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JULIAN FREEMAN-ATTWOOD

## Antarctica: Voyage of the *Pelagic*

(Plates 49–51)

An interest in using boats to get to a chosen mountain or region stemmed from my becoming part owner of Tilman's last Bristol Channel Pilot Cutter *Baroque*. Built in 1902, the poor old boat got a ferocious battering at the hands of Tilman, especially on a successful voyage to circumnavigate Spitzbergen Island, sailing within 600 nautical miles of the Pole itself. Holed by floes and bergy bits, it was all the crew could do to keep her afloat as far as Iceland where a mutiny occurred and the Skipper was persuaded to pay their air fares home. He alone was willing to continue across the north Atlantic in October, one of the windier months. On his return with the boat the following year, Tilman sold the vessel to a friend of mine and that is how I came to own my share. A taste for heavy weather was imposed on me when I was caught out in the 1979 Fastnet race which sank 18 boats and killed as many sailors. The Pilot Cutter, being a deep-draughted vessel, found it no problem, and whilst she leaked like a basket, I have always believed Tilman was right in choosing this type of boat for stability in big seas.

However, I no longer had a share in *Baroque* and my first visit to Antarctic waters was by courtesy of *HMS Endurance*, the naval ice patrol vessel which in 1989 dropped me on the island of South Georgia along with Stephen Venables, Lindsay Griffin, Brian Davidson and cameraman Kees t'Hoof. After being buffeted around the place by incessant hurricanes and ending up in a snow cave of impressive proportions for 23 days, we finally knocked off the two unclimbed peaks of Mt Carse and Mt Kling in the last 36 hours. [*AJ96*, 1-7, 1991] We had all been greatly impressed by the prolific wildlife and grandiose mountains and I was determined one day to go further south to the continent itself.

To that end I was fortunate in making friends with a mariner and boat owner with a prodigious *cv*. Skip Novak had captained no fewer than four Whitbread Round the World races before finally building his own boat with the assistance of a friend, Hamish Laird. The secret of the *Pelagic* was its seven-ton lifting keel, enabling it to get into shallow water anchorages out of danger from the bigger icebergs. It had a Bermuda rig with extremely strong running gear and a steel hull, ideal for work around Chile, Tierra del Fuego and Antarctica. Skip visited me in Shropshire armed with some slides of Grade V ice-climbing from the deck of the boat, and

I was salivating instantly. It turned out there were two berths available on the boat for January/February 1994 and, through a fortuitous meeting with Matt Dickinson at the Alpine Club symposium at Plas y Brenin, we decided to make a film. Matt had indeed already been the producer of our South Georgia film. Also on board would be two French climbers, Denis Ducroz and Chantal Mauduit, plus an Israeli climber, Doron Errel. Chantal had just climbed K2 without oxygen, becoming only the second woman to achieve it after Julie Tullis, and Doron was the only one of his countrymen to have climbed Everest. They were making the first ever Antarctic film for Israeli television.

On 9 January 1994 we found ourselves in Ushuaia (Tierra del Fuego), the most southerly town in the world, and cast off the following day heading for the infamous Cape Horn and all points south. The plan was to sail the 600 miles across the Drake Passage, the section of ocean between South America and Antarctica, and then on 300 miles down the W side of the peninsula to Crystal Sound. The whole peninsula and coastal islands comprise a labyrinth of fine peaks, iced from sea to summit and up to 9500ft high. Whilst the rock is not so good, there are some exceptionally fine couloir lines and, in the south, some fairly sound granite. The further south you travel the greater the percentage of good weather, dominated by the 'Polar high', as opposed to the endless succession of lows in the South Shetlands to the north of the peninsula.

Some 200 miles south of Cape Horn we hit a severe gale force 9 (gusting storm 10) which forced us to heave to for 36 hours in impressive seas. Heaving-up over the lee rail and elsewhere was also a common pastime at this point, reminding me of Harvey Pirie on the Scotia 1902 expedition whose diary entry for Nov 9th simply read 'sick and miserable' and for Nov 10th 'very sick and very miserable'. The strongly built 55ft *Pelagic* took it all in her stride.

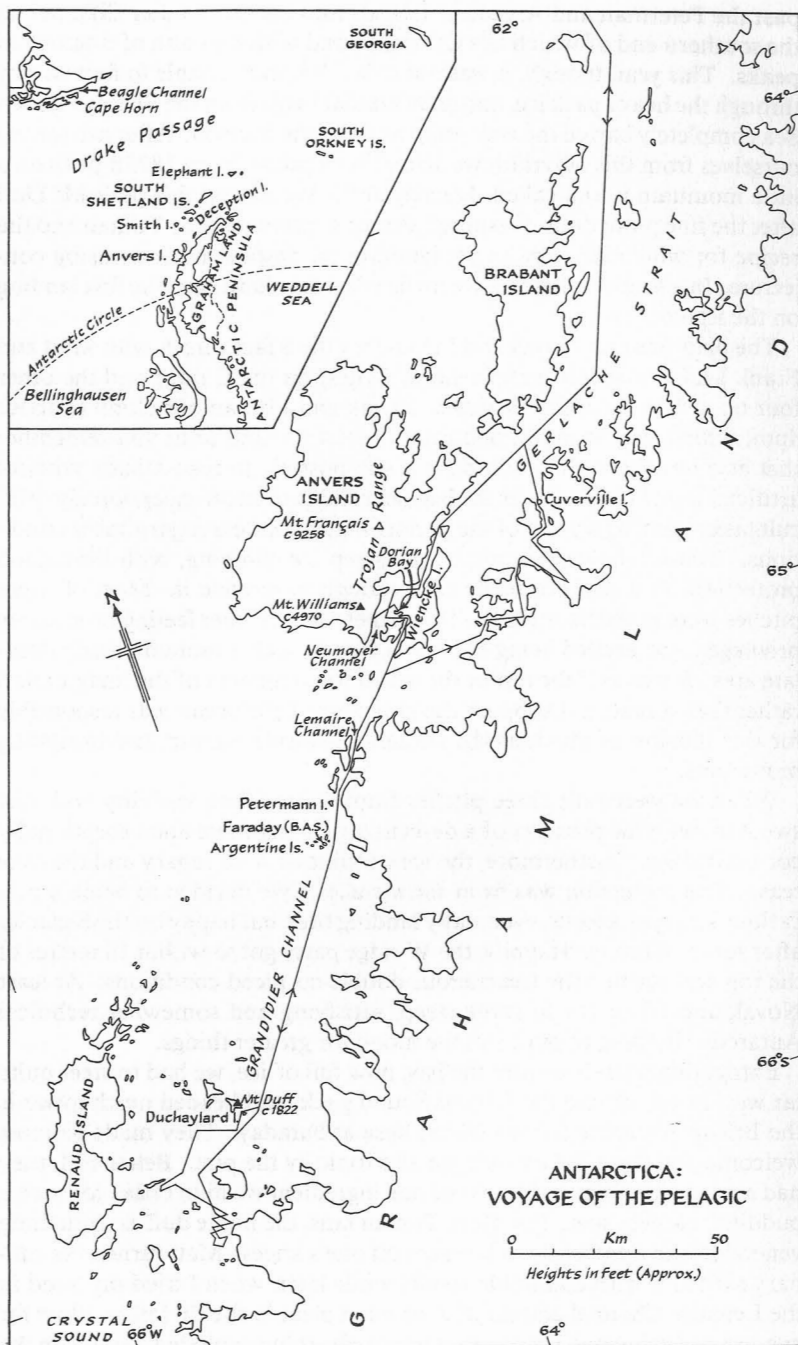
After being forced to the SE with fully reefed main and staysail in continuing strong south-westerlies, we sighted Smith Island on a rare and perfect sixth day out. Mts Foster, Pisgah, and Christi are still unclimbed despite Tilman's interest and a more recent attempt by a forces team who were dropped by the *Endurance* the year after our South Georgia trip. They had extremely bad weather and bad luck, having spent nearly three months on Smith Island to no avail. But what a worthwhile target it looked and quite unlike the uninteresting snow dome I had thought it was.

Abeam with Brabant Island was the start of the Gerlache Straits (named after the captain of the *Belgica*, beset for the winter in 1899). Fantastic mountains of impressive size presented themselves both on the peninsula and on Brabant Island. Most of the peaks on the latter were mopped up by Chris Furze's joint services expedition in the mid-1980s.

We then motor-sailed into the Neumayer Channel between Wiencke Island and Anvers Island with the intention of returning to climb there later but for now continuing through the majestic Lemaire Channel,



49. Antarctica: the Towers of Cape Renard.  
(*Julian Freeman-Attwood*) (p75)



past the Peterman and Argentine Islands into the Grandidier Channel, at the southern end of which lies Crystal Sound with a wealth of unclimbed peaks. This year, though, it was not to be. We were unable to force a way through the heavy pack ice, and great tabular bergs from the Bellingshausen Sea completely barred the way south as far as the horizon. After extricating ourselves from this labyrinth we settled for a preliminary 1822ft peak on a little mountain island called 'Duchaylard'. We named this peak Mt Duff after the fine plum duffs consumed almost continuously by Tilman and the recipe for which we were as yet ignorant of, despite much amusing conjecture. In a south-facing bay, we made what may have been the first landing on the island.

The plan was that Novak and I would try the S face direct, with Matt and Frank McDermot (an Irish friend of Skip's) on the E ridge and the other four on a ski tour to the W ridge. Novak and I began our climb at about 4pm, which may seem an odd time to start a climb until you remember that at midnight in that latitude it is still possible to read a book without artificial light. Getting over the bergschrund proved an exceptionally difficult task requiring a point of aid in horrible fathomless sugary snow conditions. There followed six pitches of steep ice-climbing, with little good protection, as it was not really cold enough to provide it. Most of these pitches were in the Scottish III/IV bracket. I remember feeling immensely privileged and excited being high on a face in such a monumentally desolate area. It was as if the rest of the world was a figment of the imagination rather than a reality. I suppose the grandeur of the ocean was responsible for this illusion as much as the endless peninsula ice cap and intriguing mountains.

When we were only three pitches from the top, bad visibility and mist swept in, with the prospect of a descent off an unknown and exceptionally corniced ridge. Furthermore, the ice conditions were sugary and the only reasonable protection was from snow stakes. We decided to begin a precarious string of abseils, eventually landing tired but happy on the S glacier after some 14 hours. Happily, the W ridge party got to within 10 metres of the top and verified the treacherous double-corniced conditions. At least Novak and I had got in some steep, satisfying and somewhat technical Antarctic climbing to put us in the mood for greater things.

Extricating ourselves from the bay, now full of ice, we had to steer quite far west to get around the Crystal Sound pack, and headed north towards the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) base at Faraday. They made us most welcome and force fed us with gin and tonic by the pint. Better still, they had a recipe for plum duff plus the one ingredient we didn't have for such a pudding, namely suet. For those Tilman fans, the noble duff is something venerable and apparently to be eaten on one's knees. Matt turned his culinary skill to it with admirable results while later, when I tried my hand in the Lemaire Channel and omitted to put a pleat in the tin foil to allow for expansion during two hours of steaming, the thing exploded, taking up the



50. Julian Freeman-Attwood on *Pelagic* with the Towers of Cape Renard beyond.  
(*Matt Dickinson*) (p75)



51. Skip Novak and Frank McDermot on the summit ridge of Mt Williams, c4970ft,  
with the Anvers Island ice piedmont down left. (*Julian Freeman-Attwood*) (p75)

entire volume of the steamer and nearly making it as far as the cabin walls. A fierce look from the captain presaged a keel hauling.

We anchored at Dorian Bay on Wiencke Island about 10 miles across from the mighty 9258ft Mt Français on Anvers Island. This is the peninsula's highest peak and towers over all else, rather as Mt Paget does on South Georgia. We had our eye on a shapely-looking Anvers Island outlier called Mt Williams, named after the ship of that name used by William Smith (of Smith Island) and later chartered by Bransfield. First we had to contend with seven days of vicious gales. In fact we were not far off losing the boat one night when anchors and warps dragged. Putting on wet suits and up to our necks in freezing water, it finally took four hours to secure the vessel which listed violently when hit by the huge gusts. Even the Adélie penguins had been silenced.

Finally the weather did clear and we had fine views of the Trojan range and Mt Williams. Hamish motored us across the Neumayer channel to drop us at the only possible landing place on the calving ice front, with one week's emergency rations, fuel and a radio with which we could contact him after the climb, as he would have to take *Pelagic* back across the channel to Dorian Bay, the one safe anchorage in the area. Matt, armed with 16mm film gear, Skip, Frank and myself planned to climb as two pairs, with the two French and Doron climbing as a separate trio. I had liked the look of the E ridge of the 4970ft mountain, but the lower sections looked hard and although it would probably go, the weather window was unlikely to exceed 36 hours. So we all opted for a route to the north – a tricky mixed section leading to a possibly somewhat unsafe easy central glacier, with again some harder climbing on the upper 1500ft. Only those who have climbed mountains literally from sea level can appreciate just how spectacular even a five or six thousand foot peak can look and, in Antarctica, how severe it can feel. All of us approached on skis except Matt and me who had snow shoes. This was not due to some Captain Scott type aversion to skis, but simply that excess baggage charges on the plane to Ushuaia had disallowed it. Anyway, the approach was short.

The lower section involved mixed Scottish Grade III climbing for 1000ft with one quite hard pitch of Grade IV expertly led by Chantal and up which the skis were hauled on jumars for the central glacier. This central section was threatened for some of its length from high on the right and ease of mind was not assisted by the thundering and thuds of ice calving into the Neumayer Channel below. On certain steep sugar snow sections Matt and I smugly overtook the skiers; step kicking in our snow shoes we were able to go straight up where the others were forced into long zigzags. At about 1500ft from the top, skis and snow shoes were cached and crampons again donned for some spectacular climbing through ice towers and crevasses. One tower gave a pitch of Scottish IV which, on arrival at its summit, was found to be entirely detached from the remainder of the icefall. A long and protectionless upper 700ft of 45° to 50° sugary ice and snow required a

general mountaineering steadiness and gave little hope of effective axe braking in the event of a slip. We pulled over a lip onto the N ridge and got the most spectacular views across the West Anvers Island ice piedmont. The summit ridge was a delight with great vistas opening up before us and later, from the summit, in a biting wind but perfect light at sunset, more superb views, the best we had even seen, showed up all the way south to Duchaylard Island, plus 150 miles of the Antarctic peninsula and plateau. To the immediate north lay the now not so dominant but grandiose Mt Français.

After half an hour of midnight filming, a twilight descent of down-climbing and abseils got us to the lower mixed section beneath the central glacier. A long abseil landed us in a 350ft 45° gully. I was halfway, carefully down-climbing, when a shout from above made me look up to see the wide and seemingly slow motion of a big and hitherto unheard avalanche descending inexorably onto us. Somehow, in the space of five seconds or so, I managed to move quickly to the left but lost footing, cartwheeled once, ice axe braked and got my head down, feeling quite certain that my (and everyone else's) time was up. The speed of the thing allowed no time for fear, only for action or inaction with hope. In fact we only had the dying front of a huge avalanche that had come from a sérac fall above the middle section of our climb. It had wiped out our route of one hour before and the scar of it could easily be seen from the boat five miles away. As everything was dying down I made the mistake of looking up and instantly received a golf ball-sized piece of blue ice in the right eye. I literally thought my eye had come out of its socket as there had been a blinding flash, momentarily nothing, and then a gradual regaining of blurred vision and some blood from the surrounding cut. Happily, the others were all unscathed – we had been fortunate indeed. My eye, by great good luck, returned to normal in a few days. Abseiling the last two pitches we gained the lower glacier and made it back to the landing place for a radio call to Hamish. We had been on the move for nearly 26 hours and already a few clouds were moving in. Hamish had seen us on the summit the previous evening through binoculars and now motored across immediately for a pick-up.

Climbing Mt Williams was a particularly fine moment for Matt Dickinson whose father attempted the peak unsuccessfully in the mid-1950s when working from *HMS Protector* on the then hydrographic survey of the area. Furthermore, Matt took much fine film footage which is likely to be edited into a TV documentary film.

Two days later *Pelagic* headed north into the Gerlache Straits for some beautiful encounters with 50-ton humpback whales. They seemed particularly interested in Hamish playing his clarinet and came right up to the boat to investigate. We moved on to Deception Island, in the South Shetland group, which is a partly active volcano with a flooded caldera 4-5 miles across. You sail through the one opening in the crater wall, called Neptune's Bellows, to enter a wierd moonscape of black ash covering permanent ice. Fierce katabatic winds are a feature of this rather gruesome



island and indeed an eruption in 1969 demolished a Chilean base and part of a British one.

A further week across the Drake and a near knockdown by violent 'willy-waws' in the Beagle Channel completed nearly 2000 miles under sail. It had been a memorable and happy trip to one of the wildest places on earth.

**Summary:** The members of the *Pelagic* expedition, January-February 1994, sailed in the 55ft cutter of that name 1000 miles from Tierra del Fuego to the Antarctic peninsula.

#### *Team members*

Skip Novak (captain of the *Pelagic* and veteran of the Whitbread Round the World race), Julian Freeman-Attwood, Matt Dickinson (film camera-man), Hamish Laird and Frank McDermot. Also aboard were Denis Ducroz (French guide and film maker), Chantal Mauduit (2nd woman to climb K2 without oxygen) and Doron Errel from Israel.

#### *Peaks climbed:*

First ascent of the c1822ft peak, named Mt Duff, on Duchaylard Island.

First ascent of the c4970ft Mt Williams on Anvers Island.

Cuvertville Island was visited and the volcanic Deception Island in the South Shetland group.