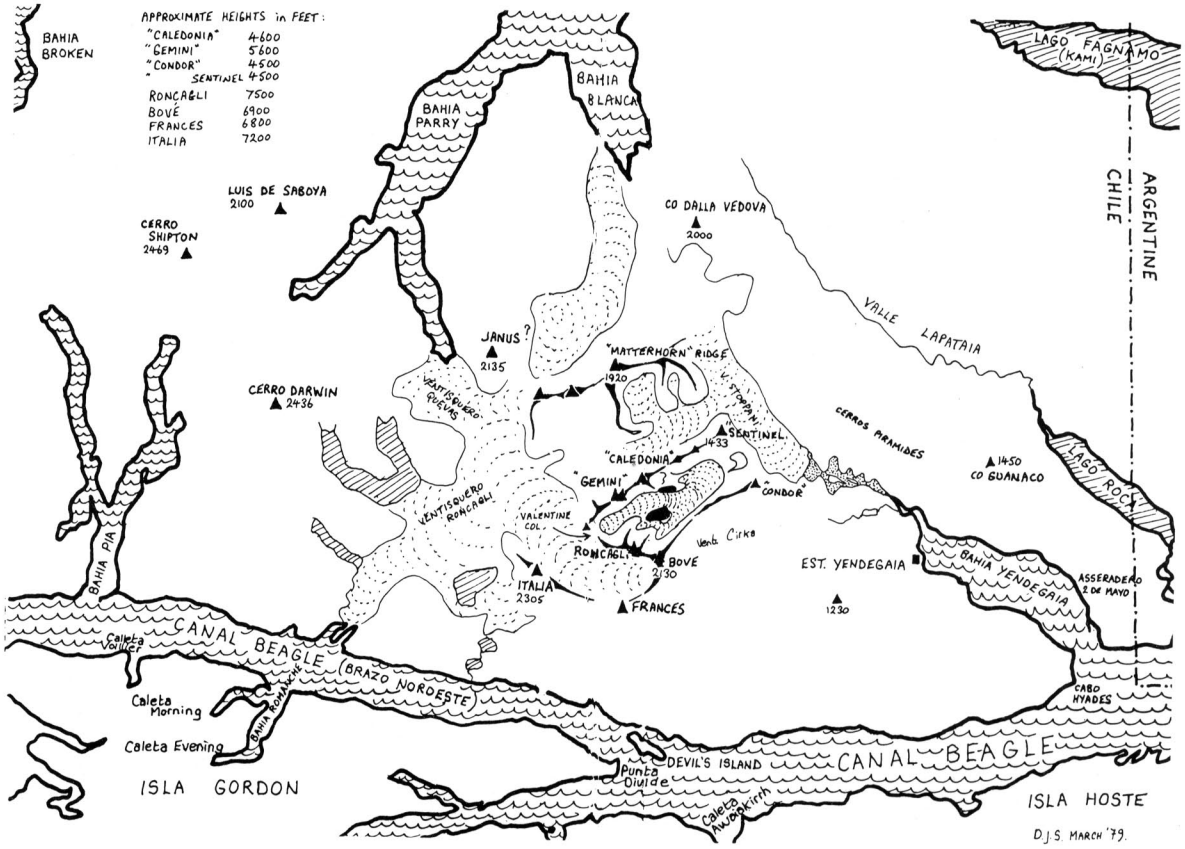


Map 7 Tierra del Fuego

Tierra del Fuego 1979

John Earle

During the early 1960s, I was fortunate enough to be invited to join 2 expeditions, one to SW Patagonia and the other to the Darwin Range, Tierra del Fuego, with the eminent explorer and mountaineer Eric Shipton (*AJ 68* 230). The aims of the expedition to Tierra del Fuego were to explore the E end of the Darwin Range and climb some of the higher peaks in the area. For this expedition, we had the generous help of the Chilean Navy who took the 4 members in the ocean-going tug, *The Cabrales*, from Punta Arenas, to the Beagle Channel and put us ashore at Puerto Olla, a small bay near Devil's Island and the divide of the Channel.

During the 4 weeks that we were there, we explored an area of glaciers, mountains, rock ridges and high glacial plateaux of some 50 sq miles and made the first ascents of 2 peaks, Bové (2469m) and Francés (2408m). We attempted to reach a third peak called Roncagli but bad weather and lack of time prevented this and in any case, in Eric Shipton's opinion, it looked a difficult peak, demanding climbing of a high technical standard that had not been previously attempted in these storm-bound mountains of the end of the World.

From the summits of Bové and Francés, we had seen tantalizing glimpses of the glaciers and mountains to the N but had been unable to reach them. When we had finished our work in the mountains, the Chilean Navy picked us up with a small vessel called *The Beagle* and on our voyage to Puerto Williams, the Chilean naval base on Navarino Island, we put into Yendegaia Bay and anchored off Estancia Yendegaia for the night.

It was a remote and fascinating place and from here a broad, flat, alluvial plain ran between sharp, rocky peaks NW towards the Stoppani Glacier some 10 miles away. Yendegaia was the sort of area that fascinated Eric Shipton and always with an eye for new and interesting areas to explore, he had discussed with me many times back in Britain, plans for starting an expedition at Yendegaia. It seemed a possible route to reach the unknown and unexplored glaciers and mountains further N than Bové and Francés, which we had seen from these summits; the great Stoppani Glacier and its tributaries seemed to lead into the area.

Another possibility was that by approaching Roncagli from the N and W or circling around it an approach to the summit might be found. Sadly this was an expedition that Eric Shipton was unable to carry out before his death in early 1976.

When it became apparent that I was likely to be able to make a return visit to Tierra del Fuego in 1979, I started to study the very sketchy maps of the E end of the Darwin Range and especially Yendegaia and tried to remember the talks Eric and I had had about an approach this way. After considerable deliberation, a plan resolved itself to try to cross the glaciers of the high plateaux, from Parry Bay, a fjord that runs S, deep into the mountains from Admiralty Sound, to Yendegaia and if possible make an attempt on Roncagli from that direction.

All the plans and preparations had gone smoothly but hanging over us before our departure and indeed on our arrival in South America was the extremely tense political situation that existed between Argentina and Chile over territorial claims in the Beagle Channel area; the very area we wished to visit. It looked as if the 2 countries were poised on the brink of war and Tierra del Fuego was a military zone. This situation was to cause several minor set-backs and delays that eventually forced us to change some of the expedition plans.

With generous support and sponsorship by The Mount Everest Foundation, The British Mountaineering Council and British Caledonian Airways the 4 members of the expedition—Iain Peters, Don Sargeant, Dave Harber and myself—flew to Buenos Aires on 28 December 1978 and then on S. At Rio Gallegos in the Argentine, Ian Peters disembarked to travel overland with the expedition food and equipment to Punta Arenas in Chile, firstly to keep an appointment with the Commander of the Third Chilean Naval Zone, who had been kept fully informed of our expedition plans, to discuss help with transporting us to the Darwin Range. Secondly, he had to meet representatives of the Chilean Forestry Department to arrange details of his scientific work of collecting seeds of the Nothofagus, the Southern Beech, for the British Forestry Commission. Don Sargeant, Dave Harber and I continued to Rio Grande for filming commitments.

It was from this time that nothing we planned seemed to dove-tail and unavoidable delays here, followed by the need to make return journeys earlier than expected there, began to eat into our money and available time for the actual climbing.

We were forced to abandon the original plan of crossing from Parry Bay to Yendegaia as the Chilean Navy at that stage was unable to take us there and concentrate our exploration and climbing in the area to the N of where I had been with Eric Shipton and so link, hopefully, the known with the unknown. We needed now to start at Yendegaia.

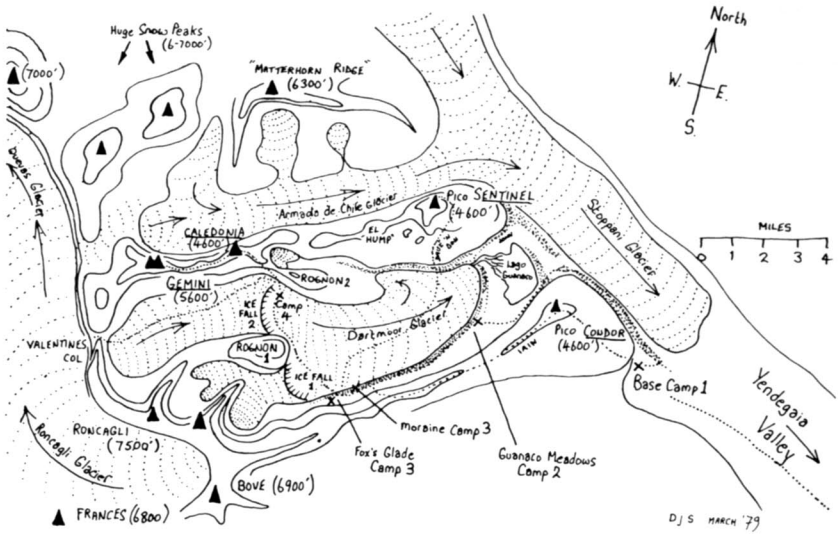
When, at last, the 4 of us were re-united in Punta Arenas, after several more hold-ups we were able to fly to Puerto Williams (the Chilean Naval Base) on Naverino Island. While we had yet another enforced wait here, Iain Peters and Don Sargeant were able to make the first ascent of 2 of the fine line of unclimbed granite peaks lying inland some 9 miles from Puerto Williams, called the Teeth of Naverino. In fact the whole interior of the island is unexplored, with countless unclimbed peaks between 900 and 1500m.

Once again, it was the Chilean Navy which took us to the mountains, this time in a landing craft. We left Puerto Williams at midnight, setting out into the inky black Beagle Channel under the Southern Cross. By first light, we were off Yendegaia and after breakfast of newly baked bread in the wardroom, the captain took the vessel in close to a rough stone quay. It was a highly skilful manoeuvre, which demanded holding the landing craft in position by a stern anchor. The ramp was lowered and in the dawn, we made our 'Commando Raid' on to the land with all our food and equipment.

The next day with the help of pack horses and two shepherds, provided by the estancia, we rode the 10 miles up a broad, flat, alluvial plain, laced with milky, glacial rivers to the snout of the unexplored Stoppani Glacier. We were now at grips with the unknown mountains that Eric and I had seen 16 years before.

Our first problem was to find a way N. Clearly the Stoppani Glacier itself was impossible, being a grotesque maze of huge open crevasses. In any case, we could not cross the fast flowing glacial river, over 100 yards wide, to reach the glacier. However, we found a tortuous route of loose boulders, moraine and polished rock for 3 miles along the true right bank of the river. The outcome was uncertain to the end and with mounting excitement we were able, eventually, to turn W and after traversing steep, rocky slabs above a lake, reach an unknown glacier behind a high ridge of terminal moraine.

By a series of exhausting relays, we shuttled enough food and equipment to an



Map 8 The Stoppani glacier peaks

advanced camp below a threatening ice-fall to spend some 4 weeks climbing and exploring. Our route to this camp, for the first part of the way, lay along the top of a ridge of moraine for 3 miles, where we followed a track made by wild Guanaco, a shy yet inquisitive creature like the Llama. On our left were the thick forests of Nothofagus, Darwin's 'Temperate Jungle', and on our right, the world of ice, rock and snow. It was an incredible contrast.

One of our first aims now from the ice-fall camp was to reach the high col at the head of our glacier, which was marked on the very sketchy maps of the region and see if we could reach the glaciers of the interior of the Darwin Range, and possibly attempt Roncagli from the W which we believed to be an easier approach. There seemed to be two possibilities. One was to try to find a direct way up a 500ft ice-fall. The other was a longer way round the far end of the worst part of the ice-fall.

We moved first into the chaotic jumble of rotten ice towers and blocks of the main part of the ice-fall. The temperature was well above freezing for we were, after all, still only about 600m high. We climbed easily for 200ft or so but as the route became more difficult and we heard the sound of a considerable fall of ice-blocks quite close to where we were, we had no difficulty in making the decision that this was not a safe way. We cramponed and front-pointed our way down as if every step were booby trapped. Later we often watched ice-avalanches sweep the route we had taken.

Our second choice however proved easier. We climbed steeply behind our camp through a series of crevasses to a broad snow-field that in turn steepened towards a corner, where it looked as if a ramp ran through the crevasses to the area above. This proved possible and by a complicated route, we were through the main difficulties. However, we were now faced with appalling snow conditions that were to endanger us for the rest of the expedition. The rain, coupled with the exceptionally dry and warm summer made the snow very soft and granular. We expected there to be fewer crevasses on this higher area of glacier, but it was, instead, an incredibly complex, heavily crevassed section and everyone of us had to

be belayed over the obvious dangers and we had to proceed with extreme care ready to plunge our ice axes into the soft snow if anyone fell into a crevasse.

By lunch time the weather had worsened to squalls and sleet but it was vital to get to the col. All the decisions for the rest of our exploration depended on what we found there.

Visibility was down to about a ¼ mile and the wind had strengthened considerably, blowing stinging sleet as we climbed on, but at last the glacier flattened, the crevasses vanished and ahead we could see the narrow col between a steep rock ridge on the left and steep ice on the right. We had made it. The date was 14 February so obviously it had to be St Valentine's Col, height about 1200m.

In spite of the elation at reaching this unknown col, our disappointment was intense. Instead of a link through to the great glaciers of the interior of the Darwin Range, the Roncagli Glacier that runs SW of the Beagle Channel and the Cuevas Glacier that runs NW to Parry Bay, the far-side of the col was a sheer drop of over 300m of rotten ice and loose snow-covered rock. There, far below us, were those glaciers that we had hoped to explore. Even if we had been able to get ourselves down, the task of getting heavy loads and equipment to the glaciers below would have been virtually impossible, especially in the limited time that we now had. Worse still we could see also that instead of the easier snow slopes we had expected on the NW and W of Roncagli, this side of the mountain was a sheer rock-face of rotten rock plastered with snow and facing towards the hurricane force winds that sweep in from the Pacific.

The next objective was to explore the peaks to the N of our ice-fall camp and see if there was a way through to the mountains further N. To do this Iain Peters and I set out from our camp and climbed steep ice and granulated snow through another complex area of seracs and crevasses. Eventually, we reached a plateau of ice with outcrops of rock, still surprisingly very crevassed in an incredibly haphazard fashion. Quite close to the NW, we could see a peak we had noticed earlier from our moraine ridge and we decided to make a first ascent of this as it would be a good vantage point.

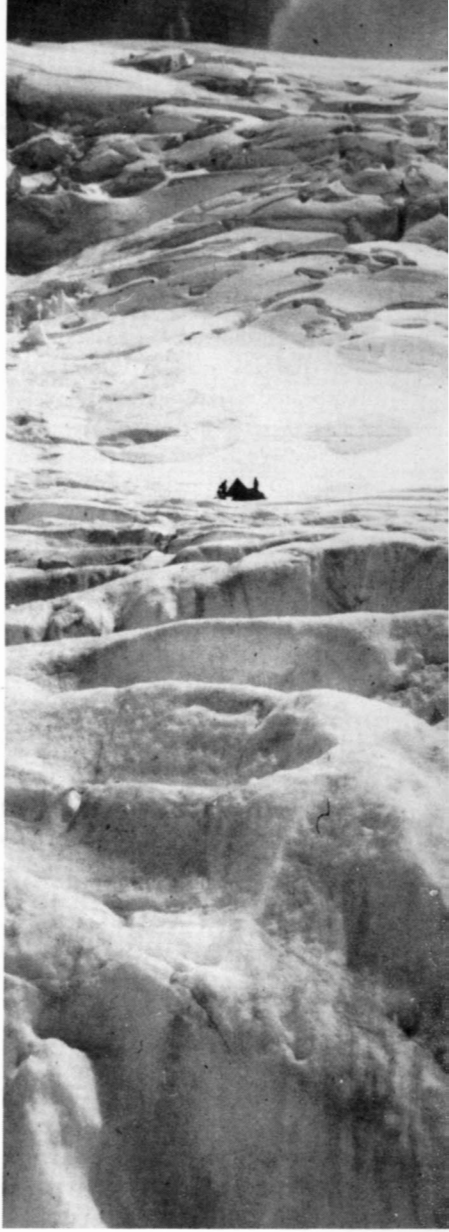
The route lay from here up a steep snow-slope and a final ice-boss to a small rock-tower which formed the summit (1400m). This peak was part of a long ridge with 3 major peaks on it and the N side of the ridge dropped sheer for over 450m to another glacier which ran parallel to the glacier where our camp was situated.

We could see that this new glacier joined the Stoppani with the Roncagli and Cuevas Glaciers. The other high snow-peaks lay further to the N. Once again our way was blocked, but this is what exploratory mountaineering in an unknown area is all about. We were disappointed obviously, but at least we were fitting the pieces of the jigsaw together.

The most westerly of the 3 peaks on the long ridge was a fine-looking snow and rock mountain above St Valentine's Col. It was clear that this should be our next objective. The easiest route up this mountain, probably, was to follow the glacier almost to the col, then strike up a long snow-ridge with one section of seracs and crevasses. Iain felt that because the crevasses in the glacier were in such a dangerous condition, an approach to the peak could be made along the ridge from the peak that he and I had climbed. From our vantage point I felt the final section looked as if it might prove difficult, which indeed it did.

During the early part of the expedition I had had the great misfortune to twist my ankle over, hurrying after the others with a 70lb load on my back, to take some

58 Roncagli (This and next photo: J. Earle)



59 Ice-fall Camp

shots for the television film I was making. Later x-rays showed a fracture. It had been giving me, increasingly, considerable pain (it often took 20 minutes to get the swollen foot into my boot) and it was with enormous regret that I had to make the decision that I could be a hindrance and even a hazard to the rest of the party when they set out to climb this peak. It was clearly going to be a long mountain day; and any delay could have been disastrous. So it was Don Sargeant and Dave Harber led by Iain Peters who set off to attempt this peak at the end of the ridge. The snow conditions were appallingly loose and granular and while the first part of the route

was technically easy, it took them a long time to reach the final approaches to the summit. They traversed out on the N slopes of the mountain, again on deep soft snow, to avoid the steep wall. When they joined the summit ridge again, they discovered that the whole snow-cliff they had been on was detached from the mountain and in danger of avalanching.

After another traverse right which entailed almost swimming through the treacherous snow they encountered thin snow on holdless rock slabs. With crampons scrabbling uselessly Iain laybacked up a detached block to a small stance and dubious belays. The rock above looked very unpromising but it led to a steep, loose, but easier ramp leading up towards the summit. However, after 50m it disappeared tantalizingly close to the top. By now it was 5 o'clock and the clouds had crept over the surrounding mountains and the wind had risen. They had discussed retreat but felt reluctant to go back, so close to the summit. Iain moved straight up with caution, as belays were illusory and reached the top via 2 awkward mantelshelves. As they gathered on the summit between the 2 ice-crests, the wind strengthened and the cloud closed in on them. But the 3 of them stood for the first time on the summit of the peak they called Pico Gemini (1707m).

Having completed a considerable amount of exploratory mountaineering from our ice-fall camp, we moved back to our snug camp site on the moraine, in a deep-wooded glade, blocked at one end by views of Roncagli with Guanaco drinking holes nearby and foxes so tame, that they trotted through the camp site on inquisitive visits and stole Don's plastic mug! Time was now running short. Don and I had to get back to Puerto Williams about a week earlier than necessary to link up with a LAN Chile flight to Punta Arenas and then to Santiago. Yet another example of the timing not coinciding well. Iain and Dave needed at least 10 days below the tree line to carry out their scientific work of seed collecting. To tie up the final exploration of this area, Don and Dave climbed the third mountain at the E end of the ridge. Iain climbed another rock peak by the ridge above our first base camp.

I found a way across the icy waters of the river that runs from the end of the ice fall glacier and reached the edge of the Stoppani Glacier. Here I traversed across the cliffs above it, NW until I could satisfy myself that a route through existed to the glacier to the N of our area, which in turn leads through to the glaciers in the interior of the Darwin Range. This is the way that future expeditions will have to go, if they wish to climb the big peaks to the N of the area where we were.

Finally we had a monstrous carry of huge loads back to our base camp at the snout of the Stoppani Glacier and then back to Yendegaia, ending with a walk along the beach past mussel covered rocks and long fronds of kelp swaying in the water. After weeks in the mountains, the smell, the sight and the sound of the sea were delightful.

The Chilean Navy sent a helicopter to lift us out and it was all over too quickly with hardly any time for re-adjustment. It left one feeling dissatisfied in a strange way. We needed time to step back and view it from the distance, to gather our emotions and feelings and impressions and to mould them into a coherent pattern. But one thing was clear, we had carried out extensive exploration in a remote and difficult area and we have linked the known with the unknown. It was an expedition, I think, that Eric Shipton would have enjoyed.