

# The South Georgia Association Expedition 2009

## Final report

*Pelagic Australis* and crew had the immense pleasure of hosting eight members of the South Georgia Association for a 28 day cruise to the 'Wild Island' during October. A few of those had spent time on the island in the 70's as field researchers for BAS and they were keen to revisit the scene of their adventures that was possibly the most defining period of their lives.



*Pre departure safety brief by skipper Stewart Richardson*

Bob Burton, Bird Island 1971/72, took up the unenviable task of coordinating the itinerary based on the desires of the group which ranged from visits to Elsehuhl down to Larsen Harbour – not an easy task compared to satisfying the general tourist who has never been to SG. Sadly, our first anchorage at Elsehul on October 15<sup>th</sup> was so rough and 'williwaw' prone it was unwise to land.



*Les And Crag with williwaws Elsehul Bay*

The next morning we moved on in high winds and big seas directly to KEP. Bruce Pearson, Bird Island field biologist 1975/76/77, and since then a wildlife/landscape artist, amazed us all by setting up his watercolour canvass on the life raft box and painting various parts of the coastline with frozen fingers peppered by sea spray. His mission was to paint in the field in all conditions and if a wave blotted the canvass, that was part of the interpretation. He became an instant curiosity and was the most photographed species on the trip!



*Bruce Pearson paints on the liferaft box*

During two days of thick weather, while docked at the Tijuca Jetty at Grytviken, the team wandered about with abandon caging cups of tea at the SG museum and King Edward Point (KEP), the administrative base for the island. Bob, who normally visits the island annually on cruise ships as historian, commented on what a pleasure it was to wander around with no fixed schedule with days in hand.



*Grytviken Museum*

Back on board, myself, Crag Jones and Julian Attwood were preparing to be dropped near the tongue of the Nordenskjold glacier for an attempt on Mt. Nordenskjold. It's long summit ridge as viewed from Cumberland Bay is probably the most inspiring shape of all the big mountains on the island. As soon as the weather cleared on October 19th, the SGA group was rid of us and gained some space on board.



*Mt Nordenskjold from the Upper Glacier*

Skip's narrative of the climb follows in italics:



### *A tricky landing*

*This was a tricky dinghy landing in surf complicated by brash ice grinding into the bouldery beach. Climbers are always desperate to 'get started' so ignoring what could have been an embarrassing capsize we convinced Chris the dinghy driver to charge in, come what may. Three trips later with some very adept manoeuvring by Chris we had all our gear on shore and broke the comfort link to the mother ship Pelagic Australis. Followed a scrap and bag exercise where we eliminated much of the food that looked so attractive while packing on board, now less so as the pulks were loaded to the unbearable point. 14 days supply was cut down to 10, half a salami went under the knife, half the Parmesan supply and various jars of mustard, Marmite etc., that frankly confounded me in the first place. After all we were supposed to "roughing it!"*



*A short pull across grassy ground and a few relays of the pulks over moraine debris brought us to the snout, where we roped up and skinned up an easy slope to the level of the mighty Nordenskjold Glacier, the largest on the island that winds it's way up to the base of Mt Roots and Paget.*



On the same day, *Pelagic Australis* made a quick move to Fortuna Bay where David Mclean and Philip Sanders were deployed ashore on the Breakwind Ridge side to spend the night camping before snow shoeing the last day of the Shackleton Traverse. David is on the committee of the James Caird Society and is involved in authoring and producing various publications on Shackleton and other polar topics. He visited the island on a cruise ship in 2005. Philip, an enthusiast of wild places, had never been to South Georgia before, but was keen to camp and trek with David whenever possible. A full account of Philip and David's treks ashore follow in a separate section.

*By late afternoon our trio had arrived at the base of Mt Sheridan, a rocky spur of a peak, named after Guy Sheridan, commander of British Forces during the Argentine invasion of the island in 1982. It was a dream day – easy pulling up the neve of the glacier, negotiating very few crevasses en route, the high ground of the Allardyce Range and Nordenskjold, our focus, rising above us while the wind chop on Cumberland Bay East was lost to a deep blue sea as the coast receded below. We set up camp below the ridge on safe ground and settled in for the night, luckily windless.*

On October 20<sup>th</sup> while this David and Philip were en route to Stromness, John Alexander, the 'old boy' on board at 76, was taken to Leith Harbour, sadly to look on the whaling station from afar beyond the 200 meter line – he spent 6 years from 1954 to 1960 working as an electrician at Leith. John is a whaler in the flesh. A keen photographer even back then, he documented the workings of the station during those twilight years of land based whaling and donated copies of his presentation DVD to the museum, all proceeds going to the SGHT. Accompanied by Stewart Dodd, the president of the Dundee Photographic Society, and a veteran of 27 years in the RAF (closest he got to SG was Mount Pleasant Airport in the Falklands!) this pair had all 'guns' blazing throughout our voyage in order to document this nostalgic tour.



*Crag looks down on Pelagic Australis moored off Husvik*

*Pelagic Australis* spent two nights anchored off Husvik, an abandoned whaling station in Stromness Bay. Billeted at the 'managers villa' was a team of marine mammals specialists from St Andrews University, their multi year mission was tagging elephant seals with electronic transponders to study not only the elephant seals habits, but also to provide data to an oceanographic project studying water profiles in the Southern Ocean – a very clever collaboration.



*Thinking we had only about a three hour pull to reach the base of Nordenskjold, we broke our Sheridan Camp at the late hour of 0800, skinned around the corner and began another gentle pull up the unnamed glacier that leads to the base of Nordenskjold. Five hours later we arrived at a steep step where it was impossible to haul the pulks, so we decided to camp at the base of a rock buttress -convinced that the base of the mountain, could only be an hour and a half away – which also proved to be overly optimistic – blame all this optimism on the amazing clarity of the air!*



*We dug out a tent platform hard by the buttress, on the edge of a deep windscoop, which was earmarked as a good snow cave position, de rigueur for any base camp on the island, as collapsed tents due to the savage winds are a fact of life – we've all lost them! Cutting snow blocks with shovels we built a 1.5 meter high wall around three sides of the tent,*



*the fourth being the buttress itself. We felt pretty secure . . .*

#### *A secure Room with a view*

*On October 21<sup>st</sup> and only the third day on the climb, we got off to a leisurely start, intending to ski up to the base of the mountain on a recce, and possibly dump climbing equipment to make the next days carry light. The steep step was negotiated with crampons, and carrying our skis it became a slow pull which took an hour, and then easier ground led all the way to the snow fan and bergshroud of Nordenskjold – three hours from the camp! It was now midday, the sun was shining, the slope to the summit ridge looked laid back and we reckoned it was only five hours to the top . . . so we decided to go for it, realizing there could be a bivy on*



*the way down at worst. The forecast was northwest 20 to 25, not a great situation, and the next day was calming to 15, but the South Georgia adage is 'carpe diem,' and here we were.*



On the face on the recce

*Crag led up the fan, step plugging into soft snow, and later found ice for ice screw runners, the three of us always moving together. By 1430 we stopped for a lunch break in amongst rock outcrops on the face. Cloud was now forming over the summits of Paget but our peak was still in the clear, although spindrift was ably on the long summit ridge. We pressed on over steeper ground, now front pointing into hard ice.*



*At 1700, still an hour short of the summit ridge, with no obvious bivvy site, a rethink was in order, shouting to each other above the rising wind. With no obvious bivvy site at this late hour, we decided to bail out, already fully in the teeth of a blow. Visibility was on the way down, the wind was freshening to gale force sending strong gusts of spindrift down the face. After eight hours of abseiling and down climbing, the light having faded by 1900, we arrived at the bergshroud pretty knackered. We rigged Crag's*

*emergency bivy shelter and huddled under a serac for three hours waiting for first light in order to safely ski down back to the camp.*



*Midnight under the serac*

*At 0630 we collapsed into the tent, 24 hours on the trot without a break - and of course the day remained sunny and windless while we slept it off when we should have been climbing . . . .*

While we three climbers were struggling in a storm on Mt. Nordenskjold (Bob Burton described our outing as a 'futile exercise' – and by then I was agreeing with him . . . ), *Pelagic Australis* struggled south in high winds to get to Larsen Harbour, with a short stop at Moltke Harbour for respite. At Larsen, Bob counted the Weddell pups, one of his many goals on the voyage – the score was nine, and we are all interested to look up past counts as a comparison.



*Les and Bruce Action Men*

Our action men Bruce Mair, field geologist on SG for the seasons 1974/75 and 76/77; and Les Sturgeon, field geophysicist in the Antarctic from 1975 to 81 with landings on SG en route, hiked over to Doubtful Bay. This was an especially poignant stopover for Bruce as he was part of a team that had mapped the strata during two six month field seasons helping to define the Larsen Harbour Formation. For his labours, Mt. Mair towers above the Drygalski Fjord. This pair would put on their touring skis at every opportunity and disappear over the horizon.



*Crag Jones, Julian Attwood*



*Skip*

*The drama did not end there with out failed attempt. The day after our 'day off' we dug a snow cave in the windscoop in view of a bad weather forecast for the next 48 hours. This took most of the afternoon of October 23<sup>rd</sup>. We closed the entrance with snow blocks, marked the spot*

*with a ski pole sticking out of the wall, and retreated to the tent for the night, just as it started to snow heavily.*



*By morning the tent was buried up to just below the peak, the snow wall having created a gathering point for spindrift. I had to dig myself out of the tent flap, upwards, with a plastic plate. It took most of the morning to excavate the tent, but as fast as we dug it out it filled. Crag and I took a tour in a white out up on the snowfield above the buttress, and there was a full meter of snowfall perched above our camp position, which immediately became a concern.*



*Mulling this over, we decided to go into the snow cave for the night. The ski pole marker was just visible and Julian had to dig through two meters of drift to find the blocked in door. We made the cave comfortable, moved all the kit down from the tent and settled down to a boil in the bag dinner . . . Before nightfall, Julian opted to return to the tent, feeling a bit claustrophobic in what was a tight space.*



*Comfortably shooting the breeze before the penny dropped!*

*Now with more room to spread out, Crag and I shot the breeze for an hour comfortable in our sleeping bags, but just as we were dozing off, we started to hear snow sloughing off the high ground. It didn't take long to conclude that we might have dug this cave on what was a snow fan for avalanches from above, and it would be stupid to linger. If the windscoop filled it would be hard or impossible to dig ourselves out!*



*Julian ready to lower the pulks down the glacier*

*We quickly packed our gear, dragged everything up to the tent and alerted Julian who needed no convincing that we had to evacuate the camp. After digging out the tent (2 hours), by midnight we skied off the campsite and down on to the glacier to witness a sliver of moon just setting behind Mt Rootes. Navigating with GPS positions in pitch black we kept going, later waiting for an hour for first light to find the way off the upper glacier down on to the Nordenskjold.*



*Well down the Nordenskjold Glacier looking back at the Paget massif*



*On the beach exhausted after 30 hours on the go!*

*By 1100 we were back on the beach, exhausted, wandering around the depot like zombies trying to get our tent back up. Pelagic Australis picked us up the next afternoon, just in time for a slap up dinner on board. . . . So ends the climbing, or does it? – read on . . .*

Everyone was glad to be back on the jetty at Grytviken. The next day we dried and organized the climbing gear for the ride back to Stanley, feeling somewhat dejected. Invited by KEP for 'desert' the following evening we were asked to 'sing for our tea.' John Anderson gave his whaling lecture with his images from the fifties and Crag amusingly chronicled our adventures (immediate gratification via digital photography and a laptop!) on Mt. Nordenskjold to a delighted KEP and museum audience (at least the drinks kept coming!).





*Les Sturgeon and Bruce Mair above Gulbrandsen Lake*

The next day we stopped at Husvik when the seaway was too unpleasant to continue to the Bay of Isles. Myself, Crag, Bruce Mair, Les, David and Philip all took a late afternoon junket (skis and snowshoes) to Gulbrandsen Lake. From a vantage point high above the 'lake' (empty) we were shocked to have a clear view of Cumberland West Bay hard up against the snout of a much 'down wasted' Neumayer Glacier. In 2002 when Crag and I camped on the Neumayer the snout of the glacier was more or less as is depicted on the current SG map – see it and weep for glacial recession.

The result of our ad hoc foray (not to mention a superb ski down) was a lively speculative debate at 'happy hour' in the pilot house regarding successive beach lines above the lake, the glacial drain plug and other phenomena not clearly understood. The following morning we made our way to the Bay of Isles to visit the albatross and prepare for the return voyage to Stanley.

The last day was more than busy right to the end. The plan was to visit Prion Island the following day. This is a must stop while on the island to see the great Wandering Albatross on a breeding site. Bruce Pearson was chomping at the bit to get ashore with his art materials, as this would be one of the most significant subjects for his intended exhibition.

Meanwhile, in an impetuous, lightening fast decision, as the majestic Mt Ashley came into view, myself and Crag decided to make a one day attempt on it during what would be the last day on the island. I had book marked Mt Ashley in 2006 while with the Swiss Italians, as a nice unclimbed summit, easily accessible from above Salisbury Plain.



*Mt Ashley from Bay of Isles*

Succinctly, Crag recounts the adventure:

*We camped ashore on the night of the 29th behind Start point on the edge of Salisbury Plain. A fairly filthy night weather wise. Got up at 2am and started skiing up the Grace Glacier by 4:00am.*



*Early morning on the Grace Glacier*

*Reached the top of the glacier by 5:30 below its headwall. Stashed skis there and took a GPS reading. Climbed to the col and took another GPS reading.*

*Very bad visibility then necessitated slow progress up and across to the SE in trying to identify which was the highest of several possible tops. This back end of the range is a broad undulating glacial slope overlooking the outer part of King Haakon Bay. After many protracted waits for clearings we finally identified what we thought was the highest point, the second of 4 summits in a chain stretching away to the SE over about a mile. We proceeded up easy slopes to a col between the 1st and 2nd top. 100m of climbing up a steep icy dome led to the 2nd top, the last pitch being belayed from ice screws.*



*On the false summit premature celebrations*

*I waited for clearings to confirm that this was higher than the 3rd and 4th top in the distance. However Skip spotted that the ridge behind us leading back to the 1st top disappeared worryingly for several hundred feet higher until it was lost into the cloud. We thus descended back to the col and ascended this ridge up to the 1st and highest top.*

*Though spectacular with vast drops off to the N, the broad ridge was straightforward climbing, moving together up through the final hoarfrosted towers to a flat summit. By now it was approx 13:00 hrs. We retraced our steps towards the Grace Glacier but continuing white outs necessitated the use of the GPS to find the col and the correct decent back to the skis.*

*We had not seen evidence of a single crevasse on the ascent. Bearing this in mind and that it was early in the season in any case we descended*

*unroped on skis. Steady snowfall and heavy mist meant we still had to follow a GPS bearing until nearly back to sea level. We packed away our camp and were recovered to the good ship Pelagic Australis at 19:00 hrs in time for Tea 'n' Medals!*



*Skip on the summit of Mount Ashley*

*30 October - 13:00 on summit, GPS Lat 54 06.963 long 37 21.650 Elevation 1136m*



*Crag takes in the brief view down to King Haakon bay*

The following section by reports the various overnight forays ashore made by David and Philip.



Following the dropping off of the main climbing party at the northern end of Nordenskjold Glacier, the Pelagic Australis sailed up the coast to Fortuna Bay. Here, we were deposited by zodiac on the beach opposite the point where Shackleton crossed over to find Stromness. We were immediately impressed by the profusion of wildlife thronging the shore area, most obviously king penguins, elephant seals and numerous reindeer. As it was already 16.00 hours and out to sea dark clouds were brewing we headed along the bay to find a suitable camping spot, choosing one where the tussocks and hillocks gave way to a long beach and the moraine plain of the Konig Glacier. Our chosen spot offered some shelter from the wind, was close to a clean source of water but away from the wild life on the shore below. No sooner was the tent was up but the drizzle became heavy rain, gusting as the evening wore on. Sufficient order was maintained within the tent that we were able to rendezvous early next morning with Les and Bruce, who spent the night on the boat. They also planned to do Shackleton's last day, using skis.

It had been assumed that the river of glacial outfall was not running and we could round the beach without difficulty. No sooner had we started our walk but we found a vigorous stream that inland was evidently at least waist deep and at the beach, with tide high, was not readily negotiable. We prospected further and further inland. We soon realised that there was a substantial moraine lake blocking our approach. As the glacier was barely a mile inland it was agreed we should all head up to the right hand of the glacier's end and by pass the water by crossing over the glacier. By keeping well to the side and clambering up and down piles of choss we reached the snout. To mount the glacier it was necessary to scramble up a huge serac of ice separated from the main glacier and from the bottom of which a torrent emerged. An awkward jump was managed including by the skiers wearing gum boots. We traversed about 800m, sometimes over

the shelving ice itself, sometimes across moraine. This was negotiated



IMG\_6508 On the Konig Glacier looking down Fortuna Bay. © D McLean 2009

without crampons or ice axes and at the far end we stopped for lunch.

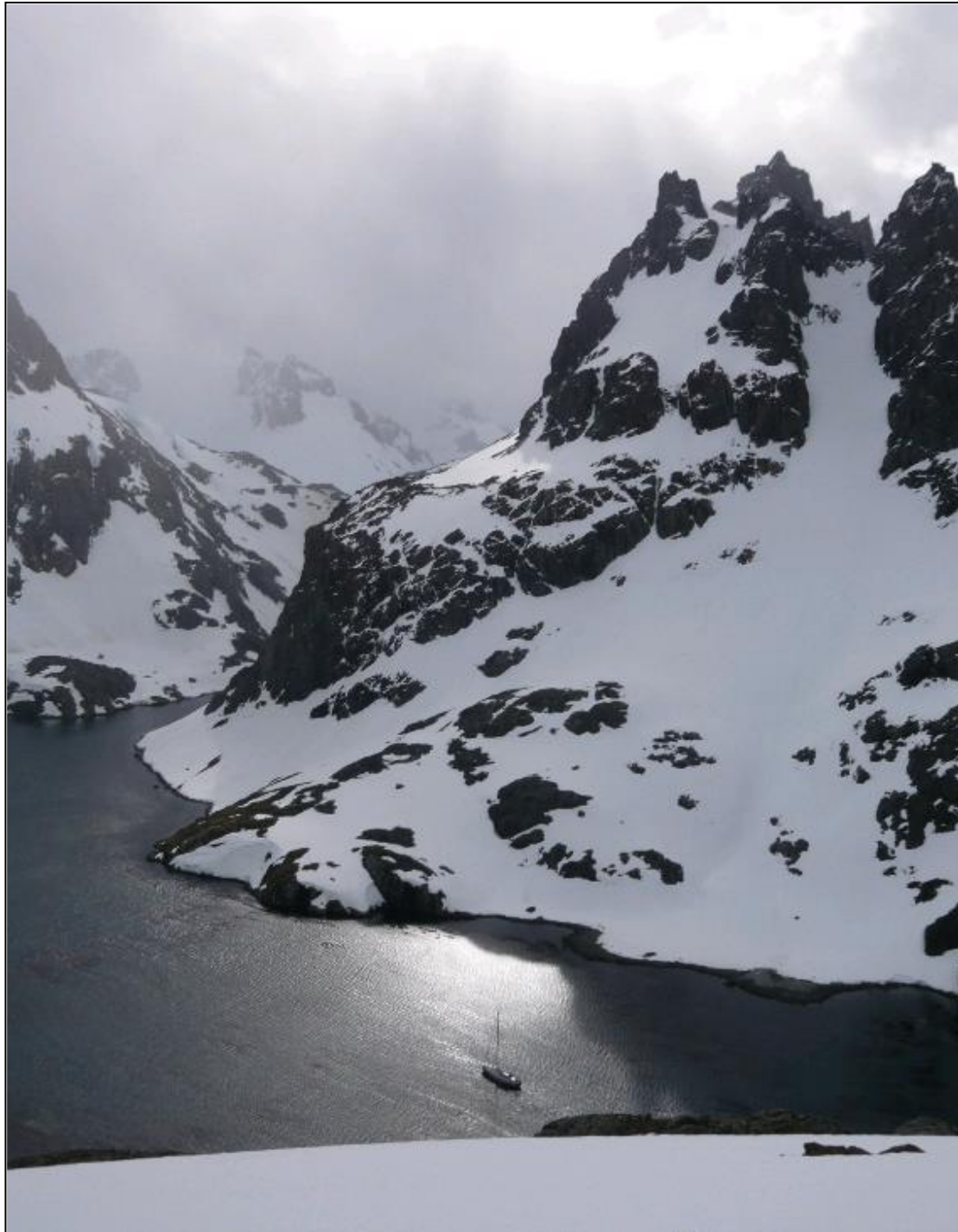
The way was now clear to climb up to the pass over to Stromness. With the skiers shouldering their skis and us our camping gear, we mounted the rough bouldery hillside until snow cover was reached.

Soon the skiers overtook us on their skins, we moving more sedately but steadily on snow shoes. We were rewarded, however, when at the coll, brilliant blue skies lit the jagged mountain scenery in brilliant sun, with little wind. We lingered for an hour to soak in the magnificent scenery. With the afternoon wearing on, and the boat wanting to move on from Stromness to anchor at Husvik, we pressed on down past the Shackleton waterfall. Removing the snow shoes we down climbed a steep gully to the left of the waterfall, before crossing the grassy plateau to Stromness.



IMG\_6560 Final steep descent towards Stromness. © D McLean 2009

Two days later, the Pelagic Australis was anchored in Larsen Harbour at the extreme southern end. In idyllic weather, four of us made ascents to the ridge line to look down on Doubtful Bay. That night, however, the wind blew strongly. When the anchor began to drag the crew raised the anchor and decided to motor out into the wider waters of the fjord itself, returning to the anchorage when the wind lessened.



After the run north into what we thought would be gentler weather, we arrived at Andrews Bay on October 26th. The following day was slated for our two night trek from St Andrews Bay along the Sorling Valley to Cumberland East Bay, with camps at each end. The forecast was 30-40 knot winds, rising on the second day. We were warned to expect the

possibility of a third night ashore if conditions made a landing at the far end impossible. Sobered by the conditions that developed on the previous abortive camping, we decided not to take the risk. While it might have been OK, the high winds followed by substantial snowfall at KEP suggested this would hardly have been a comfortable hike.

It would have been disappointing only to spend one night ashore. A suitable alternative outing came up when Skip and Crag decided to attempt Mt Ashley from Ample Bay. Our team made the first landing, close to Start Point at the edge of Salisbury Plain. We surveyed Ample Bay with little enthusiasm given the lack of shelter and its exposure to any catabatic winds off the glaciers, but we managed to find some shelter higher up the slope and away from the exposed beach. We passed a relatively quiet night with the sound of elephant seals growling in the distance.

By next morning the weather had changed for the worse with low cloud, more wind and some snow. We decided to take it easy until the snow stopped and we felt like going out and exploring. Although we had brought crampons and axes, we saw no point in blindly heading into the cloud. Instead we clambered around over moraines, then across the wide open spaces of Salisbury Plain to see the extensive king penguin rookery. Ascending up the flanks for 700 odd feet, we could appreciate the vastness of this unique set of grassy levels. Countless numbers of Kings lined the many streams which flowed across the Plain. Many were in molt and the streams ran with penguin down! In a more protected area higher up the Kings protected the huddled gatherings of fluffy brown chicks. Diverting as best we could around the packed masses of the birds, we made our way back towards the beach. As we approached, the topmast of the Pelagic Australis appeared above a hillock. We radio'd in, struck camp and rejoined the boat. An hour or so later Crag and Skip got back as well after their successful ascent of Mt Ashley.

Philip Sanders and David McLean

November 2009