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The 1997 Scottish Torssuqaton Spires Expedition

final report

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BRITISH MOUNTAINEERING COUNCIL
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THE SPORTS COUNCIL

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REPORT PRODUCED BY PETE BENSON
24 NOVEMBER 1997

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NEVISPORT TERRA NOVA EQUIPMENT

1 PRE-AMBLE

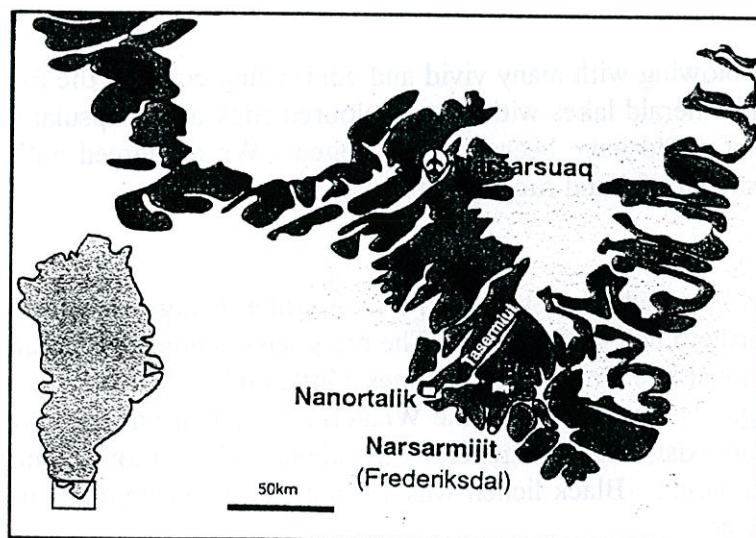
During July and August 1997, four adventurous climbers from the UK travelled to the Cape Farewell region of Southern Greenland in search of virgin rock, seals and blackfly; this is their story....

2 INTRODUCTION

First visited by climbers in 1996, the Torssuqatoq Spires lie just south east of the well-developed Tasermiut Fjord in Southern Greenland. The only exploration of this area has been by a Leeds-based team who concentrated on making first ascents of the summits in the region. On their return, they reported the vast potential for big new routes particularly on the south faces of Maujit Qaqarssuasia (1560m) and Agdlerussakasit (1763m)—the highest peak in the region. In response to this challenge, the 1997 expedition was brought together to exploit the unclimbed rock in this remote and rugged part of the world.

The Cape Farewell region is a place of polarities. Just south of the main ice cap, at the same latitude as the Shetland Islands a lush and *green* landscape is to be found with surprisingly moderate temperatures.

Due to the activity in the Tasermiut Fjord there are plenty of expedition reports available to obtain logistical information on the area. The Lonely Planet Guide to Greenland, Iceland and the Faroe Islands is particularly useful for travelling and general background information.



Map 1. South Greenland

3 TRAVEL

Although not a great distance from the UK, Greenland is fairly difficult and expensive to get to. As with the 1996 team we selected *Mountain and Wildlife Adventures of Ambleside* to arrange our travel. There were two options available: via Iceland (expensive) or direct from Copenhagen (prohibitive). We chose the former as it was cheaper and allowed some time to explore Iceland. From Reykjavik City airport, Iceland Air flew us to Narsarsuaq – the main international airport of Greenland. After an overnight stay and two scheduled helicopter flights, we arrived in Nanortalik where Henriette, (the tourism officer) had arranged for us to stay in the youth hostel. From Nanortalik a small charter boat took us on the three-hour

journey to the head of the Narssap Sarqa Fjord - our home and base camp for the next three weeks.

4 BASE CAMP

At the head of the Narssap Sarqa fjord there are numerous excellent - if exposed campsites, but like the '96 trip we made repairs to a dilapidated hut that had been abandoned close to the shore. Although the windows and one third of the roof were missing, these were quickly patched by means of a large tarpaulin, which we had taken with us for this use. Inside the hut there were 2 useable bunks and tables. Once repaired the hut was totally waterproof. It had been our intention to camp beside the hut, and use it for cooking and storage. However, our main tent was destroyed by strong winds during the first night; we retreated and slept in the hut, which was perfectly adequate for this purpose. The locals from Narsarmijit occasionally used the area around base camp for picnics.

5 ENVIRONMENT

5.1 Terrain

Access around the area was fairly easy-going underfoot considering that there are not any paths. Scrub willow was not a great problem and the boulder fields were not too horrific; only the active moraines were loose. Glacier travel in general was straightforward, but some of the approaches deteriorated towards the end of the trip exposing large crevasses. Of note, the glacier below Navianarpoq provided some interesting route finding around deep crevasses and over thin snow bridges; it was deemed to be quite dangerous. Some of the snow slopes were also getting a bit icy towards the end of the trip due to the excellent sunny weather that we experienced.

The scenery was completely mind-blowing with many vivid and contrasting colours: the frozen white of the icebergs, sapphire and emerald lakes with flame coloured rock all encapsulated in an atmosphere so clear and crisp it could have been liquid nitrogen. We all agreed without doubt that the vistas were the most beautiful and rugged we had ever witnessed.

5.2 Rock

The rock is of two main types: banded Gneisses - Prow, Aiguille Rouge, and Maujit Qaqarssuasia -, which form the northern half of the range. The red gneiss is generally excellent while the white quartzite bands are just like Gogarth; sometimes a little bit brittle.

Navianarpoq, Blizzard Ridge, Magic Arrow Group and the WhaleBack Peak are made of good grey granite. Areas of poor rock do exist, but were generally avoidable. Vegetation is limited, with most of the cracks of a clean nature. Black lichen was a significant problem on some of the routes and was suicidal when wet.

5.3 Wildlife

There seems to be very little wildlife about on the land: we saw one arctic fox and a few hare droppings. Snowbuntings, ravens, Ptarmigan, the odd gull and a single bird of prey occupied the air whilst in the sea a couple of whales visited the fjord. To make up for this lack of wildlife there is an abundance of insects, most notably a whole squadron of black flies. Mercifully they did not bite, however they did seem to enjoy flights into the inner reaches of your mouth or any other orifice that you were unfortunate to leave open. To combat this aerial assault, headnets were essential and seemed to offer much better protection than insect repellent, which did not seem to bother them. However, Kenton did get some encouraging results when he sprayed 50% DEET *directly* onto the wee radges.

5.4 Weather

The weather consisted of many extremes, ranging from penetrating cold too swelteringly heat. We experienced a 12-day stretch of high pressure, which brought stability and relatively mild temperatures. At the start and the end of the trip a super-chilled wind from the arctic ensured that we were climbing in near sub-zero temperatures.

Fogbanks sometimes lingered at sea level ensuring a good chill at base-camp, whilst at the same time it was sunny and warm higher up. We only experienced one storm when a severe low passed through on the first night. This provided copious quantities of rain accompanied by a howling gale that flattened our base-camp tent. In addition there were a few other periods of bad weather but these only lasted for about 12 hours however they did arrive without much warning and caught both teams unawares on separate descents. On balance, the weather was very good and considerably better than might be experienced at the same time of year in the Alps. From chatting to the locals on our return to Nanortalik, it would appear that it was not freak weather and in most summers sunny settled weather could be expected.

Some expeditions departing by boat from Nanortalik have experienced problems with the field ice blocking the harbour. The ice which is formed by glaciers (not frozen sea) only cleared from Nanortalik on August 15, ten days before we arrived.

(See the Expedition Diary for a summary of the weather).

5.5 Climbing

We operated from an Advanced Base Camp (ABC) at the end of the blue lake and a good bivi site by a large boulder at the col below Maujit Qaqarssuasia, with other forays and valley cragging from BC. Our plan was to put up free climbs on the biggest and best bits of rock that we could find and to this end we were very successful. We usually kept to a more traditional approach of finding natural descent routes rather than rapping the line of ascent, which sometimes meant carrying more gear, but lead to more satisfying mountain days out. In any case, the majority of the descents were relatively straightforward. The odd sections of aid were resorted to on a couple of routes due to a lack of holds and wetness and were simply achieved with a few nuts and friends. The notable exception was the full aid ascent of *The Totem* by Pete and Andy, which involved the placing of a few pegs. In general, free climbing of the highest quality was the order-of-the-day.

6 EQUIPMENT

6.1 Climbing Hardware

It seemed prudent to take out very large racks in case of any protracted aiding activities, and/or as replacements for lost/discarded equipment. For the most we climbed with a standard Alpine rock rack consisting of: two sets of rocks (1-10); 8 cams (friend 0-camalot 3); 12 quickdraws; a few slings, and lots of tape for retreating and setting up rappel points. Larger cams were used and these are indicated in the individual descriptions. Pegs proved superfluous. We climbed on two 60m x 8.5mm ropes and these proved to be extremely useful for the numerous abseil descents.

Leather Boots and strap on crampons were excellent, however Al seemed to manage with fell running shoes and step-in crampons (kids - don't try that at home), although he did end up with wet feet for most of the time but being a hardy vegan it was not a problem. Fairly essential was an ice tool, we all carried 'North Wall Hammers', which also had the advantage

of offering us the ability to place pegs (although not extensively used for this purpose). Standard summer clothing was worn on most routes although on a couple of baltic forays this was ramped up to full Scottish Winter rations. Waterproofs were carried at all times.

6.2 Tents & Stoves

Two 2-man mountain tents were pitched at ABC and the four-man tent was used whilst travelling. Gas stoves were used up at ABC (4 kg gas was plenty) and down at base-camp we used an MSR Whisper-light running on local Kerosene. To ensure that it did not get too sootied during the priming stage, we pre-heated using a gas stove. This ensured that it ran pretty well for the whole trip.

7 FREIGHTING

We decided to freight some of our equipment directly to Nanortalik to minimise excess baggage costs on the flights (strictly limited to 20kg on all flights). The sea freighting service was organised by a Danish company called Leman who conveniently have a Bradford Office. Sea freight is charged by volume and for the three barrels that were sent (0.3m³), we were charged £205 one way. The barrels were available on our arrival in Nanortalik at the Arctic Lines shipping office by the quay.

8 FOOD

Nanortalik (and most other large towns in Greenland) have well-stocked reasonably priced supermarkets. We bought almost all our food requirements in Nanortalik where the prices are similar to those in the UK. Fresh bread can be bought; ask for some plastic bags to maintain freshness. The supermarket does not accept VISA, but there is a cash machine in the entrance to the post office/bank across the road. If freighting equipment, and looking to fill some space with some goodies, we suggest: chocky bars, curry paste, packet meals, Marmite, custard mixes, cheesecake mixes and batteries for your comfort.

9 ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Where it was reasonably practical, the expedition adhered to the environmental guidelines set by the BMC. Latrines were sited at both BC and ABC which were filled in on our departure. Rubbish was bagged and disposed of in Nanortalik. This area has so far been developed in a clean adventure style and it is hoped this trend will continue. The only fixed gear left in place were abseil anchors on natural descent lines, generally at 60m intervals. Please leave your bolt kit at home and keep the place clean. Overall, care was taken to minimise our impact on this very unspoilt area.

2. **Blizzard Ridge**, SW face, TD-, 400m, AB/PB. A very pleasing climb on excellent rock and line, particularly in its lower half. The central corner system is climbed for 4 pitches, V+ before traversing right to another corner system (lichen). Descent by E ridge and compulsory snow storm (4 abseils).
3. **Antipodean Delight**, Corner Crag, E25c, 300m PB/AB/KC (first three pitches), AP/KC continuation (see route 15). A delightful three pitches, the second being particularly fine up the snaking finger crack in the steep slab.
4. **Blocklands**, valley crags, E25b, 60m PB/AB. The biggest small crag about 15 minutes walk from BC. The crag is easily identified by a large undercut roof the length of the buttress.
5. **The Corner**, valley crags, HVS, 45m AB/PB. A very obvious corner 20 minutes walk up the hill from the above route. See BC map.
6. **Rampant**, Maujit Qaqarssuasia, S Face, TD/TD+, 800m, 7 hrs, AP/KC. The first foray into this large wall followed a surprisingly easy line of ramps up the centre of the face. Three devious and tricky pitches made the crucial link pitches in the upper wall. Progress halted on summit ridge just short of the top due to a fast advancing storm front. An uncomfortable descent was made down the W ridge and the N face (abseils).
7. **Tikaguta**, SW Ridge, AD, 400m, AB/PB. The '400m of near vertical rock' described by the 96 team turned out to be easy terrain abounded with terraces. Peg discovered on descent. The sea-level traverse 'Dave Lee Traverse' was thought to be considerably easier than was described by the 96 team, but was still a stiff solo with sacs in the rain.
8. ☺ **Portion Control**, The Prow, S Face, ED-, (E25C), 375m, 6hrs, AP/KC. 7 pitches of excellent quality climbing up this magnificent feature, heading for the prominent corner at the top. An easy scramble off the back and fine weather made this a fantastic route.
9. **Maujit Qaqarssuasia**, Main Summit, D-, AB/PB. A fine alpine line taking the South Couloir and ridge to the highest summit of the mountain. Descent by the line of ascent; 11 hours from BC.
10. **The Colour of Magic**, Wall of the Early Morning Light summit wall, NE face, Navianarpoq, ED2, E2/3 5c, 750m, 15hrs, AP/KC. A sought after climb on this intimidating dark face produced a serious and sustained route directly up the highest part of the wall. Summit bivi, descent by the N flank (abseils).
11. **Totem**, A1, PB/AB. A highly enjoyable aid ascent of this very dramatic pole of rock.
12. ☺ **Steel Drum Idolatry**, Wall of the early morning light RH tower, Navianarpoq, ED2, E3 5c, 600m, 14hrs, AB/PB. A tremendous route on an amazing line! Big cams very useful, Camalot 4. Descent by easy scrambling down the continuation of the access ramp to the glacier.
13. **Totty**, Maujit Qaqarssuasia, S face, ED2, E3 6a, 10hrs, 750m, AP/KC. Looking in search of a harder line, we came away satisfied. This counter-diagonal to *Rampant* attacks the upper wall via Hell Groove followed by more devilish climbing above. An unwell KC

10 EXPEDITION DIARY

DATE	EVENT	WEATHER
Fri 25 July	→ London→Keflavik, camp Reykjavik-clubbing (not seals!)	☁
Sat 26	→ Reykjavik→Narsarsuaq	☁
Sun 27	Walk ↗ ↘ above Narsarsuaq	☁
Mon 28	↖ Narsarsuaq→Quqortoq→Nanortalik, buy food, camp at hostel	☀
Tue 29	☞ Nanortalik→Narssap Sarqa fjord ≈ 3hr, set up BC	☁→☁
Wed 30	Walk ↗ ↘ Blue Lake	☁
Thur 31	BC ↗ Blue Lake set up ABC, recce Maujit Qaqarssuasias	☀→☁
Fri 1 August	AP/KC climb Magic Arrow N ridge D-, AB/PB climb Blizzard Peak SW face TD-	☀→☁
Sat 2	ABC↘ BC, p.m. AB/PB/KC, climb <i>Antipodean Delight</i> Corner Crag	☁→☀
Sun 3	AP+KC ↗ ABC ↗ col bivi, AB/PB recce Tikaguta	☀→☁
Mon 4	AP/KC recce N side Maujit Qaqarssuasias, AB/PB valley cragging, (<i>Blocklands</i> E25b, <i>Drainpipe</i> Corner HVS)	☁→☁
Tue 5	AP/KC climb <i>Rampant</i> Maujit S face TD Thr, AB/PB climb Tikaguta S ridge AD	☀→☁
Wed 6	AP/KC ↘ BC, AB/PB rest BC	☁→☀
Thur 7	AB/PB fjord crag attempt, KC/AP rest BC	☀
Fri 8	AP/KC climb <i>Portion Control</i> , The Prow, AB/PB ↗ ABC	☁→☁
Sat 9	AB/PB climb Maujit main summit first ascent AD+, AP/KC ↗ ABC	☀
Sun 10	AP/KC climb <i>The Colour of Magic</i> , The Wall of the Early Morning Light Summit Wall, ED2 (summit bivi), AB/PB climb <i>Totem</i> A1	☀→☁
Mon 11	AB/PB ↗ The Wall of the Early Morning Light RH tower, abort ↘ BC for more gear, AP/KC ↘ ABC rest	☀
Tue 12	AP/KC rest and swim, AB/PB ↗ ABC and swim in blue lake	☀ (valley fog)
Wed 13	AB/PB climb <i>Steel Drum Idolatry</i> ED2 E35C Wall of the Early Morning Light Right Hand Tower, AP/KC ↗ col bivi	☀→☁
Thur 14	AP/KC climb <i>Totty</i> , S face Maujit, AB/PB rest ABC	☁→☁
Fri 15	AP/KC ↘ ABC, AB/PB ↗ col bivi	☁→☁
Sat 16	AP/KC ↘ BC, AB/PB walk around ice lake	☁
Sun 17	AB/PB climb Agdlerussakasit (1763m) ↘ BC, AP/KC climb <i>Vegan Whale Fluid</i> , E25b Corner Crag	☉ (valley fog)
Mon 18	Rest in hut, PB beats KC at Monopoly	☁
Tue 19	AP/KC climb <i>Deathflake 2000</i> , The Prow E45c, PB/AB climb <i>Skirmish</i> The Prow L Wall HVS	☉
Wed 20	AB/PB climb <i>Finis</i> on Corner Crag HS, AP/KC rest and pack	☉
Thur 21	☞ BC→Nanortalik, stay at apartment	☁
Fri 22	↖ Nanortalik→Narsarsuaq	☉
Sat 23	→ Narsarsuaq→Reykjavik, alcohol abuse and clubbing	☉
Sun 24	☞ Reykjavik→Keflavik, camp	☉
Mon 25	→ Keflavik→London Heathrow	☉

11 THE ROUTES

All the routes listed below are claimed as first ascents **apart from Tikaguta and Agdlerussakasit**. The Magic Arrow was climbed first by the 96 Leeds team but by the SW ridge as was Navianarpoq by the N flank.

1. **Magic Arrow**, N Ridge, D-, 300m, AP/KC. Used to view Maujit Qaqarssuasias S face. An uncomfortable lichenous ascent featuring pitches of V+, subzero temperatures, hoar frost and a snowstorm at the top. Descent by abseil (line of ascent, 60m intervals).

13 APPENDIX

13.1 Balance Sheet

ITEM	EXPENDITURE (£)	INCOME (£)
Flights	3265.38	
Boat charter	570	
Freighting charges	410	
Food, gas & stores	481	
Ropes & equipment	582	
Travel Expenses	184	
Phones & misc.	112.60	
SMT grant		800
BMC grant		700
MEF grant		700
Personal contributions (4×851.25)		3404.98
	5604.98	5604.98

13.2 Contacts

CONTACT & ADDRESS	ASSISTANCE PROVIDED
Henriette Pederson Nanortalik Tourist Service Box 43, 3992 Nanortalik GREENLAND Tel/Fax: 00 299 336 33	Can sort out boat hire, check freight has arrived organises accommodation in Nanortalik: a great help!
Nielsen Travel PO Box 183 3920 Qaqortoq DK GREENLAND Tel: 00 299 38913 Fax: 00 299 38987 email: ntravel@greenet.gl	Rene & Klaus Nielsen's travel company could be useful if exploring other parts of SW Greenland. Rene used to be the tourism officer in Nanortalik.
Leman Dealburn Road Woodroyd Industrial Estate Bradford West Yorkshire BD12 0QN Tel: 01274 693231 Fax: 01274 693190	The freighting company. Allan Webster was the contact that dealt with us.
Mountain & Wildlife Adventures Compston Road Ambleside Cumbria LA22 9DJ Tel: 015394 33285 Fax: 015394 34065	This company arranged our travel from London to Nanortalik. It would be wise to make early travel plans (January) to avoid flight connection difficulties.
Steen Madsen Hylderej No 2 9560 Handsurrd Denmark	This man compiles route information about Southern Greenland, send your descriptions to him.

dictated a rightwards line to the ridge, where easier ground led to the summit and the same descent as before.

14. ☺ **Agdlerussakasit**, S Flank, AD+ AB/PB. A superb Alpine Adventure on perfect rock to a knife-edged summit ridge. First climbed by the 1974 St Andrew's University expedition, possibly by the same line. Descent by the line of ascent.
15. **Vegan Whale Fluid**, corner crag, E25c, 300m, AP/KC. The very obvious corner towards the L side of the crag. Still a bit damp despite many days of hot sunshine.
16. **Deathflake 2000**, The Prow, L hand corner, ED, E45c, 400m, AP/KC. More serious than the first route on this face, requiring steady nerves and strong arms, especially on the top corner-definitely the knarliest pitch of the trip for Al and Kenton.
17. **Skirmish**, The Prow, L face, HVS, D, 400m, AB/PB. Some tremendous climbing initially led to a disappointing loss of line and a flanking manoeuvre was made to find some amenable rock.
18. **Finis**, BC crag, HS, 300m, PB/AB. After some difficult moves to get off the ground, the rock opened out providing an extremely pleasant sun-kissed route.

12 OTHER OBJECTIVES

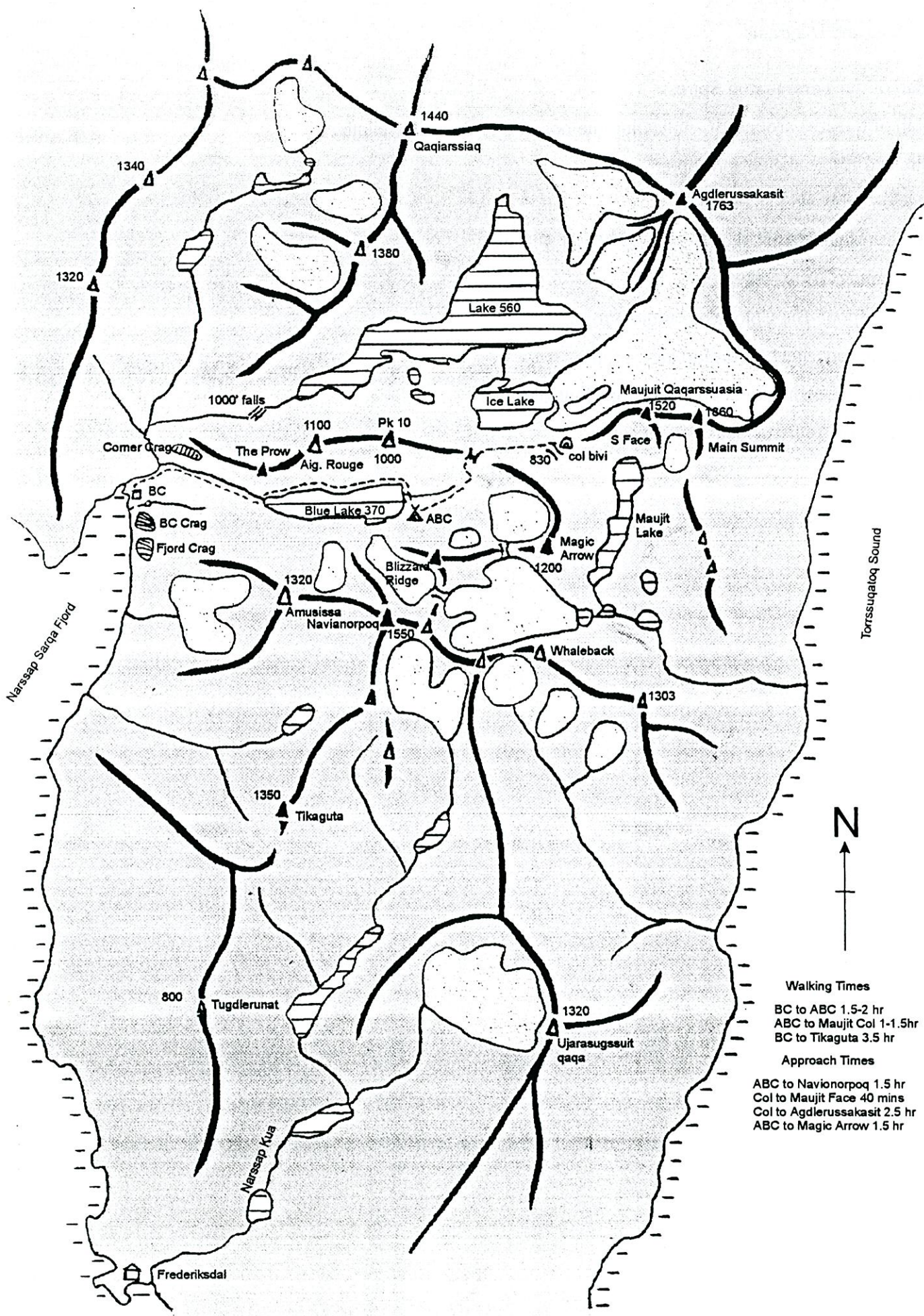
Given the limited exploration that the area has received, there is plenty of scope for many more excellent new routes. Below is a list of some possible future objectives that we would have most definitely had a bash on if there were more time:

1. Fjord Crag. This fantastic chunk of rock towers for some 500m straight above the water. An attempt was made, but aborted due to blank walls on the third pitch. The very obvious massive diagonal overhung corner would give a very hard free climb for a determined team.
2. Maujit Qaqarssuasia, N face. Viewed from the north this mountain takes on the appearance of something from the Dolomites. Plenty of scope for routes on the 4 towers; complete ascent of the W ridge would give a fine outing.
3. E face of the Magic Arrow seems to be less affected by lichen, and it looks steep and clean.
4. Lots of potential on Agdlerussakasit; the rock is very good.
5. ☺ 'The Whale Back', how it got this name I don't know: ask the Vegan! Fine walls on all sides. The SW arete is a stunning rock feature as are the slabs to the right. The face is possibly about 600m high and would probably be best approached from Torssuqatoq Sound. The nearby Ujarasugssuit Qaqa group looks good too.
6. Spires between Tikaguta and Navianarpoq have potential.

13.3 Maps and Diagrams

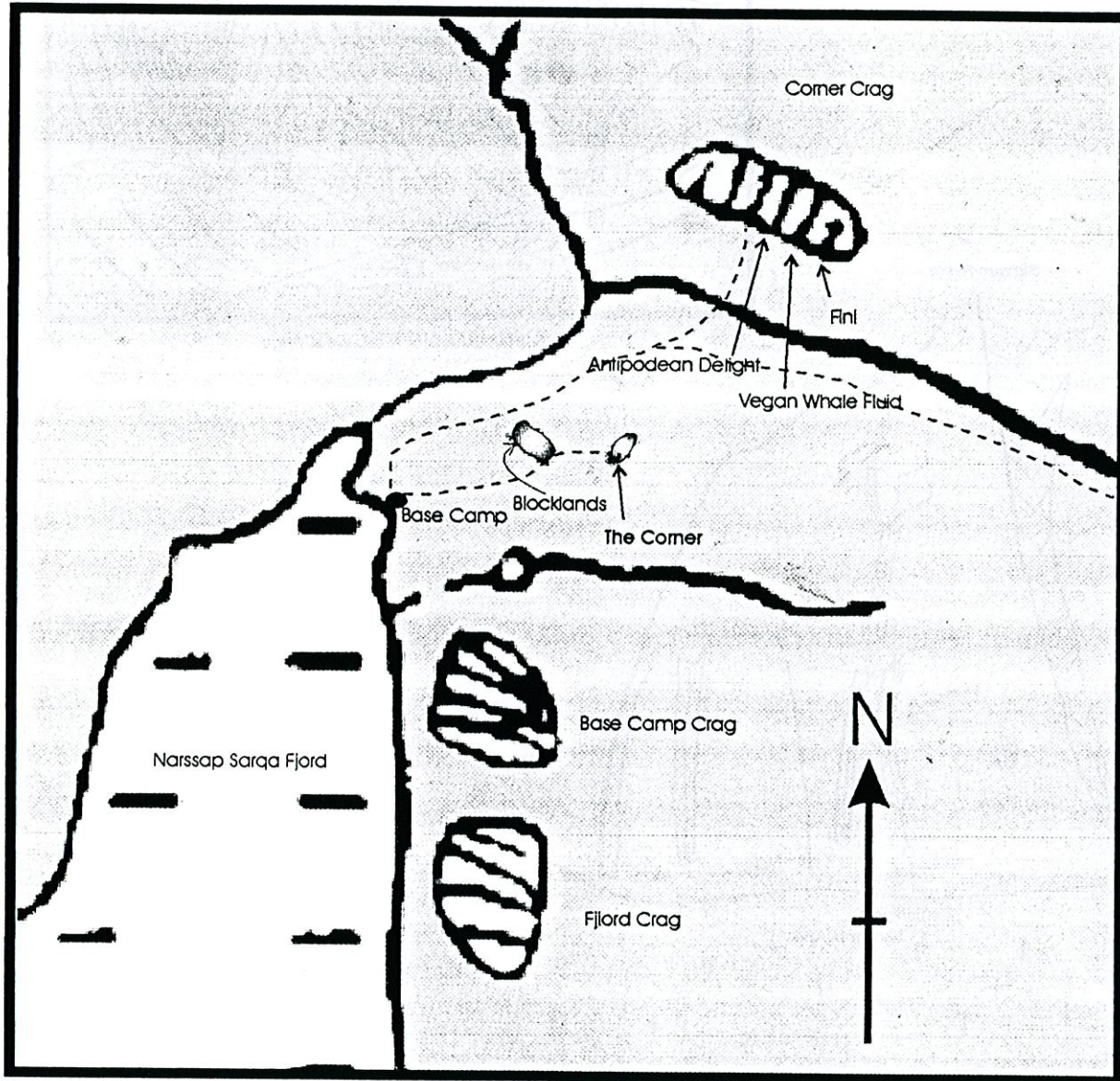
1. Map of the Torssuqatoq Spires.
2. Map of the area around BC indicating the position of the valley climbs.
3. Blizzard Ridge sketch and topo.
4. Magic Arrow sketch and topo.
5. Maujit Qaqarssuasia: sketch of the NW and S faces.
6. Rampant & Totty topos.
7. Navianarpoq: The Colour of Magic – topo.
8. Navianarpoq: Steel Drum Idolatry – topo.
9. The Prow: Deathflake 2000 & Portion Control topos.
10. Sketches of Agdlerussakasit & Tikaguta.

The Torssuqatoq Spires

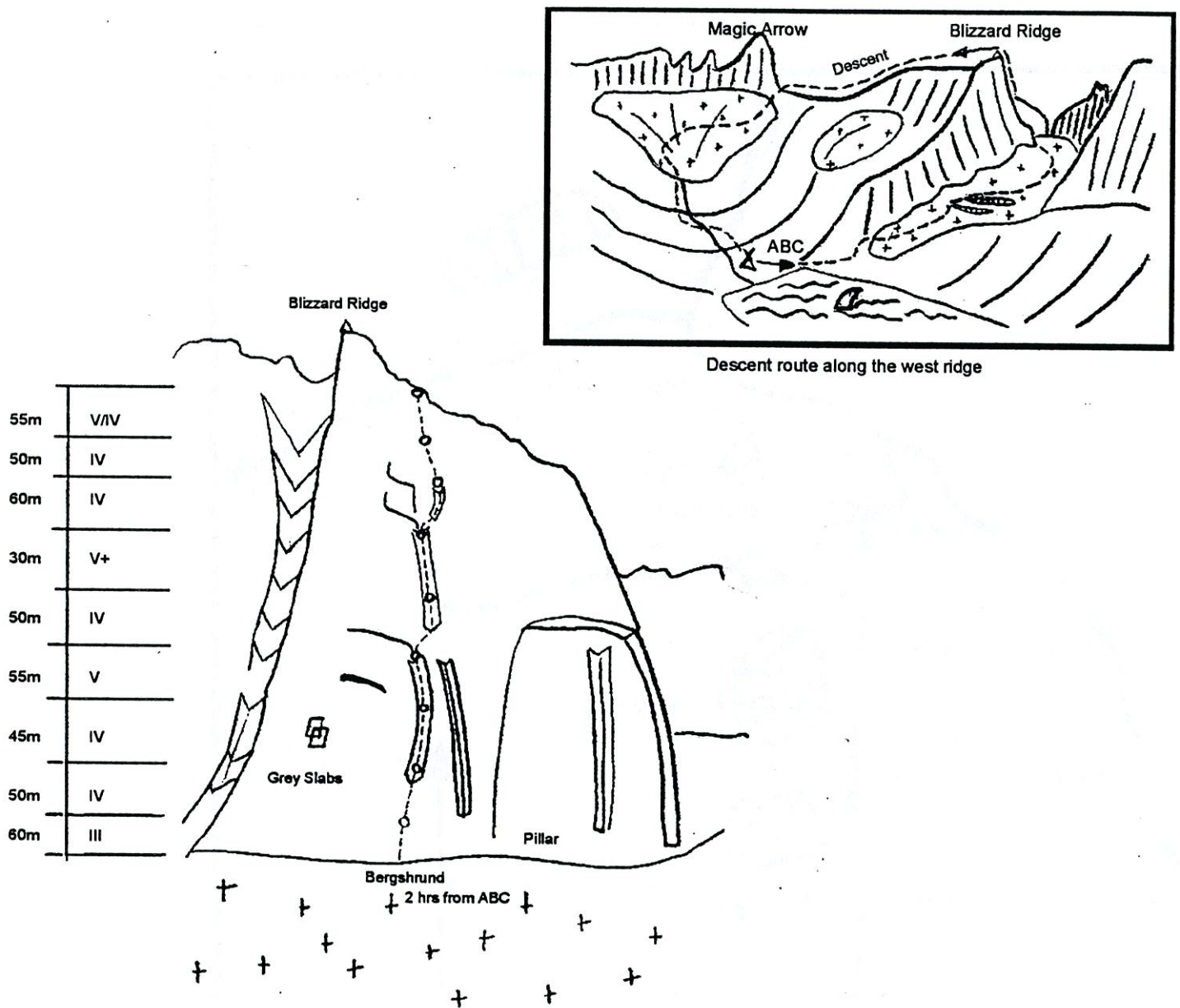


Base Camp Area

Sketch of the area around the base camp showing the location of the valley crags

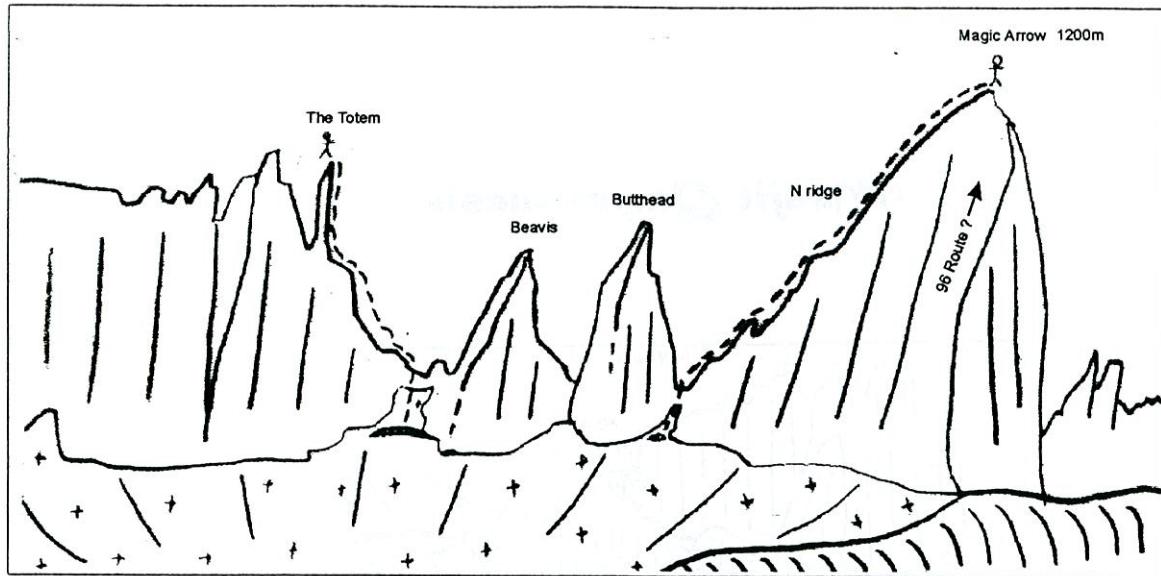


Blizzard Ridge

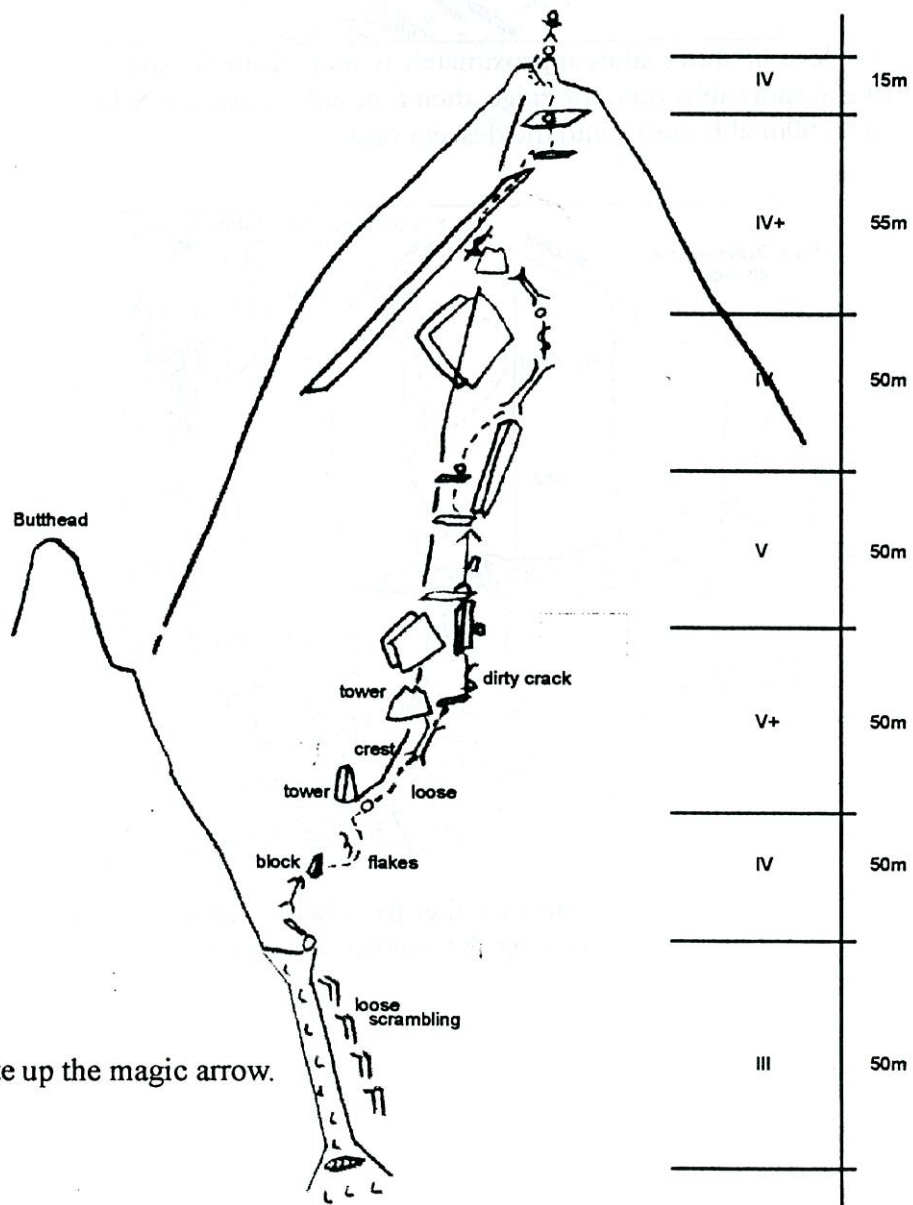


The South face of Blizzard Ridge, showing the lines of ascent and descent.

The Magic Arrow Group

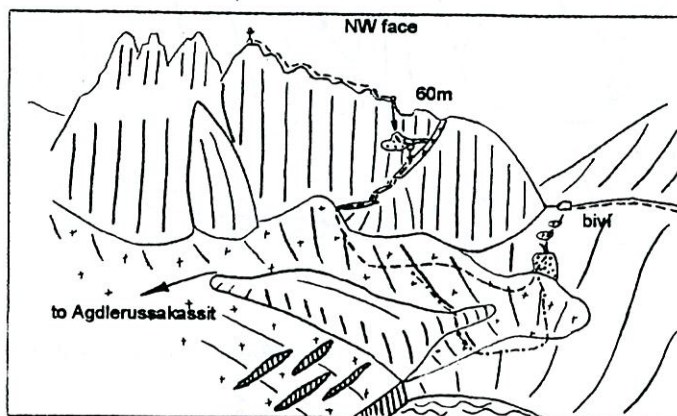


The Magic Arrow - N Ridge

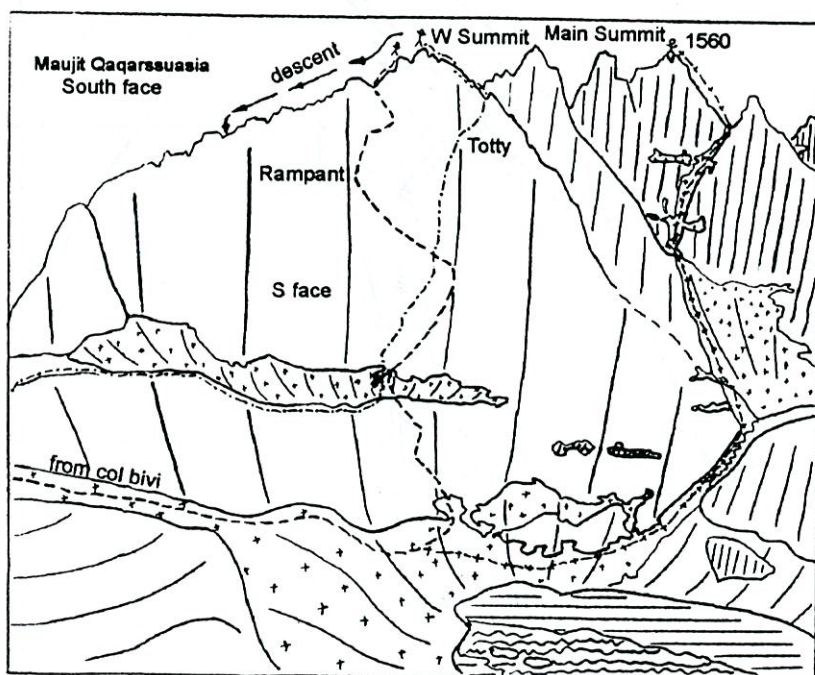


Al and Kenton's route up the magic arrow.

Maujit Qaqarssuasia

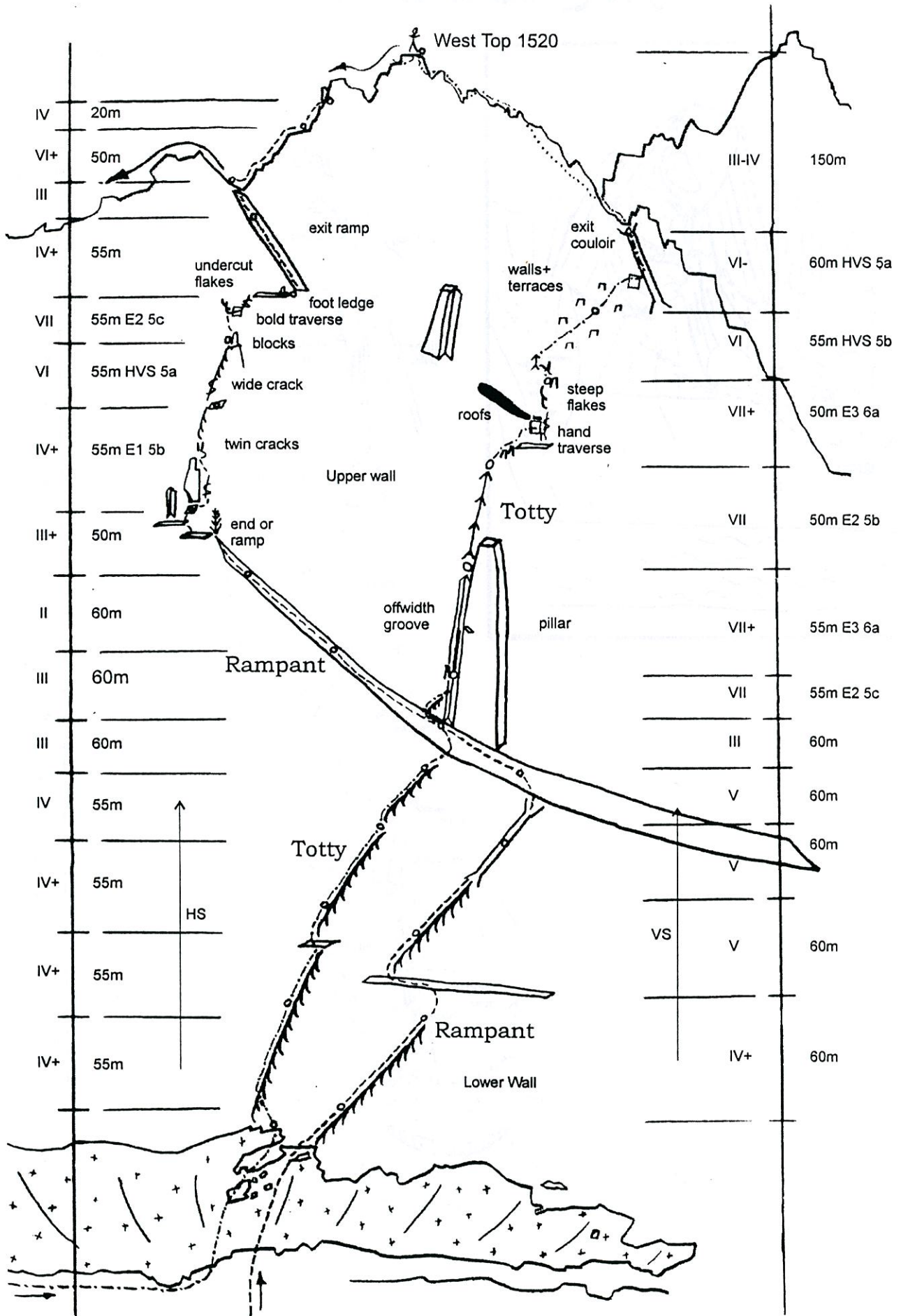


The descent above takes approximately 6 hours from the summit to the col bivi. Several short abbs onto the ridge, then four abbs down the N face to a terrace & a final 60m abb down onto the descent ramp.

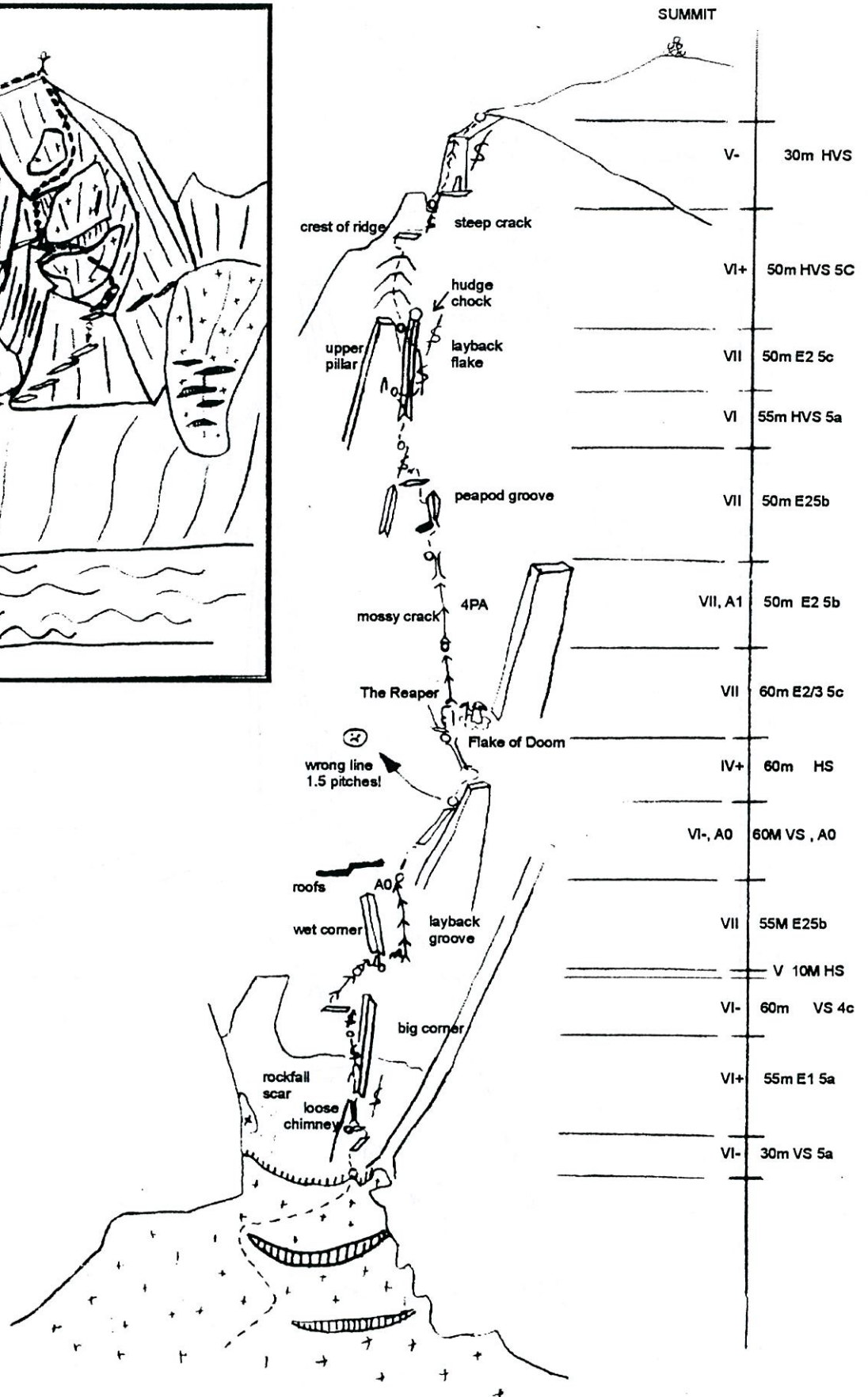
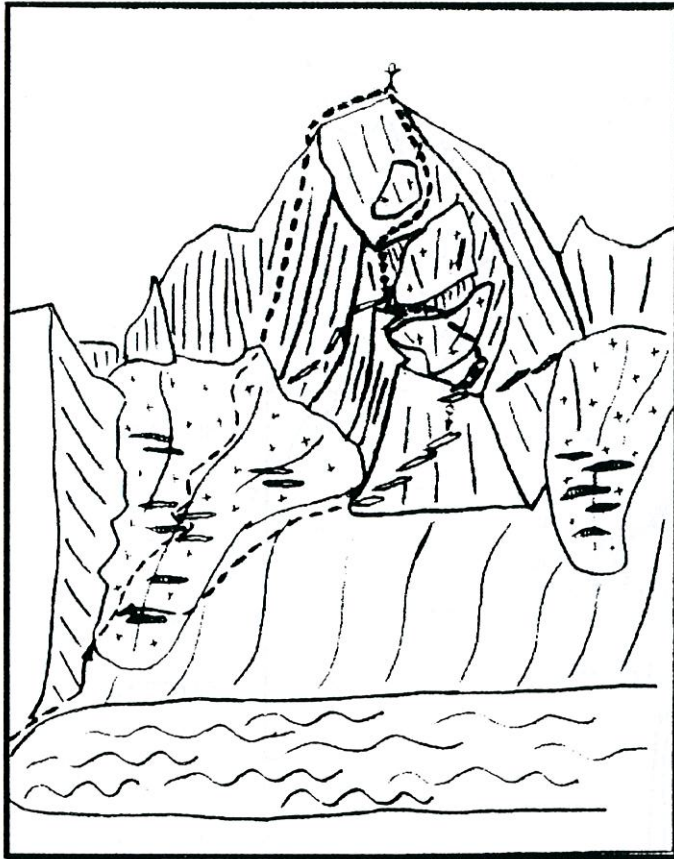


NB The face can be approached either from below (1st ascent), or by scrambling up the first tower on the W ridge & traversing below the snow terrace.

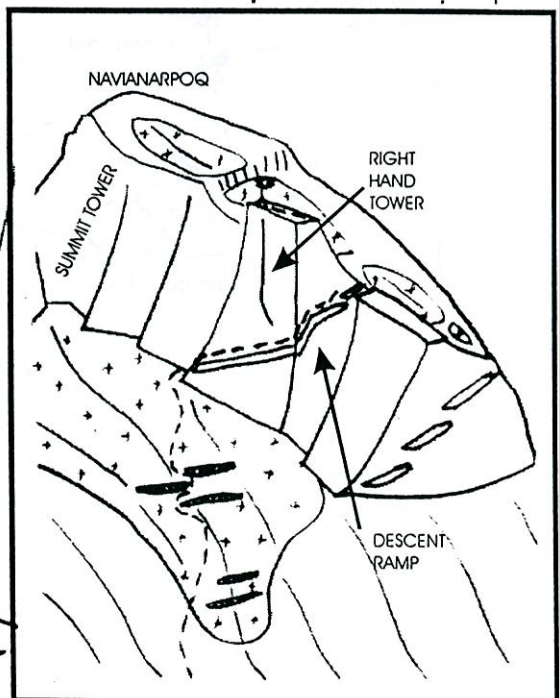
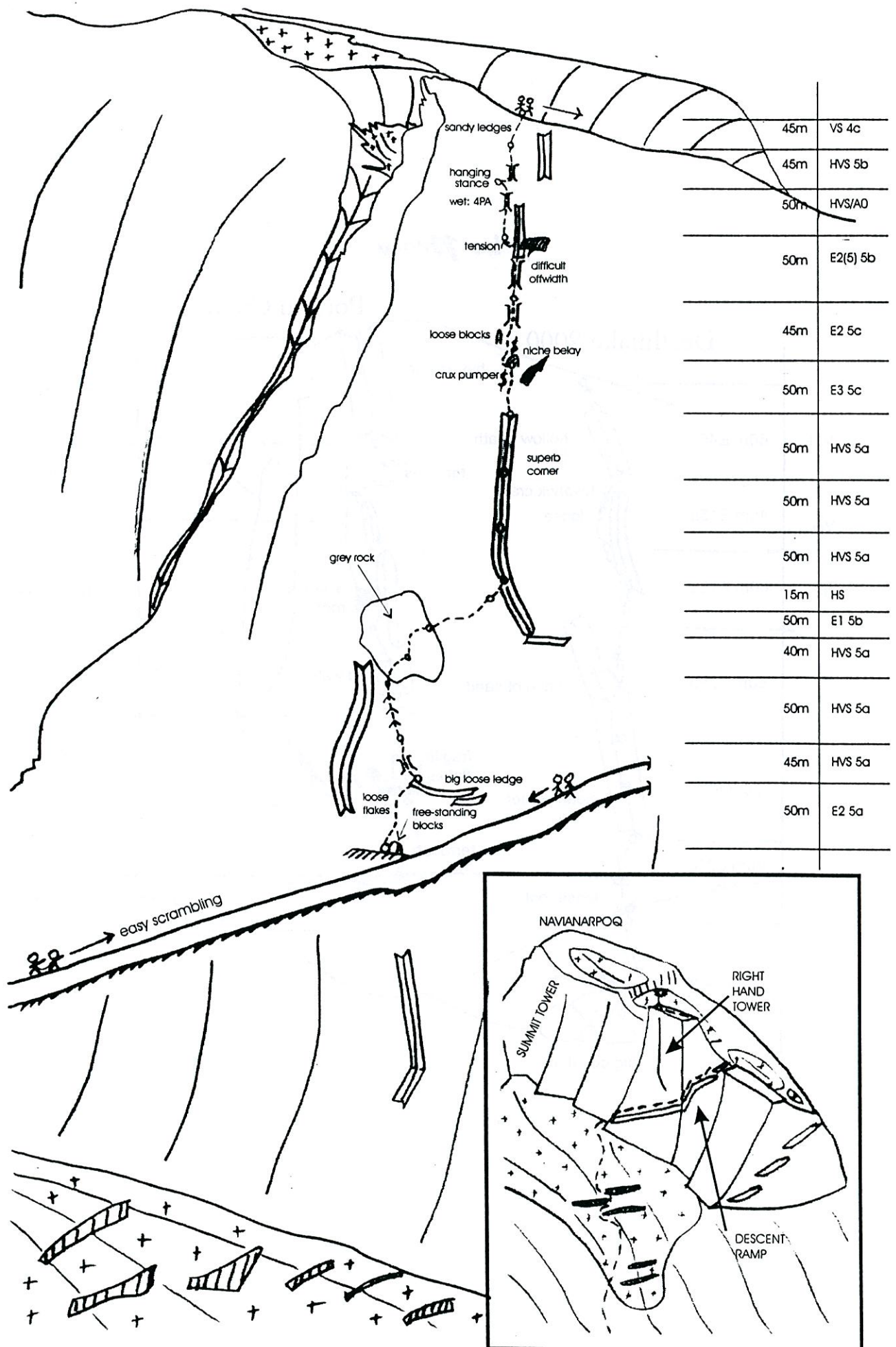
Maujit Qaqaarsuasia - S face



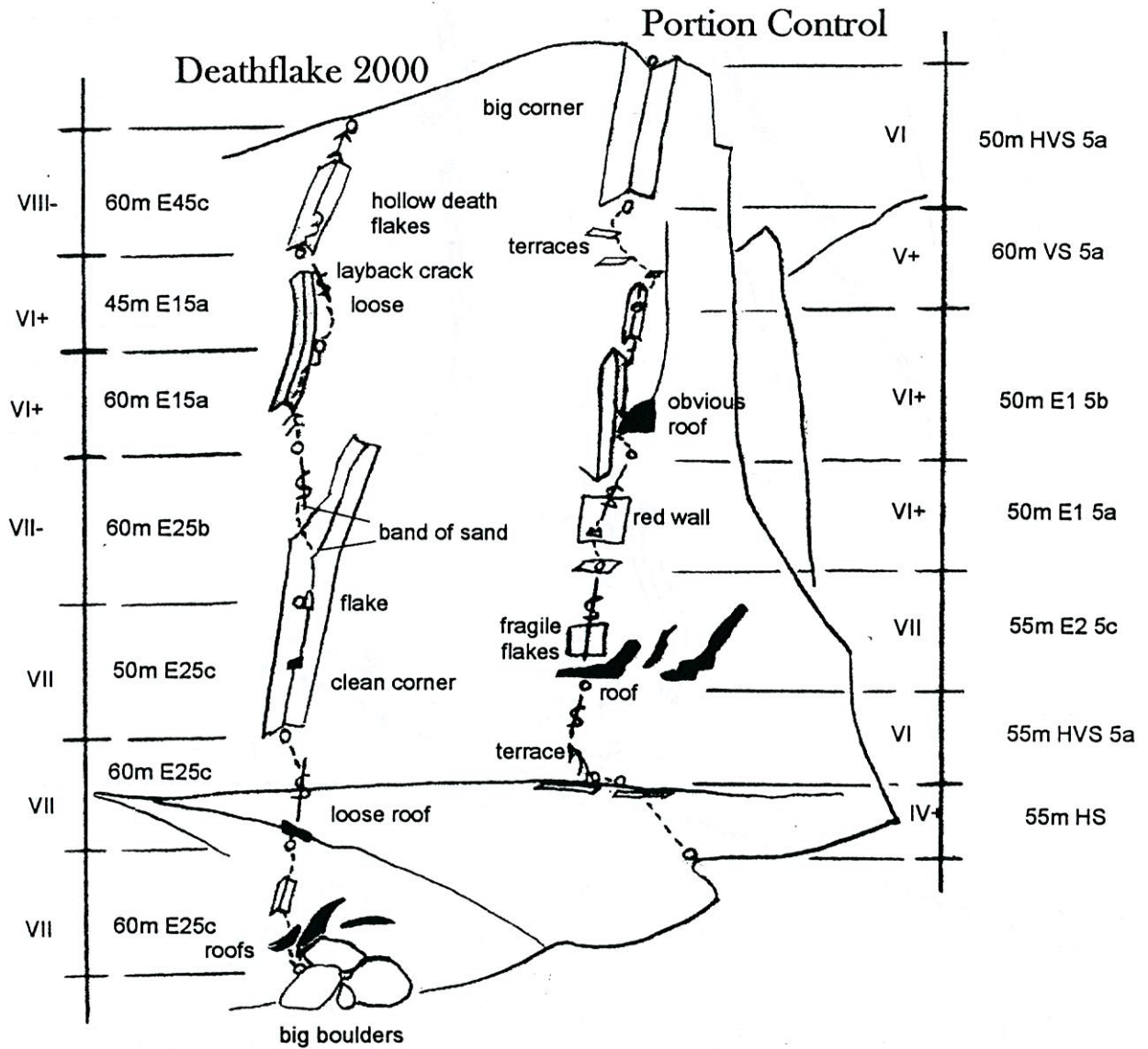
The Colour of Magic



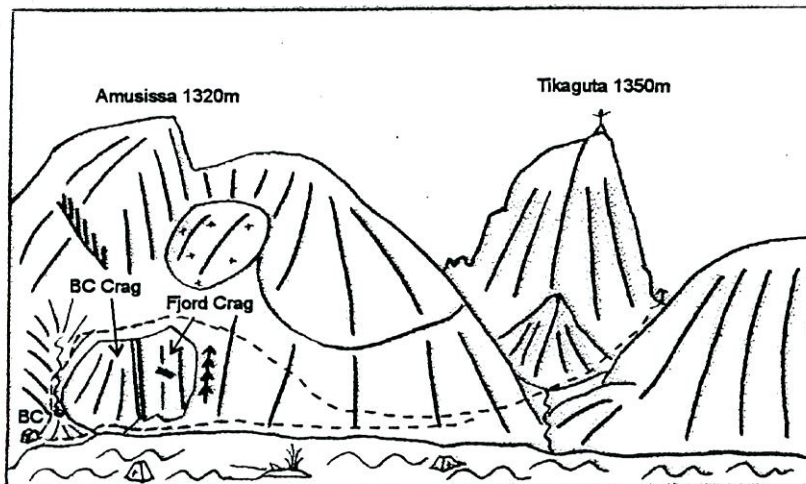
Steel Drum Idolatory



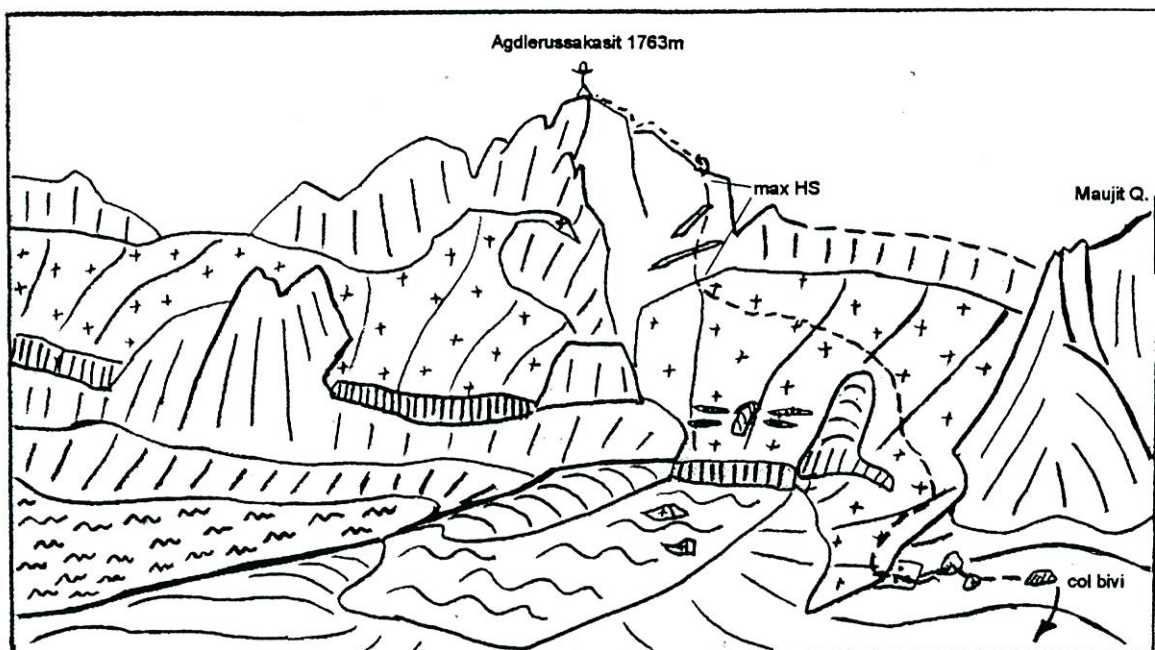
The Prow



Tikaguta & Agdlerussakasit



General approach to Tikaguta.



Sketch of Agdlerussakasit.

