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Sailing and Mountaineering on the Antarctic Peninsula

British Army Antarctic Expedition 2001-2002

In early November 1991 a small band of mountaineers huddled in their two remaining storm-lashed tents on the beach of Molke Harbour, South Georgia. They had been ashore for nearly fifty days, frustrated by the notorious South Georgia weather after landing on the wrong beach. Now at the eleventh hour they were having to wait for a pick-up by boat while their base camp was slowly torn apart by a week-long storm.

I was last off the beach the morning we were picked up and the inflatable capsized in the surf. Later, warming up in the engine room of our pick-up vessel, I mused on our experiences. It seemed obvious to me so I turned to Dick Pattison, my climbing partner, and said: 'Next time we'll bring our own bloody boat!' And so the British Army Antarctic Expedition was born.

These things are never quite as easy as they first seem. It was to be another ten years before we achieved our ambition to return south in our own vessel. Finding a suitable yacht, getting the Army to agree to the time off, selecting a team and – the hardest part – raising the money, all took time. The Services did not own a yacht that was large or tough enough for our needs, so after a number of false starts we ended up with a 72ft steel ketch called *John Laing*, chartered from the Ocean Youth Trust, a sail-training charity. She was sailed to the Falklands Islands by three Army crews, at which point a team of 16 mountaineers and sailors took her over for the final ten-week leg of the voyage.

We sailed from the Falklands at the end of November 2001 into the depths of the notorious Drakes Passage. The trip across to the Antarctic Peninsula took six days, during which some of the landlubber mountaineering team decided to take up a routine of dieting and hanging over the side rail to get a closer view of the sea. The first port of call for the team was Deception Island where we sought refuge from an approaching storm. The expedition had a number of aims, mountain exploration being but one. We also planned to conduct survey work for the Hydrographic Office, undertake a heritage and historical site survey for the Scott Polar Research Institute, record various wildlife details for the British Antarctic Survey and collect geological samples for Brighton University. Deception Island offers little by the way of mountaineering challenges, so while we were at anchor many of the non-mountaineering projects started in earnest. And the skipper amused himself untangling a rope from around the prop.

The storm passed and we headed further south to our target of the Danco Coast. In 1957 Sir Wally Herbert had led a dog-sled team down the spine of the Antarctic Peninsular from Hope Bay in the north, to the Reclus Peninsula where the team were picked up from Portal Point. Sir Wally had been supported by a team which had over-wintered at Portal Point. They pioneered a route up the Reclus Peninsula to the Peninsula Plateau. It had taken them six weeks. Once on the Peninsula Plateau the support team made the first ascent of Mount Johnston, at 7580ft one of the highest points on the Peninsula. Sir Wally had been very helpful to the expedition and our first target was to make the second ascent of Mount Johnston.

On 10 December 2001, a recce team of three was landed at Portal Point, the yacht was secured at the nearby anchorage of Enterprise Island and the balance of the mountaineers prepared loads to follow on the next day. The aim was to identify the 1957 route and cache sufficient food on the Reclus Peninsula to support a three-week trip up onto the Plateau and an ascent of Mount Johnston. From Mount Johnston it was hoped we would be able to push on further along the Forbidden Plateau and make the first ascent of Mount Walker lying about 10km to the west. The recce went well until I carelessly fell into a rather large crevasse. The rope held but I didn't dwell on the view down for too long. Because of the very deep snow it took some two hours to extract myself, having in the end to tunnel up through the side wall of the crevasse. To add insult to injury, I lost a ski down the crevasse and was forced to wade through deep snow for four hours back to our tent.

Having survived this minor drama and successfully identified the 1957 route, we left a cache to sustain a future attempt and retired to the yacht to contemplate our next move. After dinner our 'tame' accompanying journalist, Sam Greenhill from the Press Association, approached me and asked if I minded if he penned a piece on my crevasse fall. I agreed saying that I thought there would be little interest as crevasse falls were an occupational hazard of mountaineering. Needless to say, thanks to satellite phones and e-mail, within 24 hours the story had made headlines in most of the national papers. The phone started to ring with endless requests for interviews from radio and television stations. The hits on our website rose from 150 a day to 7000. The sponsors and Army PR were happy. It seemed my 'publicity stunt' had worked.

We sailed further south into Paradise Harbour to try to identify an exit from the Plateau that would allow a round trip of Reclus Peninsula, Mount Johnston and Paradise Harbour. Unfortunately, very dense ice stopped the yacht where, like Shackleton, we became stuck albeit for only a few days. Because of the ice in Paradise Harbour, landing proved difficult so we decided to cut our losses and head back to the Reclus and start the ascent to the Plateau and Mount Johnston.

Setting off on 22 December in beautiful conditions, we reached our high cache late that evening and established a base. The following two days were spent moving the cache up steep ground onto the shoulder of Harris

Peak (3287ft) but deteriorating weather meant we were forced to return to our Base Camp. Christmas Day was spent confined to tents as the weather had become unworkable. As we set off on Boxing Day morning the weather was beginning to clear and by the time we came to undertake a difficult exposed traverse under the summit of Harris Peak the weather had cleared completely. One of the ropes took the opportunity to climb Harris Peak and take some photos while the rest of us pushed on, reaching the Bayly Glacier above the first icefall, where I had previously fallen into the crevasse.

Once onto the Bayly Glacier the route up was straightforward with a steady ascent in good firm snow conditions. We paused regularly as we skied, trying to take in the scale of the magnificent vista around us. It was simply breathtaking; mountains and glaciers as far as we could see were all covered in snow and ice with no exposed rock. We finished the day camped below the second icefall on the Bayly Glacier.

Unfortunately, the following day the visibility had once again reduced dramatically and it was almost impossible to find the route. We had a couple of crevasse falls trying to negotiate our way through the second icefall and so decided to camp and wait for the weather to clear. After 24 hours or so visibility began to improve and it was possible to pick our way through the icefall onto the long and gently-sloping final section of the Bayly Glacier which led to the Foster Plateau, named after Dick Foster who had led Sir Wally Herbert's support team. We skied along the Plateau to the base of Mount Johnston where we quickly established camp and grabbed some food before immediately setting off to climb the mountain. We had learnt by now that as the weather in Antarctica was so fickle, you had to take your chances as they arose. The joy of 24-hour daylight meant that could be anytime.

By now it was late on 28 December and we had been on the go for over 16 hours but the prospect of reaching the summit renewed our vigour. The climb was easy with only a bit of grade 2 ice on the final summit pitch. All nine members of the mountaineering team reached the top around 1am on 29 December. Unfortunately, as we approached the summit the cloud once again closed in and we were robbed of the magnificent views looking out across the top of the Antarctic Peninsula.

The next few days were frustrating as once again we were confined to our tents waiting for yet another storm to break. By now our rations were beginning to run low and as there was no sign of an improvement in the weather, I reluctantly decided that it was time to cut and run. The route down the hill was more straightforward than the ascent as we were able to accurately retrace our steps using marker wands and GPS. Two days later, on the 4 January 2002, we were back on the yacht celebrating a belated Christmas and New Year in some style, complete with morning swim.

Once the hangovers had given way we set sail and headed to Port Lockroy where there is a small UK heritage site in the old base, manned for the summer by three Brits. This stop-over allowed us to get the sailors out for a

day on skis and to try their hand at a spot of mountaineering on the lower peaks on Weincke Island. The minor summit of Jabet Peak was climbed several times and the more notable peak of Mount Luigi (4708ft) was scaled on the night of the 9 and 10 January in fabulous twilight conditions. It was during our time on Weincke Island that Sarah Piesse, the lone female member of the team, fell during a roped descent, fracturing her thumb. Fortunately this was the most serious injury of the trip and our doctor was able to spend his time climbing.

From Port Lockroy we moved back to Paradise Harbour which was by now mostly clear of ice. We anchored in a little bay called Skontorp Cove. From here we mounted a number of mountaineering forays using our two inflatable boats. The first was to climb Mount Banck (2208ft) which guards the southern entrance to Paradise Harbour. The climb was straightforward with a need only to put on crampons and pitch the last 200ft or so. Nevertheless, from our research it appears that the climb was probably the first ascent. Inevitably the summit was once again enveloped in cloud and snow as we arrived.

The next few days were spent trying to outwit the weather and establish a route up Mount Heogh (890m), which lies at the northern end of Paradise Harbour rising above Waterboat Point. Our first attempt along the western ridge failed in deteriorating weather when we came up against large overhanging ice blocks. For our second attempt on the mountain we teamed up with the 'Endless Summer' expedition who were also climbing and conducting glacial research in and around Paradise Harbour.

This time we attacked the eastern ridge. The route involved skiing round and up through an icefall. To gain the summit ridge we abandoned our skis and pitched 300ft of exposed grade 3 ice under some overhanging séracs. Once on the ridge, snow plodding for a few hundred metres brought us to the summit and this time we beat the clouds and were treated to the most fantastic panorama of Paradise Harbour as the sun was just setting below the horizon. This was followed by an equally memorable descent through some fantastic powder in eerie grey light.

As the yacht had to be back in England by mid-May, time was now beginning to press, but we wanted to make a final port of call at Elephant Island before heading back to the Falklands. The expedition had agreed to undertake some geological sampling in and around Elephant Island, as well as examine a possible heritage site and conduct a wildlife survey. Our first sight of the Island was bleak and grey, the sea was rough and a large swell was adding to the general discomfort on board the yacht. The conditions meant we were unable to put parties ashore for 24 hours but by late morning on 27 January conditions had calmed enough to land two parties. One put ashore at Hut Point to cross the Island to Stinker Point where various surveys would be carried out. The second party were landed on the southern end of the island at Cape Lookout from where they planned

to climb the highest mountain on Elephant Island – Mt Pendragon (973m). Meanwhile the yacht circumnavigated the island collecting geological samples from various points, including visiting Point Wild where Shackleton's crew had been stranded.

Crossing the island, a distance of about 15km, appeared to be fairly straightforward; the day was sunny with interspersed low cloud. All was going well as we descended from the high point of the route (737m) down towards Stinker Point until about three kilometres from our destination when we hit a series of well-hidden crevasse fields. The snow gave very little indication of where the crevasses lay and the next two hours were spent nervously picking our way through this very difficult terrain with countless holes opening below our skis. Fortunately there were no serious falls but the team were very glad to reach the safety of the moraine leading down to Stinker Point.

Meanwhile the Mount Pendragon team was enjoying a spectacular climb through the cloud into the sunshine and onto the summit of Mount Pendragon, just as the sun was setting. The whole of the summit dome was covered in a series of vast ice mushrooms, which had to be overcome by various orthodox and unorthodox means to claim the prize.

After a further three days ashore collecting various samples, the land teams were picked up and the expedition sailed north for the Falklands. We arrived at Mere Harbour in the teeth of a gale, which made coming into harbour the most challenging sailing of the trip. And so came to an end the Antarctic leg of the expedition. It had been all those things Service expeditions should be: challenging, demanding, productive but very enjoyable and rewarding. Out of the team of 16, five of the participants were relative novices who were selected on merit. It is hoped that the experience will encourage them to undertake expeditions of their own, perhaps even back to Antarctica where there is still plenty to do.