

SOUTH GEORGIA – CREAN SHACKLETON TRAVERSE 2016

TRAVERSE TEAM

Cian d’Arcy (Ireland)
Morgan d’Arcy (Ireland)
Aileen Crean O’Brien (Ireland)
Bill Sheppard (UK)
Crag Jones (UK) – Joint Leader
Stephen Venables (UK) – Joint Leader

PELAGIC CREW

Alec Hazell (UK) - Skipper
Giselle Hazell (South Africa)



The Crean Glacier and Antarctic Bay from Trident Ridge

This expedition was the culmination of many years dreaming and planning by Aileen Crean O’Brien, to follow in the steps of her grandfather Tom Crean on the centenary of his famous traverse with Shackleton and Worsley. Aileen was accompanied by her two sons, Cian and Morgan, and her partner Bill Sheppard, with Crag Jones and Stephen Venables as mountain leaders. Although five of the team were successful, an unlucky accident stopped Aileen herself from completing the traverse.



Salvesen and Crean teams at Grytviken

The Crean team boarded *Pelagic* in Stanley on September 17, reaching South Georgia the following week. While waiting to rendezvous with Jones and Venables, they spent several days doing short day walks from anchorages on the Barff Peninsula, guided by Alec and Giselle Hazell, enjoying the same excellent weather which had benefited the Salvesen Range Expedition.

On the morning of October 4 *Pelagic* tied up next to *Pelagic Australis* at Grytviken and the Crean team joined Jones and Venables for a short ski near Mt Petrel. On October 5 Jones and Venables transferred to *Pelagic* which motored west to Cumberland West bay. She anchored at Elsehul on October 6 and reached King Haakon Bay on the afternoon of October 7. After a quick visit to Cave Cove, the team off-loaded all the Traverse gear and stashed it ashore at the head of the bay, ready for an early departure the following morning.

TRAVERSE – DAY 1 – October 8

We left King Haakon Bay at 05.30, travelling on skis, towing pulks. Some bare ice necessitated wearing crampons for the initial climb onto the glacier. Thereafter, snow conditions were good. The weather was calm, but with persistent cloud at around 500 metres. At 14.30 we stopped to camp just below the Trident Ridge, just by the second col from the left.

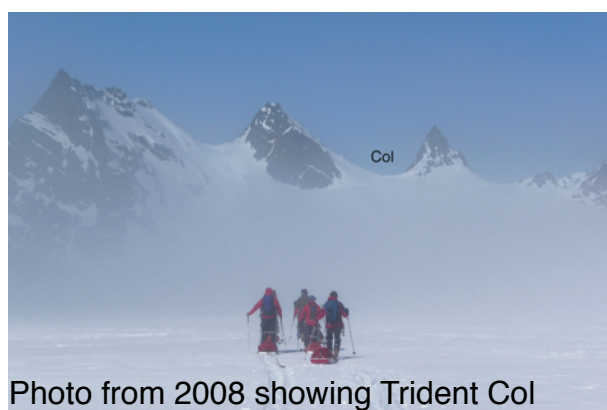


Photo from 2008 showing Trident Col

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TRAVERSE – DAY 2 – October 9

Another fine morning but with persistent cloud at the level of the col. We left at around 07.30 to start the long chore of lowering pulks down the east side of the col. Conditions were more akin to high summer than late winter, with exposed rocks on the col, and patches of bare

ice on the east slope. The large crevasse just below the col was also much bigger than usual, and there were further crevasses and bare ice patches lower down, as well as some rockfall danger. We had to do two lowers of 60 metres each, followed by two 180 metre lowers. With a party of six this occupied most of the day.

At around 15.00 Stephen went first with two sledges down the final lower, extending all of our three 60 metre ropes, so as to get right down to easy ground before unroping. Once he had been joined by Cian and Morgan, he radioed up to Crag (who was supervising the lowers) to say that he would continue a short way down the easy glacier slope to start pitching camp on a suitable flat area. He did this with Cian and Morgan. Rather than put on skis for this short easy descent, all three sledged down, sitting on their



The final 180 metres lower from the Trident Col

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pulks, as we have often done on previous expeditions. It was at around 16.00 that Morgan realised that his mother was having some problem at the bottom of the final lower. Stephen (older and deafer) was unaware of this and carried on putting the finishing touches to pitching the first tent with Cian, while Morgan went back up to help his mother. He returned shortly with Bill, pulling Aileen on her pulk. She was in shock and suffering severe pain in her left leg.

Aileen was the only witness to her accident and we have never received a precise explanation of what happened. But the gist of it is that, while riding her pulk down the very easy-angled slope towards camp, still wearing crampons, she caught her foot and was run over by her loaded pulk, severely wrenching her leg. As soon as she reached camp, Bill and Stephen carried her into the ready pitched tent, and treated her for shock – giving her extra warm clothes, sleeping bag and hot drinks. Although we carried morphine, a staggered regime of Tramadol, Paracetamol and

Ibuprofen was sufficient to deal with the pain and make Aileen moderately comfortable. Alec Hazell was informed about the accident on the scheduled Iridium call that evening.

TRAVERSE – DAY 3 – October 10

Hoping that it might be possible to evacuate Aileen from Antarctic Bay, Crag and Stephen were up at 04.30 and away by 05.00, skiing the 2 kilometres down to a point where they could look into the southwest corner of the bay. Although a French team had managed to use this access point in 2011, it was immediately obvious now that the long, steep ice and rock slopes dropping straight into the sea were totally unsuitable for a team of mainly novice mountaineers lowering a casualty. So Crag and Stephen returned to camp to awake the others for breakfast and prepare them for along day's haul towards the only viable exit at Fortuna Bay.



The unviable exit to Antarctic Bay

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Our longest pulk, by Snowsled, made a good blood wagon, with Aileen lashed in a sleeping bag on top of three mattresses. Stephen was the chief beast of burden, with Crag taking over on the final pull to the Crean-Fortuna col. Stephen's and Aileen's luggage was distributed amongst the other five pulks, with Morgan and Cian taking turns to tow two pulks. We set off at 10.00 and, stopping every hour for a short rest and food, we made good progress, reaching the Crean Fortuna col at 15.30. After an enjoyable ski down onto a suitably level section of the Fortuna glacier, we stopped to camp at 16.00.

On the scheduled call that night, Alec passed on valuable information from Skip Novak (who was now back in Stanley) with a waymark point and verbal description of the best descent to Anchorage Bay (Stephen had not been down this way since escorting

another casualty, one Reinhold Messner, in 2000).

TRAVERSE – DAY 4 – October 11

After three or four inches overnight snowfall, we set off at around 08.30 in poor visibility and continuing snowfall, taking about one hour to descend 2.6 km to Novak's waypoint, with Stephen towing Aileen and Crag in charge of navigation. Once we started descending the side branch of the Fortuna Glacier flowing into Anchorage Bay we were helped by better visibility. We were also helped by the sticky new snow, which



provided perfect braking for the blood wagon. By 10.30 we were safely down off the glacier, where Alec was waiting, having been up most of the night watching *Pelagic* at a blustery anchorage. The fresh snow enabled us to tow Aileen the remaining few hundred metres across the beach to the shore. As her



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pulk made an excellent rigid stretcher, we kept her in it, rigging it with climbing slings for a central hoist attachment.

Alec did a superb job of getting the stretcher casualty onto the RIB, and out through considerable surf to *Pelagic*, which was rocking a fair bit in the swell. We used the main halyard to winch Aileen up on deck, then lower her vertically, still lashed to her pulk, through the forepeak hatch. She was then made as comfortable as possible in her bunk for the short journey back to Grytviken, where we tied up at 18.30.

EVACUATION TO STANLEY

So far so good. The accident had happened at the most serious, committed point of the whole Shackleton Traverse. Despite that, we had managed to evacuate Aileen quickly and efficiently, 16 km across the glaciers to Fortuna Bay, and from there back to Grytviken. Of course we had been blessed with good weather, bar some snowfall on the night of October 10. But, even if we had been hit by several days bad weather, we would have had adequate food, fuel and medical supplies to sit out the storm. It would have been unpleasant for Aileen, but not life-threatening.

Alec, Crag and Stephen were all acutely aware of the need not to assume any outside help. However, it would have been foolish not at least to ask, so on arrival at Grytviken Crag sounded out Pat Lurcock, who arranged for Dr Becky Taylor to come and look at Aileen. Over the next three days she went out of her way to help, visiting *Pelagic* several times, giving just the kind of expert advice we needed and confirming that Aileen probably had at least one serious fracture. She also provided Co-Codamol to supplement our own supply of painkillers, plus some other useful equipment.

Meanwhile Alec had been studying the weather forecast. After more than two weeks of exceptionally fine weather, the high pressure was now shifting and the outlook for the next fortnight did not look promising. It

was obvious that our returning passage, motoring into the wind at barely 5 knots average, was going to be long and tedious. While we were quite prepared to evacuate Aileen ourselves if necessary, it was obvious that it would be very uncomfortable for her, and worrying to have to wait so long for a full diagnosis and hospital treatment. So Crag made discreet enquiries about the possibility of getting Aileen onto the *Clyde*, which happened to be tied up at KEP and scheduled soon to sail back to Stanley. The Crean family was understandably keen to explore the *Clyde* option, so on October 14 Alec, Crag and Stephen went by invitation aboard *Clyde* and asked formally whether Aileen could have a lift back to Stanley. That evening the captain confirmed that he would be happy to help and the following morning Aileen was taken aboard just before *Clyde* departed.

COMPLETION OF THE TRAVERSE

Despite the awful weather forecast, Alec now did everything possible to give the rest of the team a chance of completing the traverse from Fortuna Bay to Stromness. To get us close enough to benefit from any weather window, he decided to motor round to Husvik on October 16. Strong winds kept us anchored throughout the 17th, but the 18th was calm enough to motor round to Fortuna Bay and be put ashore at Anchorage Bay, to carry on where we had left off a week earlier.

It was good to be on the move again, walking round the bay to the König river crossing and then up past Crean Tarn to the



Tom Crean's
great-grandsons on Crean Tarn

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final col. With only partial snow cover, there was no point in taking skis and we all wore either walking boots or Wellingtons. Alec and Giselle picked us up in Stromness that afternoon and *Pelagic* returned to anchor at Husvik.

On October 19 we left South Georgia. Eight-and-a-half days later, on a fine blustery evening, with a bigger blow approaching, we sailed through The Narrows and timed up at Stanley public jetty.

By now Aileen had been evacuated from Stanley she underwent surgery on a fractured tibial plateau and spiral fracture of the proximal tibia, just in time to fly home to Ireland the same day as the rest of her team.

Stephen Venables & Crag Jones

12 December 2016

