THE SOUTH GEORGIA SURVEY, 1955–6

By LOUIS BAUME

SITUATED some 36° west of Greenwich and about 54° south, the rugged and windswept island of South Georgia lies just within the Antarctic Convergence. It is a massive and precipitous upthrust of ice-covered mountain whose principal ranges rise steeply from the Southern Ocean to an altitude of over 9,500 ft. From these frozen heights, swept by winds and hurricanes of vindictive force and uninhabited except for the snow petrel and vagrant skua, innumerable glaciers flow and tumble into the turbulent grey seas.

The backbone of this important island consists of the Allardyce Range in the north-west and the Salvesen Range in the south-east, the two being divided by the 2,000 ft. Ross Pass. The Salvesen Range contains about four peaks of over 6,000 ft. and about four of over 7,000 ft., all unnamed and the highest being 7,649 ft. The Allardyce Range can boast some eight peaks of over 6,000 ft. and about four of over 7,000 ft. : among these are Sugartop (7,637 ft.) and Nordenskjöld (7,725 ft.). Dominating them all, however, is the massive, aloof and oft shrouded summit of Mount Paget, 9,625 ft. above the sea, barely more than 4 miles away.

The island, about 120 miles long and an average of 15 miles wide, has, particularly along the northern coast, a deeply indented shoreline ; into these many bays and fjords flow unnumbered glaciers the more important of which, at least in their upper reaches, form relatively easy highways for sledging.

Though discovered by Captain Cook in 1775 and extensively visited by whalers and sealers in the following years, South Georgia remained virtually unexplored until a few years ago. A preliminary survey party led by Duncarn Carse visited the island during 1951–2 and a second smaller party continued the survey during the 1953–4 season. In 1954–5 a climbing party led by George Sutton managed, in addition to some glaciological work and local surveying, the first ascent of a 6,171-ft. summit at the southernmost extremity of the Allardyce Range. During the 1955–6 season, Carse led his third and final Survey Party down to South Georgia.

The aim of this expedition was, first and foremost, to complete the exploration and mapping of the island by closing the four large remaining gaps and co-ordinating the results of the three seasons' work. Of low priority in the programme was an attempt on Mount Paget, hitherto unclimbed.

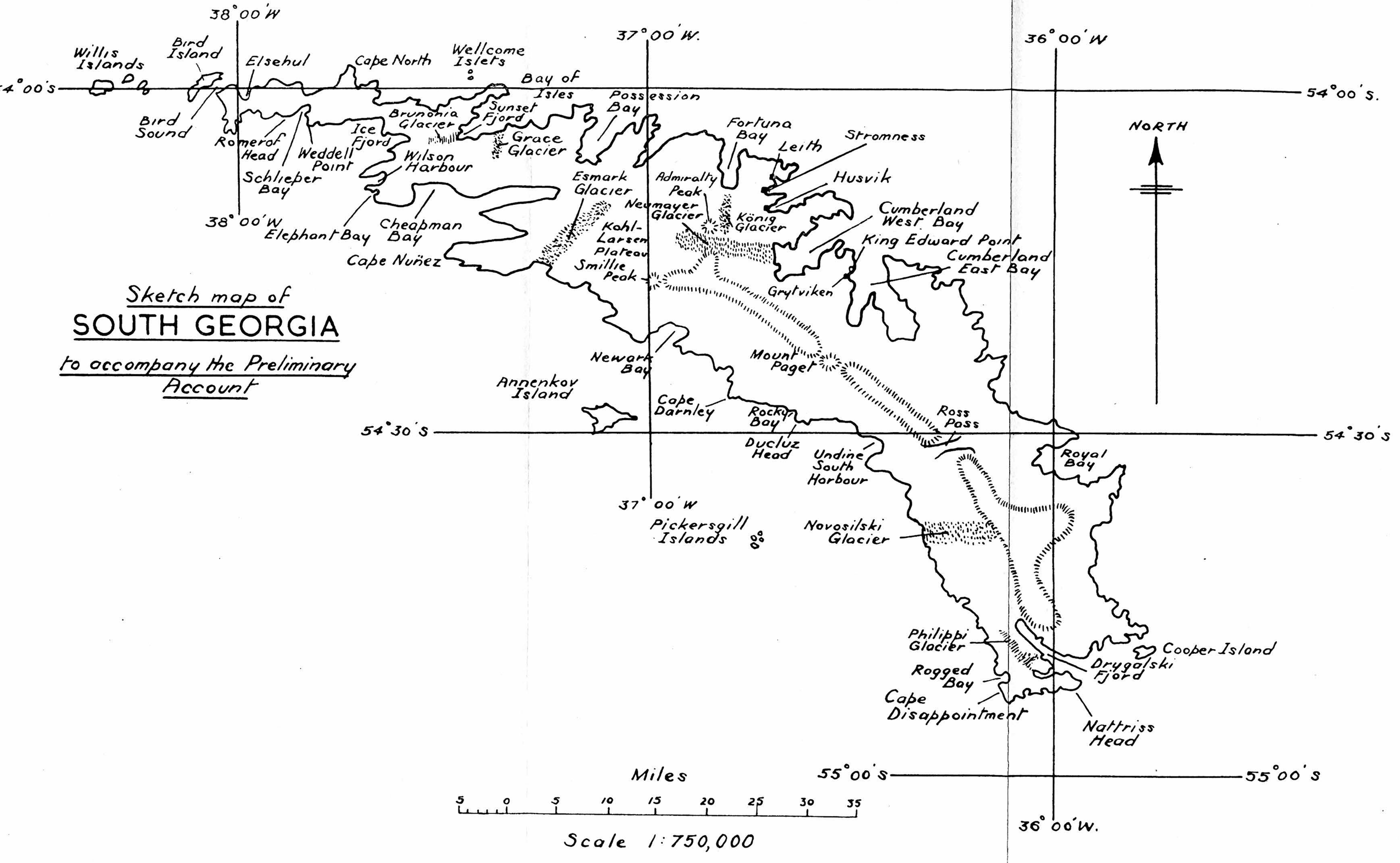
We sailed from Newcastle in August 1955 aboard the *Southern Opal* and thirty days later, after refuelling at Dakar, reached the British whaling station of Leith. There we transhipped to the ex-sealer *Sabra* and sailed round to King Edward Point, the seat of local administration, where we were to establish our Base Camp in and around the local ' jail '. There were four journeys to be undertaken—weather permitting—and the first of these was to be of sixty days' duration.

We were landed at the head of Fortuna Bay, in the lee of some grounded icebergs, by the Argentinian sealer *Albatross*. Our very first camp was pitched on the beach and that night, after our evening hoosh of pemmican had been finished and the candle had been blown out, I lay in my warm sleeping-bag and listened to the magic and music of the night : the steady beat of the waves on the shore, the belching and grunting of the adult elephant seals and the plaintive bark of the new-born pups. Our route took us up the König Glacier and six days later, after one or two hard blows, we skirted round Admiralty Peak (3,100 ft.) and turned west up the snow-covered Neumayer Glacier flowing down past Spaaman, the Three Brothers and other unnamed peaks of the Allardyce Range.

Within ten days of landing, we had established Camp VIII on the central Kohl-Larsen Plateau at an altitude of 2,680 ft. There Tony Bomford, our chief surveyor, established the first and principal Base Line and started the survey. ' Trig ' stations were subsequently established on the summits of several hitherto unclimbed mountains, one of which was ' Dimple ' (5,637 ft.) off whose insubstantial summit crest John Cunningham, George Spencely and I were eventually driven by a fierce and freezing wind.

Stan Paterson, our second surveyor, was suffering at that time from snow-blindness and so, while Carse led three of the party on to Camp IX, the remaining four of us stayed behind until Paterson was fit enough to travel. The spell of clear weather ended and we were confined, somewhat impatiently, to our tents.

Survey inevitably took precedence over any purely mountaineering project but the climbers nevertheless nurtured a secret hope that they might one day have the opportunity of climbing one of the higher summits. Such a one was Spaaman (6,367 ft.) whose long West ridge terminated on the edge of the Kohl-Larsen Plateau. Happily, the morning before we were to move on to Camp IX, the weather cleared and so three of us—Keith Warburton, Spenceley and myself—were out of our tents and off. To give our projected ascent of Spaaman an aura of respectability, we took with us some light survey equipment in order to carry out a compass survey from the top and draw a panorama of the unknown south side of the Allardyce Range, across which we would have to travel during the fourth journey. The weather remained clear and



Sketch map of SOUTH GEORGIA

to accompany the Preliminary Account

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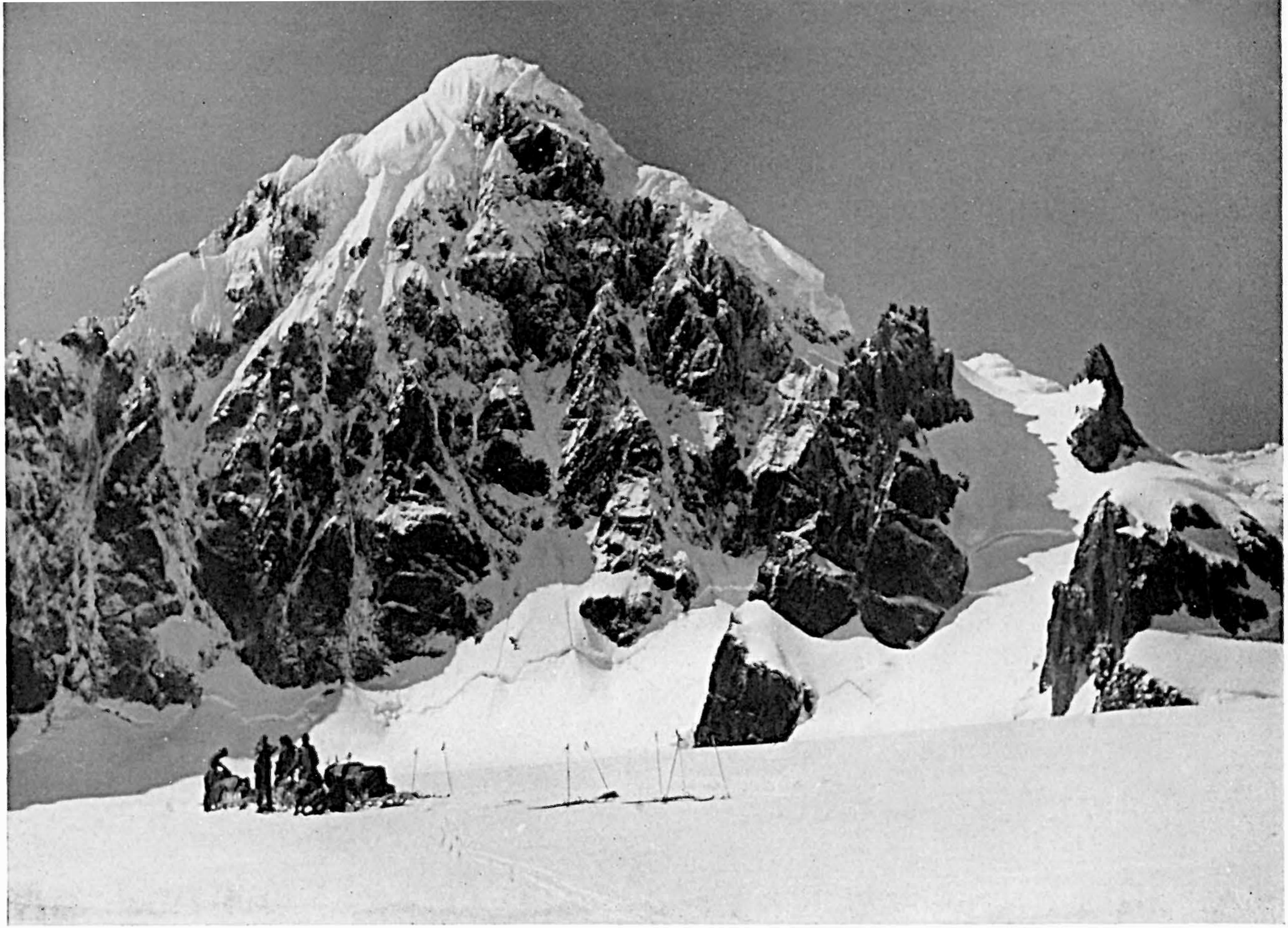
with little wind. The broad undulating ridge of frozen snow narrowed towards the top and just short of the actual summit was cleft by an immense cut—a precipitous Devil's Kitchen with vertical walls of ice polished by its captive winds. We reached the summit after five hours: a writhing crest of ice, knife-edged and sculpted by the winds, overtopping the broad Neumayer flowing below. It was the greatest height yet reached in South Georgia.

From Camp IX, we travelled north-west to the isthmus between Possession and King Haakon Bays and then on down the Lucas Glacier, manhauling our sledges and carrying out surveys from various summits on the way. It was from King Haakon Bay that Shackleton, accompanied by Worsley and Cream, and in the face of incredible odds, had set off on his epic crossing of South Georgia forty years before. From the Lucas we crossed over with some difficulty to the Grace Glacier, also running northwards into the Bay of Isles. On November 11, with heavy snow falling and poor visibility, we pitched Camp XVIII at the head of the Grace in a most vulnerable position. Carse described it well in his diary:

'It was a malevolent site, and we would never have chosen it had we first been able to see where we were. The smooth steep face of the col rose abruptly through 500 feet a minute's walk away, and the flanking precipices of dark rock east and west gripped the head of the glacier in two pincer-like corries. There was no free run for the wind, only an irregular serration of gashed crags.'

It started to blow that evening and by next morning the gale had increased to hurricane force. The fierce winds roared and screamed around us, bouncing off the mountain faces and tearing at our tents, lashing us with hard-driven snow and ice. We remained fully dressed and with everything packed in case of emergency. In the early hours of the 13th, I was awakened by the hurricane: lumps of ice were flying through the air and bombarding our camp; powerful winds were shrieking down from the cols around us resolved, it seemed, on our destruction. At 5 a.m. Carse gave a shout to say that his tent had been ripped open by a chunk of ice; three men went out into the storm to help collapse the tent and pile boxes on top of the debris. And then all raced back to shelter. The winds increased in violence to a force of about 110 knots; it seemed impossible that our tents could hold out much longer. At about noon, another shout was heard above the turmoil: the metal poles of Bomford's tent were collapsing under the strain. Before long, he and Paterson had to abandon their tent also and seek refuge in the remaining two. We were now four in each two-man tent. For the rest of that day and the whole of the following night we remained awake, taking it in turns to support the metal poles and side-guys against the onslaught of the gale and to sit bracing ourselves



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SLEDGE PARTY TAKING BREATHER ON THE SOUTH SIDE OF CENTRAL BASIN OF NOVOSILSKI GLACIER ON FEBRUARY 18, 1956. PEAK 5507 BEHIND.

against the sides of the tent so as to prevent the canvas from being ripped apart. With the onset of darkness we made plans as to what to do should the remaining tents disintegrate during the night. But my diary records on the following day:

'Round about 02.00, as I was lying very cold against the tent side, I heard and felt wave upon wave of wind, solid with ice and snow, crashing down upon us like breakers of a rough sea pounding the shore in all their fury. By a miracle the tent was standing up to it. . . . Dawn slowly appeared. . . . The other tent had also just survived.'

And with the dawn came a lull—a lull just long enough to enable us to break camp and make our way down the glacier to a less vulnerable site.

The most rewarding climb during the first journey was undoubtedly when we carried out a survey from a modest summit commanding a magnificent view across the Bay of Isles. On setting up our theodolite, we were somewhat surprised to see an upturned bottle embedded in the ice. We dug down very carefully with our ice-axes and removed the bottle. Inside was a note and a piece of string leading further into the ice ! The note read :

' This peak was climbed on
10th March 1954
by Bernard Stonehouse and Nigel Bonner.
Its height by our aneroid is 1980 feet.
Farther down in the pile is a small
bottle of whisky.
Good health.' [1]

And true enough, at the end of the piece of string, we found the small bottle. God bless all such thoughtful pioneers !

The first journey ended on December 2 when we reached the Norwegian whaling station of Husvik. Ten days later we set off again, in two parties, to map the north-western end of South Georgia. The island here is much narrower and the mountains very much lower. There was also ample opportunity to study and photograph the wild life, so prolific in this part of the island : seals, penguins, albatrosses, blue-eyed shags, and many others ; all, with the exception of the leopard seal, friendly and unafraid of man. Christmas and New Year were spent under canvas and on January 10, 1956, we were back again at Base. We remained there for quite a long while, working out survey results, making and repairing equipment, and preparing for the third journey down to the south-eastern end of the island. Some of us even spent a few days out with the catchers hunting whales.

On January 28 we were landed from the eighty-five-year-old *Lille Karl* in Royal Bay, at the foot of the towering ice-cliffs of the Ross

[1] Two biologists who worked for eighteen months around Ample Bay in 1953–5.

Glacier. Six days later we were over the Ross Pass and encamped above the Brögger Glacier. From there, one evening, we enjoyed a magnificent view as the clouds drifted away and revealed the whole of the southern chain of the Allardyce Range bathed in the glowing light of the setting sun : Nordenskjöld, with its razor-sharp arêtes, the two summits of Rootes and, beyond, Mount Paget, the sight of which convinced us more than ever that, given the chance, we could reach the top.

The mountains of the Salvesen Range, into which we now penetrated, were rather different in character from their northern neighbours : less massive but with more individuality their rocky crags festooned with leaning towers and aiguilles ; a terrific concentration of mountains thrusting up above the tumbling glaciers and deep narrow fjords with few of the wide sweeping vistas of the north-west.

On February 14, a party of four—Warburton, Tom Price, Cunningham and Paterson—left Camp IX, pitched at the head of the Novosilski Glacier, and, despite poor visibility to start with, achieved the first ascent of ' Cake ' from whose 7,209-ft. summit a full survey station was observed. This was the highest mountain to be climbed in South Georgia. A project to climb ' Biscuit ' (7,649 ft.) a few days later had to be abandoned owing to adverse weather conditions and the priority of survey.

We succeeded in finding a sledgeable route through these unexplored regions and finally arrived above Larsen Harbour, a narrow inlet off Drygalski Fjord. There we were held up and confined to our tents by an eight-day hurricane-blizzard of stubborn and unremitting intensity. The abrasive power of the frozen drift which, driven by winds of 100 m.p.h., lashed our tents unceasingly during all that time was such that the canvas became completely worn and ripped at the slightest touch. Our original plan had been for us to be picked up by the ex-sealer *Diaz* in Larsen Harbour and taken straight round to the Rocky Bay area on the south coast, from where we would make an ascent of Mount Paget, returning to Husvik via the Kohl-Larsen Plateau. Unfortunately the condition of our tents made it imperative for us to return first of all to Base. Furthermore we learnt that landing on the south coast was impracticable, though not impossible, so late in the season and also that our ship for home was sailing ten days sooner than expected. A drastic alteration in plan was made and hopes of having a crack at Paget diminished as a result.

On March 6 we were landed close to the snout of the Neumayer Glacier. Then followed five gruelling days of back-packing and hauling, first over an immense triple lateral moraine chaotically crevassed and without any snow cover, and then over the exceptionally difficult lower reaches of the broken and considerably crevassed Neumayer. But at long last we reached the Kohl-Larsen Plateau and there we pitched

SMILLIE PEAK (5,798 FT.) FROM ABOVE CAMP VIII ON THE KOHL-LARSEN PLATEAU. OCTOBER 1955.

Camp VI, not far from ' Dimple ' and Smillie Peak (5,798 ft.). A short sharp blizzard forced us to lie up for the next two days.

Wednesday, March 14, dawned fine and clear and while three members went off to observe a ' trig ' station from a nearby summit, the other five—Carse, Warburton, Spenceley, Cunningham and myself —struck camp and moved on towards a 4,000-ft. col beyond Smillie Peak, over which we had to cross in order to reach the southern side of the Allardyce Range. But the col was never reached for during that same afternoon the five of us, who had pitched camp and gone back to lead in the survey party, had ourselves become hopelessly lost in a raging blizzard which was by then sweeping across the high pleateau. With no visibility, savage winds and blinding drift, we were unable to find our tents. After wandering around in vain for a couple of hours or more, aware that our survival in the open could be only a matter of hours, we succeeded in falling through a suitable crevasse and climbed in to seek shelter.

We spent fifteen uncomfortable hours in that crevasse, soaked and without food. Throughout the night the barometer continued to fall and the storm to rage outside ; gradually our icy hole filled with drifting snow. We huddled together for warmth, stamped our feet and beat our arms and fought against an almost overpowering weariness. And uppermost in our minds was the problem : What to do ? With the weather conditions as bad as ever, it would be impossible for us to search for our camp ; nor could we hope to find our three companions whom we presumed, like us, were lost. Yet their eventual safety might well depend on our survival. Next morning we decided to make a bid for Husvik, some 15 miles away, a journey which we knew would not be without hazard.

We crawled out of our hole and were met by an icy blast of sleet, driven by winds of 70–80 knots. But we managed, though we had neither ropes, crampons nor ice-axes, to cross the Plateau and descend the Neumayer Glacier and the foothills leading down to Husvik. The safe negotiation of steep and heavily crevassed ice-slopes while coming down onto the Neumayer—a manoeuvre rendered even more desperate by the appalling blizzard conditions and a total lack of visibility—was largely due to John Cunningham who, with an almost complete disregard for his own safety, took the lead and brought us successfully out of the entanglement. The descent of the Neumayer, above its juncture with the König, was a nightmare but by crawling on our bellies or linking arms together we managed to cross the extensive crevassing without loss. Warburton in his diary writes :

'There were rarely 5 people on the surface at any one time, and John on one occasion fell in to a depth of 30 feet—from which he immediately climbed up and emerged like a cork from a bottle.'

Once at Husvik, immediate preparations were made to return and find the missing survey party. However, these three had by a miracle found the tents the same afternoon and two days later, having given us up for lost, came down to Husvik too. Eventually another party of three returned to the Plateau and completed the survey. Their work finished, they returned to Base Camp, bringing down the more valuable equipment which had been abandoned at our ill-fated camp.

The expedition, reunited once again, went round to Leith Harbour on March 31 and four days later sailed for England aboard the *Southern Garden*. After calling in at the Cape Verde Islands to refuel, the ship docked at Tilbury on the evening of May 6.

During the season's survey, the mapping of South Georgia was virtually completed and some twenty first ascents were achieved. Nearly all these were on the periphery of the Kohl-Larsen Plateau in the King Haakon Bay–Possesssion Bay area, the Kade Ridge–Brunonia Glacier area and in the Brögger Glacier–Novosilski Glacier–Philippi Glacier area in the south-eastern corner of South Georgia.

Note : Names of peaks shown between inverted commas are not approved names ; they were our own reference names.