

EXPEDITION REPORT

TRAVERSE OF THE SALVESEN RANGE SOUTH GEORGIA

SUPPORTED BY SV PELAGIC AUSTRALIS

CRUISE/EXPEDITION DATES: September 10th to October 15th 2016

CO-LEADERS: Stephen Venables (UK) and Skip Novak (USA)

CLIMBING TEAM: Stephen, Skip and Henry Chaplin (UK), David Lund (UK), Crag Jones (UK - WALES), Simon Richardson (UK)

SUPPORT TEAM: Jose Aguirre (SPAIN), Cliona Bacon (UK), Jennifer Coombs (UK)

PELAGIC AUSTRALIS CREW: Dave Roberts (Skipper UK), Thomas Geipel (Mate GER), Kirsten Neuschafer (Crew SA), Ed Danby (Crew UK)

The Purpose

None, other than the joy and adventure of a ski mountaineering traverse from the southwest coast beginning in Trollhul and ending in St. Andrews Bay attempting unclimbed summits along the way.

Preparation in Stanley

The overseas team joined Pelagic Australis on September 10th straight off the LATAM flight from Chile. She was berthed at the Public Jetty, the new FIC jetty still under construction. We spent Saturday evening and all day Sunday settling in stowing the gear and being briefed by the sailing crew on living aboard (how to operate the heads paramount!) and of course having a comprehensive safety briefing, in addition to checking personal gear and discussing biosecurity issues on the island.

We find a trip of this length and magnitude needs a full day at least on the jetty in preparation. Having a five week trip in hand gave us some leeway, so on the Monday morning departure after a 'full English' we were well set for the ocean crossing. The weather forecast was for light westerlies with nothing onerous on the five day GRIB forecast.



On the Public Jetty, Port Stanley

Looking back to August 2014

This was in contrast to a similar expedition we did in August/September 2014 – five weeks with the intention of landing on the southwest corner of the island and traversing along the Salvesen Range to Royal Bay. However, in that year stationary high pressure over the Falklands gave us a cracking sail to the island in 25 to 30 knots of cold southwest winds. Great sailing, but with sub zero temperatures (down to -7 degrees C at times) icing became an issue and we found ourselves with accumulation up to three meters off the deck on the sails and rigging. Luckily we were sailing with the wind aft of the beam, but the rate of ice accretion from an almost imperceptible mist was dramatic and our single plastic hammer had to be deployed every four to five hours up forward. It soon became a losing battle in spite of other blunt instruments brought to the fray and the triple reefed mainsail and staysail, a conservative sail plan, became fixed with all control lines frozen into position. This was the situation when we dropped anchor in Husvik where we spent a day chipping out.

Due to persistently strong winds from the southwest and a failed attempt to start the traverse from Larsen Harbour we changed plans and went north to climb the Trident Peaks as a worthwhile consolation. It should be noted that while the weather stayed foul (black clouds evident) at the south tip of the island, the central and northern sections of the island were fair.

The Voyage

This year we were better prepared for a repeat with a half dozen wooden mallets and a 30 kg bag of rock salt, and wisely leaving a month later in mid September which made a difference but it should be noted that from September 12th when we departed to the 16th when we landed we had winds from the northwest quarter so sub zero temperatures were not an issue. In the same condition of cold, polar air sweeping up from down south that we experienced in 2014, risk of ice accretion any time in September must be considered a possibility.



Making sail in the old fashioned way, coming out of Stanley Harbour

Our intention, if at all possible, was to sail directly into Trollhul and begin the traverse from there, as the ascent on to the level of the Graae Glacier is a relatively easy pull compared to a steeper and possibly a threatened (avalanche risk) start from Larsen Harbour, not to mention it saves a day in travelling along the traverse route.

Luckily we sailed directly into Trollhul on the morning of September 16th and dropped anchor in 12 meters. The weather still holding fine.

The Landing

Open to the southwest it is clear that to land in Trollhul relatively calm conditions are needed. Although the wind for the last four days had been persistently light from the north to northwest, there was still a reasonable surf running on all the beaches of what is a near perfect shaped circular harbour.

The plan was to get all the heavy kit (pulks, skis, food bags, climbing and glacier travel gear) ashore in the afternoon, carry that up to the snow line and then early the next morning go ashore with light rucsacs and be on the off. The first test landing in the northwest corner of the cove went just OK, but the second attempt flooded the dinghy in the surf. A better landing place was found further to the west on a rock plinth without surge and minimal heave. Although a longer walk around it was safer and with help from the support team and crew we had all the gear placed well up the beach above the seals and penguins – fur and elephant seals and kings and Gentoos – not in huge numbers but enough to make things interesting in this spectacular but somewhat melancholy redoubt (it was a grey day) which sees little or no visitor traffic.



The beach at Trollhull and the access to the Graae Glacier



250m up on the start of the Graae Glacier, Trollhul and Pelagic Australis below.

Day 1 September 17th

Away by 0900 it took two carries from the snowline to reach the 300m contour on the Graae Glacier. Some of us stayed on skis, others on crampons as the surface was icy in places on the steeper sections, but otherwise an easy and safe slope to go un-roped.

The conditions were overcast but otherwise clear. A compass bearing was taken on the pass that leads from the Graae to the Harmer Glacier, plus we had GPS positions from the route that Crag and I took with two others in 2005, and Stephen who had reversed the route leading a team from Royal Bay in 2010. As soon as we moved off roped up in two groups of three, the visibility clagged in and by compass alone with occasional glimpses of rock on both sides we arrived on the col above the Harmer Glacier at about 500 meters and made camp late in the afternoon in worsening conditions - Crag, Simon and I in one tent; Stephen, David and Henry in the other. The usual 20.00 Iridium sched with Pelagic Australis had 15 to 20 from the W to NW rising to 25 to 30 during the next few days. Not a great forecast but the fact we were now committed and established on the route, having left the boat the day after our arrival on the coast stood us well going forward. Harmer Col Camp 1 position: 54 46.182S 036 12.255W elevation 400m.

Day 2 September 18th

Tent bound all day. Snowing over night. Zero visibility. Westerly strong.

Day 3 September 19th

Tent bound all day. Same conditions, westerly strong, spindrift hammering the tent. Easing by early evening with some clear views of the surrounding terrain. Forecast still westerly strong.

Day 4 September 20th

An easy night prompted a false start at 0530. Strong headwinds and zero visibility was again the reality by the time Crag emerged from the tent declaring it a 'no go' the wind having veered northerly fresh. Decided to lie in again, but sloth and screaming bowels forced Stephen and me to emerge and build an igloo (without the problematic roof) for the snow latrine.



The ablution block taking shape.

Day 5 September 21st

Same story, blowing with spindrift burying our tent behind a snow wall which was built too close. Otherwise very secure, but another 'no go' day. Forecast tomorrow is slack, finally.

Day 6 September 22nd



Clearing weather and time to move on.



Mt Starbuck southwest face.

Took five hours to dig out, our tent buried to the peak, and break camp. Calm conditions. The accumulated snowfall was heavy which was a good sign as that snow conditions was likely to consolidate straight away. We skied or sledged on our pulks from the col down to the Harmer losing about 150 meters. Then a slow, but easy pull to Camp 2 on the col that joins the Harmer to the Novosilski Glacier at about 800 meters. Simon and Henry immediately went off to recce Mt. Starbuck, our first climbing objective. We also had a good view of the west face on the way up and identified a rising snow ramp that looked like a possible route. That left Crag, David, Stephen and I to make a camp. On their recce Simon and Henry climbed a minor unclimbed summit north of Starbuck, Point 1245m. They named it Costa. Starbuck Camp 2 position: 54 43.990S 036 13.885W 800 meters.

Day 7 September 23rd

First day of climbing. Up at 0415, away by 0600 in first light. 17 hours later we returned in the dark after a great alpine ascent of the unclimbed and much coveted Mt. Starbuck, rated Scottish Winter VI. The snow ramp was the key but what we didn't expect was that it spiraled right around the mountain from the north where we gained it to the northeast where we summited. Truly a unique route unlocked by Simon leading the pitches. With very airy belay stances luckily the weather stayed calm with mist tickling our position now and then. The mood was relatively relaxed with a very assuring forecast of light winds for the next few days. The snow and ice climbing was not easy with the range of conditions on the snow and ice continually changing and finding good belays on the typical rotten rock was sometimes problematic, otherwise relying on ice screws having to dig deep. The summit mushroom had room for only one at a time – no group photos possible!



The traverse pitches on the girdling snow band, west face.

Mt Starbuck is 1434 meters and its radically steep on all sides summit dominates the surrounding peaks. From this lofty viewing point all was revealed. Immediately to the northeast the mighty Mt. Carse filled a fair chunk of the horizon - Stephen and Brian Davison had climbed Carse in 1989, the story well told in Stephen's book "Island at the Edge of the World." To the southeast of Carse a string of unclimbed peaks fell away to the entrance of the Drygalski Fjord and we could just make out the mouth of Larsen Harbour. After the vertical pitches were abseiled, the sun sank below a grey duvet like cloud layer soon leaving us in awe of Venus leading the charge of stars appearing in stages against the blackest of night skies. We did the traverses by head torch, found our skis on the col and made the tent by midnight.



Stephen on the summit of Starbuck, the Drygalski Fjord below.



Crag, David, Simon, Skip, Henry, Stephen and that mountain.

Day 8 September 24th

Rest day but not for everyone. Simon, Henry and Stephen took an afternoon ski and stroll up an unclimbed unnamed summit (confirmed) off the Harmer Glacier to the west. At roughly 1000 meters with twin summits, they had fine views down along the south coast above Diaz Cove. They were back in time for dinner. The good news was that the forecast for the next five days was slack and variable winds, much of it from the south that meant clear as well. High pressure had truly moved in was staying. They are still mulling over a name for that peak – its position is: 54 44.792 S 036 15.173 W.

Day 9 September 25th

Up by 0600 (long lie in) and with a lazy start we were away by 1000. A shallow descent on to the Novosilski Glacier was easy but not steep enough to ski which became unsatisfying. Skins on and then off, some electing for crampons pulling across wind blown snow ridges - 'sastrugi.' The 10 kilometer march across the breadth of the Novosilski was in fine weather requiring sun hats. Then it was up on to the Spenceley where we eventually roped up for a long, steepish pull to the Spenceley Col under Mt. Baume. Crag and I had come this way before in January of 2005 and the surface was wet and sugary which made it doubly hard. This time, early in the season we were lucky with a hard surface, but it seemed just as hard as in 2005 which we and I put down to 11 years of ageing . . .



The long pull across the Novosilski Glacier and up to Spenceley Col

We made camp at 1830 – a long day. Roughly in the same place as 2005 this was a good launching off spot for an attempt on Mt. Baume. In 2005 Pelagic veterans Crag, myself, Julian Attwood and Rich Haworth had failed on Baume in 2005. With a good forecast for the

next three days we decided to use the next day as a rest and recce day and then climb on the 27th. The Spenceley Col Camp 3 position: 54 38.793S 036 12.275W 1250 meters.

Day 10 September 26th

Rest day and recce. Henry, Stephen and Simon climbed the ridge to the north above our camp (again climbed by Carse's team in the 50's) while Crag and I returned to the snow fan below Baume where we started in 2005. Putting in ski tracks and a few flags would speed things up in the predawn darkness on the morrow. One concern we had though is that with the warm weather and the route on Baume north facing, the stability of the upper snow fields would be suspect for a safe descent. During afternoon tea while milling around the tents airing out it was decided that a 2200 start was the way to go, which was modified to 2300. Henry and David decided to opt out of Baume and do a ski ascent of Mt Pelagic just to the northwest. Crag, Rich Haworth and I made the first ascent of this unnamed peak in 2005 after the Baume failure – and then with Julian spent four days in a snow cave as a major storm swept the island.

Day 11 September 27th

2300 start after a few hours of fitfull sleep. Calm and clear night. 40 minutes ski to the snow fan below the gully which had steepened dramatically since 2005. Back then we strolled up in soft snow on an easy laid back slope. Now it required front pointing above the bergshrund to the first belay. Crag led off having done these pitches before, but the combination of a moonless night and steeper ground than either of us remembered from 2005 gave pause for thought. Not much looked familiar. After six pitches of Scottish V up rock and ice gulleys we reached the arête which bordered the seracs on the lower slopes of the north face. Then two pitches up the arête in first light and we then belayed on an ice block at the edge of the seracs, the main snow slope having no hard ice to screw into. After a long day of pitching on steep snow and ice we reached the summit tower, resembling a perfect shaped nosecone of the 'Baume rocket ship.' Again, room for only one on the summit so taking turns to get up there for the obligatory photo op soaked up another hour.



Crag leading up the gully on the north spur of Mt. Baume



Belayed on a serac below the upper snow and ice slopes. Simon in the lead.

The views down the south ridge, a route we had mooted from the Novosilski Glacier looked daunting with waves of knife sharp snow ridges and wavy cornices described by Stephen as looking like a cartoon mountain. It was late in the day and clear we would be benighted on the way down. Weather again held fine, but it was hellishly cold on the belays as we made 12 abseils back down to the top of the snow fan. Simon led the way finding the anchors followed by Crag, then myself and lastly Stephen. We arrived back at the tent at 0300. Mt. Baume via north spur, 1912 meters. Alpine grade TD. We were on a roll.



The 'nose cone' summit of Baume, Venables on top belayed by Simon and Crag.

Meanwhile on Mt Pelagic, Henry and David made the 2nd ascent of Mt Pelagic on ski and Henry had skied off the summit!



Mt. Baume and Crag, Skip, Stephen and Simon

Day 12 September 28th

Rest day. Miraculously after checking in with the boat at 0800 the forecast was still holding fine with slack weather although a 25 to 30 knot westerly was predicted for October 1st. After a 'pow wow' at tea time we decided to make an astute break down the Spenceley and up and over the Ross Pass the next day while the weather held. It would not do to be stuck on the wrong side of the Ross, the windiest part of the island where Stephen and friends spent 18 days in a snow cave unable to move back in 1989. That story is South Georgia legend. Plus our food and gas were running low so caution prevailed.



The Spenceley Col Camp above the Brogger Glacier in mist. From the left Mts. Paget, Roots and Nordenskjold.

All agreed with this plan, but some climbers have insatiable appetites for more, and given the circumstances of how difficult it is to even get to South Georgia, let alone operate here, Simon and Henry decided to have a go overnight at an attractive unclimbed, unnamed 1800 meter summit just below our col which lies more or less half way between Smoky Wall and Peak 2089m on the map. It looked like a 'snow plod' viewed from the south and west. So off they went at 1800 promising to be back no later than 0600 for our breaking of camp. They were back at 0100 having found the northwest ridge to be steep boiler plate ice, not to mention being enveloped in a thick mist one on the route.

Day 13 September 29th

Up at 0600 and away at 0945, exceeding the typical three hours to break camp. We took off down the Spenceley Glacier skiing and sledding the pulks, but whereas in 2005 we skied steady all the way to the spurs below the Ross Pass, a distance of more than 10 kilometers, this time we found flat glacier midway and had to pull on skins. This was disappointing but can only be as a result of glacial ablation – the gradient of the slope has leveled off as the height of the glacier has decreased, a less obvious outcome of climate change than the recession of the glacial snouts.

Descending into a mist that had floated up the Brogger Glacier off the south coast we could still steer on the lofty summit of Mt Nordenskjold coming and going above the cloud for a time and finally on a GPS position and compass bearing while in thick soup. A short, steep climb of 150 meters (again we did this in 2005 and it was not so steep) followed by a short

descent brought us just below the Ross Pass but still on the west side. We wasted no time in scuttling up and across it and down on to a dry glacier at roughly 400 meters overlooking Royal Bay.

From here there were two alternatives for reaching the coast – continue down the Ross to Little Moltke Harbour, which we did in 2005 or heading left up the Webb Glacier and down the Cook Glacier to St. Andrews Bay. Knowing that in 2005 the descent to Little Moltke was arduous through a maze of crevasses, seracs and then unpleasant moraine it now looked much worse 11 years later – a complete puzzle of jumbled ice. Plus the Webb/Cook exit was unknown to any of us so therefore an attractive prospect. We camped just above the junction of the Webb and Ross having run out of time, finding a flat piece of ice well out of the wind venturi created by the gap between the Salvesen and Allerdycce ranges. Camp 4 Ross/Webb junction: Roughly 54 32.75S 036 11.0W (no GPS taken). 400 meters.



On the Ross Pass looking west to Annenkov Island

Day 14 September 30th

Late start again at 0930 (fatigue possibly showing its hand). Windy, clear and the typical boiling pot of clouds threatened above on the Ross Pass. We were well glad to be done with what is the crux on this traverse. A quick turn of the corner and we gained the Webb which was easily climbed on dry glacier strewn with moraine debris. Hard on the skins, there is clearly not much left of the Webb and with the lack of snow cover this season on the north coast, its ablated state is evident. 550 meters defines the broad junction of the Webb and the Cook. Below, a thick mist waited to engulf us so we felt our way down through moraine debris entering the soup but happily always on easy ski terrain connecting snow patches. Our preoccupation with not winding up on the wrong side of the main river flowing into St. Andrews Bay pushed us true left down the glacier. Plus the left side had a clear gully of snow that looked too good to miss – until it petered out in a cul de sac above a steep drop off

near the ridge that separates the Buxton Glacier from the Cook. We had dropped 200 meters into a dead end. Climbing some pressure ridges on the moraine we realized the hard, smooth ice was way off to the right side of the glacier but between us and that, it was all rock on ice with vestiges of snow, untenable with the pulks.

Again, the end of the day was looming and finding a sheltered spot in amongst moraine, we set up the tents on a piece on an ice sheet with free water running underneath, but good enough for one night. Stupidly we erected the tent with one set of poles and not the usual doubles . . . having broken a cardinal rule of the island. The forecast was for a windy day tomorrow. Simon and Henry recced a way across the boulder field, gained the ice and then had to ascend 200 meters before crossing left and rejoining us – the only way out of there was to reverse that route the next day Camp 5 Cook Glacier: 54 28.152S 036 12.509W 200 meters.

We settled down to a quiet night, until 0200 when it began to fiercely blow with the noise a passing freight train makes while the gusts continually scoured the slopes above us.

Day 15 October 1st

Tent bound in a howler. The 25 knot westerly on the GRIB was swirling around the glaciers hammering the tent all morning, through the day and into the next night only abating at 0600. Ice axe picks, ice screws and climbing ropes and slings attached to boulders saved the tents. There was nothing to do but wait it out. The prognosis was another slack day following so we eked out what little food and gas we had, scraping the bottom of the food bags for crumbs. Luckily there was plenty of water running around the tents and temperatures above freezing made our gas situation more comfortable. Our last dinner was porridge oats with pesto and dried mushrooms – what we had left, but was otherwise sublime in the circumstances. The other tent didn't have the luxury dining on a packet of soup and one biscuit divided by the three.

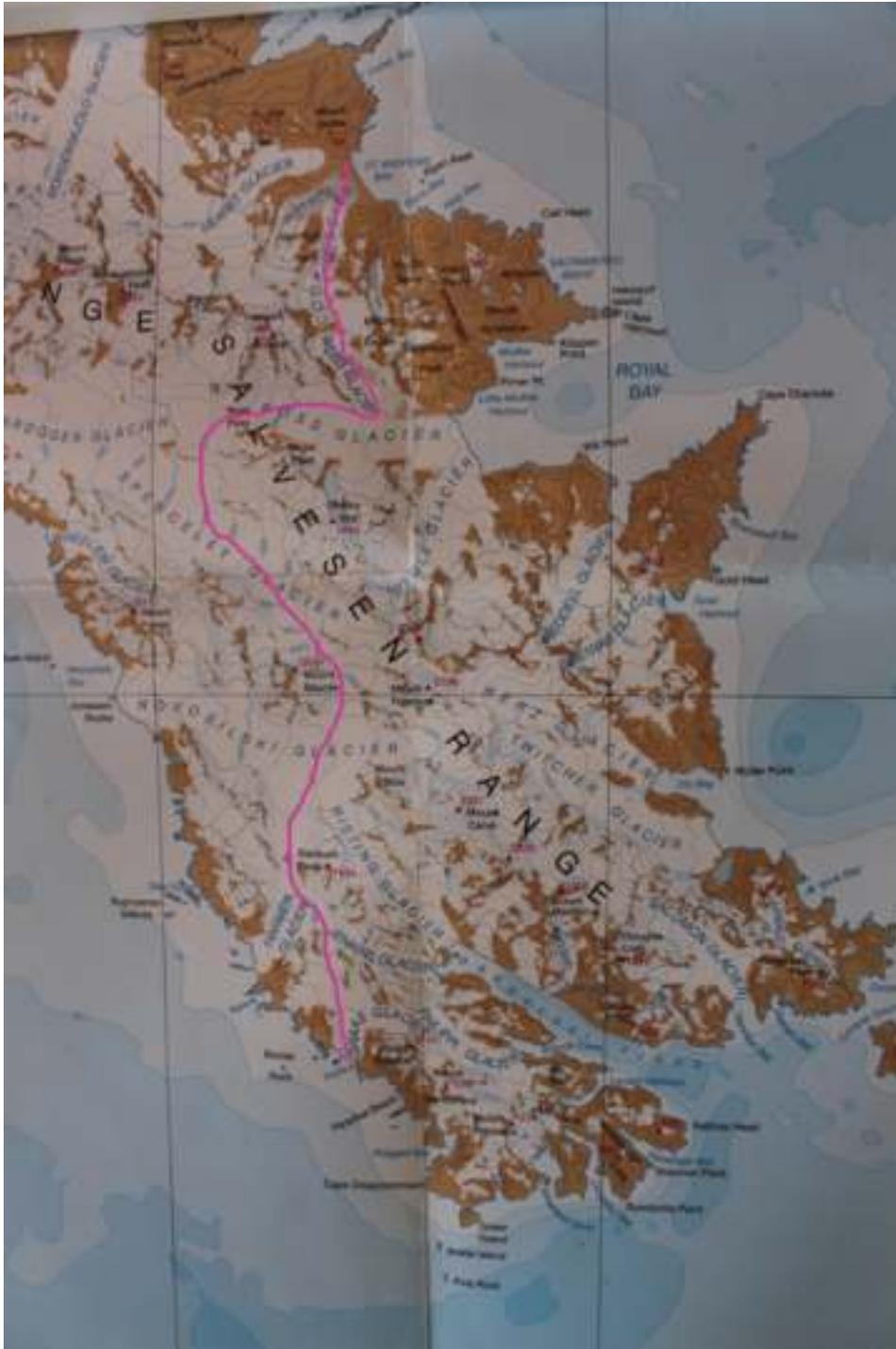
Day 16 October 2nd

Broke camp at 0830, hungry. Climbed 200 meters back up the snow gulley and pulled 1.8 kilometers to gain the high point in order to cross over to the true right bank. Even if it had been clear at the top of the Cook, this side would not have been the obvious descent route. A ski and slide took us off the ice and we dragged the pulks over moraine debris and mini 'penitentes' - sharp icicles - for a few hundred meters and then we called a halt. A heavy carry on our backs united us with the shore team and crew on the beach and we all went up to make the second carry, in amongst the penguins and seals. Back on board for a slap up dinner.



Summary

65 kilometer traverse from Trollhul on the south coast to St. Andrews Bay on the north coast. Major unclimbed summits - Mt Starbuck and Mt Baume. Unnamed unclimbed summit near Mt. Starbuck and ascent of two minor summits previously climbed by the Carse survey team. The 2nd ascent of Mt Pelagic and a ski descent from the summit. One failed attempt at the unclimbed, unnamed 1800m peak near the Spenceley Col.



6 travelling days
5 tent bound days
2 summit days
2 recovery days
1 recce day

Insofar as equipment, provisions and fuel there were no issues and no suggestions. We were supplied for 14/15 days and a reserve carried us comfortably through 16. No injuries were suffered.

The success of the expedition was due to a well thought out plan and prior experience of the terrain and weather conditions on the island. Clear climbing objectives added to this mix. But it has to be said the uncharacteristic fine weather played a major part. After the initial five days tent bound on the Harmer Glacier it turned fine and stayed that way barring the windy day on the Cook right to the end and continued until we left the island on October 8th. We sailed back to Stanley in three and half days flat in following, reaching or slack conditions – the all time record for the return voyage.

Special mention must also be made for the support of the shore team, Jose, Jennifer and Cliona and of course the Pelagic Australis crew Dave, Tom and Kirsten. Without solid back up by an able support vessel and a solid and willing crew to help out where needed none of this would be possible.

Post Script

After the obligatory three days sorting out gear and relaxing on the jetty at KEP, making various ski tours and climbs on Mt Hodges, Pelagic came alongside with the granddaughter and great grandsons of Tom Crean. There were scheduled to attempt the Shackleton Traverse as part of the finale of the three year 'centenary' of the 1914 – 1916 epic. Stephen and Crag transferred over to Pelagic on October 5th, and will lead them across. Meanwhile our climbing team that was left joined by Tom, Jennifer, Cliona and Jose went ashore in Anchorage Bay on the 6th and did the Breakwind Ridge followed by the last day of the Shackleton Traverse to Stromness. On the 9th we sailed for Stanley.



The Pelagic Fleet at Grytviken and the 19 members of the Pelagic team.

Skip Novak
Stephen Venables