

Irminger Sea: Oct 20

Hard Land, Hard Water by Dallas Murphy

It is a true privilege to see these waters, this land incongruously called Green. Since dawn yesterday, Sunday, we've been close aboard the wild east coast, 68 degrees North. I watched this morning dawn from the bridge, revealing still another astounding sight. First-light came up pale, then boney white, glinting through low, sparse cloud on the jagged mountain tops and their snowy, near-vertical flanks. Slowly the light turned buttery yellow, the mountains glowing now as if with some internal light source. Look at that coastline. It plunges straight into the cold sea. There aren't two acres of horizontal land, if you don't count glaciers, within two hundred miles. There are low places between the mountain sides, but you can't call them valleys. And layer by layer, ranks of vertical, pyramidal mountains, scree fields at their feet, march inland toward the ice sheet. This place is stirring to look at, but lethal to human ambition and life itself.

The grey-black sea was dead flat, only a lazy swell rolling in from the north, and the horizon was clearly visible, an uncommon sight on this trip. But something was different out there. What was it?

We hauled out the binoculars. It was ice. The pack ice, or some small part of it, was flowing down on us at two knots from the north aboard the East Greenland Current. Second Mate Derek had to compensate constantly with hits of power to keep the CTD wire vertical. Two hours later the ice was distinctly visible to the naked eye, a line of white arcing around us in a half-moon pattern. Dr. Bob came topside to see. For me and some of my shipmates who share the wonder and that sense of privilege, this is an unforgettable sight—and no doubt Dr. Bob responds in the same way—but for him, ice in the north meant an interruption in the picket-fence pattern of his study line. He has to figure out how to adjust, how to move his "stations" to skirt the ice and still cross the bottom-contours on the break of the Greenland "continental" shelf to maintain the continuity of his measurements. An old hand in these Arctic waters, he's used to doing that.

The ice is thickening now, 3:00 pm (1500), and on the bridge Dr. Bob and the captain are trying to decide how to get back on the survey line. A long spit of ice blocks our route, curving back almost to the coast. The captain is at the helm with his chief mate discussing whether or not to try to push through the ice to the open water beyond, and the lookout scans the black, flat water ahead looking for growlers and bergy bits, while we gawkers stare out the window. The air temperature is hanging around 30 degrees F (1.3 C), and the water temperature is about the same.

Knorr is doing 10.5 knots on a northerly heading. The captain twists the joystick for a starboard turn. It looks like he's chosen to edge around the ice, but it's a very long way to go. No, he's putting port helm back in and peeling off half her speed. Chief Mate Dee fetches a radio and her coat and leaves the bridge. When we next see her, she is making her way to the point of the bow to help talk us around the bigger chunks. The Captain slows his ship to the pace of a leisurely jog. We're going through, no question about it.

The radio crackles, garbled.

"What did she say?" the captain asks.

"She said it looks slushy" answers Dr. Bob.

We're into it now. We fall silent as the ship shoves aside ill-formed chunks of pancake ice, water slopping around their edges. The bigger pieces, bergy bits entrained in the sea ice, are veined with blue. You can hear them slither along the hull.

"Come right," says Dee. "There's a big one on the bow."

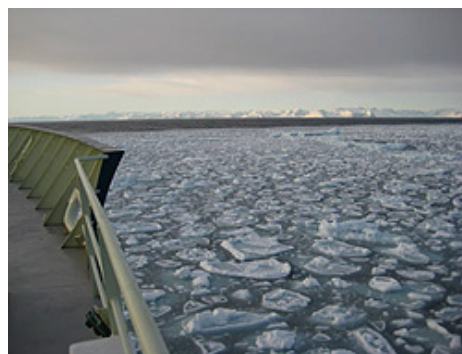
Captain Kent twists Knorr to starboard a few degrees, then back left to straighten her out. And then, just like that, we're free, back in liquid water. The ice has closed back up in our wake as if we never existed. "I don't like doing that," the Captain mutters.

The telephone rings, engine room calling. Knorr slows and stops. Why? Slush has clogged the raw-water intakes, causing the engine to overheat. The engineers switch to the other engine, and soon we're underway again, heading to pick up Dr. Bob's amended study line, and Bob is most grateful to the Captain for saving a lot of time.

The sun's going down, 6:00 (1800), and the off-duty science staff is shooting the picturesque pink glow over patches of drift ice. Greenland lies in the far distance now, and the ragged tops of the mountains look like teeth on a ruined saw. This is the last we'll see of it this trip, I'm sorry to say.

The weather report for Wednesday is calling for 60 knots along the barrier, but Dr. Bob hopes that we'll be far enough away to get only

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40 knots. Before I signed on this trip, I thought 40 were a lot of knots.

Ukioq ersarissivoq by Nick Møller

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