

Equipment belonging to Ian Harrison and Tony Prosser, lost on Öräfajökull in 1953, recovered in July 2006

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Abstract — *Items of mountaineering and camping equipment were discovered by Eyjólfur Magnússon and Alexander Jarosch on the surface of Skaftafellsjökull, 5.5 km from the terminus on 6 July, 2006. They were identified as belonging to Ian Harrison and Tony Prosser, members of the University of Nottingham student expedition, who disappeared on Öräfajökull in August, 1953; no human remains were recovered. The following account attempts to explain the circumstances of the tragedy, describes the extensive, but unsuccessful, rescue attempt, and catalogues the items recovered. A map of the locality of the discovery is included. Produced by Matthew Roberts, it uses estimates of glacier movement to illustrate the approximate location of the final camp of the two students.*

INTRODUCTION

Following a reconnaissance in July and August 1952 by Harry Gleave and myself, the University of Nottingham student Exploration Society organized a ten-person expedition the following year to Skaftafell in southeast Iceland. The late Ragnar Stefánsson and family, of Skaftafell, provided base and logistical support. The Royal Society, the Royal Geographical Society, the University, and many private companies and individuals of the City of Nottingham provided financial and material support. The scientific objectives were developed under the guidance of the late Professor Sigurður Þórarinnsson (University of Iceland) and Mr. Vaughan Lewis (Cambridge University). The primary objective was a detailed study of the ogives, movement, and mass balance of Morsárjökull, to be extended to Skaftafellsjökull and Svínafellsjökull, if time permitted. A geological component was mapping the bedrock geology of northwestern Öräfi, including investigation of the Svínafell sedimentary strata. A further expedition in 1954, with several members of the 1953 group participating, continued the survey of Morsárjökull and extended the glaciological studies to the other two glaciers.

The glaciological results were published in the *Journal of Glaciology* (Ives and King, 1954, 1955; King and Ives, 1955, 1956). Also in 1954, Jim Exley and Malcolm Mellor made the first ascent of Skarðatindur from the site of the 1953 Ice Camp, north of Miðfellstindur.

All of these positive results were eclipsed by the disappearance of Ian Harrison and Tony Prosser on Öräfajökull between 6 and 16 August, 1953.

As expedition leader, I and Ian Harrison, deputy leader, had originally planned on an attempt to ascend Hvannadalshnúkur from the expedition's Ice Camp, situated on Vatnajökull some two kilometers north of Miðfellstindur. This was to have been a mountaineering adventure with scientific objectives: (1) to assess the 1952/1953 snow accumulation as high as possible on Öräfajökull; and (2) to collect rock specimens from any of the nunataks that proved accessible. Very much at the last minute, I reluctantly decided to withdraw from the Öräfajökull adventure and give priority to work on Morsárjökull, which had fallen behind schedule. Tony Prosser leapt at the chance to replace me as Ian's companion.

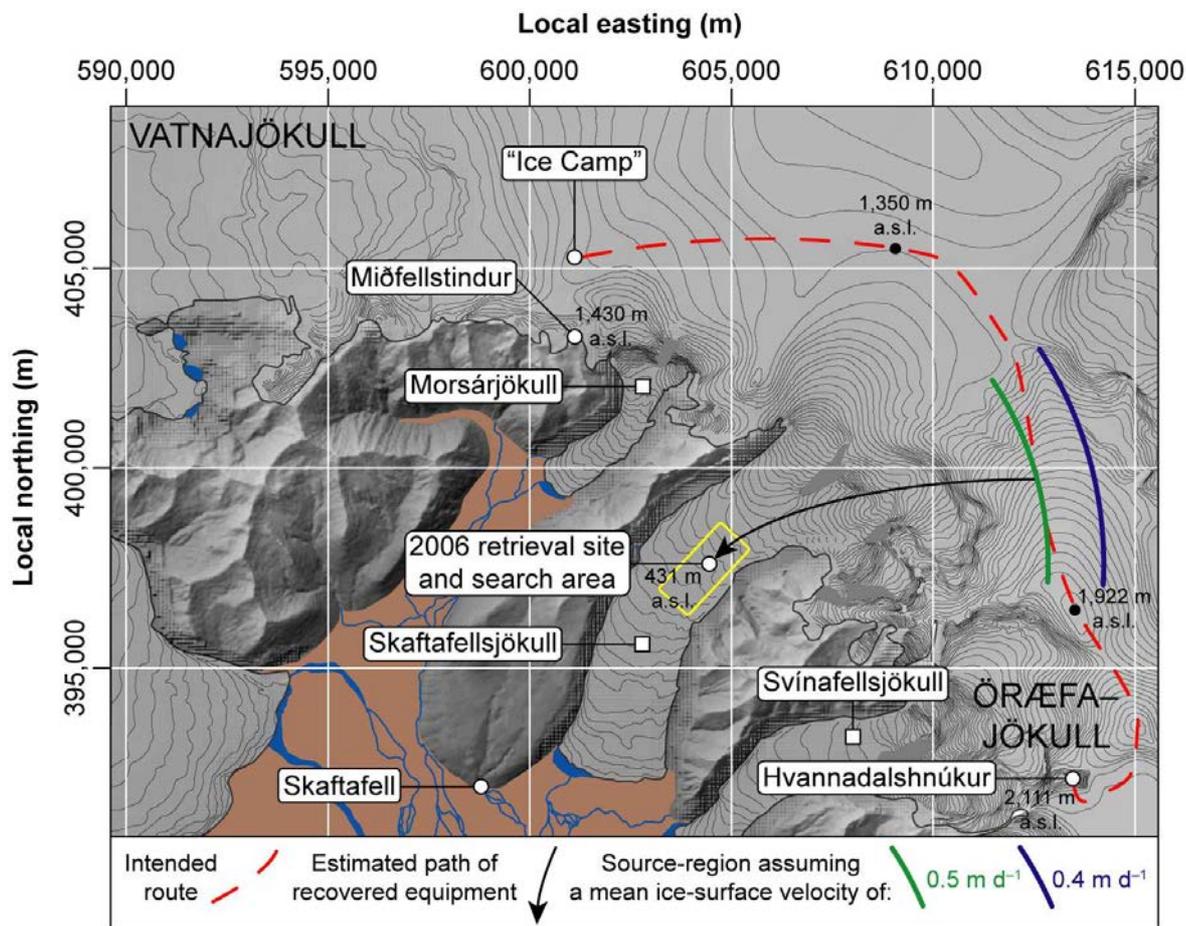


Figure 1. Map produced by Matthew Roberts (Icelandic Meteorological Office) showing the site of the discovery on Skaftafellsjökull and a projected estimation of the locality of Ian and Tony’s final camp. The map projection is Lambert Conformal Conic, referenced to the ISN93 datum. Contours are represented in 10 m intervals. – Kort Matthew Roberts af staðsetningu síðustu tjaldbúða við Miðfellstind, áætlaðri gönguleið Ian og Tony (rauð brotin lína) ásamt fundarstað búnaðar þeirra á Skaftafellsjökli. Hæðarlínur eru með 10 m millibili.

Ian and Tony set-out for Öraefajökull on 6 August leaving Jim Exley and Chris Leahy to maintain routine meteorological and glaciological observations at the Ice Camp. Ian and Tony were never seen again, despite an extensive ground and air search.

Ragnar Stefánsson maintained throughout his life that the remains of Ian and Tony would be returned to me because “the glacier always gives up what it takes“.

JULY 2006 DISCOVERY

On Thursday 6 July, 2006, Eyjólfur Magnússon and Alexander H. Jarosch, scientists with the Institute of Earth Sciences, University of Iceland, found many items of broken and weathered equipment high on the surface of Skaftafellsjökull. These items were spread out over a small area on the eastern side of the glacier’s medial moraine, about 5.5 km above the



Figure 2. Some of the equipment recovered from the surface of Skaftafellsjökull in July 2006. – *Hluti þess búnaðar sem Eyjólfur Magnússon og Alexander Jarosch fundu á Skaftafellsjökli 6. júlí, 2006.* Photo/Ljósm. Matthew Roberts.



Figure 3. The Ice Camp north of Miðfellstindur in good weather, July, 1953. – *Tjaldbúðir norður af Miðfells-tindi á góðviðrisdegi í júlí, 1953.* Photo/Ljósm. Jack Ives.

terminus (Figure 1). Eyjólfur and Alex realized that the items they had discovered were very old when they identified a broken pair of crampons to be of a style that would date from the immediate post-World War II years. This led them to suspect that the equip-

ment had belonged to the two Nottingham University students who had disappeared over 50 years ago. Consequently, they brought some of the recovered pieces to the warden's office in the Skaftafell National Park headquarters. However, Ragnar Frank Kristján-



Figure 4. Ian and Tony at the Ice Camp north of Miðfellstindur on 6 August, 1953, shortly before their departure for Öraefajökull. This was the last time they were seen. – *Ian og Tony við tjaldbúðir norður af Miðfellstindi þann 6. ágúst 1953, stuttu áður en þeir lögðu í sína hinstu för á Öraefajökul.* Photo/Ljósm. Jim Exley.

son, the park superintendent, was vacationing with his family at the time. Fortunately, Matthew Roberts was staying at the park. He also realized the significance of the discovery and, since he had been in close contact with me for some time, accepted the responsibility for informing me and asking if I could make a definite identification. He sent me a number of photographs by electronic attachment and assured me that a further visit to the discovery site was being planned. He and three others accompanied Eyjólfur and Alex to the site the following Sunday (9 July, 2006).

There followed a painstaking task of collecting, mapping, cataloguing, and photographing and preserving what eventually amounted to more than 150 pieces. They included broken tent poles, pieces of tent fabric and clothing, a paraffin stove, crampons, broken skis, a crushed aluminium water flask, two pocket

knives, remnants of a small sledge, and pieces of an air mattress. Matthew forwarded to me electronically an additional set of photographs of the items recovered together with the map reproduced here as Fig. 1.

By telephone and e-mail discussion Matthew and I quickly came to the following conclusion: the equipment, without a doubt, represented the remains of that taken by Ian and Tony on their fateful journey from the Ice Camp to Öraefajökull in August 1953. Perhaps the most significant elements were the trade names of the air mattress (Li-Lo) and the paraffin stove (it was a one-pint 'Burmos' stove that had been the standard Nottingham expedition issue). I had probably used both items while staying at the Ice Camp in July 1953. But even without these specific pieces, practically all the recognizable items were familiar to me and there was no single piece that was exotic or 'out-of-place'.

Of equal importance was the absence of items that one might have expected to have been found: human remains; items of food, even empty food cans; note books or diaries; cameras; ski poles; ice axes; climbing rope.

The main retrieval site covered a small area, about 100 metres in diameter. Wind-blown items were found as far as 700 m away from the centre of the retrieval site. Moreover, Eyjólfur and Alex, quite incidental to their discovery, had been able to make a rough approximation of the rate of movement of Skaftafellsjökull over the previous year from their GPS measurements on a large surface boulder in the vicinity of the recovery site. By applying two approximations (0.4 and 0.5 m/day), Matthew constructed a map (Figure 1) to give a rough indication of the whereabouts of the original camp site which had been buried and from which the remains had begun their glacier journey to emerge on the surface of Skaftafellsjökull, 53 years later. It is remarkable that the estimation of glacier movement closely coincides with our actual survey of Skaftafellsjökull in 1954 (King and Ives, 1955). Matthew also concluded that the tent had been left pitched in 1953, the camp basically abandoned. This was based on the fact that several of the aluminium poles (A-frame) were still connected and several tie strings with torn pieces of canvas remained attached to the poles. Any further interpretation remains as a hypothetical reconstruction.

Until this recent discovery, surviving members of the expedition had always accepted a simple explanation for the events surrounding the disappearance of Ian and Tony. We had assumed that they had reached the main dome of Öraefajökull on 6 August, 1953 before the weather broke and forced them to pitch their tent and take shelter. The atrocious weather, with heavy snow and high winds, would have kept them tent-bound for several days, probably a week. By this time they would have consumed all or most of their food and fuel. By the seventh or eighth day they would have begun to experience brief lulls in the storm, with short clearings (throughout this period the weather station at the Ice Camp had been maintained by Jim and Chris so that a complete picture of the day-to-day weather pattern was available, at least at

the 1,200-metre level). During such clearings Ian and Tony may have been able to see almost their entire route back to the Ice Camp. Hunger, and probably their concern that Jim and Chris would be tempted to set out in search for them, prompted them to strike camp during one of the brief clearings and set off to return. With the weather closing in again they lost their sense of direction, diverged from the safety of the broad ridge crest, and entered badly crevassed terrain. At the time, the crevasses would have been hidden and bridged by a deep snow cover; eventually, they caused a snow bridge to collapse under them and fell a considerable depth to their death.

The July 2006 discoveries require that this original, somewhat simple, explanation be modified. We still believe that Ian and Tony did indeed set off on their return journey, tempted by one of the brief clearings, but the weather closed in again forcing them to pitch their tent and camp (from Matthew's map, they may have been more than half-way back). By this time they would have been without food as not even an empty pemmican can has been recovered amongst the 150-odd pieces. Subsequently, more heavy snowfall buried the tent; they were forced to evacuate the tent and attempted to walk back to the Ice Camp with no more than climbing rope, ice axes, note books, cameras, and what they were dressed in. From this point: disorientation in yet another snow storm and eventual collapse of a snow bridge into a crevasse at some unknown distance from their abandoned tent. Even after all these years we still feel the agony of this tragedy. Given good weather, they would likely have been only a few hours away from safety.

At some future date their remains could emerge from the northwestern arm of Skaftafellsjökull having been carried through the icefalls north of Súlukambur, or even from Morsárjökull. In either case, discovery of their remains would be a distinct possibility. However, if they had inadvertently crossed the broad snow ridge into the accumulation area of Breiðamerkurjökull, recovery will be much less likely.

Ragnar's prediction that the glacier always gives up what it takes is, so far, only partially enacted. We still mourn our comrades. They, in their turn, remain forever in the fullness of youth, vigorous, beautiful,

bright-eyed, fearless; we, in contrast, continue to age, already no longer fit enough to walk up onto Örfafajökull which, over the past fifty-three years, has become the objective of a somewhat overcrowded tourist trek.

EPILOGUE

The search for Ian and Tony in August, 1953, developed as a large-scale co-ordinated effort with the expedition members taking part in only the first phase. The United States base at Keflavík provided two DC-3s; the Icelandic Glaciological Society fielded a team of ten mountaineer-glaciologists under the guidance of Sigurður Þórarinnsson for a prolonged search on the ice cap; and Björn Pálsson generously volunteered to fly his small private plane to achieve a very low-level search. The glaciologists ascended Örfafajökull from Fagurhólsmýri and traced the assumed route of Ian and Tony all the way to the Ice Camp (by then abandoned) on Vatnajökull and returned roughly the same way, making first ascents of several of the Hrútsfjall summits en route. The US airforce command arranged for Sigurður Þórarinnsson, Ragnar Stefánsson, and me to accompany the final airborne mission. No trace of the missing students was found.

In 2003, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the 1953 expedition a memorial plaque, dedicated to Ian and Tony, was set into a large boulder on one of the Skaftafellsjökull end moraines. Practically all the still-living members of the 1952, 1953, and 1954 expeditions and many family members, including three generations, attended together with three undergraduate students from the University of Nottingham.

Ragnar Frank Kristjánsson has informed me that a selection of the recovered equipment has been incorporated into an exhibit at the park's Visitor Centre.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to so many people that only a few can be mentioned. The late Ragnar Stefánsson and family, and especially Anna María Ragnarsdóttir, have assisted throughout a life-time; the late Sigurður Þórarinnsson; Ragnar Frank Kristjánsson, Na-

tional Park Superintendent; all those involved in the recovery of the remains of Ian and Tony's last camp, but especially Alex, Eyjólfur, and Matthew: their care and sensitivity in the face of a most delicate personal situation is greatly appreciated. And, perhaps ironically, the Grimsby deep sea fishing industry is to be acknowledged for providing me with my first experience as a school boy in the High Arctic and for introducing me to Iceland.

ÁGRIP

Búnaður frá breskum leiðangri árið 1953, finnst á Skaftafellsjökli.

Eyjólfur Magnússon og Alexander H. Jarosch, frá Jarðvísindastofnun Háskólans, fundu gamlan fjallgöngu- og viðlegubúnað á Skaftafellsjökli 6. júlí síðastliðinn, er þeir voru þar við íssjármælingar. Munirnir lágu um 5.5 km upp á jökultungunni, á móts við Svarthamar. Tekist hefur að bera kennsl á munina en þeir eru hluti búnaðar Ian Harrison og Tony Prosser, meðlima úr námsleiðangri Nottingham Háskóla, sem týndust á Örfafajökli í ágúst 1953. Engar líkamsleifar hafa fundist. Hér er greint frá aðdraganda þessa harmleiks, umfangsmiklum en árangurslausum björgunaraðgerðum sem og fundinum síðastliðið sumar.

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