

# THE LAST LEVIATHAN

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"It's unclimbed. Criquet told me himself." *"By the way, I never made it to the top."*

Kerching! I could hardly believe my ears. Tim Carr was telling me that Mount Nordenskjold, the second highest peak on South Georgia and one that sits slap bang centre stage for all to see, had yet to receive its first ascent?

"I've been keeping it under my belt, in case I had the chance like, but I'll be off soon. So if anyone deserves to know, you do."



Tim and Pauline Carr were shortly to leave South Georgia as one of the few couples to have ever lived there for a long period of time and this was his generous parting present from a sporadic warm friendship over the years. It had for long been assumed that Christian de Marliave (Criquet) had made the first and only ascent in 1988 of the 7725' mountain. Now, the cat was out of the bag, or, in my pocket, for the time being at least. The erroneous initial assumption had simply been repeated in various publications and reports since then, until corrected by Christian himself. His bold and determined solo effort had seen him getting high on the mountain but not to the summit. Tim had provided me with that bare nugget of information some time ago, upon which I had been unable to obtain any further elaboration\*. I ran out of time before departing on this expedition and had not pressed the issue earlier because the historical misunderstanding had kept the path clear for me to make an earlier attempt two years ago with Skip Novak and Julian Attwood followed now by our new attempt at the NE ridge. Certain elements of the 'opposition' were in any case beginning to suspect my aberrant interest in this peak. Stephen Venables had only recently been spotted stalking its approaches making sinister utterances along the lines that all was fair in love and war. Make no mistake, that bluff exterior conceals a predatory competitor if ever there was one. Why should we be scrapping around for leftovers whilst one of the great beasts remained unclimbed.

John Griber, Doug Stoup and Rick Armstrong had also made an unsuccessful attempt in November 2001 as part of a North Face sponsored expedition. Griber also reached the summit ridge at around 2135m, some 200m below the top but was forced back by deteriorating weather electing to descend the icy face below by extreme snowboarding, described by Stoup as “One of the most amazing things I have ever seen.”!

Hence we returned in November 2011 to South Georgia for what was about my 9th visit, counting work and play over the years. The island whilst amazingly beautiful is also prone to ferocious weather. The inspiration provided by the former has to therefore be tempered with consideration for the latter! It is a place I have come to know well. I first worked there in 1990 as the sole civilian living with the military garrison. My role was to begin to re-establish civilian management of shipping and fisheries.

I have returned many times for fisheries research and management work but also increasingly on private mountaineering expeditions often in the company of American, Skip Novak with his specialist Antarctic sailing vessels Pelagic and Pelagic Australis. We were again transported and supported by the Pelagic team now also comprising Miles and Laura West as Captain and 1<sup>st</sup> Mate with Dave Roberts as the 2<sup>nd</sup>. They had a charter of enthusiasts who were aiming to cruise around the island visiting many of its magical locations and wildlife spectacles. They dropped us off at the start of their visit and retrieved us for the return voyage to the Falkland Islands.

My team-mate for this venture was Richard Spillett an old climbing friend whose calm technocratic exterior masks a determined and adventurous soul. Whilst I occasionally masquerade as a house-husband Richards day-time job (or should I say after dark he comes out of his coffin!) was as a one-time derivatives trader now turned risk manager in a sort of poacher / game-keeper gig. He was obviously lying low whilst financial Armageddon consumed Europe. As usual with Richard I fully expected to improve my education on the finer points of capitalism during the expedition whilst Richard would undoubtedly benefit from repeated broadsides of my unreformed Marxism. It was the sort of well balanced team that might never leave the tent due to protracted arguments along the lines of

“Look all those thieving ‘so-and-sos’ ought to be shot” being countered with

“Well you were all happy to accept the credit when the going was good eh? It’s the juice that oils the wheels of industry. “

“Harumph, more like the juice that’s sucked out of society in inflated commissions until it ends up like a shrivelled prune.”

“I did not say there was social value to 2<sup>nd</sup> order derivatives but it’s what the market values them at.

“But it’s like letting the police make up the law as well and decide how much to pay themselves on top of it . . .?”

By this stage I’m howling at the moon and Richard is laughing his socks off.

You get the drift! Mad polemic countered with intractable economics. The flies on the wall of our tent cashed in their pension funds and fled.

But as unlikely as it seems those were the necessary ingredients for us to stand a chance. The more intractableness the better when it comes to climbing mountains, madness is always handy as well. The economics allows us to actually make a reality out of our dreams and if it wasn’t for the polemics, well you would not be reading all this bollocks about our holidays!



*Mad Polemicist?*



*Intractable Economist?*

We joined the Pelagic Australis in Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands for the 800 mile sail east to South Georgia. This would take about four days downwind and a few more on our return. We were aiming to be dropped off at the head of Cumberland Bay east where the Glacier comes into the sea. It should then take us about three days to ski with sledges into the foot of the mountain before we started the technical climbing proper. We aimed to establish our base camp a bit closer to the foot of the mountain than on the previous attempt but away from any avalanche danger which forced a retreat on that occasion when both our tent and snow cave became threatened after heavy snowfall in a prolonged storm (see below).



*'If you are in a hole, stop digging.' Our Base Camp tent and snow hole during the last attempt.*

Once established we aimed to sit tight until there was a reasonable stretch of steady weather within which to make an attempt on the mountain. There would only be a few days for that because of all the time required in getting there and back.



#### *The Journey Out:*

***UK, Madrid, Santiago, Punta Arenas, Port Stanley – Falkland Islands, Nordenskjold Glacier Front - South Georgia.***

Wind and weather were good for a quick departure from the Falkland Islands and East for the promised land. There was little time to catch up with people. We were so busy making sure we had everything, and checking gear, buying food and stowing everything aboard. We were cast off by the evening of the 13<sup>th</sup> November. At least I was able to stand up this time as we left through the 'Narrows'. I remember going through there a few years ago on my knees, unable to stand up after a particular memorable party aboard Pelagic. A saucepan banging band dancing on the table clanged their last as the sun rose. Skip chucked them off and they threw our lines aboard and we sailed SW for Argentina. It's East this time, 800 miles at about 180 miles every 24 hours. There were kind gentle winds to start with, always the best for delicate stomachs!

We were soon into our regular 3 on / 6 off watches as the westerlies strengthened and we ran ahead at a good 8 knots. Gradually what rope does what came back to me under the watchful eye of Miles the Skipper and Laura his Mate (and wife!), and Dave the 2nd. Luckily for them everyone else bar Richard were experienced sailors and even he got off to a flying start, getting stuck in wherever required. With only gradually strengthening winds it gave us the chance to go through manoeuvres without too much of a panic which stood us in good stead in case things got tricky

The guys who were going to cruise around the island once Richard and I were dropped off are the Steven brothers, Jim and Bob from Chicago, Julian Fox from London and Marcelo Telles from Bahia, Brazil.

Jim and Bob, two of twelve siblings, run a family business, the world renowned Webber Grill Co., suppliers of bespoke cooking platforms to the barbecue world. A great pair, the kind who regard a Brit that cooks on a rusty bucket as a marketing challenge rather than a lost cause. Such is their passion to form and function, they can only be to a seared steak what Steve Jobs was to an iPad. We would not have been surprised if Richard and I had ended up hauling one of their de-luxe models up the glacier on our sledges. It seemed as if we already had the kitchen sink so why not a barbie as well.



Perhaps they can fit a heat shield for when we are crossing delicate snow bridges over crevasses? Or perhaps send some of our self-propelled penguin fodder ahead as multi-tasking slot-poodles as well?



*Jim and Bob Stevens aka the Barbeque Bombers. Here seen heavily disguised to avoid 'Homeland Security' discovering that they FRIED a steak in a FRYING PAN!!!*

Back in the Falkland Islands we got Bob and Jim on the run from dangerous feral sheep.

“ALWAYS maintain eye contact, it’s essential.”

“You sure there?”

“Believe me, I’m an expert. Don’t ever let them get the upper hand, psychologically, that is.”

“Christ, it’s bad enough with all these landmines. Now we’ve got man-eating wildlife to contend with as well. Skip never said anything about this.”

“He does not like to talk about it. Brings back terrible memories.

You’ll be OK, just make sure you get back to the road before nightfall.”

“It’s OK, we have a head-torch.”

“NOOOO! for Gods sake, never put one of them things on. They hunt in packs, at night.”

Never have two Americans crossed from the Two Sisters over Mt Tumbledown and got to a bar in Port Stanley in such good time. Well before nightfall, no worries.

Julian a corporate management head-hunter had great fun discussing the various forms of management 'puddins' a business like theirs might end up with. It's his job to try and help companies get the right type of person into the right role. When not bashing hopefully round pegs into round holes, he loves to sail, ski and climb. If one of us broke a leg he promised to lend a hand dragging a sledge stretcher back to the coast. A thirty something +ish about to be married, he wondered how we coped with children having witnessed friends being reduced to ghosts of their former selves, ravaged by parenthood. “Well mate, often its domestic carnage. However our wives are sort of ‘understanding’, at least we like to think so. Right now for example, they’re at a stag-do.” His eyebrows raised, worryingly. We just kind of muddle along really, there’s no science to it. When I first sailed on the

Pelagic just everyone involved was a merry bachelor in their forties. Within just a few years we had between us all somehow managed to be fathers of around ten kids. It was becoming difficult to keep count.” For me it didn’t seem to be the kind of thing you planned or organised. You just did it and all calculations about losses and gains become hilariously irrelevant once the little blighters were actually spawned. At least the Commodore of the fleet (as we respectfully refer to Skip) and Nos. 1,2,3,4 could regale each other with mutual parenting disasters and the wonders of married life. Julian did not look convinced. Laura’s jaw was agape, and Miles meanwhile had vanished in case my frank assessment of the wonders of married life down the road might lead to awkward questions from his new wife. “No messing, I tell you, a force 8 with a torn main, or freezing nights battling through avalanches. They’re a bleedin vicars tea-party compared to le ‘Terror’. Richard nodded in grave confirmation. I tell you I do. I was a ‘new man’ I was and now look at me, someone’s ‘old-man’. All them old clichés, they aint political incorrectness, it’s the language of survival . Words to keep you afloat, little life-jackets in the harsh sea of reality”. Richard agreed we’d done our duty and briefed Julian well and felt sure we could look forward to the wedding invitation.

Marcelo on the other hand is a Pilot, also used to the stormy seas of married life. He guides boats for a living into safe harbours around Salvador on the E coast of Brazil. Another good man to have aboard who was also at ease with the sailing. One unusual thing he was looking forward to though was seeing snow, for the first time in his life! It’s a rare commodity on the tropical coast of Brazil. Gentle but intense, it could have been hard for him to be thrown in like this with a boatload of English speakers. He somehow had the knack of fitting in with everyone and we looked forward to getting to know him better during the voyage.

We had steady sailing in calm conditions (by Southern Ocean standards that is) with winds no more than 35 knots, All of the familiar birds still plied austral skies. No Albatross were shot so we did not see

*the ice that was here,  
the ice that was there,  
the ice that was all around,  
it neither roared or howled,  
nor moaned or growled,  
no more noises in a sound;*

Playful dolphins accompanied us for many hours, racing around us at will. On the afternoon of 16<sup>th</sup> November we passed the magnificent Shag Rocks towering out of a misty sea. Sometimes in the past we have sailed straight between them, not this time though. I remembered the time I was battling past them on a dark and stormy night going back the other way. On that occasion I was the sole ‘escort’ on a Russian long liner, the ‘Makshevo’, we had arrested for poaching. The patrol ship followed behind when its engine had not broken down. It was a rather lonesome voyage as understandably I was not their most popular passenger. Fortunately their sense of fate preserved me on that occasion. My filleting knife under the pillow was an unnecessary precaution. Their engine was so knackered it took us a week to reach the Falkland Islands. But even that felt quick compared to the following due process of the law.



*Sailing through the middle of the magnificent Shag Rocks on our previous voyage.*



*Bruce Pearson paints them In Vivo during the previous voyage.*

Suddenly, breaking water to one side. Christ, is it Black Rock! A horrible shoal that prowls near these parts. No, a whale, a big Sei Whale. It stayed with us for half an hour until both its curiosity and our wonder wore off.

After four days of sailing we were finally closing on South Georgia and expected to reach Bird Sound by mid-morning. At 3am and I had just finished the graveyard watch. It was cold and grey, with worrying fog banks, but no ice bergs lurked within as they did 2 years ago. We do cheat by using a radar as well, but even that does not show up the 'growlers' that lurk just on the surface. The next watch took over and after a welcome brew I cosied up next to the diesel stove, soon to be snuggling down into my scratcher.

Later in the morning it was down below, into the Pelagic's workshop. Imagine your dad's garden shed only a bit more watertight. A sinking would hold no fear providing someone could hold their finger in the hole, long enough. That workshop is so well equipped another boat could be built from within, to spring forth phoenix like. This time though it's to sharpen our steel spade. This too has fashioned a refuge anew on several occasions when our tents have been destroyed. I never travel those parts without it these days. Its biding its time, a gleaming edge, ready to dig a snow hole in iron hard neve should it be needed. Crampons and ice axes were next. A bit of work now might mean easy efficient progress when we are climbing steep ice, instead of the all too usual frustrating smashing of dinner plates and cramping hands. Finally the re-gluing of skins onto skis. The old glue might come unstuck and, so would we!

The weather was forecast to hold fair up to the time we planned to be dropped off then to turn foul for three days. It was best to get ourselves ashore though at the earliest opportunity. Its fatal to cling to the comfort of the boat, little is usually achieved if that state of mind sets in.

News from home via satellite email to the boat! Owen's friend Isabella came to tea. They baked cakes together. He's very excited about going to be an 'evacuee' next week. Has the Euro crisis got that bad I wonder? Better not tell Richard. Eleanor's friend Catriona is coming to stay as well. I wondered at the chaos and work that Sian must be calmly navigating. Such is the life of a runaway expeditioner. Though we miss them all dearly, we must focus on what we have chosen to do here for a while, think of them all and 'look carefully to each step'.





*Madness: 'One Step Beyond . . .'*

*and*

*'ere comes v boat, only 'alf afloat*

*No it's not the 'Last Boat To Cairo', but it's the last we'll see of Pelagic Australis for 10 days after dropping us off at the snout of the Nordenskjold glacier.*

On the afternoon of the 18<sup>th</sup> we spent a few thirsty hours chasing an iceberg trying to chip bits off it. As evening drew in we were forced to confront our state of denial. We remembered we were meant to be establishing our 'beach head'. The Gin and Tonics would have to wait for their ice another day. As evening drew in a bitter wind swept off the Nordenskjold glacier. Miles calmly nosed the Pelagic through icebergs and across an uncharted bottom to the head of Cumberland bay East to give Dave as short a run as possible to get us ashore in the dinghy. He looked askance as this was loaded down with an unfeasibly large amount of kit.

"Don't worry Dave. We'll have to thin it all out tomorrow and stash the barrels behind the beach."

"We're sick of packing, and can't be arsed to do it tonight."

"Huh huh, I was wondering how the hell you were going to carry it all up that mountain of yours!"

The vast majority of yachtsmen and women have a primal aversion to being parted from their boats. They looked pityingly at us as we voluntarily forsook Pelagic's warm delights for a grim and barren shore. We bid everyone a wistful farewell.

"See you in ten days. We'll have two more for leeway if the sea is too rough or the ice blows in for a pick-up then."

We staggered across the boulder beach avoiding an assortment of squawking seals and piqued penguins. We headed for the rock bluff that offered a sheltered spot, tucked in its lee behind a ten foot whale vertebrae. Smaller ones made nice stools. As it went dark Richard wrestled the tent into shape single handedly. Meanwhile I ferried all our loads up from the landing spot.

Time is very tight to achieve anything significant during a one month charter. Unless you have the luxury of having the boat on continuous standby to take advantage of a break in the weather for a lightweight dash then the only alternative is to go heavy. Keep moving up in bad weather with enough shelter, kit, food, fuel, spares and supplies to sit out any very bad periods. Hopefully we would then be in a position to take immediate advantage of any good days without being too extended.

Two years ago we had skied from the beach but there was much less snow this year. The first day was spent thinning out our loads to two heavy packs apiece which were carried up to on to the glacier to the point where we could start using the sledges, though not the skis which had to be added to the loads. The next day we commenced our approach proper. The ice fall was nearly completely 'dry' this year. Everything as hard ice with all crevasses visible and open. It became a very torturous and slow process navigating the sledges through the labyrinth.



*Trying to scout a way through the icefall for the sledges.*

The glacier appears to be breaking down with large areas of new depressions and major inward collapse, giving us a somewhat surreal passage through. One cannot but help to wonder and draw parallels with the decimation of the whale stocks in the last century. Is this the next stage of change wrought by man, this time on the very physical fabric of our surroundings? As the glaciers spew their entrails, are we witnessing the murder of the last leviathans? Places I carried loads to over a week, ten years ago, can now be sailed to in open water. Change is occurring very quickly. No one will ever see the fabled filling and flushing of the huge and mysterious Gulbransen Lake any more. The Neumayer glacier has receded four kilometres in the last 10 years. It looks like the same will be happening to the Nordenskold sometime soon.

Finally we crested the ice fall and found the first skiable ribbon of snow 'the yellow brick road' heading gently downwards into another broad collapsing basin about half a mile across. We donned the rope in case of suspect snow bridges and sped on, happy to be using the skis at last. Richard had not used mountaineering skis for a while and complained they were turning outwards." Keep your knees together and think of England" was not the kind of advice Richard was hoping for. Skip had lent us his old Skis and we were nursing a cracked moulding on the binding so we could not afford to mess around with them. The spare binding and tools had been ditched in the rationalization. Any problems would have to be resolved with the climber's perennial string and gaffa tape solution. My flippancy was to be short lived. As we skinned up out of the bowl my own binding came off three

times in quick succession. Uh-oh, perhaps my scrounging of Julian Freeman-Atwoods skis from Skips container had been a false economy? Instead I was soon expounding on the parentage of Silvio Berlusconi and more particularly Italian boot manufacturers. The back half of my sole unit had come completely unstuck and was uselessly flapping around. Disaster, this could scupper the entire expedition. My brain started racing, a) spare pair of boots under the forward bunk on the boat, b) Pat (Lurcock) might have a spare pair at King Edward Point as well. The pelagic contingent had both been on a walk yesterday and been invited on to a cruise ship. That little combination meant tiredness plus a skinfull of booze, equalling a likelihood they had not yet left Cumberland Bay. A couple of frantic calls on our Sat Phone confirmed the scenario. The boots were on their way. Dave Roberts on the Pelagic was not the sort of man to be deterred by crashing surf laden with ice blocks when it came to piloting his zodiac on to a rocky beach. He was up to his neck in freezing sea-water but got the boots ashore, assisted by Jules, Jim and Marcello.

Meanwhile we had established 'Boot-Camp'. A lash-up with a prusick loop had made a surprisingly robust crampon attachment to my boot. This was holding the whole caboodle together, perhaps good enough to climb on? But if it all came apart on an exposed ridge it would be a nightmare. I'd have to return to sea-level to get the spare boots. I knew Skips enormous plates of meat would mean I could probable use them as a sledge rather than boots. The thought of trying to front point in them later with three extra inches of leverage was already bringing tears to my eyes. Perhaps staring down at their wonderful style and colour scheme will ease the pain. They would undoubtedly improve my attractiveness, perhaps even my sex life apart from the small technical detail of my darling wife being 8000 miles away. Still, it's the thought that counts.



***Boot Camp***

So back down, through the belly of the beast. I took a more circuitous route, avoiding any soft snow and bridged crevasses. More hidden ledge systems and through passages were discovered as I descended. Everything went smoothly and I was back at the beach by mid-day. I had a quick refuel on some previously abandoned chocolate before setting off once more. I was back at boot camp by early afternoon. I was racing to beat the advancing fog to the lip of the glacier, but in the end had to stop to deal with the inevitable blisters that were developing. I took solace at the sheer beauty of these boots. One has to suffer for art. Usually someone else's. It was good to be back.

Next day we made an early start pulling sledges once again with crampons. We found a way through



a lateral moraine that led to the toe of the ridge extending down northwards from Sheridan Peak. There is then a steep climb, just on the limit of what is possible with skins. This went surprisingly easy compared to last time and we were soon over the lip and on to the third section of the Nordenskjold, a vast broad snow covered valley leading up alongside the western slopes of Sheridan Peak. A truly enormous wind scoop forms a moat adjoining this. It's another sign of the that the ablating glacier is also melting top-down and not just bottom up. We gave the dizzying drop into the wind scoop a very wide berth. Roped up again we marvelled at how skins and sledges crossed crevasse after crevasse without any breaking through, even in hot soft conditions. I knew from previous experience that terrain like this would be murderous if we were only on foot. By early afternoon we were near to our high camp from two years previously. This time we camped out on the glacier flat away from the avalanche danger and snow dumps that had done for us on that occasion.



*A Snow Petrel comes to nibble at my skis.*

This time I was determined to establish our advanced camp at the foot of the technical climbing rather than begin our climb from here. We were still too far away. The next morning we loaded rucksacks and climbed the long steep snowfield that led to the upper stage of the Nordenskold Glacier. It by-passed a long and heavily crevassed ice fall to the NW. It took us two carries to get all the gear up. I trailed an empty sledge during the first carry. We had wet snow and very poor visibility all day. We reached the shoulder navigating by memory from two years ago. Returning to locate the last load was a very real test of Richards GPS skills. He navigated us right back to the dump in a complete white out. All that practise on Clapham Common with his daughter Lottie was paying off! We struggled back up to the shoulder leaving the other empty sledge and the skis behind. I knew it was only a few kilometres at most to the site of our final camp and did not fancy the effort of setting up camp now, early, when we could press on. Richard was having none of it though. We were soaked and tired. Also in the white out we might site the final camp in a threatened spot in any case and only have to move it again. We were soon ensconced in warm sleeping bags making another hot dinner.



Meanwhile back aboard the Pelagic Laura had kindly updated our blog.

*It's been 5 days since we dropped Crag and Richard off at the bottom of the Nordenskjold Glacier. They left the boat on a grey evening, cold and drizzly, but a gentle breeze which meant it was possible to land them on the beach.*

*We manage to speak to them on the Iridium phone most evenings and so we have a daily update of their position. It took them 2 days to get all their things up to the snow line, and just as they started making progress up the glacier Crag managed to rip the bottom off his boots. Luckily we have a spare pair on board so we took them to the beach and left them for Crag to collect. We didn't actually see him as he had quite a trek to come all the way down again, but we know that he has collected them now and they are well on their way again.*

*Last night they had reached the top of the Nordenskold Glacier, and were planning to make it up to Advanced Base Camp by the end of today. I believe that this involves a technical ice climb and therefore the sledges with their gear on have to be left at the lower base camp. They will have to take two loads of gear each up the ice climb to advanced base camp and so it will be a long and tiring day. They have asked for a more detailed forecast through Commanders weather starting from tomorrow so that they can plan their final ascent. The wind forecast - all that we have on board the boat - suggests that a front with quite some wind, will come through tomorrow, but then it calms down again for a few days. Let's hope it gives them an opportunity to make it to the top. I will try to keep you posted with what is happening on the mountain, as we hear from them. All the best, Laura (first mate on the support yacht Pelagic Australis)*



***Richard finishes the hard pull to the top of the icefield to gain the upper glacier.***

Next morning we set a likely location by lat/long on the GPS so we could progress in the continuing whiteout. Odd breaks enabled me to remember the lay of the land. As we finally pulled on to the final flat a brief clearing enabled us to get our bearings and choose a good spot. We anchored the tent with guylines attached to sections of buried engine hose. We always use these or buried bags of snow.



**Our top camp, at last.**

Next day was my birthday. Laura had packed me a special candle which we ceremoniously placed in a mini Christmas pud. Today was the rest day. We triangulated the various weather forecasts and tomorrow looked to be the day. Timings had worked out well for once.

Laure reported. *So, on Friday night we spoke to Crag and they were comfortably at their advanced base camp. They were well settled in a secure place, and had a good forecast to go for the peak yesterday.*

*We know that they had planned to depart for the summit at 0200 local on Saturday morning and expected to be around 24hrs before they got back to camp. Crag said they would bivvy on the way down if necessary, but they would try to push all the way there and back. Here on board the yacht, we were watching the weather all day. It was calm, and the cloud cover was high, and so we decided that if they didn't manage to make it to the top, they had encountered a problem that they hadn't foreseen - we prayed that the weather didn't stop them. As predicted, we didn't get our 8pm phone call so we assume they did go for it.*

*This morning we received an email from the spot tracker. 'All OK here' is all it says! So, our assumption now is that they are both well and in a safe place. We still don't know if the mountain has been climbed or if they even went for it, but our fingers are crossed. We have to wait now until the 8pm phone call tonight to find out for certain what the situation is.*

*I will write again when we have more news but for now, fingers crossed!*

*All the best*

*Laura*

We got out of bed late at 2am on the 26th finally getting away by around 4 after the ritual faffing. The right hand side of the North face is threatened by regular serac falls. But by skirting the rocks on the left of the face you can avoid these. There was much less snow and ice cover than before but the line was still there. A convenient spindrift avalanche cone bridged the bergschrund and we were on to the face. We moved together heading up and right, aiming for the foot of a steep gully that broke through the rocks. The bottom part is the steepest. As we passed the 500' mark we started to become aware of the worrying void. On this kind of terrain its essential to have a clear instinct for every crumbling step. It's a mixture of rotten ice and powdery snow but you know by feel when they are good for the job. You have to trust each other and concentrate on not making a single error. To move fast you cannot afford the luxury of belaying and climbing in stages. The rope is only out so as

to be ready to be deployed when needed in a hurry. As I reached the start of the gully I Placed our first ice screw. We kept moving together only stopping when all the ice screws had been used up and swapping them back to the leader. As we emerged from the gully it was a relief to find the ice was slightly softer than before.

I remembered the harrowing night we'd had descending this on our earlier attempt. Weary down climbing over hard ice in continuous spindrift avalanches. The first down would place an ice-screw just before the stances so if the leader decided to take a jump the resultant 300 footer would not come directly on to the belay.

Now we made quick progress and by 8am we where we'd been at 5pm before! We crossed various rubble shoots and broken terrain. This naturally safeguards a pair as the rope runs over intervening spikes, without having to resort to the time consuming placement and removal of other running belays. At last we reached the crest of the east ridge. The rock is hilariously rotten. In high winds chunks are simply blown off! All those years Richard and I had spent climbing on the shale of Devon sea cliffs were now paying dividends. After Tin Tagel we were not as fearful of this tottering heap of Weetabix as logic might otherwise dictate. We wove the rope in and out of towers and blocks to safeguard our progress. One has to always be prepared to jump the opposite side if a companion was to slip.

The boiling broth thickened. Soon all I could see was a thin shard of dark shale soaring skyward. Eventually this ran out leaving us with 'white on white'. Things were now becoming a bit abstract as we started to depend on the subtle differences of whiter shades of pale. The angle of the crest was not extreme but the north side fell away very steeply. I crawled forward on my belly in the strong wind and poked my head over the south side. Oh dear, it was an impressive drop. The ice was now glass hard along the crest. The saving grace was a ribbon of wind-blown snow glued to it like a rooster's comb. If you choose your spot carefully and drove down hard enough it enabled you to get the shaft of your left axe in to the hilt and provide good purchase. Meanwhile one could use the pick of the right hand axe in the hard ice for the other hand and progress like some sort of demented crab. We shortened the rope and always had at least one ice screw between us to ward off disasters. When the wind dropped we could stand up instead and balance along this precarious banister rail. Every now and then the snow comb would develop into a proper cornice. This is when an overhanging wave of snow builds up on the leeward side. It's often a treacherous structure that breaks off without warning, It's all too easy in a white out to wander too close to the edge of one of these with unfortunate consequences. If you're lucky your mate will remain on the other side and you get away with a protracted bout of swearing and nothing worse. However it's best not to test this theory, but only to hold on to it as an article of faith.



*Surreal progress on the very crest except you can't see it.*

I was becoming increasingly aware that our progress along this perch was only possible if the winds remained low as they were. Richard meanwhile was becoming increasingly demented by the sastrugi effect. These downward pointing ribs of snow kept snagging any slack rope. This necessitated a horrible decent off the banister on to the hard ice in order to free the rope. I looked on in bemused horror as he cursed and swore, unpicking various macramé. We inched onwards and after a while reached a more level section where we could walk. The mist cleared briefly and revealed bulbous overhanging ice pillars disappearing into the southern depths in a grotesque phantastagorasmiasm. If Gaudi had designed mountains, this would be one of his. Things got steeper again. We had already passed the 'false knob' and surmised this was the real one, a distinct lump visible from afar, high on the summit ridge. We crept over the top and down climbed a steep pitch of pure best crystal to reach the saddle beyond. It was the sort of place where you make the final commitment to go for the top. We distinctly felt like we were space walking now, out on the upper limbs. Visibility got even worse but we knew we must be getting close and prayed there would not be a horrible obstacle at the last. Richards bank of instrumentation, altimeters and GPSs were registering summit proximity. Providing he did not short circuit in sastrugi fury we might be in with a chance. What appeared to be a huge long S in the ridge reared up ahead. The mist was playing tricks with us and we passed it in less than a rope length. Gradually the angle eased off and after 4000' of height gain, and getting on for double that in actual climbing distance, what looked like a typical South Georgia summit assumed its form. A flat platform crested by a 10' rounded bollard with a slightly higher whaleback a little to the right. All plastered in hoar frost. We staggered up together. Everything fell away in all directions. I waited and peered through breaks in the broth to make sure there was nothing higher nearby. It was the top. We logged the point on Richards GPS it was midday.





*Tippety-top, summit joy for Richard Spillett.*

We said what was on our minds almost together, right we're half way there. Let's get our god dammed asses off of here in one piece. We stepped down on to the platform and gave Pat a call at King Edward Point on our VHF radio. We had hoped they would have been able to see us on the summit. We offered to do a highland jig? He suggested setting fire to some bushes. We turned tail for the long haul home.

The steep sections on the upper icy ridge had to be carefully descended. Crampons balled up even with little snow, then only to skid on the polished ice. Worse still the infuriating sastrugi pushed our patience once more. I had to keep going fast enough to stop the rope tangling in them but not so fast as to pull Richard off. Whilst concentrating on this I just felt the toes of one foot waving in space long enough not to step down backwards any further. I had almost gone over the lip of a huge void plunging into the great unknown of the SE Face. Eventually the shale crest appeared below from the white out. It was a welcome sight just seeing something. We carried on down its awkward steps.

Luckily we emerged from the whiteout at exactly the same altitude we'd entered it, on the shoulder. This allowed us to pick up the right line back across the middle of the face. I carried on first to route find and set up any belays. Richard had the unenviable task of coming second. No comfort of a rope from above for him. In that position you cant even let the prospect of a huge fall become a nagging worry. It simply is not allowed, the state of mind or the actualite! Just keep plugging on, and fast as well, as night was looming and we had to find the gully through the rock barrier before dark or we'd have more than a nightmare on our hands. A 500' diagonal descent across the icefield led to the rocks. I started traversing back and forth, failing to recognise the upper entry to the gully. To far to the West and we'd be under the threatening seracs. To far east and we'd end up on appalling collapsing rock with no safe place to secure the rope. Worse still I could not find any good ice to place an ice screw to protect Richard as he descended. Finally I made a decision and committed to what I thought might be the right place. I crossed a thin scab of ice lying on a crackless blank slab. In the mush on the other side I dug down a meter until I hit hard ice. I drilled in a good ice screw at last and set off down the steep gully with Richard simultaneously following on from above. I doubled up

two poor ice screws at the bottom exit and traversed left onto a rotten rock pillar. All snow and ice was now just about useless for belays. I finally constructed a reliable piton belay after some desperate hammering. Richard hove into view in the last of the light.

We fished out our head torches. I re-racked the gear and resumed our descent. I was becoming increasingly worried by the lack of security. This last 700' or so felt steep and unreliable. That infuriating consistency that was too soft for ice screws but too hard for driving in the shafts of our ice axes. Digging down to the depths of my armpits revealed a morass of soft crystals, like Demerara sugar. We were very tired, this was not good. We had to find reliable belays or something bad could go wrong here. From the depths of my sub-conscious a possible solution wafted towards the surface. Perhaps if I buried by axes deep enough in a 'T' shape. The horizontal bar of the T would brace the vertical leg to make a strong and secure anchor, even in this shit. I dug like hell. A Vertical slot, deep into the slope. But for the next step, it was impossible to dig crosswise, deep enough, to make the horizontal cut with the adze of my axe. Instead I used the shaft of the axe working sideways out from the vertical cut. That way a horizontal slot angling in perpendicular to the slope was soon dug. I lashed my axes into a T shape and stuffed them in as far as they would go. I lowered down below them to get the right angle of pull. Bingo, we could hang a bloody herd of elephants of this set up. "OK Richard. You can fall as far as you like!" He joined me at my proud belay. "I was wondering what the hell was going on." "Look at this man. You can breathe easy now." We carried on down, pitch after pitch, diagonally to our right, searching for the one point to get across the bergschrund that would not involve an overhanging abseil. Finally I spotted it and gently eased across the deep slot without it collapsing. I took a final belay to safeguard Richard in case it gave way as he came across.

I drunkenly staggered down the last of the slope in the halo of my head torch to join Richard on the flat glacier. I felt like the Pope and wanted to sink to my knees and kiss the beautiful horizontal ground. Thank \*!?!# that's over. After over 7000' of actual down climbing we groaned in mutual thanksgiving. After a final rearrangement of our ropes and gear to cover a crevasse fall we set off across the glacier in the pitch black night in search of our camp, somewhere, about a mile across the valley.

Aided by 'La Bruja', Richard's GPS, we finally found it and collapsed into the tent at 2am on the morning of the 27<sup>th</sup>. As we drifted into oblivion yesterday's alarm went off. We wearily laughed, yep, this one had definitely been a 24 hour round trip. Never had the ignoring of an alarm been so sweet and now we could finally succumb to a sleep so deep . . .

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*\* note: subsequent to this article I managed to get hold of Christian de Marliave. He had got very close to the summit, only stopping below the final ice 'mushroom' that was too dangerous for him to climb on his own.*