

## BAFFIN BASE TRIP SETS SEVERAL FIRSTS, INCLUDING A SAD ONE

By Robin Heid

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A jumping expedition to Canada's Baffin Island this past May made lots of jumps and set several milestones, including a number of "firsts" by female jumpers and, unfortunately, the first jumping fatality from the towering cliffs of the world's fifth-largest island.

Organized by Chad Peabody, who had been to Baffin the year before on a sponsored trip, eight other jumpers and a cook went with him on the April 30-May 24 expedition that took a year and many late nights to plan. For non-staff jumpers, the trip was \$5,000 complete, and it started and ended in several stages.

First, Peabody, Katie Hansen and Melissa Andrzejewski set up in Canada's capital city of Ottawa, Ontario, as the advance party, and greeted the rest of the hand-picked team as they came in from Japan, France, and several parts of the U.S.

"There's so much more to an arctic BASE expedition than parachuting," said Peabody. "The team members had to have a higher than average amount of experience in many activities – cold weather camping, rock climbing, avalanche training, crevasse rescue, medical training, and emotional flexibility – to even be considered for a slot on the team."

They took a jetliner from there to the southern Baffin town of Iqaluit, then transferred to a Twin Otter (with seats) for the 465-mile flight to Clyde River, a small town of 800 native Inuit on the island's northeast shore.

They spent two nights there getting acclimated by camping on the town's snow-covered baseball field and playing in the snow with the town's children.

"It's a whole different world up there," said Andrzejewski. "I know this is a bit obvious, but it's *cold* (daytime, +15 – +20 F., nights 0 F. – or below). Jake (Kilfoyle),

Jimmy (Hall) and I were the three on the trip who had been living in the tropics, and the first few days of adjusting were tough. I even went and slept on the couch in the hotel the first night. But after a few days, your body starts creating more heat – that along with all the butter we added to *everything*. You'd never think you'd crave butter in things like soup, chili and spaghetti until you stay in the Arctic."

The final leg of the trip to Sam Ford Fjord took nine hours by snowmobiles towing large sleds called kamutiks. Their Inuit snowmobile crew deposited them – and two guides to run the base camp – on sea ice near the base of their primary jump platform, the overhung 3,200-foot-high Kiguti. It is one of the mid-sized cliffs than line the fjord.

"It's definitely a big-wall paradise," said Chris McNamara, who is also a veteran rock climber. "I don't think any other big wall place in the world can even come close. Shane McConkey once told me it was like 100 Yosemite Valleys. I thought he was exaggerating, but I think it may be true. I just saw a slice of it and I saw 40 cliffs 3,000 feet or bigger, and definitely there are some 6K jumps to be done."

"It was huge," added Andrzejewski, "and the reality of how far you are from everything really hits you once the kamutik sleds drop you off on the frozen ocean and then drive away. It's so quiet there, and so *big*."

For team leader Peabody, the scale and remoteness had another aspect.

"I tried to think of everything that could possibly go wrong, big or small," he said. "Every scenario I could imagine, we had a plan for."

Despite all the what-ifs and challenges, Peabody felt comfortable with the overall situation.

“I heard another expedition planner say that if you can cover every scenario you can possibly imagine, and have a plan in place for each of those, you’ve covered about 90 percent of what can go wrong,” he explained. “If you have that 90 percent covered, you will be better able to deal with the other ten percent of things that will most invariably come up.”

Jumping started the next day. After a 3-hour hike to the launch point, Peabody went first, followed by Hansen, who became the first woman to jump from a Baffin cliff.

Kilfoyle, Hall and Frenchman Matt Gerdes did a 3-way, followed by Rich Webb’s solo and McNamara and Andrzejewski with their wingsuits.

“That made me the first girl to wingsuit in Baffin,” said Andrzejewski, “since Katie got the ‘first jump’ title. Tom (Dancs), though, decided to wait until the next load because it was an extra cold day. Probably a good choice; we all had fun, but the next jump was way warmer.”

The group jumped regularly during the next few days, sometimes making the hike twice in one day.

On May 6<sup>th</sup> came more firsts. Andrzejewski and Hall jumped together to celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> BASE jump for each, the first time anyone had hit that milestone on Baffin.

Andrzejewski added another first at the same time by stuffing her clothes into her hat before the 10-minute hike down to the launch point, thereby becoming the first woman to jump naked in Baffin.

“It was *so cold*,” she said. “No one was allowed to complain about the cold after that jump. The tough part was that I had to gear up, then hike down to the exit. I was probably naked for a good 15 minutes. The jump was just fun. The canopy ride was the coldest part, but I was too psyched for it to matter. I’ll say one thing though; my accuracy has never been better! I landed right in front of the guide tent – the warmest tent in camp!

“Jimmy thought it was awesome; we had the best 100th jump ever. He’s also good friends with Miles Daisher, the only other

person to have jumped naked in Baffin. Jimmy said that Miles was good because he didn’t have boots on like I did, but we didn’t have the helicopter Miles did.”

The next day, McNamara chalked up another first with a proximity wingsuit jump down a narrow, previously unjumped canyon on Kiguti’s right flank. Unusable for normal jumps, the launch point is about 800 feet above the terrain, but requires the pilot to fly efficiently almost from launch to stay above the ground until clearing the canyon and swooping out over the ice.

“It was a pretty spectacular jump, and that’s why we were there,” said McNamara. “You have to maintain a fairly robust glide angle, but I didn’t feel it was a reckless-type jump. There was *some* margin, but it was very heads up.”

Weather and fatigue curtailed jumping the next day. The following morning, Andrzejewski wingsuited it through the canyon with McNamara. Gerdes and Hall, both world-class paraglider pilots, followed the wingsuiters with a speed flying run down the canyon on their small, highly loaded paragliding canopies.

After that came a stop for lunch, followed by the first nobody wanted to be or see.

“After having lunch, Chris, Jimmy, Matt, Rich and I hiked up for another jump,” said Andrzejewski. “It was a beautiful day, cloudy but perfectly calm, and everyone was well rested from the day before.”

Gerdes and Webb planned to jump the main launch point, while Hall joined the wingsuiters for another blast down the canyon.

Gerdes and Webb watched as Andrzejewski went first, followed by McNamara.

Hall went last and apparently had trouble getting his suit going. He ran out of altitude before clearing the canyon and tried to open his canopy instead. He hit the ground with his canopy partially open and slid all the way down the canyon to the base of the cliff.

Team members reached him within minutes but he was dead of a head injury, probably incurred on impact.

Why Hall didn't clear the ledge is uncertain. He had more than 800 total jumps, many of which were wingsuit jumps. More than half of his BASE jumps were with a wingsuit, too, including descents from the Eiger and other cliffs in Europe.

"The simple answer to what happened is that he didn't fly well enough to clear the canyon," Andrzejewski said. "Everyone was experienced enough for this jump, and Jimmy was very current. He did all he could when it was clear he wouldn't make it out.

He flew towards the middle of the canyon to gain as much altitude as he could, and then pitched."

Part of the problem, she added, is that while "the flight itself was not that difficult, but as far as margin for error, there really isn't much. Once you go past about the 10-second mark you are too close to the ground and too deep in the crevasse to open, so you need to open before that point if you aren't going to make it out – but it's extremely difficult to know that soon in the jump if you are going to make it."

Andrzejewski said Hall had been one of the more conservative jumpers on the trip.

"He always had safety on his mind, and he told me he couldn't die on this trip because he had too much going on at home. And every day we reminded each other: 'This is serious. Don't get hurt. Be conservative.'"

Still, she said, skill and caution are not always enough when dealing with dangerous sports.

"There are a lot of little factors that come together to cause something terrible like this," she said, "and a lot of factors that play into exploring and opening new exit points, a lot of unknowns.

"It was cold, we were tired, we had a lot of clothing under our wingsuits, we had camera helmets on, and, for some reason, on that day, Jimmy didn't fly quite well enough – like with a big wave surfer. One day a guy goes out and catches a wave that is like many he has caught before – but on that day, it gets him."

It took 24 hours for the snowmobiles and kamutiks to get there from Clyde River.

Andrzejewski and McNamara joined Hall's friends Gerdes and Kilfoyle to take Hall back to his long-time home on Oahu's north shore. The rest of the group continued jumping.

"It took about five-and-a-half hours to get to Clyde River," Andrzejewski. "We were going really, really fast – It took us nine hours to get to the fjord the first day. There are only a few flights in and out of Clyde River a week so we caught a flight the next day to a town further south in Baffin where we had to wait another night to catch a flight to Ottawa. Jimmy was with us all the way, and the local people were extremely helpful in making it as speedy a process as possible."

Back at Sam Ford Fjord, the group opened up four more new launch points, and jumped two other cliffs near Kiguti: The Fin and one without a name.

"An attempt was also made to jump the Ship's Prow on Scott Island," said Peabody, "but a 13-foot polar bear was standing at the edge of the cliff near the gully we would have had to hike up to get to the exit point."

By the time everyone headed back to civilization, more than 50 jumps had been made. Jimmy Hall's death added a sad edge to what was otherwise a near-perfect trip, but at the same time it didn't dim the powerful impression Baffin Island left on those who had experienced it.

"I first visited Baffin Island just over a year ago," said Peabody. "I saw the potential of the area and my vision was to return with a highly experienced team of BASE jumpers and spend two solid weeks jumping the massive cliffs. Being able to share that experience with other jumpers was immensely satisfying to me."

"It was the chance of a lifetime," said Andrzejewski. "There are no words to describe that place, and no pictures or video, either. It is bigger and more spectacular than anything I have ever seen. When we were halfway there, we came across a cliff that looked like Half Dome – and the guides said it was *small*. That place has so many jumps that if they were anywhere else in the world they would be jumped all the time, but

because they are in Baffin and there are so many *better* jumps there, they will never be jumped.

“And it’s definitely spiritual, you feel close to God out there. You are in His creation. You can feel His power

everywhere and His beauty in everything. And everything is so fresh and clean because it’s all covered in ice and snow. It was amazing – or as Jimmy would say, *awesome!*”

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#### SIDEBAR: “MORE LIKE JIMMY...”

“Jimmy Hall would give you the shirt off his back just to see you smile,” said his friend Miles Daisher, who had BASE jumped and skydived with the 41-year-old Hawaiian, and lent him his cold weather gear for the Baffin trip. “From the first five minutes I met him, it was like we were best friends. He was a very personable, down to earth, friendly guy.”

But while Daisher’s view is echoed by pretty much everyone who knew him, there was way more to Jimmy Hall than just being a nice guy and a good jumper.

He was a celebrity in Hawaii, where he ran Hawaii Shark Encounters and once swam unarmed and unprotected with an 18-foot, 2-ton Great White. His shark-related activities had put him on national television regularly and recently landed him the host slot on Discovery Channel’s *Shark Week* show. A skilled diver, underwater photographer, surfer, kite boarder and sailor (he’d done a 6-year, 14,000-mile Pacific trip in a 30-foot sloop), Hall practically lived in the water – when he wasn’t living in the sky.

He had wingsuited all over the world. He’d paraglided all over the world too, including from an active volcano in Peru and the top of 22,000-foot Huascarán in the Andes.

Lately, he’d been one of the first paragliders who downsized to small, highly-loaded gliders that flew more like swooping canopies than traditional gliders.

“He was one of the very few people I’ve met who had that many amazing stories and told them so well,” said Chris McNamara, who first met Hall on the Baffin trip. “He’d done a lot of things really, really well and it was amazing how many things he’d done. I can’t even think about doing that much by the time I get to that age.”

But for all of his prodigious accomplishments, Hall remained first and foremost a genuinely nice guy.

“He was one of those guys where when you were introduced to him, you’d immediately be drawn to him because he had such an engaging personality,” said his friend and agent, Micah Johnson. “He’d make you feel comfortable and he’d accept anyone into his circle of friends. And other than some people who don’t like shark tours, I challenge anyone to find someone with something bad to say about him.”

“‘More like Jimmy’ became our quote when we got back to Hawaii,” said Andrzejewski, “because, in general, we wish the world could be more like him.”

– Robin Heid