During 1983 two Americans, Frank Wells and Dick Bass, attempted to climb the highest point of every continent. As part of this in November they went for Mount Vinson (5140m). This was logistically the most difficult since neither the American National Science Foundation nor the British Antarctic Survey would co-operate. They hired a specially modified DC3, whose airframe dated back to 1942. It had three modern turbo prop engines fitted (the third in the nose) and special skis for snow landings. It had excellent range and payload and was probably the only aircraft in the world that could do the job.

Giles Kirshaw, a Briton with extensive Antarctic experience flying for BAS and for Rannulph Fiennes’ Transglobe expedition was the pilot. The final party consisted of Bass and Wells, with Rick Ridgway and Chris Bonington acting as climbing experts and Steve Marts as climbing cameraman. Yuichiro Miura, the man who skied from the South Col of Everest in 1970 was also a member of the team, hoping to ski down Mount Vinson. He also had a cameraman with him.

The party flew from Punta Arenas to the British/Chilean base at Rothera on 17 November. The Chileans had already made a fuel drop by parachute from a C130. On the 18th the team flew down the peninsula to the southern side of the Elsworthy mountains, landing on the ice cap about five miles from the foot of Mount Vinson. On the 19th, the team sledged their supplies to the head of a glacier leading to the base of a secondary ridge guarding the massif. They climbed the head wall on the 20th and reached the site of their first camp, just below the col between Mount Vinson and Mount Shin. They moved up on the 21st and on the 22nd reached 4000m on the ridge leading to the summit of Mount Vinson.

They went for the summit on the 23rd. The temperature that day was around -35°C with a wind of about 80km/h. The others were forced to turn back, but Bonington was going well and took the chance to go to the top by himself. The climbing was fairly straightforward with only one awkward section getting round a rocky gendarme, but in view of the wind and cold, and the constant threat of severe wind storms that can last up to a week, it all felt very serious. He reached the summit at about 17.30, to find a ski pole embedded in the snow left on a previous ascent. The others sat it out at Camp 1, supplied with further rations by Giles Kershaw and Bonington until the wind dropped and they made a successful ascent on 30 November. Miura was able to ski only the centre section of the route, the upper and lower parts being too rocky.

They had followed the route made by Nick Clinch’s expedition of 1966, though had used one less camp and were a very much smaller team. There had been another ascent by some American geologists surveying the area but they had cheated, using a helicopter to get them quite close to the summit.
Mount Vinson, Antarctica showing route

On the summit of Mount Vinson with Gardner, Tyree and Shina beyond