

The Sword and others

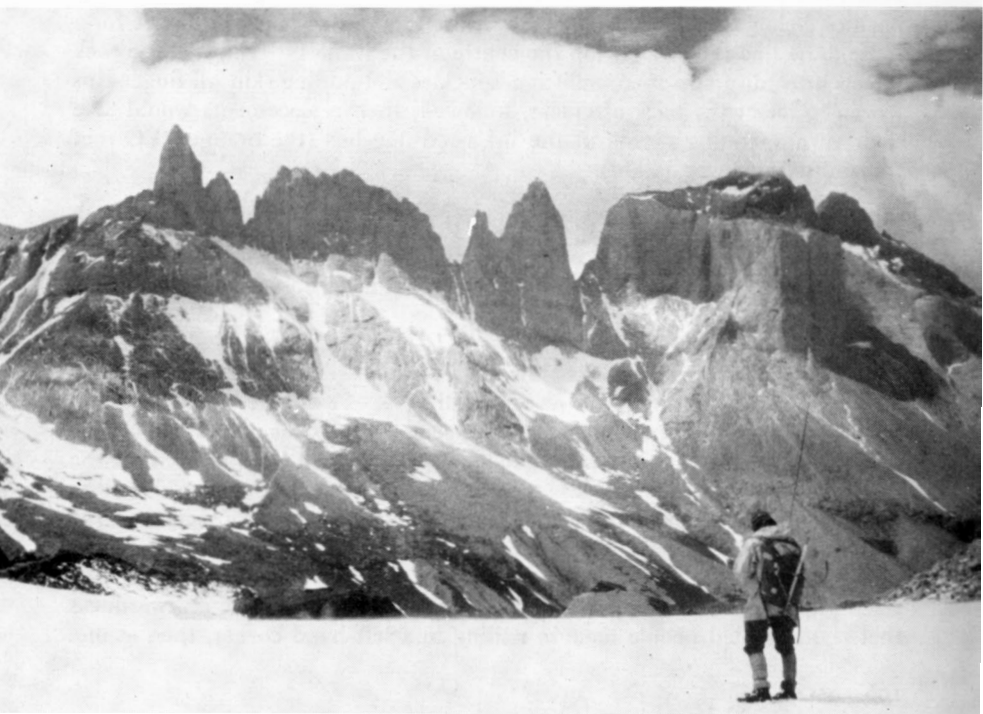
Michael Scott

Essential equipment for any expedition is a box of gear which is lost. If we hadn't lost our Box 59, I don't know what would have morally sustained us whenever we lacked some luxury. Someone could always recall positively packing the missing item in Box 59, which grew from 2 ft square to about 10×15 , but eventually turned out to be the most trivial box we could have lost. What an anti-climax at the end of our trip when we collected the box from the Embassy, where it finished up, to find that for weeks the staff had been walking detours around the ripening smell of mouldy salami.

From December 1971 to January 1972 our team of South Africans—seven men, two with their wives—spent 50 days in the Paine National Park in Chile, resulting in first ascents of the Sword, Cuernos Norte and a spirited attempt at the E face of the Central Tower of Paine before we ran out of time.

Senor Valdez owns a Magirus truck in Punta Arenas, the historic town on the Magellan Straits. He had previously taken the Japanese to the Paine Norte and was tremendously friendly and helpful to us. Soon we were dumped into the expedition shack at Pudeto, where the famous Pancho initiated us into the

78 *The Cuernos ridge above the Río Frances valley* This and next photo: M. Scott



mysteries of his Patagonian horses. These nags sank into quagmires around Lago Nordenskjöld where, being incredibly lazy, they promptly fell asleep until we evolved special methods for dealing with them.

The Cuernos ridge seemed the best choice we could have made. Although my altimeter acted berserk, rising and dropping our Base Camp a 1000 ft every two days, the weather was barricaded by the Cathedral and Fortress, which were hammered day and night while we were relatively sheltered. Even so, we had decided to attune ourselves mentally to climb no matter what the weather was. Slow progress rather than no progress, and our first goal—seen previously only in one magazine picture—was the Sword.

Severing the sky, the Cuernos ridge erupts in a granite serration of sharp, golden spires, breath-taking in pillared prominence. Like granite galleons the peaks stood broadside to the Rio Frances valley, the lines waiting to be rigged with abseils.

The approach to the Sword was complicated due to a threatening line of séracs barring access to the highest snow-field. We could not, therefore, take the obvious gully, but had to traverse over left, up a snow-slope and back right, across another two snow-fields, before we came to our fixed ropes up the slabs to the top, steep snow-field. Tony Dick and Paul Andersen had hacked through a dangerous ice pitch in the séracs to fix the ropes, which we were grateful not to have to repeat. The séracs all fell away some weeks later in a thaw.

When our Davies Box (a South African version of a Whillans Box) was in position below the looming cliffs, we realised there was only one choice for a route. The line ran straight up the centre of the wall. Two days on the rock for each team of two men, splitting knuckles and pulling skin off finger-tips frozen to ice at the back of cracks, followed; then replacements would take their turn spending nights in the infra-red dog-box (the orange PVC roof transmitted this weird light).

Paul Fatti and I started up a break below the neck between the Sword and the Penknife for 150 ft (A2 and F2). Even more nerve wracking as a start had been our decision to toe-kick up to the rock, which put us on 70° ice before we could lunge for the granite.

Now what had appeared from below as a barely possible traverse, turned into an easy ledge leading for 60 ft over to a tall pillar of exfoliated flakes glued to the rock by ice. Paul climbed an alarming series of laybacks up these flakes for a rope-length, placing only nut runners, as pegs would have levered off the flakes. Occasionally he would disappear in a flurry of powder snow, avalanching from high above. I came up, calling with the nonchalance of a second on the rope, for plenty of tight!

Each pitch would have a punch. A trail of blood indicated the awkwardness that right-handed people have in nailing in a left-hand corner, then at one

stage I had almost to strip to fit into a chimney before coldly wriggling up. The other teams each had their two days' turn.

Now well past the definite line where the grey rock turned to red, Paul Fatti and I reached an awkward system of cracks. Jamming up a 10-ft section with our weight of gear on was such a sweat that it took half an hour.

A little traverse now led round to the right to a big platform where we could gaze around the back of the Sword and sweep the view. Next door, the Blade had six obvious lines, while the lurking, cowed Mummer, had none. In the local dialect, so Pancho had said, our row was known otherwise as the Finger, Mushroom and Dagger. Back we went to our cracks, where a pitch higher an easy long walk on a sloping ramp ended at a tall step in the corner. Paul climbed the top section of this entirely on small nuts, and it was so overhanging that I had to battle to keep myself into the rock while removing them, and would spin out each time I lifted one out. Where we could climb free, the straight incut edges on such compact rock were so adequate that it made exhilarating moving. We nearly lurched right over the dramatic knife-edge we had landed on, and were jubilantly straddling this towards the summit cap when we saw our first condors in the sky.

In perfect calm sunshine, after eleven protracted and tense days of combat climbing, the legendary giant condors of the Andes made their appearance, and soared from the shadows, down the Frances valley on silent, 12-ft wing-spans. Lofty guardians, they circled and inspected in tacit acknowledgement of our photographic salute.

One easy pitch remained, though incredibly exposed—looking right down 2000 ft to the snow-field below, and the valley 4000 ft below that, and then Paul and I were 'after you, no, after *you*' at the summit. This was the only pitch where we did not leave fixed ropes so that the others, prusiking up the next day would all have to climb the last little bit to the top.

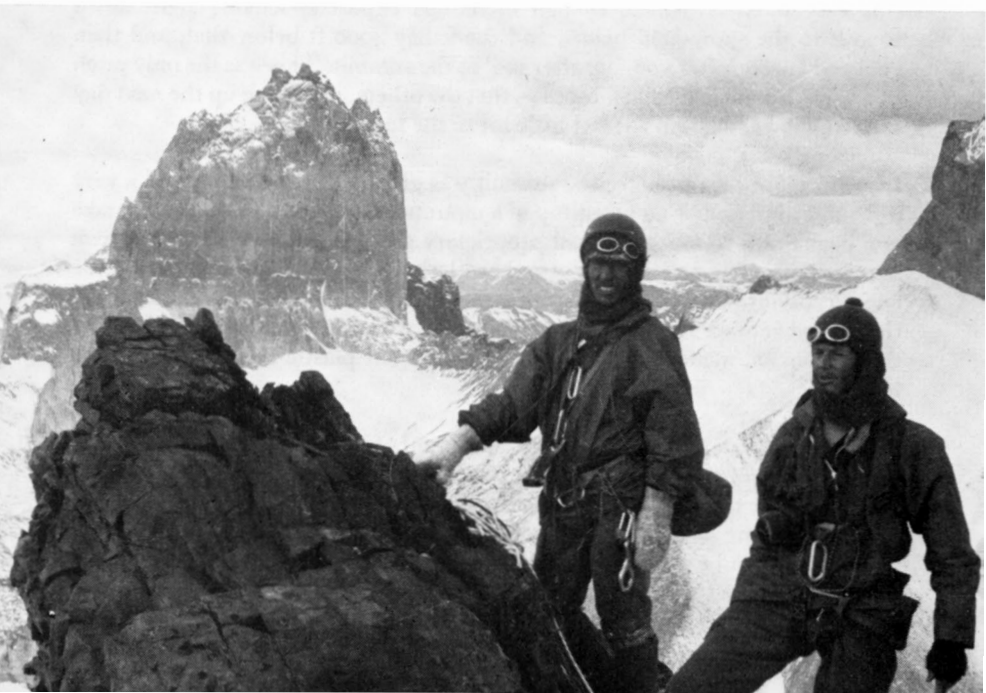
I really enjoyed it up there; the summit was grandly small and seemed a very right sort of place to find at the top of a mountain. Perhaps an eleven-day stake in a peak tends to make you feel proprietary about even the view. When you have to rush after one of those southern latitude 20-hour days, you must be late, so abseiling the many fixed ropes went rapidly. The gathering dusk turned the Sword into an incandescent monolith as we sank lower, until, finally, on the bottom snow-fields we could toboggan on our plastic trousers seats back to base.

The following day was also perfect as the others slogged up, then prusiked to four hours of tanning on the summit, but the day after, when Rick Hoare and I took the ropes off was a different story. Hunching clouds in the sky and heavy breathing as we caterpillared endless lengths on our clogs, made us tense. By the time we were up, the view was masked, the peak choked and rattling in the express-train blasts. Then ensued one of those cold, slow-motion nightmares as ropes went berserk, tugging straight up in the air, and

wrapping frenziedly round every rock. Twice I belayed Rick as he climbed back up a rope stuck somewhere above us, in order to free it for pulling down. We had this idea about not cluttering up the mountain, which seemed important. Once in the line of the feature recess it was easier, then we met with Roger Fuggle who was busy coming up to help, but had stopped at a rope above him already half chafed through by flapping on an edge.

For a change of scenery we then made a sortie from the head of the valley, over into the Cathedral valley, up a steep hidden gully to the right of the one at the side of the Cathedral itself. This valley was white-choked with snow, and we couldn't stand upright in the icy blast rocketing through. I think I prefer the E face to Dave Nicol's route.

After Christmas we found the Czech's old camp site, and started on the Cuernos Norte (or 2nd Cuernos). Carl Fatti and Roger Fuggle went gaily at it in a blizzard, digging piton cracks out of the ice up a line to the right of a bold black-slashed dike of shale, that looked like the grandad of chimneys, but wasn't. They got past most of the problems before Carl prusiked the toe off his double boot. Rick Hoare and Tony Dick then sped up into the gully leading to behind a huge gendarme, and were confident of an easy 60 ft the next day, up a blank wall with three beautiful Yosemite cracks in it, to the black triangle of shale. But fate! The morning dawned a white-out. Three times up and down the 2000-ft snow-gully, thinking they must have missed the right branch, and they couldn't find the ropes! Dejected, they returned to base.



So we arranged a circus—Paul Andersen and I would do the easy 60 ft, starting early from the Box, the others would troop up behind so that the ropes would be up to the black fruit-cake top 1000 ft of the Cuernos, when they got there.

Well, the easy walk Tony and Rick had done, was plastered into a two hour soft snow pitch, then Paul had to spend numbered-foot hours in a stance in the dike, while I pegged through the negligible six foot roof and up the 'short, easy' 150-ft wall of A2. The perfect parallel-sided crack took only big angles, of which I had two; I was therefore soon well up with no runners at all below me, as I depegged then replaced in front.

The rest of the team popped one by one on to a long, thin ledge, and were sitting in a row, swinging their feet and eating peanuts, when Tony laughed—'if only the Czechs could see us now!'

I nearly performed for the circus, by standing on tiptoe on two tiny edges to hit the next peg, and lifting the nut from which I was hanging out of the crack. Sweating profusely I clipped slowly into the top half-hammered peg, while silently thanking the bootmaker that my toes were still on.

Once we were on the black stuff, it was a slog and scramble up poor, shattered rock for 1000 ft to the top. There was another summit, harder to get on to, which we did not do because we voted ourselves already on the highest point. What was confusing was that the Cuernos Principal was so obviously higher than our peak, that we didn't know why the Chileans hadn't been sure which was the highest peak. Maybe the view looked different from their side. The most superb sight was looking on to the miniscule summits of the Mummer and Sword, a few hundred feet below, which speared the gaze as it travelled across the ridge to ram into the mammoth wall of the dominating Fortress.

After New Year, and fitting celebrations, an excursion to the neck next to the Fortress proved a spectacular vantage point, but an uninviting abseil to get into the Rio Ascencio valley, so round we trudged the long way.

We met the cheerful New Zealand expedition trying the Whillans-Bonington route on the Central Tower of Paine. They were camping in the soggy woods, but Tony Dick found us a great troglodyte hole instead of that. The NZ tents on the col, 1000 ft up on the w side of the Tower, kept getting snowed flat, so they re-constructed the original Whillans Box, which still had girders intact and flapping tarpaulin.

Although the sunny w face has some superb grooves up it, we opted for the big one—the E face. The misleading photograph in *Mountain* cut off the bottom third, which was why we could not understand the query from the NZ-US team about how we intended tackling the bottom slabs. We did not know they existed, or that the rock starts 2000 ft lower than it does on the existing route.

Tony Dick and Roger Fuggle did the first slabs and steep snow-fields, and

we all learnt something new about avalanche conditions. We were clueless. The slabs were great—150-ft pitches would go free (F2) at great speed. We did one pendulum, after the crack line pinched out, on to a long easy break to the top of a pillar. If, in spite of the falling stones, you had the nerve to go higher up the snow-fields to below the neck, you could climb a shorter distance on rock. The blizzard increased in fury as Paul Fatti now tried another king-swing. Eventually he succeeded in leaping into the crack and jamming after spinning off on several tries. But as he pegged up, the snow began piling on his head and the rock was awash in a torrent of water.

After 1460 vertical feet we had to abseil back—we had no more time. We and the New Zealanders seemed mutually glad the others had also abandoned.

Walking back round the lakes we experienced the fiercest winds of the expedition blowing us flat, back in our tracks, head over heels into bushes. Back in the Rio Frances valley, we found our box on the Cuernos had disappeared, although weighed down with tons of piled rocks.

To round off our topography we went for a slog to glacier Grey. A sudden thaw plus an avalanche on the Paine Grande swelled the rivers bloatedly to make returning a mad leaping through chasing breakers to moving mounds of rocks in a thrashing, roaring splurge of dirty, frozen water that had once been little streams. A crucial rope back to camp had been fixed, but when we broke camp next day and used various methods of spanning ropes (like heaving an ice-axe into trees), Carl Fatti had to pull himself across the deepest stretch on that fixed rope, now under water by several feet.

Thus we got the girls out dry at the end of the adventure, which is almost as good for morale as having a Box 59!

SUMMARY The Sword (2500 m)—first ascent (19/12/71) by L. P. Fatti and M. J. Scott. Also climbed (20/12/71) by R. Fuggle, A. Dick and C. Fatti and (21/12/71) by R. Hoare and M. J. Scott.

Cuernos Norte (2600 m)—first ascent (30/12/71) by A. Dick, M. J. Scott, P. Andersen, R. Fuggle, R. Hoare and L. P. Fatti.