

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Editor,

This year, 2010, is the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Arctic Institute's research station on Devon Island. The station supported a wide variety of research and teaching activities for more than 40 years, far longer than was originally conceived. It continues to be useful to the hunters and trappers of Grise Fiord.

On 19–20 August 1960, C.M.S. *d'Iberville* landed eight people and 60 tons of material on Truelove Lowland in the middle of the “night” after waiting more than 36 hours in Jones Sound for fog to clear and 40-knot winds to subside so that a landing was possible. (The ship's captain would have cancelled the landing because of his other commitments if the wind had not subsided by midnight August 19. It did—at 11:00 p.m.) The landing party's objective was to set up the base station and to move supplies onto the ice cap for a station to be established there in 1961. The *d'Iberville* departed for the Eureka weather station on the morning of August 20. By August 21, a site for the base camp had been found about 0.8 km inland, and the camp was quickly set up. (It was moved to a much better site about 2.8 km from shore in 1961.) The archaeology team then walked to Cape Sparbo, about 25 km away, for several days of exploratory excavations. The rest of the party explored a possible route (and as it turned out, the only route) to the plateau, elevation 300 m, which was the road to the ice cap. The route was passable for vehicles but very rough, and in several places a “road” had to be constructed by moving boulders and filling “potholes.” Several days were then spent in hauling houses, fuel, and supplies to the plateau on stone-boat sleds pulled by two tractors, with frequent interruptions to deal with flat tires, broken tractor tracks and towing cables, and other problems. On August 29, the two tractors, two “Weasels,” and some supplies reached the edge of the plateau for the first time. By September 4, six tons of material for the ice cap station had been assembled at the edge of the plateau, but the tractors became mired in its soft, mud surface. Taking supplies to the ice cap edge, 16 km away, was impossible. Several reconnaissance walks and Weasel trips then found a vehicle route across the plateau and around several impassable moraines, anticipating a move across the plateau the following spring. The ice cap edge was reached by a light, tracked Weasel on September 6; it was found to be very accessible by the vehicles when the plateau surface, frozen and snow-covered in the spring of 1961, would permit.

The next few days were spent in securing and winterizing the base camp, a power boat, and four vehicles and equipment, and in local archaeological investigations. The party was lifted off Devon Island by a helicopter from U.S.C.G.C. *Westwind* on September 10 and taken to Thule, Greenland. It had had 18 working days on the island and had reasonable success in preparation for the work in 1961 (Apollonio, 1960).

The participants in the 1960 landing were S. Apollonio, leader; V.D. Boyd, master mechanic; B.D. Clarke, tractor specialist; C.R. Harington, naturalist; G.R. Lowther, archaeologist; R.S. McCall, archaeology assistant; D.R. Oliver, zoologist; and G.E. Stewart, Weasel specialist.

The station was occupied in April 1961, and the ice cap station was operational at the end of May. Twenty-one people carried on the fieldwork until early September, supported by a Piper Supercub aircraft. The program continued through the winter of 1961–62 and in the summer seasons of 1962 and 1963. Lack of funds precluded a winter party in 1962–63 and made it necessary to terminate the program in September 1963.

The research activities in 1961–63, including winter research in 1961–62, focused on archeology, geology, geophysics, glaciology, marine biology, meteorology, and oceanography, as appropriate for the seasons, and were reported in 23 preliminary and progress reports published in *Arctic* (e.g., Koerner et al., 1963). The work of 1960–63 resulted in 25 peer-reviewed, published papers and four graduate-degree theses. Other papers were also published from work undertaken in later years, but as direct results of the 1961–63 research.

The primary objective of the original program was an integrated study of glaciology, meteorology, and oceanography, with the focus on air-ice-sea interactions among Jones Sound, the Devon Ice Cap, and Sverdrup Glacier. At the time, this program was understood to include the effects of glacial erosion upon marine productivity—perhaps an overly ambitious objective for a three-year program. The marine biological work was less than complete, in part because the expedition's 8 m powerboat was fatally damaged by a storm when anchored in its harbor before more than very preliminary (but suggestive) results in waters off Sverdrup Glacier could be obtained. Even so, the expedition as a whole obtained an impressive amount of respectable results. The Arctic Institute in 1971 listed over 50 informal and formal reports from the work in 1960–63. Research on the Devon Ice Cap continues today. Boon et al. (2010:14) summarized nearly 50 years of research with the conclusion that “The Devon Island ice cap is now one of the most intensively studied large ice masses in the circumpolar Arctic.”

The north shore of Devon Island—with its active glaciers discharging into water from the Arctic Ocean undiluted by water of Atlantic origin, and with reasonably certain access for ship supply each year—was the logical base site for the original objectives. And Truelove Lowland is the only practical point of access to the north shore of the island *and* the ice cap. The name *Truelove*, incidentally, was that of a ship built in Philadelphia in 1764. Used as a privateer during the American War of Independence, the *Truelove* was later owned by an English wine merchant and ship owner in Hull, where the ship was refitted for whaling. The *Truelove* served as a whaling ship and cargo vessel in Arctic waters for over 100 years.

The Devon Truelove area and ice cap proved attractive in later years to researchers (and artists) in a number of fields.

Scientists, including scientists from the 1961–63 years who continued research in 1964–66, found ways of using the camp as a base for their work. The camp was enlarged and improved to support a large field party for the International Biological Programme, 1967–73 (Bliss, 1977). As J.C. Royle (1974:5) wrote in the *Canadian Geographical Journal*, “Few places on earth have been as thoroughly probed, analyzed, measured and photographed as Truelove Lowland.” The Arctic Institute continued to operate the camp in later years (except in 1993 and 1994) with additional improvements to the facility—improvements the people of 1960–63 would have envied. The institute turned the camp over to the Iviq Hunters and Trappers Organization at Grise Fiord in 2005.

Ross Goodwin, Manager of the Arctic Science and Technology Information System (ASTIS), estimates that in more than 40 years of operation the station supported research that produced 400 or more publications, of which over 210 are listed in ASTIS. It would be instructive and gratifying if a complete bibliography of that work could be compiled, and one would like to have a complete list of all the people—all the alumni—who made possible and contributed to that record.

One hopes that, in addition to the satisfaction of jobs well done, all the Devon-Truelove alumni share Kurt Vögtli’s sentiment, expressed as the last sentence of his published report on geophysics of the Devon ice cap (Vögtli, 1967:642), about the “overwhelming beauty and sublime quietness of an Arctic fine-weather day.”

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Sincerely,
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