

GINO WATKINS MEMORIAL FUND AND EDWARD WILSON FUND
FINAL REPORT

EXPEDITION LEADER:	EXPEDITION NAME:	EXPEDITION DATES:
Ross Hewitt	2014 Baffin Steep Skiing Expedition	16 th April – 25 May

White Lines – Exploratory Steep Skiing in Baffin’s Remote Arctic Fiords

Skiing Baffin’s couloirs has been on my to do list ever since I saw Andrew McLean and Brad Barlage’s trip report from there. The place is filled with aesthetic splitter couloirs between the biggest walls on the planet in a remote area within the Arctic Circle. With guaranteed cold snow and the ability to ski around the clock in 24 hour daylight, what’s not to like?



The Komatik Ride

Our trip started out mid April at Clyde River by securing a skidoo ride from the Inuit hunters to the Fiords. Ilko and his son John agreed to take myself, Michelle and Marcus out to Scott Island on a Komatik (wooden sled). Ilko was a man from a bygone era for us Westerners and had lived by hunting in a tiny remote Inuit settlement to the North of Clyde River until he was 26 years old. He displayed the calm confidence of a man who knew how to take care of himself in the wilderness.

The ride out was brutal with the wooden komatic shuddering every few seconds as it hit wave after wave of wind hardened sastrugi. The roughness of the ride also took its toll on my body as each blow would rattle right my spine and I eventually adopted the crouching position on hands and knees with arms slightly bent to absorb the shock. The following day we would all have crippling headaches from back and neck spasms.

As we headed North across the mouth of Sam Ford Fiord we found a seal pup that had been killed at a breathing hole. The polar bear had only eaten a bit of fat and left the remainder of the kill showing that food was currently plentiful for the bears. Nothing goes to waste in the Arctic and our Inuit guides quickly bagged the dead seal for their dinner.



Ship's Prow

As we progressed inland past the 600 m high Ship's Prow and 71 degrees North point into Scott Inlet, we caught glimpse of some stunning ski lines and since we were over the komatik ride, we asked Ilko to stop. It was getting late and with the temperature dropping we raced to get the stoves going, eat some food and make camp. After months of emails, calls, procurement, logistics and planning, it felt pretty awesome to finally be in the place we had all been dreaming off. Looking around at the terrain put a smile on my face knowing it was a ski mountaineer's playground, and we had it to ourselves. Ilko and John quickly took off and with a wave and gunned the skidoos out of site. It would be a longer day for them. Our final task before bed was to get the bear perimeter operational. Poles supported a perimeter rope attached to a pin trigger on a refillable air horn. We hoped the fence would allow us to get some sleep at night albeit with a gun at hand either side of the tent.

On the first morning there was wind down fiord and I had to learn about kiting very quickly before the other two more experienced kitters left me behind. Over the next 3 days we skied 5 lines on Scott Island, 3 of which were outstandingly beautiful, varying in length from 450 to 620 m vertical. I also have some great memories from hanging out on the summit plateau enjoying the evening light and the relative warmth far above the sea ice with views stretching far and wind in the pristine Arctic air.



Michelle Skiing on Scott Island

It was soon time to move camp and as luck would have it the wind was blowing inland so we caught a ride 35 km into Gibbs Fiord to our second base camp. Well, Michelle and Marcus managed 35 km but with a smaller kite I got becalmed after 30 km and had been working hard all day to fly it in the light winds. I had been flying continuously for six hours by now and being a novice kiter I was pretty spent. I wasn't able to fly, ski, watch the loads on my 2 sleds and eat & drink all at the same time. After an hour untangling lines, righting the kite, and trying to re-launch without luck my toes were getting dangerously cold as the liners froze. While I ate and rehydrated I got into my sleeping bag to rewarm my feet and thaw my boot liners out. It was a fine night to bivi and in the morning there could be wind to use to re-join the others. At worst it would be sled hauling in the sun rather than in the damp polar frost that was descending fast. The radio batteries weren't working in the cold so I went to sleep with the gun at my side and some extra rounds at hand. I must have been asleep an hour when Michelle woke me up. She had skinned back with a thermos of hot water and food, a little worried and unsure as to why I had stopped. After my short rest and with warm feet I felt a lot better, and we skinned the last 5 km up fiord together.

Camped in the middle of the Gibbs Fjord, we all became 'fools of scale'. (quote Jordan Manley). The following day we set off on a south facing line on Sillem Island that looked about 700 m high. After 500 m we reckoned 350 m remained. After another 300 m it looked like it was about 150m to the top. We finally topped out at 1300 m! The view from the top was breath taking with a 360 panorama of the fiords, glaciers, towering impending big walls and islands. Down below gorgeous red minarets lined the sides of our couloir, reminiscent of the Y couloir on Aiguille Argentiere.

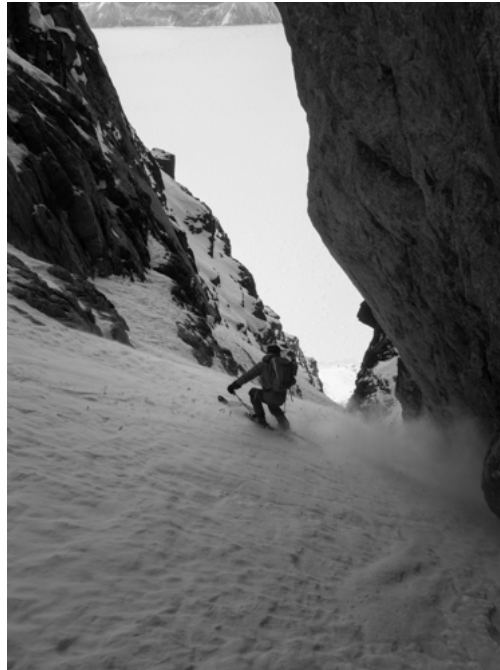


Michelle 1300 m above Gibbs Fiord

That evening I decided to back up the photos on a laptop and portable hard drive. Even with it insulated in a sleeping bag with a hot water bottle under the hard drive and it took 4 hours to do what would normally take a few minutes.

In Gibbs Fiord we followed a daily regime of getting up about 9 am when the sun was up, have breakfast, then go ski the first line that took our fancy. Each line held unique rock architecture that

never failed to inspire as the imagination went wild with all the skiing and climbing possibilities around us.



Marcus Skiing a Tight Technical Line in Gibbs

One day we woke up to low cloud and some fresh snow and decided to skin up fiord to explore and look for that 'big line'. With the cloud base at 600 m we passed a buttress more akin to a fairy tale fortress with some of the biggest walls we had seen. The Fortress is an incredibly impressive mountain feature, immense acres of impeccable vertical rock soaring upwards with no hint of relief. A couloir split the buttress but looked like it hit a cul-de-sac at 600 m. We continued past up fiord and as the weather cleared we found a good line to ski. At the top we enjoyed a five-minute sunbath before putting the layers back on in preparation for descending into the fiord freezer. The fresh snow had accumulated in the couloir and effortless big turns take us back to the ice in a few minutes. Its 6 pm and the 650 m line felt like a half day so we decided to go ski the cul-de-sac line we had skinned past a couple of kilometres down fiord.

At the bottom I left my thermos with diluted hot High5 caffeine gels knowing it could be a long shift. We were some way from base camp which was out of sight even on the flat fiord ice. I couldn't be bothered warming up GPS batteries to find out how far. My mid-layer pockets were stuffed with my camera batteries, lighters, ammunition and my leatherman which I wanted to keep warm to stop it freezing to my fingers. Anyway, opening my outer layers would let that unwelcome cold air in. The climbing was quick and an hour later we found the couloir curved to the right where we thought it stopped. We continued on with little doubt that the couloir will stop round the corner, such was the scale of the walls soaring up around us. I had mixed emotions; I knew Michelle was tired and part of me hoped we found a cul-de-sac, but if the line went to the summit it would be a once in a lifetime opportunity. I slowed down slightly so Michelle didn't get demotivated and we continued upwards a round another corner. The couloir narrowed from 100 m to near 10 m wide. At 900 m we rounded the next twist on the spiral, the couloir narrowed further to 3-4 m. I could see light at the end of the tunnel, OMG, it goes.



The 1250 m Spiralling Stairway to Heaven.

At 11 pm we topped out on the summit plateau just as the sun dipped below the horizon leaving us in bright twilight conditions. Marcus and myself briefly discussed waiting for the sun so we could photos. However I knew that would be a hard sell to Michelle and definitely a miserable few hours so we quickly put on all our down kit and stepped into our skis. Initially the couloir was 3 m wide and required precision turns but the snow was incredible sluffy powder and even on the steeper rolls the skiing was just unadulterated fun. Occasionally we stopped to film and take some photos but as the couloir opened up at the 600 m point, I just wanted get into the flow and sent the remainder of the couloir in one shot with legs on fire by the bottom. At the 'shrund' we all celebrated, stoked with an amazing line that had us in doubt until the last moment, all the sweeter for topping out and knowing that was one of those precious moments in a lifetime.

After sharing the contents of my thermos, we set off back to basecamp with the GPS showing 7 km of flat skinning. Freezing fog was accumulating on the fiord reducing visibility to 50 m. We continued skinning in the murk with tired legs while ice formed on our clothes hair, and eyelashes, distracted from the current unpleasant reality by the memories of what went down in the previous few hours. We crashed into basecamp in the early hours, pulled on down trousers and jackets and attacked the snack food while listening to the comforting roar of the stoves as we waited for hot water for our evening meal.

It was time for us to move camp again and once more the wind Gods favoured us with wind down Gibbs Fiord and into Refuge harbour. I launched my kite in gusty 40 kph with a lot of apprehension and the acceleration was incredible despite towing 2 sleds weighing 100 kgs. Almost immediately I spotted one of the steering lines had a twist in it and I had to put the kite down and sort it. This gave me the confidence that I could cope in the wild wind. A few minutes later I was back flying and trucking along happily at 30 kph and making sure the kite stayed well clear of the power zone. At the junction with the inlet to Refuge Harbour the snow surface was more uneven and the sled with my camera equipment flipped so I had to put the kite down. The wind was stronger now and the kite would not fully depower and continuously kite looped (like a propeller) near the ground as I battled to get it anchored to an ice screw. It took quite some time to sort the lines but the wind was still blowing and I had the choice of covering 10 km effortlessly in 20 minutes or burn a lot of

calories sled hauling for 3 hours. We put the kites down again at Refuge Harbour and with 20 km behind us and ate some lunch in preparation for what lay ahead.

The next few hours promised to be tough sled hauling through the moraines up into Stewart Valley and the biting wind continued to howl. Luck was on our side and a streak of smooth water ice provided easy transportation up into Stewart valley. At some point the pressure of the lake must have washed out a section of moraine providing the channel we followed. Now the wind changed direction into our faces, which we had fully covered. At the end of the first lake we made camp on a desolate freeze dried and wind blasted beach, trying to gain some shelter behind a small spur from the incessant wind. In the morning the wind continued to howl and we broke camp relatively quickly knowing there was a long way ahead. For about 10 km we hauled over the ice and sporadic wind eroded shallow snow bumps that were left over from the autumnal snow falls. The unravelling scenery provided welcome relief from the monotony of sled hauling and I spent my time studying the rock faces, looking for any continuous free climbing features, which were few and far between.

As the incredible Sail Peaks came into view we spotted a couloir that split the main peaks. For the next few hours of hauling we kept looking towards it hoping it would go. Once we got line of sight we could see that the couloir had its glacial ice teeth bared and it wasn't to be. With the cold wind I don't think any of us were that psyched to break our rhythm and go skiing, preferring instead to stay hauling in hope of finding a sheltered camp. At lunchtime we found a small boulder under Great Sail Peak and dug into the snow accumulation on the lee side to get out the wind while we got the stove going. It was Marcus birthday and a pretty cool place to spend it. We sat down to eat soup and both of us saw that Michelle's nose had frozen in the wind. The map showed it was another 15km to the end of the lake that made the ideal stopping point for the day. As the kms dragged on, I found myself burning fuel at an incredible rate of 3 bars an hour. Our food rationing was 4 bars per day.



Birthday Celebrations for Marcus Under Great Sail Peak

A couple of kms from the beach we spotted a sheltered recess in the snow-covered moraine. It was so good to be able to fully relax without the wind harassing you. The site also had a large boulder that provided one of the only civilised toilets we had encountered in the Arctic. Up until then this had been a particularly unpleasant affair, generally involving several things freezing fast. In the

morning I cut a seat into a snowdrift and enjoyed my coffee while taking in the view back down Stewart Valley. It was the first seat with back support for ten days and it felt wonderful to let those muscles relax. With what might have been the highlight of my day over, we started sled hauling to the 'Russian Beach' at the Southern end of the lake Stewart (so named after a Russian big wall team took two days ferrying loads en route to put up Rubikon on Great Sail Peak). My Achilles had started to play up and I cut away a section of the boot liner to relieve the pressure, hoping this would prevent further aggravation. 5 km of moraines separated us from the Walker Arm and we weren't about to get through 'Scott free'. A variety of hard snow interspersed with rotten sugar snow over loose rock had us sweating and cursing as we triple carried over the watershed. By evening we had covered 1 km of moraine and I was over it. Instead of continuing we decided to reward ourselves and go for a night ski in the worthy Crosshairs Couloir. We raced up the couloir trying to stay in the last rays of sunshine as it crept up the mountainside. At the top we soaked up mindblowing views into Stewart Valley and down the rose tinted Walker Arm to the hanging Northwest Passage Couloir . A 1000m of creamy powder in Crosshairs was a great end to day as we skied back to camp in the dreaded moraines.

I woke up to what felt like groundhog day, still in the middle of the moraine nightmare. We climbed a 50 m high spur double carrying and dropped down onto a small glacier. After a short section of easy travel we encountered more peppered terrain, causing frustration to build with sleds overturning, sleds overtaking, skins falling off due to the cold, and general moraine warfare. Finally we encountered a vein of snow that lead us down the last kilometre to the edge of the Walker Arm where we celebrated the end of the trip's physical difficulties with another big meal. Back on easy flat sea ice we hauled for a couple hours across to the Walker Citadel with the sun beaming down the fiord behind us.



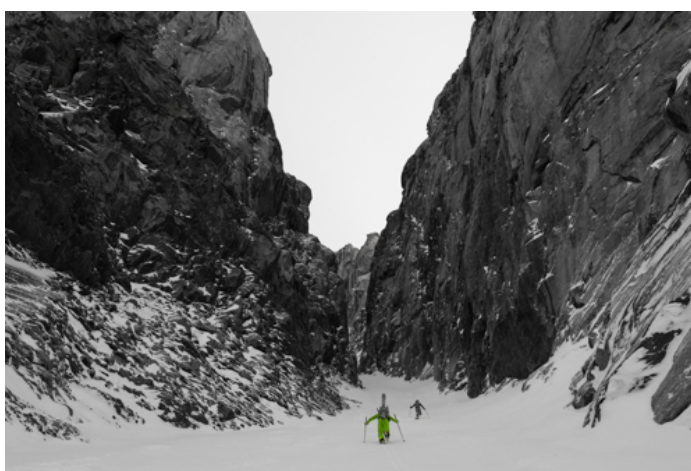
Camp 6 Under the Walker Citadel

Now we were in the established zone with all the classics it was possible to relax more and it was easier to plan the days according to the time we wanted to ski. Simply knowing the height of the lines accurately gave us a huge advantage in planning our days. Marcus and myself start off by skiing Debris Couloir which is the left branch of the converging couloirs on the North Side of Walker Citadel. The other branch has a large hanging serac barring the way that drops all the ice debris onto the fiord. At the 900 m mark there is a 50-75 m of rock barring access to the plateau and we skied from the cul-de-sac. We had agreed before the trip that engaging in cold mixed climbing was not going to be our trip philosophy when there are a plethora of unbroken lines. Boot deep blower pow provided very sensual turns and we skied effortlessly down the first 500 m. Below this the snow turned to firmer chalk but it was still fun flowy skiing.

Our base camp was only 200 m away and as we rounded a spur we saw that Ilko and John had arrived bringing Tom who was the 4th member of the team. We hadn't seen a soul for 3 weeks with the exception of 2 birds and a seal, so it's was bit surreal having the influx of visitors. Ilko knelt on the ice and set about his lunch, a frozen Arctic Char that he caught on a previous fishing trip. We all sampled some, relishing the chance to eat real food. The previous 3 days sled hauling and load carrying through the moraines was a turning point for me in terms of weight maintenance and calorie balance. Even though it was getting warmer every day I had started waking up at 3 am slightly cold due to low blood sugar and unable to sleep with hunger pains. Fortunately our diet had been supplemented with High5 sport nutrition that had enabled a massive daily calorie intake. Marcus had previous polar experience and was ahead of us from the start with a disciplined approach to fat intake so I quickly followed suit, adding tablespoons of butter to my hot water and swigging straight from the olive oil bottle, albeit once it was defrosted in a pan of hot water! Another treat was attacking the frozen Nutella with an ice axe. It was just a matter of eating at all possible moments.

Ilko and John headed off to Sam Ford Fiord for an overnight Caribou hunting trip and we decided to spend the afternoon skiing the 600 m Broken Dreams couloir. It terminates in the notch on the Walker Citadel where the Walker Arm curves round and heads inland. The sun comes onto the line in the evening and it was our first time skiing in the sun. Up till then we didn't have the luxury to hit the lines for optimal light and often arrived at the summit plateau late evening after finding the line 1.5 times higher than the map indicated. However we did get to savour a lot of the near religious moments of sundown from the tops. In Broken Dreams we found the wind has scoured the new snow but the notch has an amazing view to the line of Northwest Passage which looks insanely steep as it hangs ominously over the Walker Arm. We started off down the couloir as the sun set fire to the massive west wall of the Walker Citadel.

The next day Ilko and John returned from their hunting trip empty handed but with tales of an all-time caribou that was too big for them to take on. Michelle was preparing to leave with the hunters and we decided to hop a ride 10 km down fiord to Polar Star Couloir on the Beluga Spire – possibly the most hyped couloir in the world. I got a good view as we approached on snow machine and its every bit as stunning in reality as the photos I have looked at over the years.



In the Guts of Polar Star Couloir On the Beluga Spire

The boot packing went quickly until near the top where we encountered a thin strip of snow with glacial ice either side. We continued up but the snow thinned down to 3 inches over death ice,

good enough for one skier to pass but not the 3 of us. We downclimbed a little until 10 inches of snow allowed us to transition to our skis. Without harnesses or ice screws there was no way to anchor oneself to the mountain and it was down to a balancing act. Even then my upper edge sat on the boiler plate ice and it was good to get going after the nervy transitional stress position. The snow below was powdery and some amazing turns with the odd face shot took us down fast. All too quickly we have skied what Andrew McLean dubbed the 'best couloir in the world'.

That evening an Arctic fox came to visit our base camp and snaffled up some morsels where Ilko had been eating his Char. Normally foxes follow the bears and eat the leftovers and with this reminder we increase our vigilance.



Our Visitor at Camp 6

The next day we hit a 1450 m South facing line we had been spying for a couple of days. I woke up feeling nauseous with stomach cramps, suspecting the dehydrated meals had sucked too much water out of my guts. We skated over the fiord at sunrise and quickly discovered that the south faces were roasting. It was the first day without neoprene overboots and unused to the heat I stripped down to my base layers. Sweat was pouring down my face into my eyes. After being in the freezer for weeks it was a strange sensation to be overheating. As I top out all I can think of is drinking litres of water and sleeping so I leave the guys to hang out in the sun and start down the line. The velvet corn snow provides smooth silky skiing and 5 minutes later I'm at the fiord. I picked up my water bottle and drained it, then proceed to down the contents of my thermos. Back at camp I slept for the rest of the afternoon.

Our sights now moved back to the Walker Citadel and a South facing line that Marcus had previously discovered. It seemed so unlikely that any continuous line of snow could penetrate this gigantic rock bastion. We skated 5 kms around the East face and another 1450 m torture session landed us on the summit plateau. Not many people have stood up here and we enjoyed the evening light from this commanding position with stunning 360° views while eating humus and bagels. Sitting with our legs dangling over the edge of these 1450 m big walls was a trip in itself. We eventually tore ourselves away from this special place and reluctantly strip off some layers for the skiing. The line starts off with some technical turns on wind sculpted snow before the couloir deepens and widens into a enormous amphitheatre with views to the Stump Spire. While we skied Marcus took photos from the plateau. We regrouped 500 m from the bottom and I started to ski out the line as fast as I can when a fist sized rock comes over my head missing me by 30 cm. The guys had been screaming at me once they saw it ricochet off the wall towards me but the noise of my edges on the firm snow masked their cries. With the classic line called 'Broken Dreams' on one side of the Citadel, an apt name for the line might be 'Wet Dreams', although Marcus had coined it 'Citadel's Secret'. We know of no other ski descents of this line.



Ross Hewitt is the Tiny Dot Skiing the South Couloir of Walker Citadel

That night we were visited by a couple of Inuits who were en route to hunt and came to let us know they had seen a polar bear a few kms down fiord. We had seen tracks throughout the trip, often a mother with one or two cubs but we had never seen our potential hunters. For the next hour Marcus grid searched the area through his rifle's scope while I made sure my weapon and rounds were good to go.

Next up was the 1200 m Northwest Passage that was a 10 km skate up fiord. The meaty upper pitches of the line hang over the Walker Arm and it sits hemmed in underneath a huge wall. After this latest torturous bootpack we hung out on the plateau soaking up the warmth like lizards and entertain ourselves with some extreme boulder trundling, trying to get something all the way to the fiord. Once again we were lucky with fantastic boot deep powder in the couloir which took the edge of the 50 degree turns. Lower down the line we hit the sun and it was possible to open up the turns and freeride down to the fiord. We all agreed about the quality of the skiing and situations of this line over another big meal at base camp.

Our options from our current base camp were now limited so the next day we moved out and hauled to the bay on the NE corner of the Walker Citadel. Leaving our kit there we went to the NW Couloir right of the Stump Spire. From the summit of the Citadel we had looked down on this couloir and guessed it topped out at 1000 m. Initially the line took a ribbon of snow underneath a sea of slabs helpfully avoiding any further undesirable moraine warfare. We earned a 100 m of bonus turns finding the col to be 1100 m with superb situations opposite Citadel's Secret and the vast East Face.



Marcus Skiing on Stump Spire with Our Line on Citadel Above Left

The lower half of the run was bathed in milky evening sunshine and we paused for a moment taking it all in before following the ribbon back to the ice. After we skated to our sleds and had another big meal, we psyched up for the sled hauling to Sam Ford Fiord, eventually setting off about 9 pm and being treated to moonrise between the Beluga Spire and the Polar Sun Spire. Here we encountered a lead in the ice running the width of the fiord, the first sign of breakup and a reminder that the trip was coming to an end. At midnight we were under the cross on Great Cross Peak, a natural mark that has served as a landmark to the Inuit for generations. We brewed up and ate some snacks before continuing onwards across Sam Ford Fiord in order to get a camp location in the sun that served both sides of the fiord. The polar frost had descended and it was cold and damp but by 2 am it had lifted and the temperature had risen slightly even though sunrise was still a couple of hours away. At 3 am I crawled into my bed glad to be lying down and quickly past out.

This was our 7th and final base camp of the expedition that thankfully put an end to any sled hauling. Over the remaining days we skied 6 classic routes on Sam Ford Wall and one 450 m ramp situated between AC Cobra and Pinto which provided access to a large ledge system with fantastic views and quality skiing down the couloir. It is hard to know if that was another first descent. One afternoon found us hanging out on top of one of the big walls on Ford Wall. We soon found entertainment trundling rocks. The fall line took rocks straight into the gully system that acted as an amplifier as our rock exploded on impact, 9.5 seconds later. We would burst into fits of giggles and do it again and again.

The team also repeated Inquisition on Great Cross Peak and kited down to the 1500 m buttress to the North of Great Cross and skied a fantastic spiralling east facing line from a step at 1000 m. Near the bottom of the couloir we found a table top rock perch and sat and shared the last of our day food. The bonus was finding the wind was now up fiord which enabled us to kite home at 30 mph saving us 750 very precious calories.



A 1000 m East Facing Line to the North of Great Cross Peak

After 20220 m of climbing and skiing behind us, our rationed meals dwindling fast and signs of the break up starting we made the call to our Inuit friends to come pick us up. Late the following afternoon Ilko appeared with his other son Michael. We packed up our tents quickly knowing it would be a really long day for our drivers by the time they got back to Clyde by the early hours. A few kms down fiord we started to encounter leads in the ice that the snow machine couldn't cross. On one occasion we used pushed a floe towards the upper fiord ice, drove the machine onto the floe, then pushed it towards the lower fiord ice and drove the machine off. On another occasion the Inuit demonstrated their ice craft by chiselling away blocks of ice with a steel spike to allow the machine to pass onto the ice attached to the walls and get round the lead. The komatiks were long enough to manually push across the leads. The final stretches across the land were now often bare rock and heather. As we crested the col into Ellington Fiord, one of the snow machines flipped and we rushed to right it and free the driver who we found laughing at the incident. The downhill from the col saw the heavier komatik trying to over take and jack knife the snow machine and we all stood at the back of the komatik ready to jump off should it all go wrong. Our driver had no choice to gun it and it was terrifying knowing a large bump could be lurking anywhere in the flat light. After crossing Ellington Fiord we arrived at the half way hunter's hut for a welcome break from the bone rattling ride. Here we met a hunter with his dog train who had spent 8 days travelling down from Pond Inlet to Clyde River solo. A few hours later we slid into Clyde River and quickly offloaded the komatiks at our shack on the beach where the adventure had started a 35 days before. Marcus and myself had spent 30 days on the ice. The guys were eager to get to their beds after 16 hours of driving but were back early the next morning for a farewell coffee and bacon rolls.

This marked the end of the an all time ski trip for me which wouldn't have been possible without the help of all the sponsors and people who contributed to the success of the trip and who I can't thank enough. The leads in the ice experienced on the journey out from Sam Ford Fiord meant we couldn't have stayed any later than the 3rd week of May. It was a solid reminder that the climate is changing quickly. A decade ago travel by snow machine would have still been possible a month later towards the end of the June.

Ross Hewitt
September 2014

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