

Joint Services Expedition to Brabant Island, Antarctica

John Kimbrey

Plates 57–58

The Antarctica is remote and for most mountaineers, totally out of reach.

When an opportunity arose in summer 1982 I wanted and needed to go. I applied to Commander Chris Furse RN, the expedition's leader, and was interviewed along with many other hopefuls at the RGS in London, a very impressive establishment. I could almost feel the presence of those great men in the old building as I tip-toed carefully along the corridors so as not to disturb anyone. Seven days later I received a letter inviting me to join a meet in North Wales a few weeks later at the first official team gathering. I had made it into the Winter Team, one of only four people to do so at this stage.

Brabant Island is nearly 56km long and 24km wide and is the second largest island in the Palmer Archipelago. At one time it was one of the largest still to be explored in the world. It lies 400km south of the Antarctic convergence and east of Grahamland, sitting in a rather weather-beaten zone where winds are regularly above force 12. Temperatures drop to around -40°C in winter and rise to about $+10^{\circ}$ in summer. The island is largely covered by mountains, the highest, Mount Parry at 2522m. The island's neglect over the years is due mainly to the large ice-cliffs which almost completely protect its coastline from the sea. Brabant Island was named by Adrien De-Gerlache who led an expedition in 1898 and was first to land on the SE coast with Dr. F. Cook and Roald Amundsen.

Over the next 18 months we trained in the rough but tranquil area around Dundonnell in Western Ross, in Cornwall and in Norway, with a final wild two weeks in the Cairngorms in January 1984. The Summer Party had flown south in December to Chile where they had embarked on HMS Endurance, our transport to and from the island for the next 16 months. Change-over day was 24 March.

At last, nearly two years from my initial enquiry, I arrived. On our flight ashore we flew past the mountains and glaciers we had come to climb. It was a fantastic day; sun, mountains, snow and ice and something I was not so keen on, 10,000 penguins. Base Camp was right in the middle of a colony and the smell took some getting used to. We set about unpacking and organising our 15 tonnes of kit, and by late afternoon all changeovers had been completed. Farewells were brief and our 12 man team had started its big adventure.

The first few weeks flew by as we erected a small tri-wall hut for use as a laboratory and a meeting place, and carefully worked out the stores and food area. This had to be marked and carefully recorded for soon it would be buried in snow. With a ready stock of most small things in the hut annex, our stores system worked very well, and only occasionally did we all have to dig in to find a special item.

Eventually with Base organised, everyone started to venture out with their skis and pulks. We skied with lightly laden pulks, splitting the load between back and pulk. As slopes were encountered the more we would put in our sacks and so on. Each person in these early days worked out his own preference for loading, but as always the best laid plans often fail, and when the snow got sticky or deep powder covered the surface, life became hell. Often we referred to Robert Falcon Scott and how incredibly hard his trip to the South Pole must have been. My first trip out took me to an area about 10km south of Base to relocate some food and fuel which had been dropped short of a cache site by the Summer Party. The day was pleasant and the snow superb as we set off up the hill above Camp. With three to one pulk, pulling together took a while to master but we persisted and after half an hour or so things were going well. The corrie to the east stretched for about 16km as it swept south then west back towards the sea. The tops were clear and sharp against the blue of the sky. The crevasse areas were immense and detours were often necessary. As we neared the cache the marker cane loomed out of the gloom, as now the weather had clamped right in. We pitched our dome tent and settled down to a night on the hill, our first of many. Avalanches roared during the night a couple of kilometres or so to the east. I slept badly: always there is that feeling of insecurity when a slide occurs, no matter how far away you are and no matter how secure the site. Morning dawned to brilliant sunshine and we ski'd around the ridge before heading back a different way to Base.

Those first trips were important in many ways, not only to test kit, but for some, apart from our training this was the first time in the mountains proper. We had a nucleus of four experienced mountaineers, and the leader, Chris, who spends half his life living with the birds, plus two or three people who had been around the hills for many years and knew enough to be regarded as seconds. As it happened, when our first big incident did occur there were two of the more experienced men in the party to organise the safe return of personnel and equipment from the grasp of a 30m crevasse.

As winter approached and the snow fell we started to cache stores around the NE to help us in spring when we pushed south. We had read of the transglobe expedition and their use of skidoos (in fact we bought two from them) and had spoken to Ollie Shepherd and Sir Ron Fienness on the matter. We hoped the skidoos would perform well even on the island's difficult terrain. This, however, was not to be, as we found out through May on a three week trip which taught us all an incredible amount during a very eventful month.

We had set off in fine conditions hoping to make our progress by a series of ferries as the skidoos would not pull heavy sledges on their own. We therefore pulled one medium-loaded sledge with three skidoos, but this was so expensive on fuel that more trips were needed than we expected. There were minor mechanical problems, and the inevitable bad patches of weather, and in the first five days we managed to shift 2 tonnes of fuel, food and equipment only a short distance from Base Camp, although we did manage to set one cache at Rontgen Peak on the E side. In fine conditions, with good snow, driving was a pleasure, and at last we could see how a skidoo could operate. Alas the terrain and snow only allowed good loads for one or two days a month. So we had to ferry light

loads and repeat the trips several times in order to operate at all. We made a second cache at Lister glacier — another 360kg dropped — and moved up the glacier to try to put a route in to Astrolobe Point. We hoped to make one more drop further south. We used a system of three drivers and three ski-oring and then used the skiers to 'recce' ahead when needed. Moving up to 700m we encountered thick fog and snow which was to stay with us for six days. One and a half metres of snow fell with only brief periods of respite. We moved on to two-thirds rations as food started to become short. On the seventh day we decided to move on skis, but as we vacated the igloos an avalanche swept past, barely missing us. Shocked by the incident, we headed back down to Lister Cache, food and safety. We had been away from Base nearly three weeks, with only a slim chance of finding a route without eating all our caches. I felt a return to base was our best choice, especially as we had no radio and I presumed the leader was becoming anxious.

We retrieved the 'skids' and headed off the following morning, reversing the outward journey except for a few variations where obvious lines had been seen from below the plateau. Conditions were difficult but we pushed on carefully and dropped back into reasonable visibility on the N side of the island. In retrospect, this was where we should have camped, but Base fever had us all as we pushed on along the north of the island. Claire's Finger, our friendly cache and starting point, loomed ahead and home seemed about 1 hour away. Suddenly the skidoo train stopped. Something was down. A large crevasse had opened and the 12ft sledge was suspended, tail down, 10m below. I skied over to assess the situation while the drivers busily placed Dead Giants to take the weight. Within 20 minutes the sledge was secure and the two front skidoos had moved on. More bridges were collapsing around us and the rumblings beneath my feet were a nightmare. Darkness was now nearly upon us and we were still in the middle of a crevasse field. With one skidoo and three skiers on the tail, we moved down and crossed on a bridge some 15m from the hole. The rumblings continued as we joined the others. I was impressed with everyone's quick thinking and ability in our first skidoo incident. The system was performed without a mass of direction; it just happened as if by instinct. We were now less than 1km from snow holes we had left 12 days previously so we headed for them, but the skidoos bogged in (our major problem with the machines) and we were forced to bivouac. Next morning, unbelievably happy, we returned to Base Camp to a welcome we had not expected, a few bottles, and story time as we talked over our first major trip and the lessons learnt.

June turned foul and we sat out in appalling weather on two occasions of four days and five days before heading back to Base each time dejected having failed to recover the sledge. Mid-Winter's Day cheered everybody up and our day was crammed with activities and feasting. The long night was helped along with performances by everyone and some refreshments which were made up from the 'hard stuff' and fruit juice: an excellent 24 hours!

Towards the end of the month the weather improved and we set out once again to bring the sledge to the surface. The marker canes were still visible, for most of the snow seemed to blow forever onwards and did not settle around our crevasse. We set a Dead Giant and skidoo belay, and I went down to inspect the

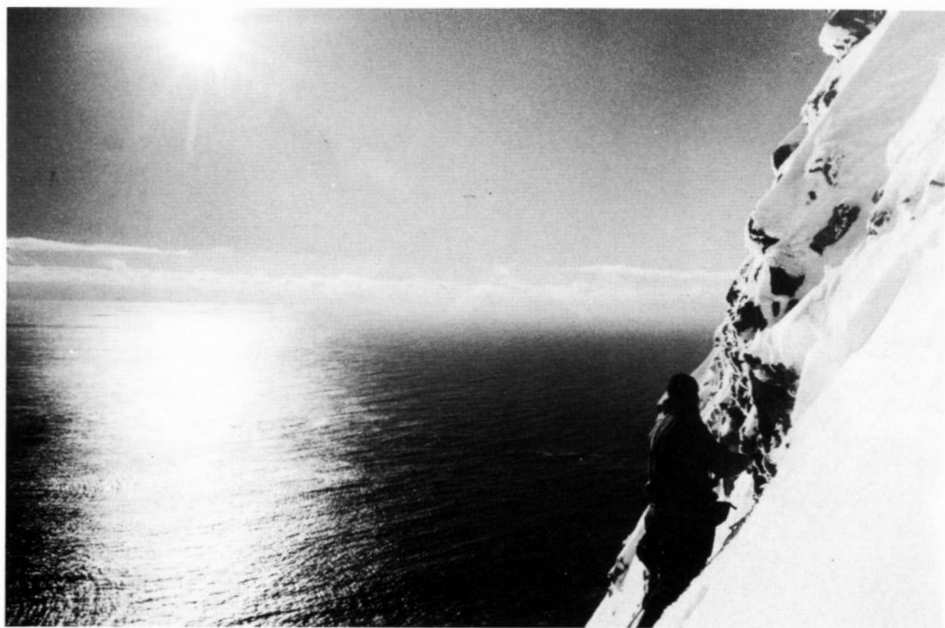


Photo: Jed Corbett

57 Collecting geological samples on Brabant Island.



Photo: Jed Corbett

58 Storm.

problem. Amazingly the huge gap of the crevasse had amassed hundreds of tonnes of snow, and the top of the sledge was only just visible. For two days we dug around the buried sledge, removing equipment from its back as it became clear of snow. We attached a wire strop to the top shackle as a back-up, which was tensioned off by a winch on the surface. At one stage I had to cut the tow rope, and the crack that followed seemed to shake the whole mass of ice and snow. What made things worse, I was standing on the sledge at the time.

On the second day, with weather still bright, we had uncovered all of the sledge, but a pulk which was riding it at the time of the incident was stuck 15m down and under the vast snow bridge. The ice above the pulk created a problem we didn't need, and so with great difficulty we hacked and gouged enough to pull the pulk clear. We were now in some considerable danger, though we did not realize it at the time. The hole we had dug was across the width of the crevasse, but sloping downwards at about 40° deep into a bridge. After an hour or so the pulk was sufficiently loose to heave it out, but the rear attachment rope was stuck fast in the ice beneath the rear of the pulk. There was now a tunnel about 2m long with a loaded pulk slap in the middle. Our only option was for someone to lie head first down it armed with a knife and try to cut the offending rope whilst someone held his feet protruding out of the hole. John Beattie and I took turns to cut the line, eventually managing it to our great relief. Some 20 minutes later, with the Turfer Winch being cranked, the sledge slowly but surely climbed vertically out of the hole until it dropped heavily on to the snow surface. A spontaneous cheer rose from us all and we expressed our joy with handshakes and the promise of a few drams that evening when we returned to Base.

By July daylight had extended to seven or eight hours, and we were able to start organising and preparing for our move south in late August. We had at this time been exploring the north and carrying out a variety of science projects which involved the whole team. Mike Ringe was very busy. His speciality was geology, and he was amassing a large pile of carefully recorded rocks from all over the north. Our doctor, Howard Oakley, was still head deep in paper as he collated all the physiological results that we had supplied. This involved recording fluid balance, having thermisters taped to various parts of the body over a 24 hour period, plus the added indignity of a 15cm thermometer strategically placed for accurate inner core temperature measurements. We all performed this deed once a month and looked forward heartily to its completion. With samples and records on seals, fish, bugs, botany and birds we were all kept busy during our days in Base Camp.

July swept into August and plans were made solid for our move south. We hoped to leave Base for four months travelling in three groups using caches placed in autumn as we progressed, backed up by the skidoo team who would ferry several tons of food, fuel and equipment around to Harvey Heights. We would then move south to supplies dropped the previous summer, hoping to ascend Mount Parry *en route*.

Whilst ferrying stores from Base, John Spottiswood, Mike and I took the chance to climb a marvellous ridge which connected the lower plateau with the Mount Hunter range; 600m of fine Alpine style climbing gave us immense

satisfaction. Some of the cornices were as large as I have ever seen and the exposure was greatly increased by the deep corries that fell away on both sides. The ascent took four hours, in a wind which increased to a steady blow. A marvellous view greeted us at the top: Grahamland far away to the west, and to the south Anvers Island, the largest in the Archipelago, with Mount Francais standing proud of the ridge along the island's NE side.

Due to unsettled weather it was not until September that we finally set off to the S end of the island. I left with three others, first to check the autumn's caches and dig out the supplies at Astrolobe Point — a journey of about 50km. We were hoping to arrive five or six days hence and then contact the skidoo team by radio, but we were in for a frustrating time due to a mixture of bad travelling conditions and appalling weather. The tents were constantly blown out and at one point we were held up for 12 days as the storms raged. We sat and repaired our kit, dropping down to half rations for the duration. We finally reached Astrolobe Point 29 days after leaving Base Camp, a little skinny and hungry but none the worse for the trip.

Our work had only just begun for the marker wands which were strapped to the food and fuel were not visible through the deep snow. We knew their approximate position and before long had found the top of one. A huge crater was dug to retrieve the stores which included the second radio. Over the next five days we tried to locate the second dump. We systematically cleared an area of 30m by 25m digging to a depth of 1.5m and found nothing. The cache had been placed next to a large boulder some 40m beyond high water mark, and behind the natural harbour wall which surrounded the Point, but it was evident that the sea had a far greater reach than we thought possible. We called off the search after seven days. Next day the remainder of the group arrived out of the mist. Eight weeks now remained before HMS Endurance was due at Metchnikoff Point to pick us up.

Mount Parry became our main objective. Four men would move south afterwards, whilst the remainder covered the centre of Brabant for geology, botany and mountaineering. During the next 12 days we ferried food and fuel up to Harvey Heights at 2100m for the attempt on Parry and to provide a central cache for journeys south and east. The weather, for a change, was good, although once through the ice-fall it snowed all through our rest day.

Next morning was very still, the mountain hidden in cloud that hung thickly on the N slopes. I had made sure the route upward had been well marked thus allowing forward movement to continue, so by 28 October we were camped at 1900m with plenty of food and reserves located at our lower camps for our return journey. Everyone had done really well and the weather was excellent. The following morning, 0400 saw 'cooks up' and by 0500 we were on our way up to the summit ridge. The morning was fine and clear, with light winds, the sun burning hot as we steadily progressed up to a point 5km from the summit. There, we pitched tents, brewed up and gazed at Mount Parry with Anvers Island, a superb backdrop, 100km beyond. At just after mid-day we set off on skis along a wide ridge south until it was necessary to don crampons and leave the skis behind. The ridge now was splendid, twisting and rising in a glistening array of ice platforms and seracs. A fantastic drop fell to a sea of cloud that

masked the coastline 2400m below. At 16.20 our efforts were rewarded and we stood firmly on the summit on our small part of Antarctica, the first men ever to do so. We had been rewarded and were filled with satisfaction as we set off back to our tents, three hours to the north.

A few days later we once again split into groups. Chris Furse, Ted Atkins, Jim Lumbsen and François de Gerlache moved south with enough reserves to allow them to return north if the food dump there had also been lost. During a fine four-day spell they ascended 12 peaks and tackled some of the best ice-climbing on the island. The remaining five of us were to explore the central area around Hill Bay. John Beattie was an ardent Munroe bagger and we climbed most of the tops, at one point finding the highest plant life on the island at 300m. We had some marvellous days of mountaineering.

The weather turned towards the middle of November. We had hoped to ski along to Rokitansky summit but we were forced to spend four days in a tent constantly digging out and eventually moving sites completely. The storm threw 2m of snow down upon us from every direction. On the fifth day the wind abated and we managed to find our way back down through an ice-fall, topping up with fuel at a previous camp half way down. We all moved a short distance to our main skidoo cache site and waited for the weather to clear. Eight days later, on 30 November, we decided to head back to Metchnikoff. It had been an eerie week. There was no wind, and fine flakes of snow drifted endlessly down burying us completely.

The remaining days at Base Camp passed uneventfully as we packed ready for our return, Jed Corbett, our photographer, taking special care over all the film he had shot. The wildlife had returned and we watched, fascinated, as the penguin chicks hatched and began their short lives. It was indeed a day of mixed feelings when HMS Endurance arrived on 29 December to take us back to civilisation . . . whether we wanted to or not!