South Georgia

STEPHEN VENABLES

(Plates 19–24)

I was lying in bed listening to Madam Butterfly, when Lindsay and Brian returned to Royal Bay. It was a stormy night, so I let Julian go and talk to the others while I remained in the tent, warm in my sleeping bag and plugged into Puccini, isolated from the noise outside of wind and rain and belching sea elephants.

Ten minutes later I was roused to go and hear the news. Inside the hut Kees 't Hooft, the Flying Dutchman – our film cameraman-cum-domestic help – was dispensing tea to the two returning heroes who sat dripping in a heap of sodden equipment. Lindsay explained how they had spent three days at the Ross pass, 600m above sea level and 10 miles away, excavating a palatial snow-cave 20 feet up the side of a huge wind-scoop. They had started on Christmas Eve and had continued through Christmas Day in beautiful hot weather. But the temperature had continued to rise and their expanding cave had dripped-dripped alarmingly. On Boxing Day it had rained outside without cease and the wind had gusted to over 100mph. Down here we had giggled nervously at each katabatic gust as it came howling down the valley, swooped up and crashed on to the ridge above. At 600m it must have been frightening. The wind had calmed slightly during the night but the rain had continued. That morning Lindsay had woken at the Ross pass, peered out of the snow-cave entrance and said gently, 'I'm not sure how to put this, Brian.'

'What?'

'Well, you're not going to believe this, but there's a lake out here.'

'What are you talking about?'

'The whole bed of the wind-scoop has filled with water. It's about a foot from the door and I think it's still rising.'

Lindsay had nearly been drowned once already on this expedition, so they wasted no time in packing up to leave the doomed snow-cave, caching all the gear on some rocks high above lake level, and starting back down through the blizzard, groping on compass bearings and finally reaching Royal Bay long after dark. Now Kees, Julian and I received the news of this latest setback with the mixture of incredulous despair and manic laughter that had become our stock reaction to life on South Georgia.

Of course we were warned. If you must choose to go climbing on a sub-Antarctic island, stuck right in the path of the endless procession of storms that crash their way round the Southern Ocean, you can expect to suffer some inclement weather. In a sense the origins of the trip were appropriate. I had

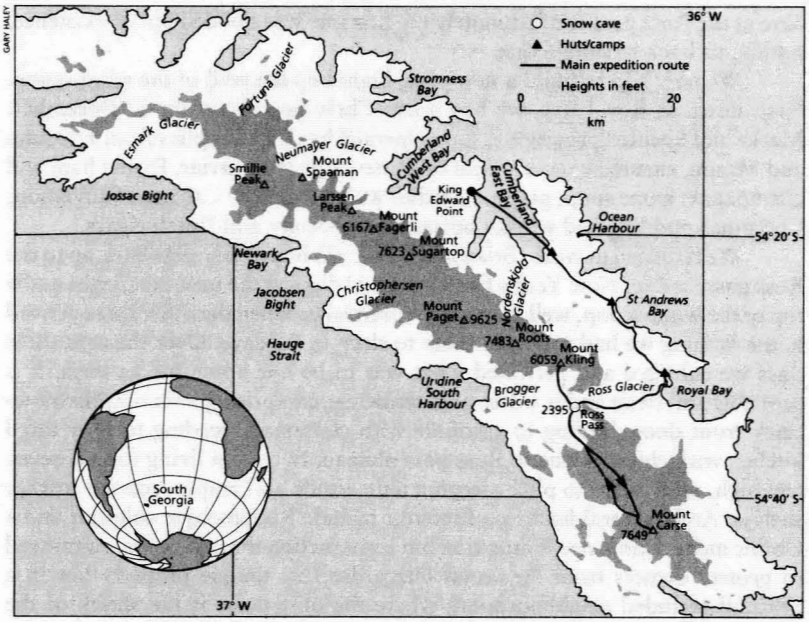
known Lindsay Griffin for years, but we had only got to know the other two climbers, Julian Freeman-Attwood and Brian Davison, on Xixabangma, during the Great Himalayan Storm of 1987. Whole camps had been destroyed; Brian had sheltered beside a boulder to find himself the next morning buried alive in a huge snowdrift; Lindsay and Julian had taken two days to struggle across a glacier that usually took two hours. The expedition to Tibet was also an appropriate genesis in another sense. Led by Colonels Day and Blashford-Snell and code-named Jade Venture, it was a great imperial venture, nurturing us for, and providing the contacts for, a visit to the South Atlantic – the last outpost of the British Empire.

John Blashford-Snell gave us the vital introduction to Nicholas Barker, who had captained HMS *Endurance* during the Falklands conflict and kindly recommended us to the present captain. Douggie Keelan introduced us to the current 'C Biffy' (Commander of British Forces in the Falkland Islands) who gave us his full and generous support; and the marvellous thing about the armed services is that, once they receive the vital rubber-stamp from on high, everyone bends over backwards to help a bunch of civilians, however undeserving and odd they may be.

And we were, as Lindsay put it, 'a bunch of weirdos'. He is nearly seven feet tall and a succession of winter epics has left him with a pronounced limp. I was also still a bit lopsided after the loss of some toes. Brian is a very talented climber with a skilful predilection for loose rock, but on the flat he appears completely uncoordinated and is incapable of walking in a straight line. Julian comes from a long inbred line of backwoods gentry, one of whom was the mad Nescliff highwayman who used to attack stage-coaches on the London–Bangor road. Kees, the cameraman, is Dutch and, as if that was not enough, he became known during the expedition as The Poltergeist, because of his tendency to send saucepans and cups of tea flying around confined spaces.

They seemed a little surprised, even alarmed, when we turned up at the officers' mess in the Falklands, but everyone was very friendly. The officers and crew of HMS *Endurance* were equally hospitable during the 900-mile sea passage to South Georgia – three days of glorious weather, wheeling albatrosses and the comforting throb of the ancient five-cylinder diesel engine. The captain, Norman Hodgson, had a busy scientific programme, but as we anchored off the island's military base at Grytviken, he agreed kindly to helicopter half our supplies to the little hut at Royal Bay, 25 miles away. That vital depot gave us the chance to spend several weeks at the southern end of the island and attempt some of the many unclimbed peaks there, including Mount Carse (2331m), the highest unclimbed summit on South Georgia. First we had to get ourselves over to Royal Bay. From Grytviken we were taken across Cumberland East Bay by the garrison's boatswain and then we started walking. We were out of touch with the army for the next six days.

During the two-day journey to Royal Bay the landscape, with its soft greens and browns and that wonderful blend of sea and mountain, reminded me of North-West Scotland. But this was Scotland on a grander scale, with white mountains in the interior and immense glaciers flowing into a sea of brilliant turquoise. And of course there were the birds and animals. On the second day



South Georgia. (Reproduced by kind permission of Geographical Magazine.*)*

we walked for two miles along a beach thronged with tens of thousands of King penguins, so ridiculously pompous beside the shorter dumpier Gentoos. Frisky fur seal pups scampered and growled about our ankles; sea elephant cows stared indifferently out of dark doey eyes, while the bulls reared up their four tons of heaving blubber and opened cavernous snouts to belch forth steaming clouds of halitosis. Their supreme indifference to rain, sleet and snow, and the albatrosses' mastery of the blasting katabatic winds put our own efforts in perspective. We always seemed to be wet and cold. Both Lindsay and I fell in the sea. At Royal Bay we watched helplessly as one of our tents imploded and collapsed into a pile of snapped poles and ripped fabric. When we established our depot halfway up the Ross glacier, we had on some days to abandon load-carries, because the sand-blasting on the beach made it impossible to reach the glacier. Through all this, Kees, who had only just returned from four months 'in the field' with the British Makalu expedition, had to nurture his £30,000 worth of Aaton cine camera, which frequently succumbed to the APD syndrome – All Pervading Damp.

Our strategy was to establish a secure base at the Ross pass and from there eventually attempt some climbing. If we had had sufficient sea or air back-up, we would have done better to use heavy pyramid tents and sledges, enabling us to move as a self-contained unit over the glaciers. However, because of limited funds and uncertain transport arrangements, we had opted for a compromise, carrying only lightweight tents and no sledges. Hence the snow-

cave at the Ross pass. Unfortunately the first one was flooded out of existence, putting us back to square one.

We now had to build a new cave, higher up the wall of the wind-scoop. First, down at Royal Bay, we had a late Christmas dinner on 28 December. Marks and Spencer provisions, supplemented by some supplies from Fortnum and Mason, ensured a decent meal of stuffed eggs with caviar, Parma ham and champagne; game soup; goose quenelles with a passable Cabernet Sauvignon; Christmas pudding and whisky butter; port, brandy and Dutch cigars.

We returned to work. Brian and I took 7½ hours to trudge back up to the Ross pass, and on New Year's Eve we started digging the new cave, right at the top of the wind-scoop, well above the frozen lake. When the other three arrived in the evening we had room for them to sleep in the cave. Over the next three days we enlarged and perfected what was to be our home for 23 days. It is probably still there and is a desirable residence, comprising a removable snow-brick front door, leading to vestibule with cupboards, leading to fully fitted kitchen with chimney flue to Ross pass plateau, two main living rooms, seven feet high, with room to pitch sleeping tents inside and ample recessed storage shelves. Architectural features of interest include Romanesque columns and a Gothic niche. Damp needs attention but construction throughout is guaranteed to protect owners from the worst blizzards. This unique property lies in a peaceful secluded neighbourhood, where the only noise is the shriek of the blizzard. There are no local transport facilities but on skis the owners may quickly reach the seaside or explore the glaciers of the hinterland. Because of frequent white-out conditions, they are advised always to leave a line of marker wands on the Ross pass, indicating the approach to the wind-scoop, which can be invisible from 10 yards.

A typical day at the Ross pass would start with the clatter of pans in the kitchen as The Poltergeist prepared breakfast tea. An ice axe shaft through the front door would be enough to ascertain 'hundred per cent blizz conditions' outside and the promise of another day in bed. Soon a gentle slurping noise would indicate that Griffin had taken up his position, statuesque, in the Gothic niche with his morning pint of tea. We read, we talked, I listened to Butterfly, Brian wished he had brought Ted Hawkins as an antidote to 'all those screeching women', Kees tinkered with the Aaton and Lindsay grappled with the jumbo crossword. Periodically one of us would emerge from the drip-shelter tents to take our daily walk round the north and south wings, perhaps stopping to poke another hole in the front door and check blizz conditions.

Every two or three days a lull in the blizz would allow us to emerge from the cave and go down the Ross glacier to collect supplies from the depot or, later, to go climbing. One briefly clear dawn we all climbed The Thing, a shapely blob on the other side of the pass, reaching the summit in a full blizz, and skiing or snow-shoeing home on compass bearings. A few days later we enjoyed a full day of sunshine, dragging everything out on to the plateau to dry, taking turns to pose for Kees's now functioning Aaton and going skiing to reconnoitre a route to Vogel Peak (1352m). The following day we all went across to the foot of the peak. The four climbers, leaving Kees at the bottom with the Aaton and a long lens, proceeded up 600m of snow-slopes, ice terraces,

crevasses, little walls and a summit ridge of rime mushrooms, to make the first ascent.

The weather was already closing in again on the way down, but we just had time to glimpse the truly Antarctic expanse of glacial snowfields and unclimbed peaks stretching south down the Salvesen range – the area we had really hoped to explore. Conditions reverted to hundred per cent blizzing and after a few more days' incarceration at the scoop our food stocks dwindled to two days'. Then, at the eleventh hour, when we had virtually given up hope of climbing Mount Carse or anything else, the wind veered round to the east, the sky cleared and we had one final chance.

Finesse is not the word that springs to mind where Julian's skiing is concerned; and Lindsay's leg injuries forced him some years ago to abandon planks altogether. However, at this stage the only hope of climbing Mount Carse, 15 miles south, was to travel fast and take the mountain by storm. So Brian and I headed south with the skis, while Julian and Lindsay took the snowshoes and travelled north with Kees to the closer but harder target of Mount Kling (1847m).

They deposited Kees, tripod and Aaton to record events from halfway up the mountain, then continued up steepening ice slopes which led eventually to a spectacular headwall of loose black rock overlaid with sugar icing. It gave Julian a long hard pitch of protectionless mixed climbing and got the pair of them on to the summit. At least they called it the summit, choosing not to surmount the final 15-foot blade of rotten ice overhanging the great precipice of the NE face. As Lindsay pointed out, the suicidal blade was not a permanent fixture and there is ample precedent on the similar structures of Patagonia for not climbing the final ice blob. Only the most ardent pedant could dispute that they had made the first ascent of Mount Kling. From the summit they had a fine view south along the Salvesen range, past Vogel, Smoky Wall and Paterson to the white pyramid of Mount Carse, 20 miles away, where Brian and I were just about to start our ascent.

We had left at seven that morning on the 13-mile journey to the foot of our mountain. We had to cross a little pass, then skim down to the start of the Spenceley glacier. As we skinned up the Spenceley it was nice to think that, apart from Duncan Carse's initial exploration of 1955, a BAS team in 1974 and the Services expedition of 1982, no one, as far as we knew, had ever been here. Brian, who is always disgustingly fit, set a cracking pace, but by cutting a straight line through his haphazard meanderings I was just able to keep up.

There was a pass to cross at the head of the Spenceley, then a brilliant descent on firm crust, followed by an hour's climb to the third, final pass, with our mountain framed in its vee. One final exhilarating descent took us skimming down on to the Novosilski glacier to pitch the tent in a hollow right at the foot of Mount Carse.

Brian kept up the pressure and we were only allowed a three-hour rest in the tent before setting off again. Knowing the fickleness of South Georgia weather, he argued that the longer we waited to climb the peak, the greater the chance of being caught by a break in the weather: once the wind reverted to normal westerly blizzing mode, travelling back down the Spenceley might be

impossible, and we could be trapped 13 miles from base with only two days' food and fuel.

At 4pm we started the 1200m route up the north-west flank of Mount Carse. The climbing was not spectacular, but the occasional ice-wall or crevasse kept us amused and the views were stunning – dagger shadows stretching across the velvet surface of the Novosilski glacier, which merged imperceptibly into the Southern Ocean, studded with glinting icebergs and the dark rocks of the Pickersgill Islands. On the final slopes we could see right up the length of the island, to the towering Mont Blanc bulk of Mount Paget and beyond, right up to the peaks of the far north-west peninsula, nearly 100 miles away. Then the sun set, and it was almost dark when we reached the summit at 9.30pm. A few shivering photos, half a pound of marzipan to refuel our bodies and it was time to descend, rushing down in the darkness to our tent, hot soup and bed.

In the morning we ski'd home. On the Spenceley glacier it took just 20 minutes to skim down ground that had taken three hours to climb the previous day. Then we hit a wind funnel and, on the final pass crossing to regain the snow-cave, we were knocked repeatedly out of our ski bindings. At one stage I was reduced to crawling on hands and knees to make progress, and on the final approach to the cave we were back to the traditional groping through thick cloud on a compass bearing. The journey to the summit of Carse and back had taken 31 hours.

We spent another month on South Georgia, based further north, on Cumberland Bay, but although the weather was better in February we achieved no more climbs. We had had enough of sitting in snow-caves, so we based ourselves at the coast, too far from the action to catch the weather windows. It would have been nice to make some more first ascents and perhaps to climb the island's highest peak, Mount Paget. On the other hand, life at the coast was pleasanter. You can climb a mountain any time, but it is not every day that you can spend a morning watching Sooty albatrosses at their nest, or walk over to see the fur seals playing around the whalers' shipwrecks or film one of the largest King penguin colonies in the world. Anyway, we had made first ascents of various assorted nunataks, as well as three of the island's main watershed peaks, including the mountain named after the island's guru, Duncan Carse, whose private, lightweight survey expeditions of the 1950s had done for South Georgia what Shipton and Tilman did for the Himalaya.

We spent our last week at the Grytviken army garrison. Kees busied himself in the darkroom, while Brian and Lindsay set off on long excursions, tramping tirelessly over every hill and crag in the vicinity; but Julian and I had tired of the 'wilderness experience' and we whiled away whole days in the mess, smoking, drinking and watching endless videos, broadening our cultural horizons with such gems as 'Death Wish IV' and 'The Blob'.

This final week of indulgence was typical of the hospitality of the armed services whose support had made the expedition possible. Nowadays there are normally only two ways for a civilian to visit South Georgia. Either you get a brief glimpse of the island from an extremely expensive Antarctic cruise ship,

or you make your own way in a private yacht. Both options were out of the question for us, and our lift with the *Endurance* was perhaps a unique opportunity to spend three months on the 'Island at the Edge of the World'.



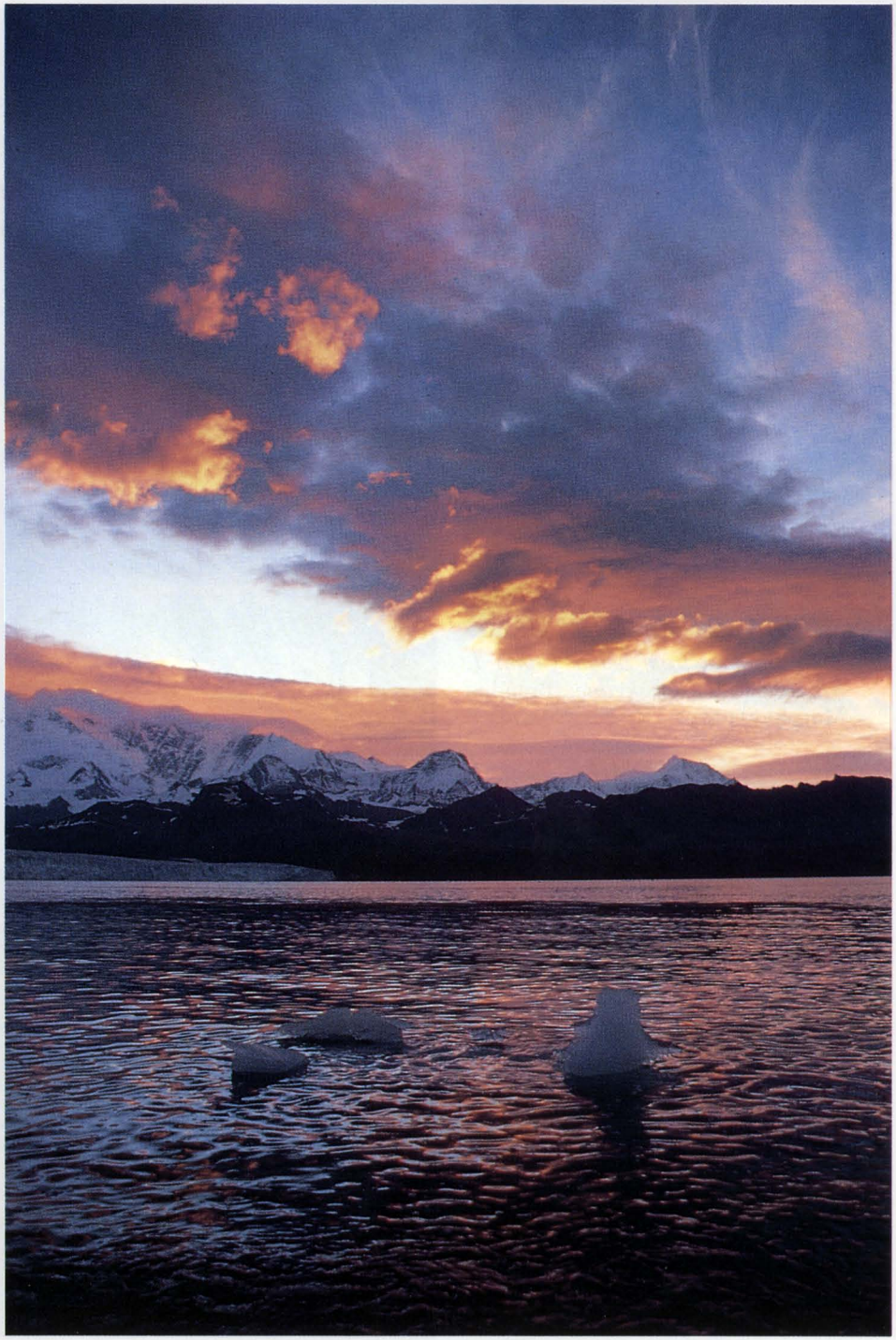
22. *Brian Davison near the summit of Mt Carse.* (Stephen Venables) (p 1)



23. *View NW from Mt Carse.* (Stephen Venables) (p 1)



21. South Georgia: Brian Davison on Novosilski glacier. (Stephen Venables) (p 1)



24. Mt Paget from Cumberland East Bay. (Stephen Venables) (p 1)



19. South Georgia, L to R: Lindsay Griffin, Stephen Venables, Brian Davison and Julian Freeman-Attwood on Vogel Peak. (Stephen Venables) (p 1)



20. Nordenskjold Peak and Mt Roots from King Edward Cove. (Stephen Venables) (p 1)