

My Kingdom for a Javelin!

by Peter Skafte

During the Euro-American Expedition to the north coast of Greenland in the summer of 2003, two of our team members became stuck on a small island in the middle of a swollen river. If they fell while crossing the icy waters, they were likely to drown. The rest of us attempted to help Andrew and Alan. We had ropes, but I had brought something unusual: my trusted javelin. We managed to get the javelin over to the island. Andrew soon made it across without incident, but when Alan's turn came, he hit a deep spot in the river and fought to stay upright.

"Lean on the javelin. Face upstream. Don't look down!" I shouted. My words were barely audible above the roar of the rushing water. Frank, who stood beside me, repeated my instructions in a booming voice that was finally understood by our desperate team member. I saw him plant the javelin up-river with both hands and regain his balance. Twenty seconds later he was safely on shore.

The danger of crossing rivers in the high arctic during the summer is often underestimated. A warm spell in the weather can double the flow of water in a matter of hours. Few people can judge when the water level of a rising river becomes life threatening. There are simply too many things to consider, such as the various speeds and depths of the water, the consistency of the stream bottom, and a person's height and weight.

I had learned some of these lessons as a teenager while trekking north of the Arctic Circle in Sweden. In those days, I was a fanatical javelin thrower and never left on vacation without my spear. When a local Sami reindeer herder saw me get off the train with my javelin, he asked to look at it and said cryptically, "You won't need that for

sports events up here, but it might save your life." I soon found out what he meant. On certain days of my trek, I had to cross more than ten swift mountain streams. This would be impossible without a long staff or javelin to lean on. (Ski poles are neither long enough nor strong enough for this purpose.) At one river crossing, I slipped on algae-covered rocks and was instantly swept downstream. It was a helpless feeling to be tumbled over the rocks while trying to get rid of my backpack. Fortunately, the water carried me into an eddy and I escaped a watery grave.

Later that day, I recovered my backpack and my precious javelin. Most of my food had been spoiled by the water, so now the javelin became useful as a fishing pole. An older and more experienced trekker showed me that a pair of woolen socks over my tennis shoes provided excellent traction on algae-covered stones. I was also warned never to tie myself into a rope when crossing a river. "If you are swept off your feet and the rope snags under a rock, the force of the water will most likely drown you," he said.

Since then I have always brought a javelin when I travel to the high Arctic in summer. On my first Greenland expedition, I learned how a javelin was useful not only for river crossings but also for pushing smaller ice floes out of the way of our Zodiac rafts. In 1996, I found more uses for my spear: as a support staff on the melting ice sea ice, as a flagpole to signal our location to two lost trekkers, and as a probe for crevasses. But its most unexpected application was holding our radio antenna wire. In a land with no trees, branches, driftwood, or any object higher than one's ankle, the javelin makes an excellent tower.

Traveling with a javelin does have it draw-



Peter Skafte holding his trusty javelin on Rughlathen Island

backs. Airline security agents regard it as a possible terrorist weapon, so one is advised to enclose it in a plastic pipe and check it as baggage. Expect uninitiated expedition members to snicker and say, "Are you going to kill a polar bear with that spear?" Most people would regard the javelin as a foolish and useless encumbrance on a trip to the frozen north. But Alan and Andrew, at least, have changed their minds. □