SPIRIT OF THE STORM

By WARWICK DEACOCK

(*Four illustrations: nos: 75–78*)

Heard Island passed unnoticed in the world until a British sealer named Peter Kemp sighted it in 1833, but it was Captain John Heard of the barque *Orientale* out of Boston who first placed the island on his track chart. Lying at 53°10′S and 73°35′E, the island is 2,400 miles from Western Australia and 300 miles from the small French base at Iles Kerguelen. Since the island is 100 miles inside the Antarctic convergence and only 900 miles from the great white continent itself, it enjoys the changeable tempests of the Southerlies and Westerlies eventuated by its oceanic isolation.

The main massif, Big Ben, named by American sealers, is a heavily glaciated, blown-out volcano, and it was as recently as 1949 that an Antarctic Division Walrus sea-plane, doomed to destruction at the hands of a 'willy waw' (a violent type of squall), photographed the mountain to reveal a summit cone which was given the name Mawson Peak (9,005 ft.).

Several scientific expeditions had touched on Heard, from the Challenger expedition in 1874 up to Sir Douglas Mawson's British–Australian–New Zealand Antarctic Expedition in 1929. The sealers had annihilated all the elephant and fur seals and king penguins; but apart from these men, no introduced predators exist on the island, which is rich in fauna.

Glaciers run down to the sea in nine-tenths of the island's circumference; and sombre cliffs guard most of the rest of the coastline, with the exception of some flat areas of greenery at Atlas Cove, the Spit and Long Beach. The beaches are pounded by rollers that journey round the world driven by the Westerlies and which guard the black volcanic sands, offering few landing spots.

It is always windy, or wet and cold on Heard, and the summer mean temperature at sea level is at about freezing, whilst an average wind is 25 m.p.h. Gusts of 100 knots are not unknown and the weather systems which have their origins in this area change unpredictably.

In 1947 Dr. Law established the first Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition base at Atlas Cove and for nine years meteorological work was carried out by an annual fourteen-man party, in addition to other sciences. When this base was closed in 1954 it was in order to establish the first base at Mawson, on the continent itself, and subse-

quently Davies and Wilkes bases followed so that now every year seventy-five men travel down to relieve the bases. Occasionally the chartered Danish ice-breakers will call at Heard and sometimes if the weather permits, Atlas Cove is visited and a fresh note placed in a bottle: 'May God bless any cast on these shores and preserve him'.

The earliest recorded climb on Heard was involuntary. A sealing vessel was driven onto the ice-cliffs of the Baudisson glacier and saved when a seaman climbed the mast, chopped steps in the cliff with an axe and helped his mates up to safety. Earlier attempts on the mountain were made from the Atlas Cove base on skis, the routes lying across the Abbotsmith glacier in an oblique line, for the peak in its first visible moments looks deceptively close. The first seriously planned attempt was by John Béchervaise, an A.N.A.R.E. officer in charge of the base, and after an initial reconnaissance he evolved a plan to ascend on this same line with a three-man party hauling a small sled. Crevasses, bad visibility and an eighteen-day blizzard found this attempt forced to retreat after repeated burying by the heavy precipitation. This was a winter attempt relying on snow cover for the glacial travel and with temperatures on the average some ten degrees less than in summer. Two circuits were made during the nine years that A.N.A.R.E. manned the base and this journey proved a considerable feat in itself, since nine glaciers in all must be crossed, several steep and of an ice-fall nature, whilst at the South Barrier a route leads between the surf and the cliff base.

Two scientists were killed in 1949 when attempting to pass under the ice-cliffs of the Baudisson en route to Saddle Point. The nature of the bases' meteorological duties and the paucity of alpinists in Australia precluded more investigations than these, and it was fortunate that on one of the circuits Dr. Graham Budd was able to gaze up at the peak from Long Beach and confirm the clues in the aerial photograph to a possible pass through the South Barrier at about 4,000 ft. on the Fifty-one glacier. Budd closed the base in 1954, leaving it in a state of preservation that excited the interest of H. W. Tilman. However the feasibility of landing a party from the 45 ft. cutter *Mischief* was discouraged by the lack of suitable anchorage coupled with the severity of a return voyage to Kerguelen by a depleted crew.

I had come to Australia in 1959 to initiate the Outward Bound School, and at the end of three years attempted to plan a private trip to Heard; a plan was also being considered by the Melbourne University Mountaineering Club. Since both of us expected a free trip on the A.N.A.R.E. relief vessel which often calls at Heard, it was not surprising that an official plan for a short term six-man scientific expedition, proposed by Dr. Budd, was accepted. Bowing to the winds of chance, I joined the three-man mountain party which consisted of Budd and Dr. Jon Ste-

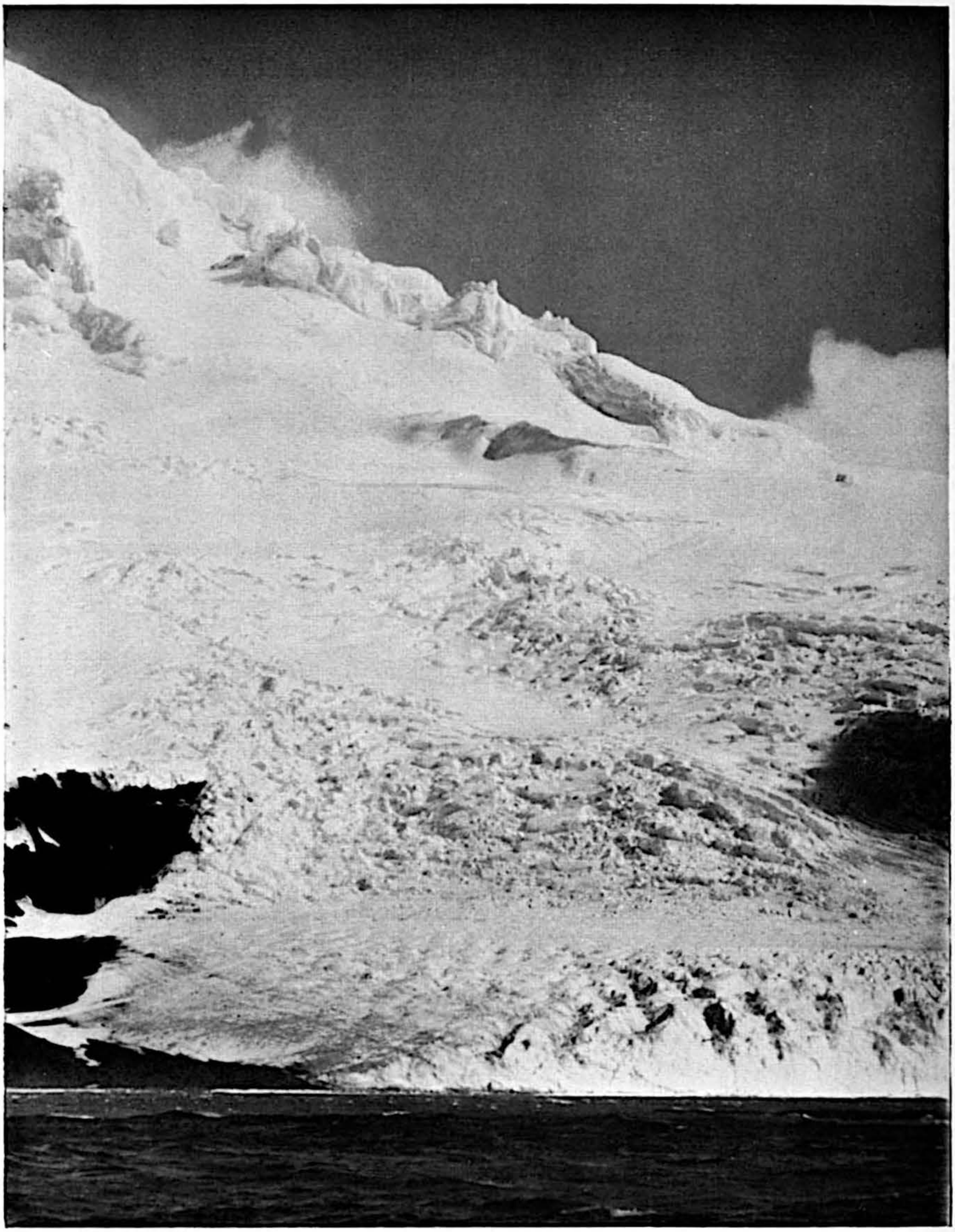


Photo: A.N.A.R.E.]

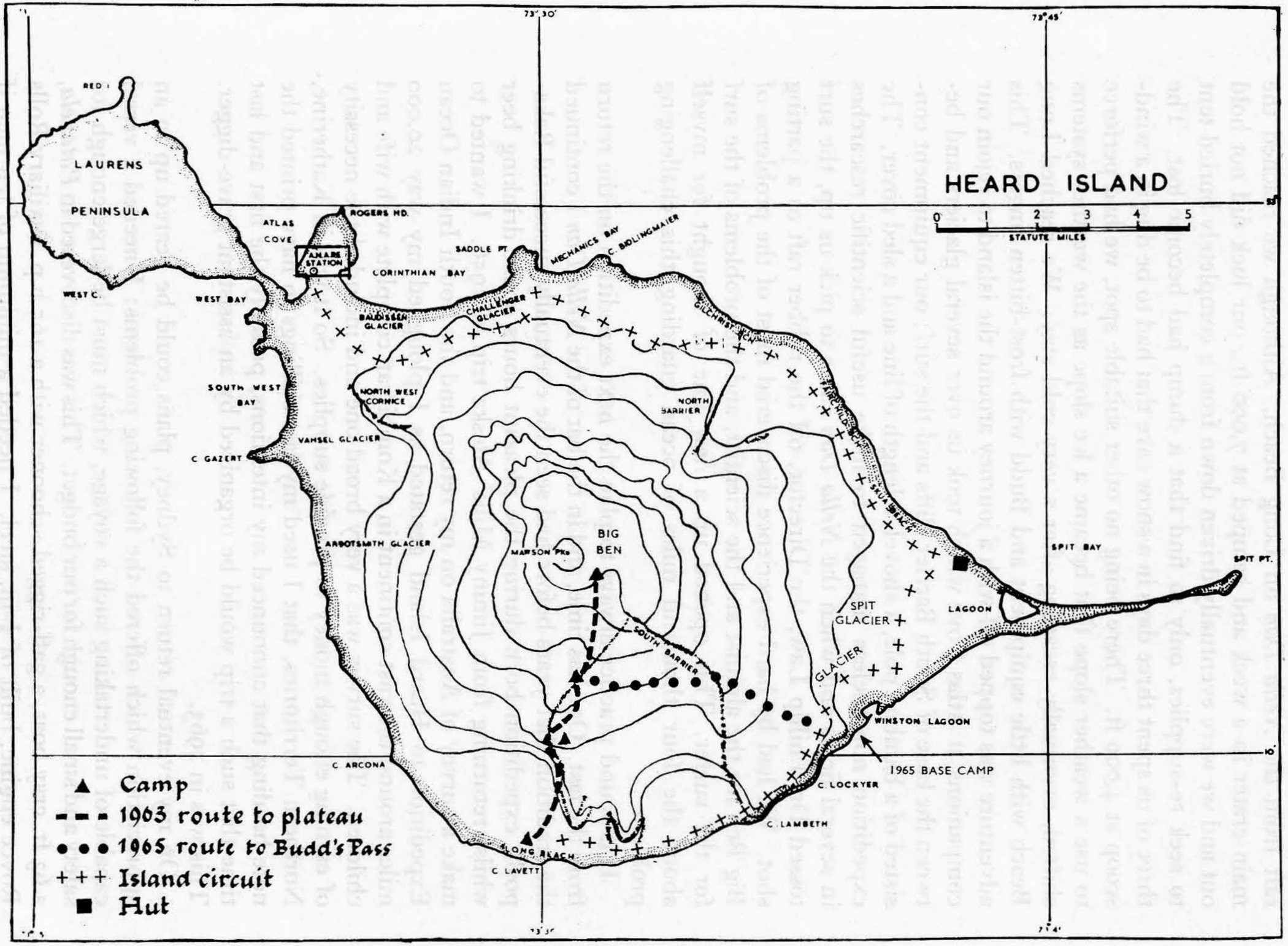
A TYPICAL VIEW FROM THE SEA OF THE FLANKS OF BIG BEN.



Photo: A.N.A.R.E.]

THE AERIAL PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN IN 1949 WHICH REVEALED THE SUMMIT CONE (MAWSON'S PEAK, 9,005 FT.) OF BIG BEN. THE 1965 ROUTE LAY UP SOUTH BARRIER (*Right Foreground*), THEN CROSSED THE FIFTY-ONE GLACIER TO JOIN THE 1963 ROUTE AT THE PASS ON THE LEFT.

(No. 76)



SHOWING ROUTE OF 1963 ATTEMPT. SAME ROUTE FOR 1964/5.

phenson, and after a pleasant, if rough, cruise we were landed by rubber raft from the *Nella Dan* on Long Beach. Although we reached the main crater in a week and camped at 7,000 ft., our luck did not hold out and we were eventually driven down from a completely buried tent to seek re-supplies, only to find that a dump had become lost. The three of us spent three days in a snow cave that had to be dug in a wind-scoop at 4,000 ft. There being no other suitable spot, we had perforce to use a weather slope that became a lee slope as the weather systems shifted, eventually escaping after a very cold stay. We reached Long Beach with little equipment and Budd with frost-bitten fingers. This adventure was topped off with a journey around the island to rejoin our companions at Atlas Cove which took us over several glaciers and between the base of South Barrier cliffs and the surf; our equipment consisted of a bamboo pole, a shovel, a length of line and a sled cover. The expedition nonetheless managed to make useful scientific researches in several fields and when the *Nella Dan* came to pick us up, the surf tossed Dr. Phillip Law, the Director, off the rubber raft as a parting shot. We had by hard experience discovered most of the problems of Big Ben for the alpinist and the scientist, and the problems of the surf for the surfer. This opened up a new line of thought for myself about the four thousand miles of ocean guarding this challenging problem.

It is sound practice always to plan the next expedition on the return from the last. One has time, and in the bar of the *Nella Dan* I continued the tradition that years before had seen the eventually successful Rakaposhi expedition born during the pleasant hours spent drinking beer whilst returning from Jimmy Mills' Alaska trip of 1956. I wanted to make a survey of Australia on my return, and the South Indian Ocean Expedition to Heard Island gestated as I ploughed my way 20,000 miles around the vast continent in a Kombi van complete with wife and children. The survey was a very broad one and included the necessity of earning enough money to provide supplies. So it was in Katherine, Northern Territories, that I used my last shillings to have printed the note heading that announced my intentions, possibly the first and last time that such a trip would be organized by an assistant grave-digger. This was in 1963.

On my eventual return to Sydney, plans could be geared up to an appreciation which offered the following problems: I needed a vessel capable of undertaking such a voyage, which must be large enough for safety and small enough for our budget. This was discovered in *Patanela*, a 63 ft. cray boat, a gaff-rigged schooner with a 165 h.p. auxiliary Rolls Royce engine, built of $\frac{1}{4}$-in. steel. I needed a minimum of ten men if the vessel could be sailed back to Kerguelen whilst landing a strong enough mountain party, and here I found a wealth of experience to be

drawn from this country, New Zealand and England, in the shape of Bill Tilman, who readily agreed to fly out on his return from Greenland in October, 1964.[1]

Our budget rose to a majestic £20,000 and we had nine months to find this amount. One further problem had to be left until later, and this was the hardy annual, for such trips, of officialdom's opposition to innovation—no different in Australia to anywhere else. We registered as a private yacht and snapped our fingers at the law. Meanwhile, Sir Edmund Hillary, by becoming our patron, gave us an aura of respectability. When *Patanela* sailed from Sydney on November 5, 1964, it was with a completely refitted vessel, a full crew and a healthy bank balance. The official atmosphere was pessimistic but not so that of the crew, which apart from the veteran skipper contained as rich an accumulation of experience as one might wish for lively discussions in the galley. Colin Putt, our engineer and secretary, a senior developmental engineer, was an old member of the N.Z.A.C. and had led the first Carstenz trip to New Guinea; Philip Temple, an English migrant to New Zealand, had been with Putt, and later on Harrer's successful return to Carstenz. He had work to do for the Bishop Museum of Hawaii collecting insects. Graham Budd returned gladly for the fourth time to what had almost become 'his mountain', in charge of science and daily plankton hauls at sea. Two other doctors came along, Russ Pardoe, who held an M.B.E. for a cranial operation performed at Mawson Antarctic base, and Malcolm Hay, who had commanded Davies base and flew back to us from England. Edwin Reid, our radio operator, had been at MacQuarie Island. Anthony Hill, a lawyer, had ocean-raced in the Sydney to Hobart races, and John Crick, our youngest member at twenty-two, had three seasons in the New Zealand Alps. These last three had all been instructors of mine at Outward Bound in their time. Out of all of these only three men with sailing experience could be found. Putt: who as engineer could not stand a watch, Hill, who naturally became first mate to Tilman, and myself who became the cook.

The journey from Sydney to Albany, W.A., of 1,600 miles seemed to produce a crew. At Albany a civic reception and Rotary dinner produced the immortal comment when our skipper was asked how he navigates in such waters: 'Sail south till the butter freezes, then turn east!'

From Australia we sailed west, then nine hundred miles from Madagascar turned south to make landfall at Kerguelen two months after quitting Sydney, arriving on New Year's Day.

[1] 'If exploration is completed, adventure still exists. The cruise of the 29-ton cutter, *Mischief*, is a testimony to this. Colonel H. W. Tilman, former pilot of a Bristol aeroplane constructed in 1906, and well-known to climbers and explorers, sailed from England in the *Mischief* with three companions at the end of July, 1959 . . .' (*The Mountain World*, 1962–3, p. 220. Albert Bauer 'Kerguelen Island').

Refitting at Kerguelen, we established a vinous entente with a small French base at Christmas Harbour, Cook's old anchorage, and sped on to Heard. Sighting the Macdonald Islands, on which I decided not to land after all, once I had viewed their perpendicular nature, we cast our anchor off Heard on January 7, only to be blown off for three days by westerly gales. Returning to the attack we got ashore on January 11, with three capsizes to remind us that sea and air temperature are standard at about 35° F. Luckily we had trained and equipped for such even-tuality and all wore rubber suits. *Patanela* returned to Kerguelen whilst we sorted ourselves out for the expedition's main aim, the ascent of Mawson Peak on Big Ben.

I had with me Colin Putt, Graham Budd, Philip Temple and John Crick. Between us, apart from having the necessary alpine experience and knowledge of the island, we could meet the demands of scientific and other responsibilities, not the least of which was the film.

The requirements for climbing Big Ben were fairly obvious. Weather was the chief problem, and this meant careful choice of equipment and an attitude to the problems of travel. Assessing that a fine weather break of about six hours might occur once only in three weeks, I decided to place a party at the pass at 4,000 ft. with three weeks' food and fuel and from there to plug up a route marked with six-foot fluorescent plastic tubes as far as the main crater at 7,500 ft. Travelling in indifferent weather and in high winds, it took us a week to establish this camp on a route running up the South Barrier uplands, down an unpleasant and nearly vertical scree-chute named the 'Escalator' and across the head of the Fifty-one glacier. On the new map of Heard our camp rested in Budd Pass below Budd Peak. We placed a Béchervaise tent at the Escalator as a back stop. This is a three-man tent with a ridge-pole developed for sub-antarctic conditions, whilst the five of us used a pyramid tent weighing about seventy pounds but adequate to the conditions. Cold, sometimes wet and often freezing, and very high winds with drift are the main features of Big Ben weather. We had developed a voluminous over-parka of plastic material, known as a Putt parka and first used in New Guinea. This was worn over normal windproofs whenever the wet North-westerlies blew, and owing to its size cut down condensation. On our feet we had the red spot Mishawakee vapour barrier boots that I had first used in Alaska, and which, although sloppy with crampons, are delightful in all conditions and can be slipped on and off with little trouble.

From the pass we established our route upwards in a few days, suffering several crevasse falls owing to the complete invisibility of snow-bridge signs. Eventually a rope of five developed, and this *cordée* emerged early in the mornings carrying full bivouac equipment including ice-saws and shovels ready to walk up its 4,000 ft. of purgatory towards the



Photo: A.N.A.R.E.]

BUDD PEAK (7,600 FT.) ON SOUTH BARRIER, SHOWING SITE OF 1963 CAMP.

(No. 77)



Photo: W. M. M. Deacock]

BIG BEN: THE 1965 ASSAULT CAMP AT BUDD'S PASS (4,000 FT.). MAWSON'S PEAK IN MIST. THE ROUTE LIES UP THE GOTLEY GLACIER.

(No. 78)

hoped for dash to the summit. With four hours only of darkness I had placed watches on triple Heard summer time, so that we emerged at about 2.30 a.m. ready to go.

On the morning of January 25, only four days after our siege had commenced, when most of the songs had been sung, the jokes told and our luxury marzipan bars were getting low, the summit peeped at us through the white mists. Our caravan marched with military precision, with five minutes halt in each hour to allow change of lead only. As the day drew on the weather stayed clear and we reached the main crater at noon, sped across the Gotley glacier and gazed wistfully at the enigmatic flat snow that covered the Marie Celeste of our 1963 camp. Budd dangled a thermometer in crevasses to measure polar and temperate temperature differences, and after a short halt we headed for the summit.

Mawson Peak turned out to be a forty-five degree slope with a plentiful girdle of crevasses and some ice-cliffs, but after cutting some steps our party reached the summit at 3.0 p.m.

This was a much more interesting virgin summit than I had stood on before, since a shallow crater about 75 yds. by 40 yds., and 40 ft. deep lay beside the knoll on which we waggled our flags. From this came sulphurous fumes and we could see varied coloured fluids and rock. Before we could investigate or collect from the sublimates and condensates the Westerly came in like an express train, and all of us turned downwards seeking the safety of our marked route back to camp. The climb had taken fourteen hours and we had been thirteen days getting there.

After a few days stuck in a blizzard, we got down to our base camp, where amongst the elephant seals and penguins the scientific work could be planned. Two parties of three went off to Spit and Long Beach, where Budd and I were pleased to re-discover a half-bottle of Negrita rum, abandoned in 1963. Putt and Crick made a complete photo-survey of the south-east section of the island whilst the rest of us made collections of insects, plants and rocks and made census of fur seals and king penguins, believed to be re-establishing. The weather remained foul for the remainder of our stay and when *Patanela* arrived a day early, having blown the length of the island at four knots under bare poles, I prevaricated all day before taking the decision to risk the surf. Eventually we got out in our 18 ft. inflatable assault raft with two packs of scientific gear and film, plus what we wore. The rest of the gear we left neatly stacked in rows on the beach of Capsize Bay; the materials were not worth a man's life in a surf that could produce bloodstained tatters of penguins as a testimony of its ferocity.

Reunited with our friends, we were told of the not unproductive time at Kerguelen, of fluid hospitality at Port-aux-Français, where Tilman is well known from his 1959 visits that are immortalised in Tilman

Glacier and Mischief Bay. Disaster at one time threatened the expedition when force eleven winds blew the schooner off her anchorage at Port Jeanne d'Arc, a period when, having rushed from their bunks, the crew's spirits were relieved by the typical comment of a barefoot, wool-clad skipper: 'I think I shall go below now, otherwise I may perish!'

Parties had reached to 5,000 ft. on Mount Ross which from its photographs offers a clear-cut reason for a future Anglo-French attempt, a climb that involves difficult alpine climbing with weather reminiscent of Mount Cook in New Zealand.

In fourteen days *Patanela* sped 1,600 miles back to Albany and all my cakes and duffs had a starboard list. Back in Sydney on March 14 with 10,745 miles on the log, we dispersed as expeditions do, but not without trace. Scientifically a very large amount of work was done at small cost, whilst the book and film may help to spread our ideas to others. The expedition, which had the support of the New Zealand Alpine Club, of which six of us are members (there is an Australian section), the Mount Everest Foundation and the Trans-Antarctic Fund has formed a Heard Island Fund to support similar ventures in this country. Each member has gone off to innovate in his own right, whilst Skipper Tilman is off with another scratch crew in *Mischief*.

To me the most important discoveries were that in a country that often negates its democracy with conformity and stunts enterprise with paternal discipline, men and support can be found for exciting endeavours; parallel with these thoughts is the realisation that the atmosphere in a galley full of ten bearded men is very close to that of a climbing hut in more ways than one. 'Patanela' is a West Tasmanian aboriginal word meaning 'Spirit of the Storm'. There is little doubt that as the well known parts of the world are visited and subdued so the less pleasant parts will invite attention, as they do already. Stormy places still exist with mysteries to be unravelled; these places contain little comfort and not a great deal of beauty at times, but there is a sort of beauty brought out of those who venture there. It may be that, as our working week grows less and our leisure greater, man will be left with the choice of re-discovering for himself through these activities the qualities that matter to his survival as an individual. Our lives like the skipper's summing up of this, his temporary vessel, can 'sail beautifully, but be a bastard to steer!'