
RODRIGO JORDAN

Hard Labour on Planet Antarctica

It is 5pm and, as we must do every day about now, we look for a place to set up our tents. After 38 days of the expedition, we have walked 148 of the 350 kilometres we estimated at the beginning. Our crossing of the Thomas Glacier has become complicated. Yesterday, from the heights of the Providence Pass, we could see its total length of 22km and rejoiced that there were no apparent difficulties. This was important because after a gruelling journey through the Sentinel Range, it appeared that we would finally emerge from it with relative ease. It seemed that the more complex of the two ranges on our route was sending us off very nicely. The Heritage Range was the next to be tackled on this trek through the Ellsworth Mountains.

Now, however, the glacier has played a trump card. Having covered the first 8km we find ourselves trapped in an enormous crevasse field. For the last three hours we have wound through a morass of séracs and crevasses, requiring all 180m of our rope to drag sledges and secure ourselves around the open fissures. Not only is there no safe place to set up camp but also no end to the crevasse field which continues in an ongoing cascade of ice. Tiredness and deep concern show on the faces of my three partners – Ernesto, Pablo and Kiko. How can we go on if crevasses block our way? Can we go back? Is there an alternative route? How will we escape from the Sentinel Range?

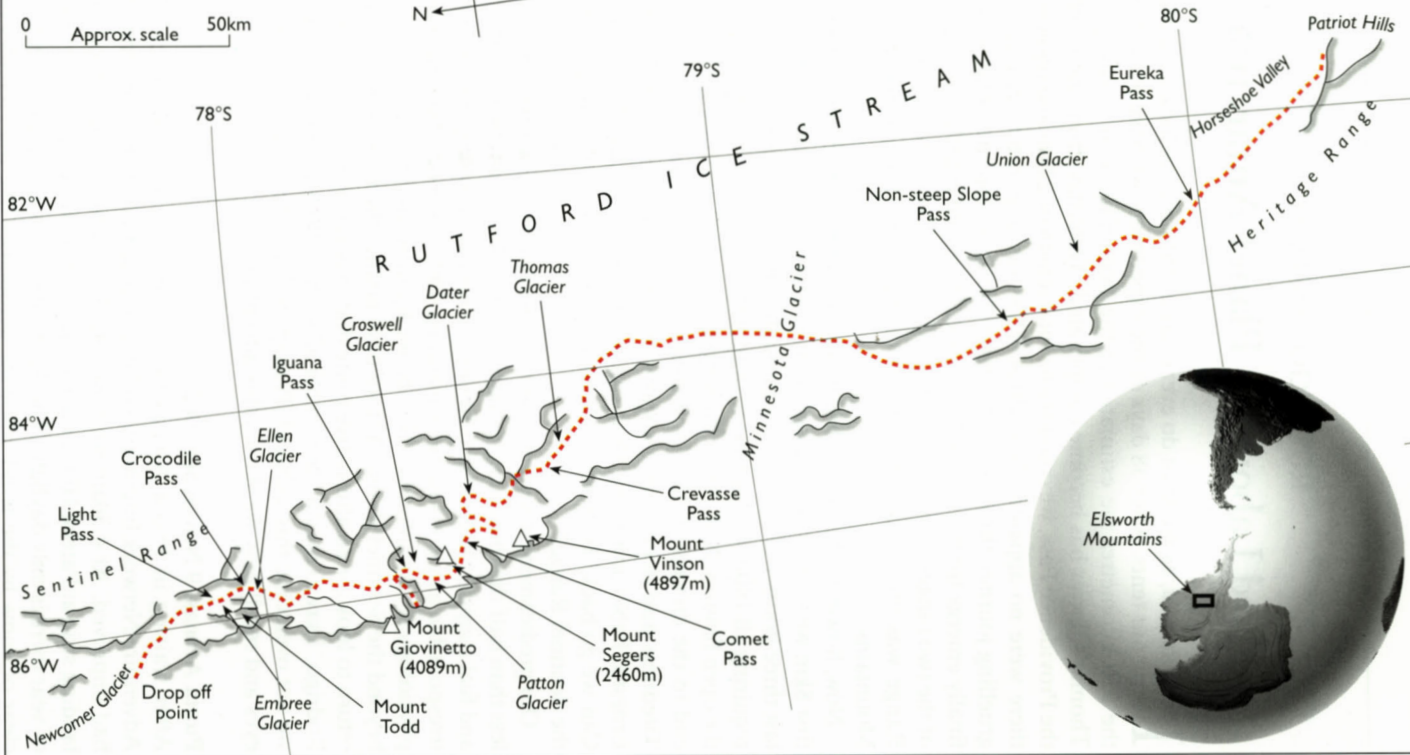
Our predicament is even more serious because in 38 days we have covered less than half the route and yet have already used up two-thirds of our food and fuel supplies. We had considered the idea of rationing, but this seemed irresponsible as we would be consuming 4000 calories a day less than our physiological requirements. Nor do we know what difficulties might arise beyond the Sentinel Range. Yet we have neither the time, food, nor fuel to return to look for an alternative route that may not even exist. ‘Remember, Rodrigo,’ I say to myself, ‘remember all we have done together. Why should we not overcome this setback?’ Perhaps to build up my spirits, I close my eyes and recall how we started this adventure

Punta Arenas, 9 November 2002

After waiting in Punta Arenas for 10 days, we received the call from Adventure Network International informing us that the weather conditions had improved. At 4.30am we came off the Ilyushin-76 and stood on the landing strip at Patriot Hills under a brilliant sun. In Antarctica at this time of year there is only daylight. The ‘landing strip’ is a natural icefield, swept clear of snow by the wind, allowing aeroplanes like the Hercules or the

Ellsworth Mountains, Antarctica

0 Approx. scale 50km



Ilyushin to land on wheels. At 5pm the same day, without having rested, we boarded a Twin Otter bound for the Newcomer Glacier, our planned starting point. The 80-minute flight allowed us our first sight of the mountains and glaciers that we would be exploring. By 7pm the plane had gone back to Patriot Hills leaving us on our own. The thermometer registered 25°C below zero. An hour later we had pitched the tent that would be our home for the next two months. Pablo installed the radio antenna and shouted with happiness on making contact with Santiago and Punta Arenas.

We were having our first meal when the sun passed behind some peaks and rapidly cast a shadow over our camp. The thermometer dropped very quickly to minus 35°C and we felt the cold intensely. Fatigue and the icy blast made our first 'night' miserable. Thus we learned our first Antarctica lesson: avoid being in shadow. We decided to move when the sun was at its highest, so that we would have enough time to prepare our campsite before the shadow fell on us.

Fortunately, during the first part of the expedition we were protected from Antarctic winds by the Sentinel Range itself. The first days were not too difficult, the biggest problems being the soft snow and the oppressive weight of the sledges. Like us, they had inexorably gained weight while being prepared for the expedition, and had eventually reached 140 kilos each. From the beginning we nicknamed them 'the beasts'.

Our idea was to move as quickly as possible across the Newcomer Glacier in order to look for a mountain pass that would lead us into the heart of the Sentinel Range. After four days we had covered 27km to the foot of the pass. The next morning was windy and the climb arduous, the sledges sinking into soft snow. Fortunately the freezing wind calmed down once we reached the ridge. Arriving first, Pablo was so impressed by the beauty of the view, with the Embree Glacier gorgeously lit by a bright sun, that he named the col 'Light Pass'. We descended easily and set up our fifth camp on the new glacier. It was much narrower than the Newcomer; the mountains looked bigger and more threatening. Crevasses and avalanche debris lay all around.

Over the following days, the glacier slopes steepened until we had to admit that we lacked the strength to pull our sledges and climb at the same time. We used ropes and pulleys to haul them up and progress became so slow that on our seventh day we advanced only 400 metres. We decided not to go deeper into the Embree Glacier but to move closer to Mount Todd and press on towards the south.

On 20 November, 10 days into the expedition, we were ready to climb a mountain, but first we needed to check our exit route from the high valley we were in. From this vantage point we could see a pass but we needed to explore it and study the descent onto the next glacier. Pablo and Kiko went to look, hoping it would be as easy as Light Pass. Unfortunately, it was cloudy at the pass and they were unable to see the bottom. However they realised the descent was going to be complicated, a drop of more than 400m

with some vertical parts. As Kiko observed sarcastically, 'It can easily be abseiled but we are going to have some trouble with the sledges.' We looked all around in the hope of finding another pass but to no avail. The descent was clearly going to be difficult, so grudgingly we abandoned our attempt on Mount Todd.

Pablo, our poet, had baptized our adversary Crocodile Pass. Next morning Ernesto was the first to abseil 180m into its jaws. Halfway down he dug out a terrace and called us on the radio saying he was ready to receive the sledges. The first sledge started its journey down the slope with the three of us concentrating hard. If a sledge came loose, not only would we lose it and an important part of our supplies, but it would transform itself into a missile that could strike Ernesto. The work was slow, with four sledges and three men to be lowered. The cold was intense as the entire area of descent was in the shade and there was not much room to move.

Pablo rappelled another 180m to a place where he could stand but which was still too steep for the sledges. He told us that 60 metres below the terrace there was a vertical wall of ice that had prevented us from being able to see the rest of the descent. At 1am, after 14 hours' work, we arrived at the bottom, on the Ellen Glacier, and set up our ninth camp.

It was the 15th day of the crossing and, taking stock, we realised we had not advanced as far as we should have done. We had covered an average of 5km a day rather than the 8km necessary if we were to complete the traverse all the way to Patriot Hills. Our food and fuel supplies were estimated for 56 days. Studying the charts, it appeared that our proposed route included more passes like the Crocodile Pass. We really started to worry. Would our supplies be enough for us to complete the journey?

However, we had not forgotten that one of our principal objectives was to attempt an unclimbed mountain. We decided to assign four days to Mount Giovinetto (4089m), one of the two unclimbed 4000ers in the range. The peak lay 7km off our route, so we left most of our gear and supplies in a depot and spent a day skiing up to the foot of the mountain. Our chosen route followed an ice gully between the glacier and the rock. We estimated the climb would take 30 to 36 hours, but once on the ice we realised that it would take much longer. With insufficient food, fuel and water we had to abandon the climb.

Ernesto reflected: 'In a situation like this we have to draw on reserves of strength that are not trainable. We are not trained to fail. When you swim or pedal, you exercise to win; nobody prepares himself to lose. When you fail in the middle of a place like this, you cannot allow yourself the luxury of a week to recover mentally and physically. You have to move on.'

True enough; and we had another problem. We were getting closer to a difficult-looking pass that opened the way to the Patton Glacier. We named it Iguana Pass since it proved as complicated as Crocodile Pass but much shorter. An iguana is smaller than a crocodile!



64. First camp on the Ellen Glacier, a perfect viewpoint for the highest mountains in Antarctica. (*Eugenio Guzmán*)



65. Through Antarctica's Ellsworth mountains; shovelling yet another terrace descending a pass. (*Rodrigo Jordan*)



66. On the summit of Mount Segers (2460m).
L to r Rodrigo Jordan, Pablo Gutiérrez, Ernesto Olivares. (*Eugenio Guzmán*)



67. Entering the crevasse field on the Thomas Glacier; two climbers were needed to haul and guide the sled around the crevasses. (*Pablo Gutiérrez*)

On the Patton and Croswell glaciers we had long climbs and cloudy days with poor visibility. While crossing the Patton we camped beneath Mount Tyree (4852m), the second highest peak in Antarctica, and on our fourth day we came across a new pass so easy and accessible that we called it Angel Pass.

On the Croswell Glacier the clouds parted to reveal the imposing faces of Vinson Massif (4897m) and we studied possible new routes up it. This is something mountaineers do whenever they look at a peak; but this time it was only an intellectual exercise. We had to admit to ourselves that there was not enough time for us to attempt the continent's highest mountain.

After 26 days the expedition had only covered 112km, a little more than a quarter of the total distance, and we had already consumed nearly half our food supply. But although we were behind schedule, the desire to attempt an unclimbed peak was so strong we decided to take two more days to try our luck on Mount Segers. It seemed foolish, but we *had* to do it. We did not want to leave Antarctica without reaching a virgin summit. The climb was wonderful and the view from the summit outstanding. Mount Segers (2460m) is in the heart of the Sentinel Range, a pristine range of peaks, passes and glaciers.

We climbed a moderate ice slope (two rope lengths) to reach a notch in what had looked, from our camp below, like a rock ridge to the summit. Once we got to the notch we discovered to our happy surprise that behind it ran a 300m snow slope, all the way to the base of the summit ridge. The ridge was airy but safe with good snow in which to use pickets as belays. The whole climb to the summit took us four hours.

Our happiness, however, was short-lived when bad weather forced us to stop for two days. Then came a new pass. Pablo called it Comet Pass, saying that the beautiful cloud formations above it resembled comets. After descending this pass, we camped and fortunately the next day dawned crystal clear. Determined on an early start across a crevasse field, we left camp without having breakfast, a good decision since the low clouds returned later in the day, obscuring any view entirely.

Somewhat relieved, we reached the Dater Glacier after having to drag each sledge between two of us to prevent them falling into the fissures of another difficult crevasse field. The next three days were quite demanding as we ascended nearly a thousand metres in our search for a pass giving access to the Thomas Glacier, our crucial exit from the Sentinel Range.

Day 38 and beyond

Thus we find ourselves in this immense crevasse field on the Thomas Glacier. Together with Crocodile Pass, the crossing of this labyrinth is the harshest part of the trip. We had never imagined such a place; the crevasse field is 1.5km long and forces us to work without interruption. The relays to bring down the sledges are non-stop. We only pause in the hope that visibility will improve, and we use these moments to eat something.



68. Bright sunshine at 3am, descending the Thomas Glacier. (*Pablo Gutiérrez*)

Our feeling of uncertainty is very strong, as we really don't know whether we will be able to get out of this field or will be forced to return to look for another escape route. To do that would take us at least four extra days. Yet our spirits during the descent are incredibly good; God is with us and we are able to reach safe ground after 25 hours of continuous work.

Our next goal is the huge Minnesota Glacier, which divides the Sentinel Range from the Heritage Range. It takes us three days to cross it. On Christmas Day we reach the Heritage Range and to celebrate we drink some extra coffee and chocolate. Unlike the previous days, we now enjoy harder snow over which the sledges slide smoothly and do not sink. Can dragging sledges for eight hours a day really be called enjoyment?

On these last days we are very cold – battered by the infamous catabatic winds that blow from the South Pole. Gusts can even reach 200km an hour and the low mountains give less protection than the ones in the Sentinel Range. On 28 December, after climbing to a pass we called Non-steep Slope, we see in the distance the Union Glacier. This sight fills us with joy. It is breathtaking. The wind has swept away the top layer of snow leaving a beautiful blue ice surface.

Two days later we reach the last pass on our long trek. It already has a name – Eureka Pass – given to it by Geoff Sommers on the outstanding Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1989/90. From here we can see across

Horseshoe Valley to Patriot Hills. We have walked 344km, and although there is still another 60 to go, we know that we have achieved our goal.

We descend towards the Horseshoe Valley and in poor visibility head towards the High Nunatak, a point of reference for our last leg. After walking 14.5km in the day, we pitch our camp number 42 at the foot of the Nunatak. We remain awake until midnight to celebrate New Year with a banquet of double rations.

As a mark of respect, we set our last camp at exactly 11 miles from Patriot Hills, the same distance Captain Scott and his companions pitched their tent from the life-saving depot they never reached. We leave the site with one overriding idea – arrival. When we are 3km away we catch our first glimpse of base camp and on 2 January 2003, after 54 days and 403km, we arrive at Patriot Hills. Here we get the only picture showing the four of us together.

Summary: A 403km journey through the almost unexplored east side of the Ellsworth Mountains in Antarctica, without external support, by Rodrigo Jordan (leader), Ernesto Olivares, Pablo Gutiérrez and Eugenio Guzmán. Between 10 November 2002 and 2 January 2003 the Chileans crossed nine mountain passes, explored 17 glaciers, made the first ascent of Mount Segers in the Sentinel Range, collected rock and snow samples for scientific research and prepared an educational programme for children.