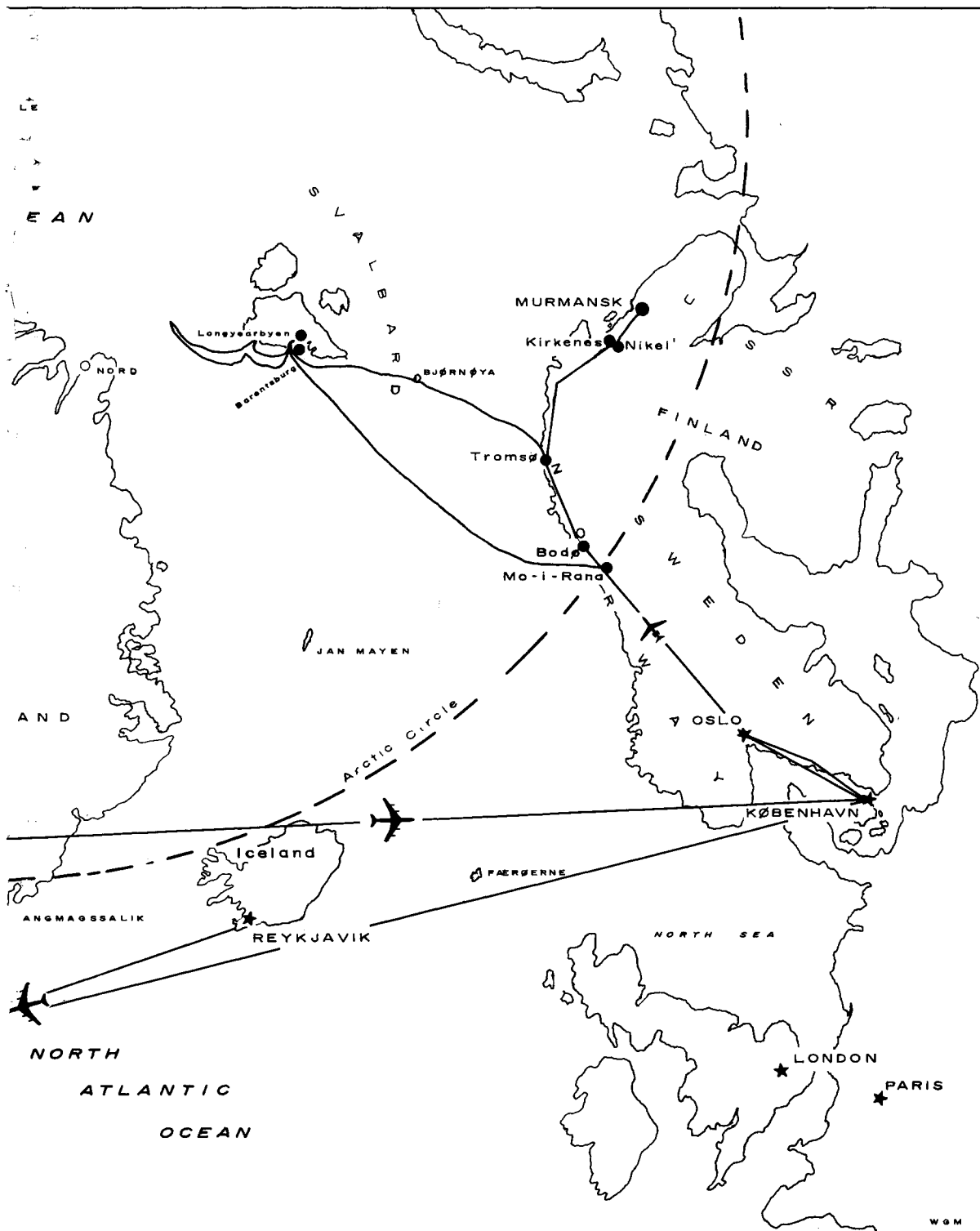
The Norwegian glaciologist's field assistant was a young Canadian girl, a graduate student in meteorology under Sverre Orvig at McGill. She had worked on the Arctic Institute's Icefield Ranges Research Project in Alaska. Women are now being "allowed" more of a place in northern research. And why not?

Halfway between Norway and Vest Spitsbergen (see also my maps in WGM-19) is a dot on the chart called Bear Island (Bjørnøya). This island lies at some distance from the rest of the archipelago but was



The southeast coast of Bjørnøya at midnight - no friendly haven here.





included in the Svalbard group under the Treaty (but not Jan Mayen Island, as one recent polar book would have us believe). It is usually shrouded in fog for most of the year, has no harbors, and little of general interest except a Norwegian radio and weather station manned by a handful of lonely souls. We dropped off two ornithologists from Finland who would be picked up again on one of "Skule's" final runs back to Norway. The bird cliffs on Bjørnøya teem with life; the imposing mountain on the island is called Miseryfjellet. That states the case as well as anything.

It took us a day (24 hours) to sail from Tromsø to Bjørnøya. (In Scandinavian, the word et døgn means "a 24-hour period", or "a day and a night". Why don't we have a similar word?) Another døgn and we reached Vest Spitsbergen and the station of Isfjord Radio, where a boatload of gay Norwegians sailed out to collect their mail and a few fresh provisions. They were singing, bearded, and scruffy-looking. They had, for the past three days, hosted a visiting group of Russians from Barentsburg. I guess they went at the bottle with gusto. This happens in the North.

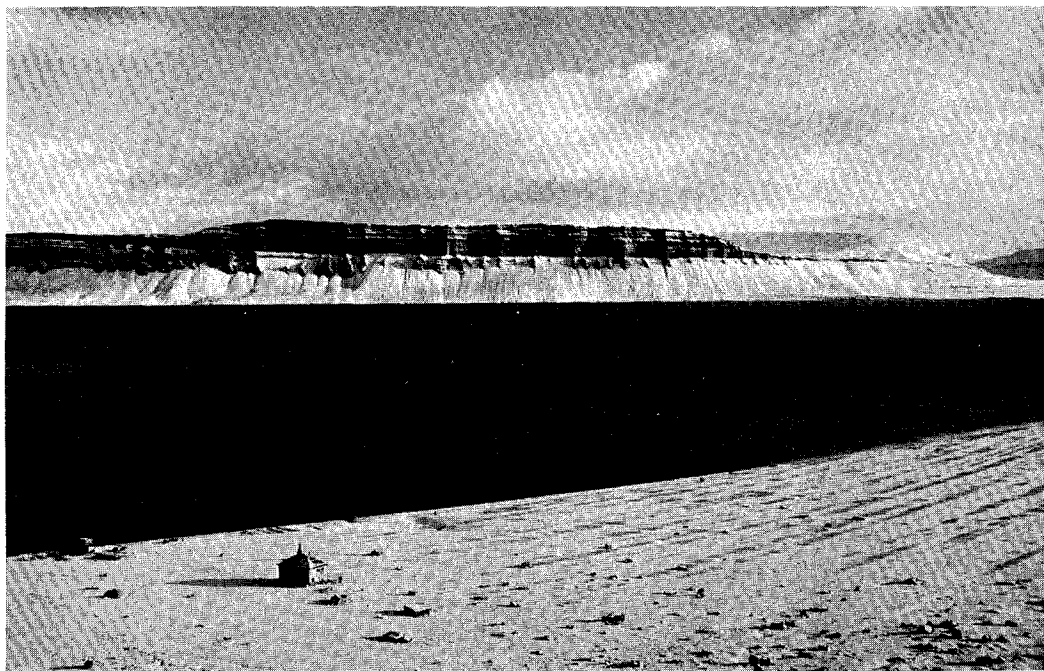
We anchored off Isfjord Radio which is at the entrance of the large Isfjord (Ice Fjord) where the coal mines are located. Having to "see everything" was beginning to take its toll. I got to bed at 3 AM, after an hour's stop off shore from the radio station. It wasn't much of a sleep because we docked at Longyearbyen after a few hours.

The Norwegian word byen means the town or city. John Munro Longyear (1850-1922) was an American from Marquette, Michigan, who pioneered coal mining in Svalbard in the early 1900's. During the First World War, he was bought out by Norwegian interests, but his name gave the main Norwegian center in Svalbard its puzzling title. Many people from Norway think the name really means "long year". This is unfortunate; it is difficult enough getting miners and other workers there.

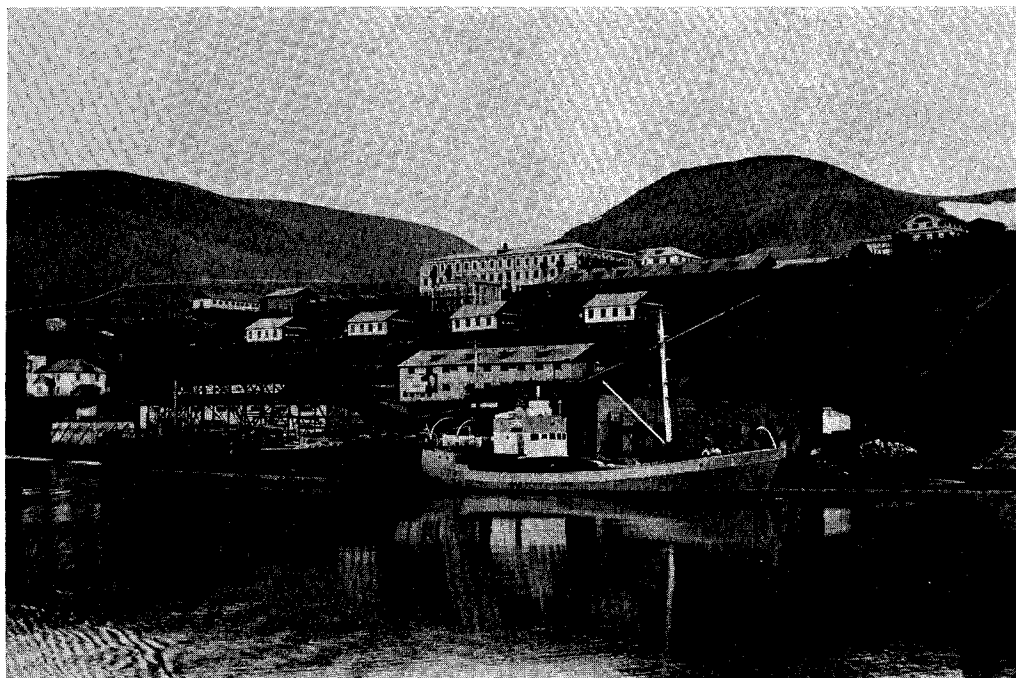
We stayed only a few hours in Longyearbyen, but long enough to talk with the general manager of the coal company and with the Governor's office about visiting the Russians. The Governor would send a telegram over to Barentsburg to inquire about it; when I returned on "Skule" three days later, the answer would be there.

After sailing from Longyearbyen we visited points of scenic or historical interest in Vest Spitsbergen. The first stop was in inner Isfjord at Bjønhamna. Here we saw one of the hunting huts of the great Norwegian arctic trapper, Hilmar Nøis. It was all too familiar. Don Foote and I had been weathered in at Nøis's place in 1953. Memories. Late that night we sailed past the Russian town of Barentsburg. Another late night.

The next morning, in the rain, we landed at Ny-Ålesund, an abandoned coal-mining town formerly worked by the King's Bay Coal Company. Ny-Ålesund is now the site of a European Space Research Organization (ESRO)



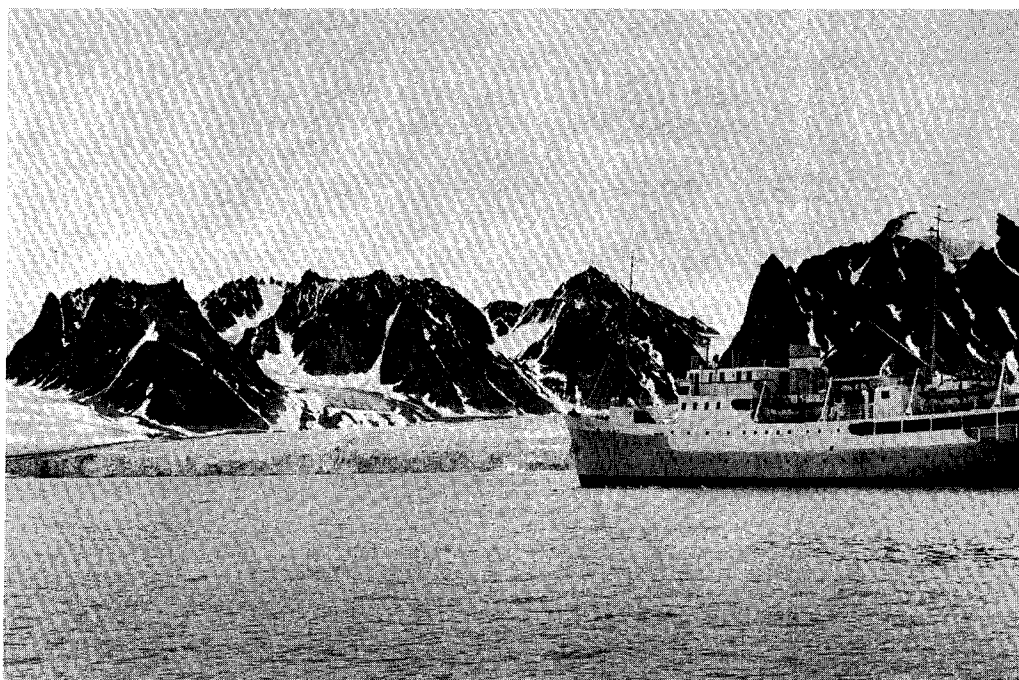
Bjonahamna, Tempelfjorden, Vest Spitsbergen (Sept. 1953) - A hunter's hut and the first snow of winter.



The Russian coal-mining town, Barentsburg, Vest Spitsbergen, midnight
10-11 July 1967



The ESRO Station at Ny-Ålesund nearing completion. 11 July 1967



M/S "Skule" in Magdalena Bay, Svalbard. 12 July 1967

station. It might also become the home of a permanent Norwegian research station run by Norsk Polarinstitut. Abandoned mining towns are sad places; this was no exception. But Ny-Ålesund is an historic spot. The names Amundsen, Ellsworth, Nobile, and other pioneers of arctic flying come to mind when hearing the name. I sent Joan a letter from the Ny-Ålesund post office. It was post-marked "Ny-Ålesund - 78°55'32" N. Lat.", and the postmaster dutifully stamped another impression on the envelope "World's Northernmost Community - Kingsbay 79° North, Svalbard". The post office doesn't get much business there any more. The Arctic Hotel is closed; the regular tourist run from Norway has ended.

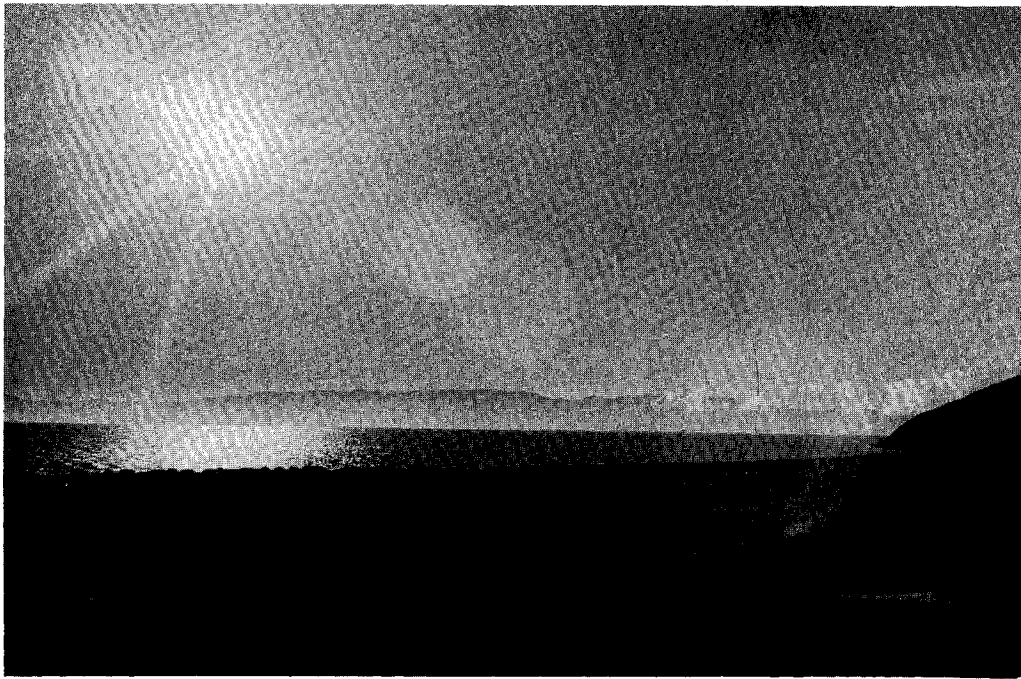
After a day of sailing to glacier fronts and into bays with spectacular alpine scenery, whose pointed peaks gave Spitsbergen its name, we visited the site of a 17th century Dutch whaling station, Smeerenburg, and, across the bay, Virgohamna where the ill-fated balloon trip of Andrée made its start seventy years before.

The next day it was back to Longyearbyen and the surprise of hearing that the Russians had not replied to the Governor's telegram. But a ship was sailing in three days for Norway, so I could leave "Skule" and have more time in Longyearbyen. Also there might still be a chance to get over to Barentsburg.

After the evening meal at the coal company's dining room, I took a tour out across the fjord with the chief engineer (whose name is also Bill) and a few friends. We walked about the hills across the bay from Longyearbyen looking for musk ox--without luck. Then a barbecue of pølser (hot dogs) and lots of laughs and songs under the midnight sun. Something about the whole scene nagged at the back of my mind. Yes, it was a feeling similar to the four months on northern Ellesmere Island in Canada--four months of continuous sunshine in a world of light which was at times sharp, then strangely diffused, a world of utter beauty. The wind came up; the spell was broken. Then a long, tossing ride back to Longyearbyen in the outboard. The boat seemed much smaller than on the trip out. After reaching Longyearbyen, the inevitable coffee and small-talk followed, as if there were no tomorrow: a reluctance, through sleep-drugged minds, to let go of that gossamer world of arctic summer.

I was falling into the typical pattern of life in the northern summer: to bed at 3 AM and up again at 8. A trip through the mines left little opportunity to consider how numb I was--the mine's temperature is always below freezing and the working face of coal only 27 inches (70 cm.) high. After crawling for what seemed like half a mile on our stomachs in that black underground world of perpetual frost, I felt rejuvenated, but also quite ready to return to daylight and an upright position of locomotion.

That evening a small group of us (including the German Cultural Attaché in Oslo) sailed out to some bird cliffs for an outing. We were guests of Henrik Varming, office manager of the Norwegian coal



The midnight sun: a view to the north across Isfjord

company. Varming was born in Longyearbyen and spoke with obvious authority about Svalbard affairs.

My notebook for that evening concludes:

"To bed by 4:20 AM. This is getting ridiculous. Luckily, the Captain from the coal boat 'Ingertre' was with us tonight; he will know where we are if we do not appear at sailing time. Off for Mo-i-Rana, Norway in a few hours."

And so I boarded the coal-carrier "Ingertre" bound for Norway. Ingertre is a steamer and far superior to the vibrating diesel ships built today. I spent two days sleeping and then began to enjoy the ride. We would land in Mo-i-Rana on 19 July, so I had good time to get to the Norwegian-Russian border on 23 July.

Sincerely,

Bill Mattox

W. G. Mattox