CLIMBING IN THE ANTARCTIC

By LIEUT.-COMMANDER MALCOLM BURLEY, R.N.

On a hill-side on the mountainous sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia, just 100 yards above the graveyard where Shackleton is buried, there is an inscribed stone. This stone is a memorial to a German who set off by himself, a quarter of a century ago, to conquer Mount Paget, 9,625 ft., the highest peak on the island. Perhaps not surprisingly he was never seen again.

He was by no means the first to try to reach the threshold of this mountain and several expeditions have tried since, but until December, 1960, none even got to within ten miles of this elusive peak. Even now, the spirit of the mountain can smile at all man's vain efforts to reach her summit.

All previous assaults had been made from the north which had necessitated a trek across exceptionally difficult crevassed and glaciated terrain. This had sapped each successive attempt. A team comprising half the Royal Marines Detachment of H.M.S. *Protector*, led by Captain V. N. Stevenson, R.M., and myself decided that this route was not practicable and a better chance might be offered by a landing on the south coast of the island. This region was wholly unexplored however; the coastal waters were practically unsurveyed and usually obstructed with immense icebergs and large areas of pack ice. Indeed the Admiralty pilot warns ships not to approach the south coast. Nevertheless the Captain took the ship quite close inshore and the party helicoptered ashore just above a seal-littered beach, some ten miles from the mountain, with instructions for re-embarkation in five days' time 'without fail'.

Despite the indifferent weather enshrouding the mountains in cloud, Vivian Stevenson and I set off on skis to reconnoitre a route up the glacier and to find a site for Camp I. Meanwhile the remainder of the party were setting up Base Camp or, wearing snow-shoes, were portering the supporting gear in our wake.

On the second day, having reached the top of Henningsen glacier, the two of us tried to find a practicable route through a 2,500 ft. high precipitous ice-fall. A route was negotiated upwards until, only 200 ft. from the top, an enormous gaping crevasse put paid finally to any prospects of continuing up that route and reluctantly we retreated to Camp I. At this stage, we decided our map, because of its many inaccuracies, should largely be disregarded; this inaccuracy was not

VIEW FROM THE SLOPES OF LIOTARD ACROSS THE ICE-BERG STREWN SEA.

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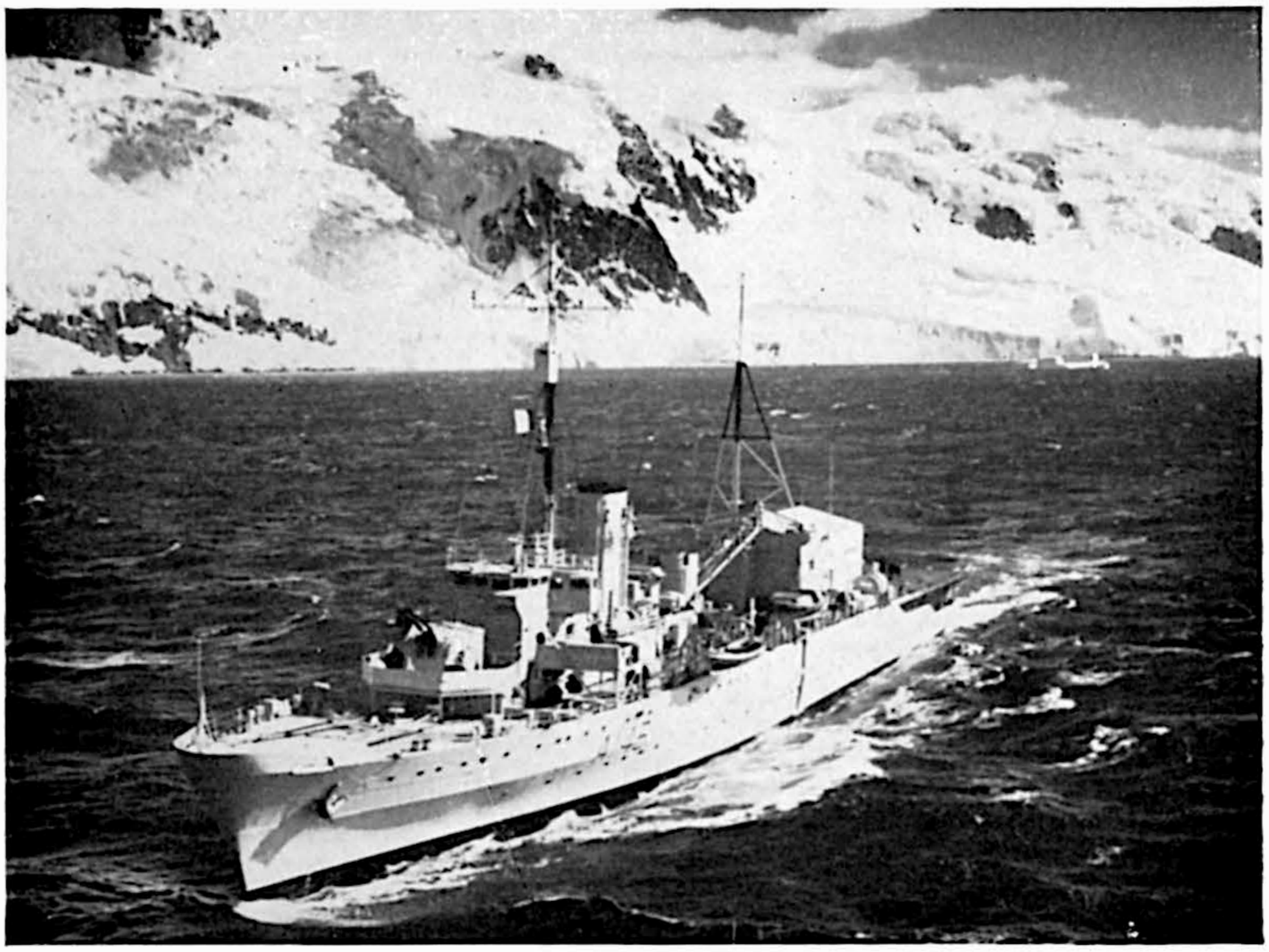
surprising as we were the first to set foot on that part of the island. Nevertheless we resolved to attempt to penetrate another ice-fall, further to the right, the next day.

This ice-fall proved more difficult than the first one, and a considerable time and effort were expended in step-cutting and wriggling on our bellies across frequent precarious snow-bridges over dark, plunging crevasses whilst the others belayed on ice-axes. We had almost attained the crest when the wind backed to the west; the cloud level descended and assumed an ugly menacing olive hue. These were the classic symptoms of bad weather, of which the Meteorological Officer had warned us, and we then had no option but to retrace our steps from the untenable position in which we were placed. Fortunately the storm held off until we were clear of the labyrinth of crevasses and at mid-day it broke. It was a dejected party which staggered back through the blizzard to the camp at the top of the glacier.

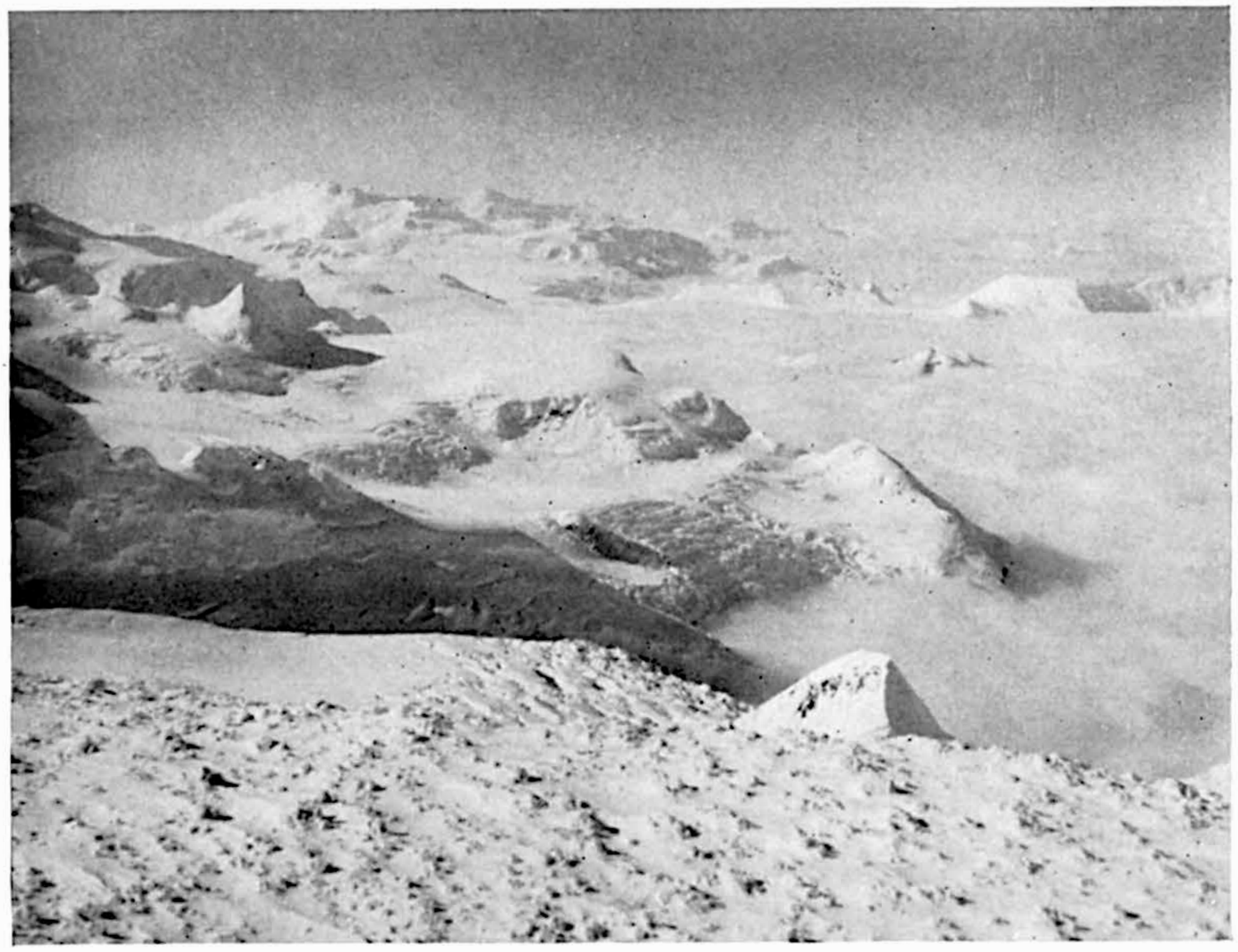
In the evening, the wind veered again to the south and swept all the clouds away and there, for the first time, we saw Mount Paget in all its majesty towering above us, tinted pink by the setting sun. At 5 a.m. the following morning, the weather was still perfect and the assault team comprising Vivian Stevenson, Corporal R. Todd, Marine D. Beck and myself set off up the ice-fall again. A fifth had been incapacitated by snow-blindness. This time, the ice-fall was negotiated without too much difficulty, apart from one superhuman leap by Corporal Todd across an unbridged crevasse which enabled us all to cross, and we settled down to a steady trudge up the ensuing glacier. Occasionally one of us would subside up to his thighs in the crust of snow over a crevasse, but we had become used to this by now and had all developed an instantaneous reaction for 'anchoring'. At last we reached the foot of Mount Paget and decided unanimously that it was 'now or never' for the final assault. We discarded all but essential gear (we had already left our tents behind at Camp I), and set forth across an avalanche track with trepidation, scarcely daring to breathe for fear of initiating a fall.

Following what seemed an eternity, climbing and kicking steps interminably, we reached the south-west spur at 5.30 p.m. The only difficulty on this leg was a slow step-cutting traverse across an ice-face immediately above the avalanche area. By now the snow was rock-hard and at this stage with 2,000 ft. yet to go, Marine Beck magnanimously volunteered to drop out and wait rather than retard us further at that late hour.

At last at 7.10 p.m., on our last legs, we achieved what we thought was the summit, but to our distress we discovered we had been cheated by the weather which had prevented a clear view in perspective of the



H.M.S. Protector in Antarctic waters.



View to the north from Liotard. Cloud is up to about 4,000 ft.

mountain, and to a certain extent the map. We had reached the West Summit and there, 600 yards further on and up a gentle slope some 200 ft. higher, was the true summit. By now, we knew it was beyond our reach as the sun was sinking into the sea, we were becoming bitterly cold as the strong icy wind scoured the crest of the mountain and were almost utterly exhausted. We planted our Union Flag to denote 'furthest on' and at last retraced our steps, collecting Marine Beck en route. Eventually we staggered back in the half-dark with trembling legs to our dump of gear where we dug a shallow snow-hole and curled up in sleeping-bags for a deep and contented sleep. At least we know that, given good weather and comparable conditions, Paget's defences are now open.[1]

The next opportunity for a serious climb came in February this year whilst H.M.S. *Protector* was operating south of the Antarctic Circle in Marguerite Bay. This time, the whole Royal Marines detachment, led by Captain F. C. T. Priest, R.M., and myself, landed on Adelaide Island with the object of getting a team up the hitherto unclimbed Mount Liotard of some 8,000 ft. The actual height is in dispute as the maps show it as 7,900 odd ft., but aircraft have flown past it at 8,000 ft. well below the summit. When the area is fully explored and surveyed, we shall know the true height.

Now there is a British Antarctic Base some twelve miles from the mountain range; and to give their climbers the opportunity of 'knocking off' what they would consider 'their' mountain, we deemed it proper to pass on our intentions well in advance. Sure enough, a 'residential' team sallied forth before our arrival but after fourteen days, they had to surrender to the inclement conditions and returned sadly frustrated. Nevertheless they generously offered us all assistance and knowledge so far gleaned and so, with two of their dog teams, we trekked across the ten miles of piedmont to the foot of the mountain range to find the peaks still blanketed in cloud.

After a thirty-six-hour encampment, it was felt that the exceptional opportunities for snow-training for the R.M. Detachment were being squandered by this inactivity and they moved off, leaving the two British Antarctic Survey residents, Sergeant Terence Speake, M.M., R.M., and myself. Despite the low cloud, we moved on up to a small plateau by a circuitous route to avoid the cliffs and ice-falls of some six miles and resumed our vigil. At last it was rewarded with an unexpected clearance, and despite his earlier assertion that he would not climb, Gordon McCallum was persuaded to accompany Terry Speake and myself on the ascent.

Having adjusted our crampons and fitted prusik loops to the rope ready for instant use, we started off on the climb. The route up was

[1] For a sketch map of South Georgia see *A.J.* 61. 466.

quite straightforward; there seemed to be incredibly large expanses of blue ice exposed on the mountain, much of it rotten, but the initial climb was largely a routine kicking grind threading backwards and forwards through the maze of crevasses. On the way up, one of my crampons came loose. To ensure there could be no recurrence at some 'moment critique', I tightened the straps up viciously before securing the end, consequently restricting circulation in the foot and inviting the subsequent frostbite. There is a moral somewhere!

About half way up, the crevasses forced us over to the corniced South ridge of Liotard, below which was what seemed a sheer drop of some thousands of feet. We climbed up until, about 500 ft. below the summit, we were presented with an 80 ft. high steep wall of hard, blue ice with a multitude of monstrous séracs towering menacingly above it like mediaeval fortress defences. We then made the brilliant discovery that, in our eagerness to get started when the weather had suddenly cleared, the pitons had been left behind!

It was quite obvious that the only route to the top was up the wall, so with bit firmly in teeth, the slow and laborious procedure of cutting steps in the steep ice-wall was started with movement up whilst the other two belayed on the blades of their ice-axes. At this critical stage, the wind started to increase in force and threatened to pluck us from our precarious holds. Eventually, however, after much perseverance, the pitch was negotiated and we plodded on up to the summit where the wind perversely dropped in entirety to create such a stillness as can only be experienced in polar regions; occasionally it would be broken by the distant barking of the huskies many thousands of feet below and quite invisible to the human eye.

The descent, culminating in a monster and largely uncontrolled glissade, was accomplished much more rapidly down the same route, pausing only to collect occasional geological specimens, and eventually the climbers returned across the piedmont to the base for a last 'stir up' of the penguins. We then returned on board *Protector* for congratulations by the Captain and H.E. the Governor of the Falkland Islands who, as on the occasion of the previous climb, had embarked for an inspection of his territories.