

Denmark Strait: 14: Errands (Wet)

Dallas Murphy

September 8, 2011

We were pounding back to *Knorr* aboard the little RHIB (they call it the work boat to distinguish it from the slightly smaller rescue boat) in something between 35 and 40 knots of cold, ironclad wind. The Skip was driving, Jen sitting behind him on the center-console seat, Russ the Electrician in the bow, Chief Steward Bobbie (chef, in land lingo, and an excellent one) and I in the stern. We were all hunched into our foul-weather gear jackets against the rain and flying spray. The bow surged up over each closely packed crest, then plunged repeatedly into the troughs throwing up blasts of spray for the wind to hurl in our faces, liquid bullets. Bobbie, not frightened but not comfortable either, hugging her purse in a plastic bag to her stomach, leaned toward me and said, "I don't do this very often. Actually, never."



Knorr as seen from Kolbeinsey Rock, a small piece of Iceland. © Rachel Fletcher

There's usually a coffee klatch on the bridge after breakfast, often sparsely attended, just the way Jen, the Second Mate on watch, likes it. She may not have liked it so much this morning. There was a clutch of gawkers and talkers and raconteurs. The difference between today and the usual morning's attendance: *Land*. We were approaching it. Namely, Iceland, specifically Akureyri, in order to pick up two new CTDs waiting for us on the wharf.

To be geographically precise, we'd had a granular glimpse of Iceland yesterday in the form of a tiny, isolated chunk of black rock that a half a dozen people couldn't sit on at once called Kolbeinsey. It seems, according to the Icelandic Sagas, that one Kolbein Sigmundsson from Kolbeinsdal got into some kind of 10th century scrape in Skagafjörður and fled for Greenland, but he didn't get far. Only 60 miles before he wrecked and died on the island that bears his name. Back then, it *was* an island, a dry-land protrusion of some size atop the Mid-Atlantic Ridge, but passing time and ocean erosion has reduced it to a cleft rock. In 1984, it was still large enough to support a helipad, but the ocean claimed along with most of the rock in 2006.

Then this morning during coffee hour, we sighted Iceland itself, a high, hulking mass of gray slightly darker than the shroud of clouds between it and us. The gawkers, the talkers, and the superfluous personnel, me among them, gravitate to the bridge when land is near. But this had special meaning to some of us, such as Pete the Chief Engineer, Kyle the bosun, Kevin the AB, Bob, Kjetil, the Skip, and others. We were heading for the mouth of Eyjafjörður. In 2008, we hunkered for almost four days behind an island, Hrisey, halfway down the fjord while a hurricane-force beast tore up the Nordic Seas. Along the Greenland barrier it blew 100 knots; it blew 60 in our hiding place, but the seas were flat. It was October, a fresh snow had fallen; Hrisey and its sweet little town of Saltnes looked like a Christmas-card fantasy, Currier and Ives in the subarctic. So we wanted to see it again on the way to Akureyri situated at the foot of the fjord. Meanwhile, we told each other "remember—?" stories, which those who weren't there had heard six times already.



Bob Pickart and his post-doctoral scholar Donglai Gong, who flew to Iceland to deliver parts for the CTD. © Sindre Skrede

Trouble was, we couldn't see much of the fjord for fog, rain, and low cloud. We were however going in the best direction for ease of motion, dead downwind in the northerly. We watched an outbound vessel maybe 100 feet long pass us port to port pitching like a bathtub toy, burying her bow in every wave, stern heaving skyward.

"That'll be us in a few hours."

"Let's spend the night in the fjord," Jen suggested, though she knew we wouldn't.

The Skip rolled his eyes. Bob wasn't about to waste a night of CTDs, quite reasonably, but still we could talk. Talk is cheap.

"Chiefski, can't you break something?"

Chiefski likewise rolled his eyes, but we still did a five-minute riff on all the things that could break, nothing serious enough to really interfere with the science, you know, just something to keep us in the fjord overnight as opposed to beating our brains out pounding to windward toward the next CTD line. Both of the new CTDs had already arrived in Akureyri, one hand carried from Woods Hole by Bob's post-doc Donglai Gong, the other flown from Seattle to Reykjavik and trucked to Akureyri, so there was no hope there. The seas flattened a little as we cleared the jaws of the fjord. Jen's track line on the chart plotter showed that we'd pass our island to port. Gradually, it solidified as we drew nearer, then Saltnes hove into sight. It felt like we'd never left, the place imprinted on our memories, the red-roof church, those blue buildings on the shore,...oh yeah, and the flashing neon beer sign.



Our Chief Steward Bobbie Bixler shopping in Akureyri. © Sindre Skrede

Two hours later we were parked about a quarter mile off Akureyri's town wharf.

"Want to go for a boat ride?" asked the Skip.

"Uh—" Forty knots, rain, four-foot seas...."Sure."

"Bobbie wants to get some fresh fruit and vegetables. Other people need some things. Get your gear."

We looked like we'd crossed the Norwegian Sea in that little boat by the time we tied it abeam of the docked pilot boat and clambered ashore, where Donglai waited with the CTDs. Russ and I marched off in the rain toward the town center with our shopping lists and got about four blocks before we realized we'd forgotten to take off our life jackets. Pedestrians glanced at us out of the corners of their eyes. "Do these guys know something we don't about the weather, or are they just weirdoes?" A couple crossed to the other side of the street as we approached.

"Knorr" was stenciled in black block letters on the back of our life jackets, and I wondered if maybe the Icelanders thought that might have something to do with the Department of Correction. "We're off the research vessel out in the harbor," Russ explained to the store clerks and everyone we asked for directions. Most stared at us flat eyed and slowly nodded, ready to bolt at any sudden moves. But maybe I project.

The errands run, we loaded the stuff and five boxes of Bobbie's groceries aboard the RHIB, six inches of water sloshing around our feet, and bounced back to the ship, where we still had to make it up the boarding ladder without serious incident.

"I don't do this very often...."

There was no further mention of a night in the fjord, so inevitably we turned and headed north into the teeth of the wind and seas. Now we move about the ship from handhold to handhold as if walking were an unpracticed action.

Last updated: December 27, 2011

Copyright ©2007 Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, All Rights Reserved.

Mail: Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, 266 Woods Hole Road, Woods Hole, MA 02543, USA.

E-Contact: info@whoi.edu; press relations: media@whoi.edu, tel. (508) 457-2000

Problems or questions about the site, please contact webdev@whoi.edu

