

## LONELY PLANET

On the east coast of Greenland, at 68°09' N, there is a cairn supporting a brass plaque bearing the words:

**L.R. WAGER 1904–1965**  
LEADER OF BRITISH GEOLOGICAL EXPEDITIONS  
TO THE SKAERGAARD INTRUSION

The Skaergaard intrusion was discovered by Lawrence Wager in 1930, when he was a member of the British Arctic Air-Route Expedition. Seen distantly from the deck of the expedition's ship, the layered gabbros and diorites were first thought to be well-bedded red sandstones. Wager single-mindedly studied these layered igneous rocks up to and after the second world war, and his classic memoir with W.A. Deer (later to be a member of the Deer, Howie and Zussman triumvirate) in *Meddelelser on Grønland* (1939) founded a rich and still engagingly controversial field in igneous petrology. Skaergaard is a wild and inaccessible place, and the prospect of doing scientific work in such surroundings was irresistible for Wager. In 1933 he reached 28,150 feet on Mount Everest, without oxygen, the highest reached by any climber (who had returned alive) until the successful ascent in 1953. According to the great explorer and mountaineer Eric Shipton, who wrote Wager's obituary for the *Geographical Journal*, Wager regarded the expedition to Everest 'merely as a pleasant interlude'. His love of wild country formed the basic inspiration for his scientific work. I suspect that is true for many *Elements* readers.

As trans-Atlantic passengers routinely tuck into their tiny dishes of limp lettuce and generic protein over Greenland at 35,000 feet, it is hard to believe that in 1930 the east coast of Greenland was virtually unknown. Early aviators were interested in the possibility of an air route on a great circle that would pass close to the settled area around Ammassalik, which today supports a population of around 3000. This community was unknown to Europeans until 1884, when 413 Inuit people, starving because of poor hunting, were discovered by Gustav Holm. Skaergaard lies about 400 km north of Ammassalik and 500 km south of the only other settlement on the 3000 km coastline, the 500-strong community around Ittoqqortoormiit (Scoresby Sund). The 1930 expedition was led by the charismatic 23-year-old Gino Watkins, and its members, mostly Cambridge students, had an average age of 25. They took two small




aircraft (De Havilland Gypsy Moths) in crates, screwed them together, and explored the unrelentingly rugged coastline and Inland Ice from the air. Try that proposal on your health-and-safety officer today!

Wager's cairn was built in 1966 by the British East Greenland Geological Expedition, jointly organized by Oxford and Cambridge universities. Wager died the year before the expedition, and its leadership was taken over by W.A. Deer. Members had to carry two 50-kilogram sacks of cement and sand 400 m up from sea level. The region around Skaergaard is regularly visited by Inuit hunters, who pass the winter in this hostile place seeking seals and polar bears. They have scratched their names on the plaque. No place, it seems, is out of reach of the graffiti artist. There is something wonderful about this monument, basking alone in the 24-hour light of the Arctic summer. Other great geologists must have similar memorials in remote places. If you have a suitable photograph and can provide a brief background text, let us know.

**Ian Parsons**

(I am indebted to C. Kent Brooks for information on the history of the plaque and for drawing my attention to the Virtual Skaergaard Intrusion at <http://www.skaergaard.org>).



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