

The world's most unusual military unit

Why members of an elite Danish force patrol the rooftop of the world ... by dog sled.

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Anders Kjærgaard, commander of Sledge Patrol Sirius, thanks his dogs for pulling the sledge.

Anders Kjærgaard and Frank Pedersen, officers in the Danish military, were out on routine patrol using an unusual form of transport – a dog sled. Suddenly, they hit a stretch of soft snow while traveling across a frozen fjord in Northeast Greenland. The men were navigating a 160-mile route they had traversed several times before. Only this trip, in January, came after the warmest year on record near the North Pole.

Within seconds, the sled dogs sank to their chests in an enclosing tomb of gelid slush. Mr. Kjærgaard and Mr. Pedersen quickly started unloading supplies to lighten the load. Water seeped into their insulated boots. They knew they had to work fast to avoid getting frostbite.

After half the weight had been removed, the men packed down a path in the snow for the dogs. The team heaved and clawed for traction. Slowly, they proceeded a half mile, then stopped. The men removed the remaining weight from the sledge, turned the team around, and retrieved the supplies left behind. They did this for two days – back and forth, back and forth, occasionally stopping to change into dry boots, socks, and clothes. Finally, they reached solid land.

“That was a bad day at the office,” says Kjærgaard. “A hard discipline, one of the worst things I’ve ever experienced up here. But there’s no one there to help you, and your body knows that as well. You just have to continue.”



Sledge Patrol Sirius candidates line up for a test in the winter survival course – a 62-mile ‘march’ on cross-country skis.

While most soldiers around the world worry about the dangers of war, members of Denmark's unique Sledge Patrol Sirius face a different set of challenges – cryogenic winds, quaggy glaciers, frostbite, and polar bears. The territory they monitor is wild, inhospitable, desolate – no place for humans.

In late November the sun slides below the horizon and doesn't rise again until the end of January. During the long polar night unforgiving winds lash the vast and vacant expanses. Temperatures plummet to 40 degrees below zero and lower. Not even the Kalaallit (Greenlanders) come to this area they refer to as Tunu, the back. In the entire region, which is more than four times the size of the United Kingdom, fewer than 30 people live at any given time. Twelve of these are the men who make up one of the world's most unusual military units – an elite force that has become increasingly important as the world's industrialized powers rush to gain a toehold at the top of the world.

Since 1953 the Sirius Patrol has operated under its original mandate – to enforce Denmark's sovereignty in this territory that lies entirely above the Arctic Circle. The unit's origins can be traced to a decree issued in 1933 by the League of Nations' Permanent Court of International Justice, which settled a longstanding dispute between Norway and Denmark over which country could claim Greenland. The court ruled in Denmark's favor but required it to maintain a continual presence in Northeast Greenland thereafter.

In 1974, the area – now about 375,000 square miles, roughly one-quarter of the island country – was designated the Northeast Greenland National Park, making it the world's largest and northernmost protected wilderness. Since then the patrol's duties have expanded to include policing the park, supporting visiting scientists and researchers, and helping a small but growing number of tourists.

But their primary mission, and the one for which they are most celebrated, is to patrol the 8,900-mile coastline – a task that even today is best achieved by dogsled.



Jens Bonde lifts a sled dog into a plane for a flight to the tip of northern Greenland. Snowmobiles often malfunction in the cold, but Greenland dogs can famously withstand subzero temperatures.

Since the demise of the cold war, this has been a relatively innocuous exercise – just the Sirius men and their dogs pitted against the formidable elements. (And they are all men – women are invited to apply but none has in the history of the sledge patrol.) However, as the region becomes a new nexus of geopolitical tension, their policing authority has taken on greater urgency. The United States, Russia, and much of the developed world, including non-Arctic nations such as South Korea, Japan, Italy, and China, want access to sea lanes that are eventually expected to open each summer in the Arctic Ocean.

These and other countries, including Germany, India, and Brazil, are also vying for a claim to the region's vast cache of oil, gas, and mineral wealth. Warming temperatures and developments in technology may open opportunities for exploration and extraction of the nation's resources that have long proved economically elusive. Meanwhile, each year more scientists arrive to study the meteorological significance of Greenland's climate and massive retreating ice sheet.

Tourism, too, is on the rise as the country increasingly becomes a destination for kayakers, climbers, cyclists, and other adventurers seeking access to some of the world's least trammled mountains and pristine waterways. Developments in energy and tourism are potentially good for Greenland's overall economy and drive for full independence from Denmark. The former colony gained home rule status in 1979 and greater autonomy through the Act on Greenland Self-Government in 2009, yet remains heavily subsidized by Copenhagen. But such developments have put new pressure on the 12 Sirius patrolmen who function as the region's sole police and military force.



Anders Kjærgaard, commanding officer of Sledge Patrol Sirius, and Rufus Gifford, US ambassador to Denmark, travel across the frozen Kong Oscar Fjord with the dogs of Sledge Team 7.

“The international community – and certainly the US and Denmark – has an interest in keeping this part of the world as safe and pristine as possible... If there are economic opportunities, we are not going to close our eyes to that. We can pursue economic possibilities in an environmentally responsible way. [The US and Denmark] will work with the government of Greenland to see whether or not there are potential opportunities for mining and drilling.”

Hours after my arrival, I go to the station canteen, where 12 young men, all new applicants to the unit, are busy in the kitchen or setting the table for dinner. Eight of the cadets are applying to join the patrol and four hope to become station specialists, providing support for the dog-sled teams. The men have been in Greenland for nearly a month to complete their wintersurvival course, a component of the patrol's training program called forskole (preparatory school). The forskole takes place annually and includes courses as varied as engine mechanics, advanced first aid, radio and communications, firefighting, shooting, basic dentistry, carpentry, and even – or especially – cooking and sewing. Since the officers will often be away on long patrols, it is important that they be well trained to meet any eventuality. Yet they have to learn far more than how to darn socks and pull a tooth. The men must also endure a three-day survival trek into the wilderness, which begins by jumping into freezing seawater through a hole blown into the five-foot-thick ice by dynamite. As the instructors and a medical doctor keep watch, each man has to swim to the edge of the opening, pull himself from the freezing slush, strip naked, and change into dry clothes. From there the recruits march into the mountains to dig snow caves for shelter and build huts from blocks they carve from the snow. Each is given seven ounces of chocolate as his only sustenance for the duration of the exercise.

Most of the forskole's sessions require that the men work as a team or in pairs. This prepares them for their time on the ice, which begins in early November and extends into June. During that span, six teams, each composed of two men with 11 to 13 dogs, patrol as many as 40 miles a day of the park's coastline. They scout the coves and capes of the park's fjords, sleeping most often on the ice in simple cloth tents with no insulation.

They are equipped with radios, a satellite telephone, compasses, and maps. But like the wooden sleds the men fashion by hand, the unit relies on technology that hasn't changed greatly from its earliest days, simply because most high-tech devices and fabrics cannot be relied upon in the extreme cold. A snowmobile's engine can malfunction easily while the ancient Kalaallit Qimmiat (Greenland dog) is suited to withstand subzero temperatures. Wool has proved to make better base layers than polypropylene and other "miracle" synthetic blends. Even the guns the men carry are a modified relic from World War I, the US Army-made M1917 Enfield. The 100-year-old bolt-action rifle turns out to be the most effective way for the officers to protect themselves from polar bears. More sophisticated guns jam in the cold.

"The first year, one is a trainee and everything is exciting," Oxlund tells me. "The winter course prepares the trainee, helps adapt him to the cold." A new recruit is paired with an officer who has at least one year of experience on the ice. "Then the next year, he's the lead and has the responsibility of the apprentice."

Until recently the Danish military required that the men be single. Although the restriction has been somewhat loosened, candidates, as one officer puts it, must "have their family relations in order" – returning to Denmark is not an option during the 26-month tour in Greenland.

The men spend up to five months on the ice without a break. They do everything together. "You go out with your partner, who you think you know, but you're only starting to know him," Bonde says. "When you're out there, it's more or less like a marriage, because you get very close. You know how your partner takes his coffee and so on." But that doesn't necessarily mean that the two will end up being good friends. "That [only happens] if you're good at letting one another in. Sometimes it goes well, and other times it's just like a marriage [in which partners] say only good morning and good night." Nevertheless, Oxlund adds, "We're still professional soldiers. You may go three months without talking. That doesn't matter. We make it work."

Amid the unforgiving conditions, the men learn to focus on what's directly in front of them. Inattention can lead to accidents and possibly death. They learn something else, perhaps their most valuable lesson – that the survival of one depends on the survival of the other. Time on the ice hacks away at the illusion of separation; detachment proves impossible.