This was the first free ascent of the SuperUnknown. A rappel to remember straight down the original sheer aid route completed the night. FA: Sean Villaneuva, Ben Ditto 21-22 August 2014

Walker Citadel: South-east Pillar (Drunken Pillar) (70˚50'N 71˚43'W)
Shepton's Shove (E6 6b, 5.12a, 1000m). The obvious arête leading to the top of the pillar. The hardest pitches were at the top. FA: Nico Favresse, Oli Favresse 23-24 August 2014

The Turret
Life on The Kedge (E6 6b, 5.12, 900m). The first route on the east face of the Turret: a quality climb. Takes the buttress just right of the chimney crack that splits the Turret from top to bottom, and follows the obvious, clean cut crack on the left hand side. 'The cracks just kept on coming'. Sustained pitches in 5.11/5.12 range. FA: Nico Favresse, Oli Favresse 28-29 August 2014

Gibbs Fjörd: Plank Wall (70˚50'N 71˚43'W)
Walking the Plank (E4 6a, 5.11+, 900m). Keeps to the steep arête. Another quality climb, on excellent rock but north facing, with little sun. Sections of the climbing were covered in snow. FA: Nico Favresse, Sean Villaneuva 4-5 September 2014

Notes: All the climbs both at Uummannaq and Baffin were done on sight and free without the use of aid; there was no use of pitons or bolts.

A curious place to play your music. *(Oli Favresse)*

CARADOG JONES

The Last Leviathan

'Ere comes the boat, only 'alf afloat. No, it's not the 'Last Boat to Cairo', but it's the last we'll see of *Pelagic Australis* for 10 days after being dropped off at the snout of the Nordenskjöld glacier. *(Richard Spillett)*

'It's unclimbed,' Tim Carr told me. 'Criquet said so himself.' I could hardly believe my ears. It was 2007 and Tim had just revealed that Nordenskjöld Peak, at 2355m the second-highest peak in South Georgia sitting slap bang in the middle of the island, had yet to receive its first ascent. 'I've been keeping that under my belt, in case I had the chance, like, but I'll be off soon. If anyone deserves to know, you do.'

Tim and Pauline Carr were shortly to leave South Georgia, one of the few couples ever to have lived there for a long period of time. This jewel of information was his generous parting gift. It had long been assumed that

Trying to scout a way through the icefall for the sledges. *(Crag Jones)*

the scientist and explorer Christian de Marliave – known as 'Criquet' – had made the first and only ascent in 1988. Christian's bold and determined solo effort had seen him get high on the mountain but not, it now turned out, to the summit. The cat was out of the bag and into my pocket – for the time being at least.

I made an attempt with Skip Novak and Julian Freeman-Attwood in November 2009, after which certain elements of the opposition grew suspicious of my eccentric interest. Stephen Venables had recently been spotted stalking its approaches making sinister comments along the lines that all was fair in love and war. Make no mistake, that charming exterior conceals a predatory competitor. Why should he be scrapping around for leftovers if one of the great beasts remained available?

So I returned to South Georgia in November 2011 for my ninth visit, counting various work and play trips over the years. It is a place I have come to know well. The island, whilst amazingly beautiful, is also prone to ferocious weather. The inspiration offered by the former has therefore to be tempered with consideration for the latter.

I first worked there in 1990 as the sole civilian living with the military garrison. My role was to re-establish civilian management of shipping and fisheries. I have returned many times for research and management work but also increasingly on private mountaineering expeditions, often in the company of the American Skip Novak on his specialist Antarctic

sailing vessels *Pelagic* and *Pelagic Australis*. We were again transported and supported by the *Pelagic* team, now also comprising Miles and Laura West as captain and first mate with Dave Roberts as second mate.

My teammate for this venture was Richard Spillett, an old climbing friend whose calm exterior masks a determined and adventurous soul. While I masquerade as a househusband, Richard's daytime job is as a derivatives trader turned risk manager in a sort of poacher turned gamekeeper role. As usual with Richard, I fully expected to improve my education on the finer points of capitalism while he would undoubtedly benefit from broadsides of my unreconstructed Marxism. It was the sort of well-balanced team that might never leave the tent.

'All those thieving so-and-sos should be shot.'

'You were happy to accept the credit when the going was good. It's the juice that oils the wheels of industry. '

Ten minutes of this and I'm howling at the moon while Richard is laughing his socks off. Yet as unlikely as it seems, the more of this cussedness the better when it comes to climbing mountains, especially in South Georgia. Madness also helps.

We joined *Pelagic Australis* in Stanley in the Falkland Islands for the 800-mile journey east – four days downwind but a few more on our return. The plan was to drop us at the head of Cumberland Bay East, where the glacier reaches the sea. It would take us about three days to ski with sledges to the foot of the mountain before we started the technical climbing proper.

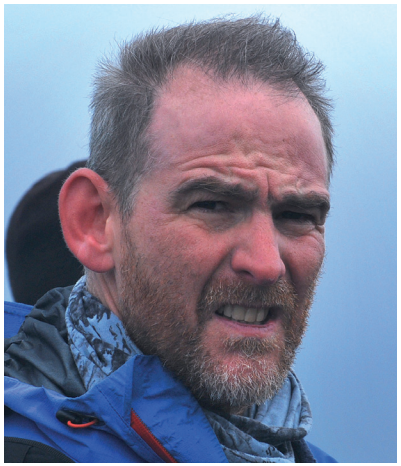
Wind and weather looked good for a quick departure from the Falklands so there was little time to catch up with old friends. We were so busy making sure we had everything: checking gear, buying food and stowing everything aboard. We cast off on the evening of 13 November.

A snow petrel comes to nibble at my skis. *(Crag Jones)*

The rest of the crew were the Stephen brothers, Jim and Bob, from Chicago, Julian Fox from London and Marcelo Telles from Bahia, Brazil, a ship's pilot who was looking forward to his first sight of snow. Jim and Bob ran a family business, the Weber Grill Co, suppliers of fancy cooking platforms to the barbecue world. They have a passion for form and function, being to a seared steak what Steve Jobs was to the computer. Even so, they couldn't spot a British wind-up. Back on the Falklands we had Bob and Jim on the run from 'dangerous' feral sheep.

'ALWAYS maintain eye contact, it's essential.'

'You sure about that?'



Richard Spillett, intractable economist. *(Crag Jones)*

Crag Jones, the mad polemicist. *(Richard Spillett)*

'Believe me, I'm an expert – don't EVER let them get the upper hand, psychologically speaking, so to speak.'

'Christ, it's bad enough with all these landmines. Skip never said anything about this.'

We had steady sailing in calm conditions, by Southern Ocean standards, with winds no more than 35 knots. On the afternoon of 16 November we passed the magnificent Shag Rocks towering out of a misty sea. In the past we have sailed between them but not this time. I remembered battling past on a dark and stormy night going in the opposite direction, back to Stanley as the sole 'escort' on a Russian long-liner, the *Maksheevo*. We had arrested the crew for poaching. The patrol ship followed behind but I was not the most welcome of passengers. Fortunately their sense of fate preserved me; the filleting knife under my pillow proved an unnecessary precaution.

After four days we closed on South Georgia, expecting to reach Bird Sound by mid-morning. The weather was forecast to hold fair up to the moment we planned to be dropped off. Then it would turn foul for three days. It seemed best though to get ashore at the earliest opportunity. It is fatal to cling to the comfort of the boat. As evening closed in, a bitter wind swept off the Nordenskjöld glacier. Miles calmly nosed the boat through icebergs to the head of Cumberland Bay East to give Dave as short a run as possible to get us ashore in the dinghy. He looked askance at all our kit.

'Don't worry, Dave,' I told him. 'We'll thin it out tomorrow and stash the barrels behind the beach.'

'We're sick of packing,' Richard said. 'We can't be arsed to do it tonight.'

The vast majority of yachtsmen and women have a primal aversion to being parted from their boats. They looked pityingly at us as we voluntarily forsook *Pelagic*'s warm delights for a grim and barren shore. We bid everyone a wistful farewell.

'See you in ten days,' Miles said. 'We'll have two more for leeway if the sea is too rough for a pick-up then or the ice blows in.'

Boot Camp. *(Richard Spillett)*

Then we staggered across the boulder beach avoiding grumbling seals and irritated penguins towards a rock bluff that offered shelter in its lee behind a ten-foot whale vertebrae. (Smaller ones made nice stools.) As it grew dark Richard wrestled the tent into shape while I ferried loads up from the landing spot. Time is tight on a one-month charter. Unless you have the boat on continuous standby, the only option is to go heavy and keep moving up in bad weather with enough kit, food and fuel to sit out any bad periods. Hopefully we would be in a position to take immediate advantage of any good days without becoming extended.

Two years before, we skied from the beach but now there was much less snow. The first day was spent thinning loads to two heavy packs apiece. These we ferried up on to the glacier where we could start using sledges, though not the skis which had to be added to the loads. Next day we started our approach. The icefall was almost 'dry' this year, hard ice with all crevasses visible and open. It meant very torturous and slow progress navigating the sledges through this labyrinth.

The glacier itself appeared to breaking down with large new depressions and major inward collapse, giving us a surreal passage. One cannot but help draw parallels with the decimation of the whale stocks in the last century. It is the next stage of change wrought by man, this time on the physical fabric of our surroundings. As the glaciers spew their entrails, we are witnessing the murder of the last leviathans. Places I carried loads to over a week, ten years ago, can now be sailed to in open water. No one will ever see again the fabled filling and flushing of the huge and mysterious

Richard Spillett finishes the hard pull to the top of the icefield to gain the upper glacier. *(Crag Jones)*

Lake Gulbransen. The Neumayer glacier has receded four kilometres in the last ten years.

We crested the icefall and found the first skiable ribbon of snow, a 'yellow brick road' heading gently downwards into another broad collapsing basin about half a mile across. Richard had not used mountaineering skis for a while and complained they were turning outwards. 'Keep your knees together and think of England,' I told him. My flippancy was short-lived. I soon discovered the heel of my expensive Italian boots had come unstuck and was flapping uselessly.

This could scupper the entire expedition and my brain started racing. There was Skip's pair under the forward bunk on the boat and the crew had been invited on board a cruise ship the day before. A skinful of booze meant it likely they had not yet left Cumberland Bay. A frantic call on our satellite phone confirmed this scenario. The boots were on their way. Dave Roberts on *Pelagic Australis* was not the sort of man to be deterred by crashing surf laden with ice blocks. He was up to his neck in freezing seawater but got the boots ashore.

Back down I went, through the belly of the beast. I took a more circuitous route, avoiding soft snow and bridged crevasses. Everything went smoothly and I was at the beach by midday, marvelling at Skip's multi-

coloured footwear. These would give me sex appeal. After a quick refuel on some stashed chocolate I set off back uphill, racing to beat advancing fog to the lip of the glacier. In the end I had to stop to deal with the inevitable blisters but took solace at the sheer beauty of these boots. One has to suffer for art, especially someone else's.

Next day we made an early start pulling sledges in crampons and found a way through a lateral moraine leading to the toe of the ridge extending northwards from Sheridan Peak. This gave a steep climb just on the limit of what is possible with skins and we were soon over the lip and on to the third section of the Nordenskjöld, a broad snow-covered valley leading up alongside the western slopes of Sheridan Peak.

Roped up again, we marvelled at how skis and sledges crossed crevasse after crevasse without any breaking through, even in hot soft conditions. I knew from previous experience that terrain like this would be murderous if we were on foot. By early afternoon we were near our high camp from two years previously. This time we camped out on the glacier flat away from the avalanche danger and snow dumps that had done for us on that occasion.

I was determined to establish an advanced camp at the foot of the technical climbing rather than begin our climb from here. Next morning we loaded our rucksacks and climbed the long steep snowfield to the upper stage of the Nordenskjöld glacier. It took two carries to get the gear up. Returning to dump the second load was a test of Richard's GPS skills but he navigated perfectly in a whiteout. All that practise on Clapham Common with his daughter Lottie was paying off. It was only a few kilometres further to the site of our final camp and I wanted to press on. Richard was having none of it. We were soaked and tired and in the whiteout we might site the final camp in a poor spot and have to move it again. We were soon ensconced in our sleeping bags, making dinner.

Next morning we set a location on the GPS so we could navigate in the continuing whiteout. Occasional breaks in the cloud allowed me to remember the lay of the land. As we pulled onto the final flat, a brief clearing gave us our bearings and we chose a good spot to camp, anchoring the tent with guy-lines attached to sections of buried engine hose. The following day was my birthday and we stayed in bed. My daughter Laura had packed me a special candle, which we ceremoniously placed in a mini Christmas pudding. Having triangulated various weather forecasts, we decided tomorrow was the day. Timings had worked out well for once.

We rose at 2am on 26 November, finally getting away at around 4am after the ritual faffing. The right-hand side of the north face is threatened by seracs but by skirting the rocks on the left we avoided them. There was much less snow and ice cover than on our previous attempt but the line was still there. A convenient spindrift avalanche cone bridged the bergschrund and we were soon on the face, moving together up and right, aiming for the foot of a steep gully that broke through the rocks.

After 150m the growing void became uncomfortable. On this kind of

Our top camp, at last. *(Richard Spillett)*

terrain, a mixture of rotten ice and powdery snow, it's essential to have a clear instinct for every crumbling step. You also have to trust each other and concentrate on not making a single error. To move fast you cannot afford the luxury of belaying and climbing in stages. The rope is only out to be deployed quickly when needed. As I reached the start of the gully I placed our first ice screw but we kept moving together, only stopping when all the ice screws had been used up and swapping them back to the leader. Emerging from the gully it was a relief to find the ice was slightly softer than on our previous attempt.

That had been a harrowing night, descending hard ice under spindrift avalanches. Now we made quick progress and by 8am we were where we'd been at 5pm first time around. We crossed rubble chutes and broken terrain and finally reached the crest of the east ridge. The rock is hilariously rotten. In high winds chunks are simply blown off. All those years Richard and I spent climbing on Devon's shale were paying dividends. After Tintagel, this tottering heap of Weetabix wasn't so frightening.

The boiling cloud-broth thickened. Soon all I could see was a thin shard of dark shale soaring skyward. Eventually even this ran out leaving us with white on white. The angle was not extreme but the north side fell away very steeply. I crawled forward on my belly in the strong wind and poked my head over the south side – another impressive drop. The ice was glassy along the crest but a ribbon of wind-blown snow was glued to it like a rooster comb.

If I chose my spot carefully and drove down hard enough I could get the shaft of my left axe in to the hilt. Meanwhile I could use the pick of my right axe in the hard ice and make progress like some sort of demented crab. We shortened the rope and kept at least one ice screw between us. When the wind dropped we could stand up and balance along our precarious banister rail.

Every now and then the snow comb would develop into a proper cornice. I was also haunted by the thought that progress was only possible if the winds remained low. Richard was becoming increasingly demented as downward pointing ribs of snow kept snagging slack rope. Each time this happened, he had to make a horrible descent off the banister onto the hard ice in order to free the rope. I looked on in bemused horror.

After a while we reached a more level section where we could walk. The mist cleared briefly and revealed bulbous overhanging ice pillars disappearing into the southern depths in a grotesque fantasy. If Gaudi designed mountains, this would be one of his. Then things got steeper again. We surmised we were on top of 'the knob' – a distinctive lump visible from afar high on the summit ridge. Creeping over the top, we climbed down a steep pitch of pure crystal to reach a saddle beyond.

It was the sort of place where you make the final commitment to go for the top. We felt like we were space-walking now, out on a limb. Visibility got worse but we knew we must be getting close and prayed there would not be a horrible obstacle at the last. Richard's bank of instrumentation – altimeters and GPS – was registering summit proximity. What appeared to be a long 'S' in the ridge seemed significant but the mist was playing tricks and we passed it quickly.

Gradually, the angle eased. After 1200m of height gain and almost double that in actual climbing, what looked like a typical South Georgia summit

Surreal progress on the very crest – except you can't see it. *(Richard Spillett)*
Below: Tippety-top, summit joy for Richard Spillett. *(Crag Jones)*

took shape: a flat platform crested by a three-metre rounded bollard with a slightly higher whaleback a little to the right. All was plastered in hoar frost. Everything fell away in all directions. It was high noon. I waited and peered through breaks in the broth to make sure there was nothing higher nearby. It was the top. We logged the point on Richard's GPS.

The same thing was on both our minds: 'Right, we're halfway there. Let's get our arses off of here in one piece.' We stepped down on to the platform and called the research station at King Edward Point on our VHF radio. We had hoped they might have seen us on the summit. We offered to do a highland jig. They suggested setting fire to some bushes. We turned tail for the long haul home.

The steep sections on the upper icy ridge were demanding. Crampons balled up even with a little snow, then skidded on the polished ice. I had to keep going fast enough along the snowy banister to stop the rope tangling but not so fast as to pull Richard off. I felt the toes of one foot waving in space long enough not to step down further. I had almost gone over the lip of a huge void plunging into the great unknown of the south-east face. When the shale crest appeared below out of the blank white we felt relief at just seeing something.

The clag ended at the same altitude we'd entered it, on the shoulder. This allowed us to pick the right line back across the middle of the face. I carried on first to find the route and set up any belays. Richard had the unenviable task of coming second. No comfort of a rope from above for him. A 150m diagonal descent across the ice led to rocks. I started traversing back and forth, failing to find the upper entry to the gully. Too far west and we'd be under the seracs. Too far east and we'd end up on collapsing rock with no safe place to secure the rope. Worse still, I could not find any good ice to place an ice screw to protect Richard as he descended.

Finally I made a decision, committing to what I thought might be the right place. I crossed a thin scab of ice lying on a blank slab. In the mush on the other side I dug down a metre until I hit hard ice, drilled in a good ice screw and set off down the steep gully with Richard following. I doubled up two poor ice screws at the bottom exit and traversed left onto a rotten rock pillar. All snow and ice was now just about useless for belays but I finally constructed a reliable piton belay after some desperate hammering. Richard hove into view in the last of the light.

We fished out our headtorches and I re-racked the gear and resumed our descent. The last 200m felt steep and unreliable, that infuriating consistency that was too soft for ice screws but too hard for the shafts of our axes. Digging down to the depths of my armpits, I found revealed a morass of soft crystals, like demerara. We were so tired but had to find reliable belays or something terrible could go wrong. From the depths of my memory a solution wafted towards the surface.

Perhaps if I buried my axes deep enough in a 'T' shape, the horizontal bar of the T would brace the vertical leg to make a strong and secure anchor, even in this shit. I dug like hell and eventually my axes were lashed into a T and sunk in the hole. We could hang a bloody herd of elephants off this set up.

'OK, Richard. You can fall as far as you like!' He joined me at my proud belay. 'Look at this, man. You can breathe easy now.' We carried on down, pitch after pitch, diagonally to our right, searching for the one point we could cross the bergschrund that would not involve an overhanging abseil. Finally I spotted it and gently eased across the spindrift cone without it collapsing.

Almost drunk with fatigue, I staggered down the last of the slope in the halo of my headtorch to join Richard on the flat glacier. I wanted to sink to my knees and kiss the beautiful horizontal. Aided by Richard's GPS, we finally found camp and collapsed into the tent at 2am. As we drifted into oblivion yesterday's alarm went off. We laughed wearily. This had definitely been a 24-hour round-trip. Then we slept.

Summary

An account of the first ascent of Nordenskjöld Peak (2355m) in the Allardyce Range of South Georgia. Approaching from Cumberland Bay East, Caradog (Crag) Jones and Richard Spillett were on the mountain on 26-27 November 2014.

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