

The Cold Patrol



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Two young Danes find out if they're tough enough for the world's only military dogsled team.

By Michael Finkel

Photograph by Fritz Hoffmann

It was dark when Jesper Olsen fell.

Dark and cold. In wintertime in northern Greenland there's not so much as a single ray of sunlight for more than three months. The average temperature is 25° below zero F. The wind is brutal.

Jesper was equipped for the climate, just as he was prepared for the unruly dogs and the overloaded sled and the rugged terrain and the thin cross-country skis. He was even ready to fall. What Jesper hadn't anticipated was that as he tumbled down the sheer, rock-strewn slope, his knife would dislodge

from the leather sheath on his waist and rotate in a perfectly unlucky way. Jesper landed on it. The blade pierced his right thigh.

His partner, Rasmus Jørgensen, did not see the accident. Rasmus had traveled a little ahead, his headlamp cutting a wedge in the darkness amid the black monolithic peaks and pale shoreline. Before losing his balance, Jesper had been positioned behind the heavy sled and 13 dogs, grasping onto the guide ropes, trying to control the team's descent. Now he lay sprawled on the ice-encased tundra, a gash in his ski pants and blood seeping down his leg.

They were 500 miles north of the Arctic Circle, in one of the loneliest and least hospitable places on Earth.

The desire to explore Greenland, which has been a Danish protectorate since 1721, first came to Jesper six years earlier, when he was a 23-year-old sergeant in the Danish Royal Life Guards, supervising troops at three of the Queen of Denmark's palaces. His official uniform included an enormous bearskin hat and a brass-buttoned jacket.

This was not his life's ambition. Jesper, who has pale blue eyes and dirty blond hair and a powerful, natural athleticism, craved the exact opposite of marching around in a fancy cap. He wanted an adventure. "I like to push myself," he says. It wasn't until 2008, after he'd left the Royal Guards to become a Copenhagen police officer, that Jesper got up the nerve to apply for an elite special forces unit that is legendary in Denmark for driving soldiers to the limits of self-deprivation and mental fortitude. He decided to try out for Sirius.

For more than 60 years, Sirius has been entrusted with patrolling northeast Greenland's 8,699-mile coast. The 12-man team visits each inch of the cracked and ragged coastline at least once every five years, formally supporting Danish sovereignty under international conventions. Sirius is the world's only military dogsled patrol. The job—low pay, no holidays—entails journeying with a partner and a dog team for 26 months and more than 5,000 miles. Injuries are virtually inevitable, as are hunger and exhaustion and frostbite. Team members are stalked by polar bears. There's no chance to visit family or friends, no opportunity to go on a date. They never even get to see a tree.

Jesper passed a battery of psychological and physical tests that winnowed down Sirius applicants. Only six people are chosen each year to replace outgoing patrollers. Women are eligible, though none have yet applied. Everyone must be under 30 to try out.

Just weeks before the Sirius trainees were to leave for an outdoor-survival program in Greenland, Jesper heard the news: He was the final man cut. He was devastated. "I was never going to apply again," he says.

He returned to the police force but could not stop thinking about the stark beauty and consummate challenge of the far northern wilds. His parents had supported his ambition; he did not have a girlfriend. So he changed his mind and tried once more. He subjected himself to the eight-month training regimen. He learned everything from meteorology to hunting skills to veterinary medicine; he memorized the shape of more than 600 fjords and points along the Greenland coast in case he lost his map.

This time, Jesper made the cut. As part of his final training, he leaped into icy water to simulate a sledding disaster, then lived for five days with only a small bag of emergency supplies, sleeping in a snow cave he dug with a tin cup and hunting arctic hare or musk ox to eat. At last, in July of 2010, he reported for duty at the Sirius base in northeastern Greenland, a collection of blocky buildings, connected with ropes so one can navigate in whiteouts, perched on a lonely spit of land. He was officially a Sirius patroller.

He found an ideal partner in Rasmus, a 28-year-old second-year patroller and former Air Force sergeant with a scruffy red beard, a weight lifter's might, and a Buddha-like unflappability. Together, in the Sirius wood shop, they built a 14-foot sled, the runners made of nylon and the boards joined with twine rather than nails for maximum flexibility. They named it Black Sun. They worked with their dogs until they felt like a cohesive unit.

In mid-October, when the seas froze—sledding just offshore is often the most efficient way to travel—they loaded Black Sun with 815 pounds of supplies and left base, following a route set by Danish military officers. With the other five teams, Rasmus and Jesper act as the only rangers in Northeast Greenland National Park, supporting scientific and sporting expeditions in the world's largest park, home to vast herds of musk oxen and hundreds of polar bears.

But four days into his first ever trip, Jesper stabbed himself in the leg. He lay on the snow, pain washing over him, fervently hoping that his dream of serving as a Sirius patroller had not slipped away just as it was beginning.

He convinced himself, within a few moments, that the injury was manageable. Probably, he thought, he'd landed on a rock. During his intense Sirius training, he'd learned to remain composed no matter

how dire the situation, and he'd been indoctrinated in the Sirius ethos: Whenever possible, out on the ice, it's best to continue moving.

So without even peeking at the wound, without yet noticing the slice in his pants or the blood trickling down, Jesper rose to his feet. He retrieved his knife. Rasmus and he exchanged no more than a few words.

"You OK?"

"Yeah."

Then each man grabbed a rope tied to the sled and stood solidly on his skis. "Ya!" Rasmus shouted. The dogs snapped their lines taut, and the sled, and the men, lurched violently forward.

Dogsledding exists at the intersection of chaos and skill. To keep the team moving, Jesper and Rasmus continually interacted with their dogs—whistling, scolding, cajoling, praising. They were crossing a peninsula called the Hochstetter Forland, bouncing over rocks, chugging up hills and sliding down, a fog of frozen breath, from both dogs and humans, forming a vapor trail hanging silently behind them. Shark-fin mountains rose out of frozen seas. Icebergs parked offshore looked like bleached battleships.

Normal sledding pace is less than five miles an hour. When Jesper crashed, they were a little more than halfway through the day's goal of 21 miles, part of a looping, month-and-a-half-long, 690-mile expedition north of the Sirius base, the shortest of three trips they'd planned for the year.

A day of dogsledding is constant and all-consuming work; Jesper hardly had time to give his throbbing leg much thought. A lunch break was not an option. The men grabbed sips of water, the dogs lapped snow. If the team is not in sync, a Sirius sled can feel like a body with 13 minds. The dogs, tethered in pairs on one long line, sometimes grow stubborn and lie down. There are fights, jealousies, love interests—Jesper and Rasmus's team had two females. The dogs can work together beautifully one minute, and the next become a snarling ball of flying fur, the snow dotted with bright blood.

"It's like being a cop again, when hell suddenly breaks loose," Jesper says. "You have to get in there and tear the dogs apart."

In this modern military age of Humvees and Abrams tanks, there's still no better way than dogsledding to traverse long distances in Greenland, where engine failure can be deadly. Numerous times, dogs have saved patrollers' lives. Sledding during the endless night, especially in fog, is often performed half blind. The dogs have stopped short at cliff edges and refused to move even when prodded. They also make a specific polar bear warning sound, a hissing growl, that lets patrollers know when to be alert.

Though Jesper and Rasmus were in the first week of their inaugural trip, they'd already agreed on a particular style. Some Sirius pairs prefer traveling light and fast; extreme weight-phobes cut tags from T-shirts and handles off toothbrushes and ration the fuel for their camp stoves. Jesper and Rasmus represented the slow and warm approach: They brought all the clothing they desired, and never worried about sacrificing a warm meal. Their motto, Rasmus says, was "We never run out of fuel."

So there was no hurry as they moved across the Hochstetter Forland. Patience and precision were more important than speed. Any miscalculation in the far north can be dangerous—put your gloves down in the wrong spot for an instant and they'll blow away. "You'll be punished if you're not doing everything right," Rasmus says. The only fatality in Sirius history, in 1968, occurred when a patroller became separated from his partners on a training ride, lost amid swirling snow, and was unable to survive the storm alone.

At the end of the day, Jesper and Rasmus halted the sled and launched into a precisely choreographed routine. While the northern lights blazed overhead in neon pinks and greens, Jesper set up the tent—some nights are spent camping, some in huts scattered along the coast—then unrolled the ultra-insulated sleeping bags and lit the stoves inside the well-ventilated shelter. For extra warmth, Jesper and Rasmus liked to use three stoves at once.

Rasmus carefully staked out the dogs, making sure they were separated enough to prevent contact. He then spent a little time with each one. "They become your family," Jesper says. Rasmus bear-hugged their proud lead dog, Johan; their cheerful female, Sally; their resident troublemaker, Indy; and their legend, Armstrong, who was in his tenth winter as a sled dog—a Sirius record, twice as long as most dogs serve. Armstrong had hauled a sled at least 25,000 miles, more than a lap around the Equator.

Rasmus knew that Armstrong was nearing the end of his career. There's no room at the Sirius base for retired dogs. And the dogs—as much wolf as pet—cannot be adopted. They must be euthanized, an act the patrollers do themselves with a pistol. Both Rasmus and Jesper say it's the most difficult part of the job.

Inside the tent, stoves running full throttle, Jesper and Rasmus finally thawed out. At minus 40°F materials like plastic become as brittle as glass. About 60 below, the dogs start to suffer; sores, from the sharp snow, open on their paws. At minus 70 you must stop and camp.

Dinner was a one-pot stew of tomato soup, pasta, cream cheese, and canned mini-sausages: not quite enough to replace the burned calories. Some patrollers lose as much as 30 pounds during a winter. Relationships between patrollers—for the better part of a year, the only humans they'll see—aren't always amicable. But once out on the ice, there is no option of divorce. Jesper and Rasmus were a harmonious match. The closest they came to a disagreement was over pipe smoking. Rasmus, following classic Sirius tradition, enjoyed an evening smoke. Jesper couldn't stand it.

As the stew simmered, Jesper finally had time to examine his wound. He wriggled out of his ski pants, and it was only then he saw the deep gash in his leg and the blood that had spilled—and continued to ooze—and he knew for certain he'd landed on his knife.

Jesper hardly reacted. He was a Sirius patroller, after all. He simply took out the first aid kit. He cleaned up the blood. And he patched himself up.