DOUG SCOTT

Climbs and Explorations in Tierra del Fuego

(*Plates 31, 32*)

On 2 December our group of eight motored out of Punta Arenas on the yacht *Pelagic*. Our direction was due south down the Straits of Magellan towards the western end of the Cordillera Darwin range. Our skipper and owner of the *Pelagic* was James (Skip) Novak from Chicago, a four-times-round-the-world renowned sailor who once came second in the Whitbread Round the World race. The first mate, Hamish Laird, was another very experienced sailor who, in 1987, had helped Skip build our yacht in Southampton. Also on board was Hamish's brother Alex, sister Joanna and Emma Ellis, all from the Isle of Wight and experienced seafarers, as was Francis McDermot who had come not only to sail but to climb with Skip, myself and Julian Freeman-Attwood. It was Julian who had asked me to join the expedition a week before departure.

The others had already spent many weeks on *Pelagic* in the southern ocean around the tip of South America and over to South Georgia and Antarctica. This was to be my first taste of 'sea mountaineering' and I set off with some trepidation. Fortunately the sea was calm and within two hours we saw shapely peaks sunlit above grey clouds, including the tip of Mt Buckland and Sarmiento. At 10pm I took my turn on watch as the sun set and the clouds turned amber, blood red, pink, grey and finally white above the black sea. A solitary albatross winged across our diesel-driven way.

We passed Cape Froward where the southernmost tip of the South American mainland is marked by a huge cross recently blessed by the Pope who, Hamish told me, had dropped in for the occasion by helicopter. The sailing game was not as I had imagined it would be and as Julian had intimated. There were none of the huge swells he had experienced crossing Drake Passage. It was so calm and peaceful that they let me loose at the wheel, heading due south, with popcorn and warm Cabernet arriving from down below.

At 4 o'clock next morning Julian shouted down for me to come up on deck to see Sarmiento in the dawn light. 'The most sublime spectacle in Tierra del Fuego' Darwin had asserted on seeing it from the south. Hamish confirmed that from there it rises up pure white above the green forest. If anything, from our northern aspect, Mt Buckland is more impressive – huge with all its rock and ice.

During the morning we continued south and then south-east down the Canal Keats and finally into the Agostini Fjord. It was a lovely morning with all of us up on deck snapping away with our cameras. Skip's plan was first to climb in the Cordon Navarro on account of an aerial photograph he had come by showing an icy-pinnacled mountain in the centre of the group. Before long we could see the peak in question, so we headed off into a bay some halfway along the southern shore of the Agostini Fjord. It is a place where several glaciers come down to the ocean. We went into the northernmost bay and the 54ft *Pelagic* fetched up about 100yds from the rocky coastline. Using the Avon inflatable, we ferried most of our gear over to the beach and set up camp a short distance up a little beech-tree valley by a clear-water stream.

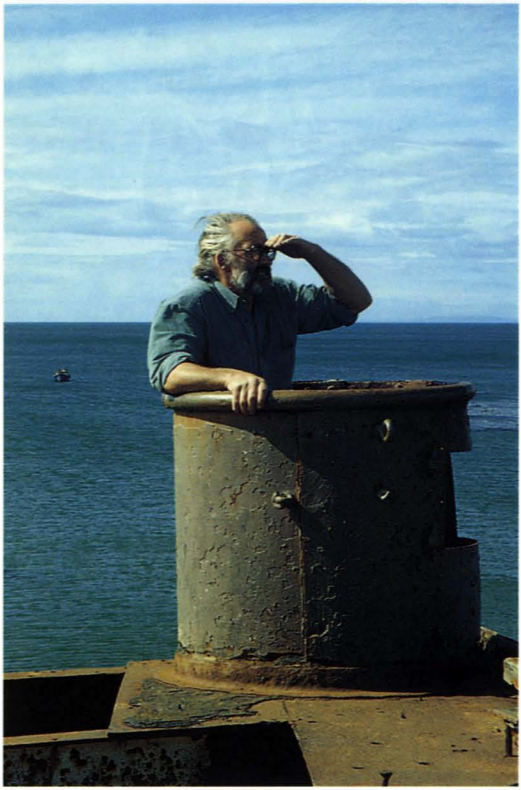
Julian and I hacked up the valley in a southerly direction, first through calafatti thorn bushes and then dense dwarf beech which was almost impenetrable at times. After two hours' hard labour we were above the jungle and made a dump of our gear. We walked on up to a ridge-top and scrambled up a small rock peak, enabling us to spot an excellent campsite down in a hidden valley to the west of us. Skip and Frank added more gear to our dump before we all returned to the yacht.

That afternoon half our group were out in the Avon, checking the possibility of reaching the proposed campsite by an easier way, when an enormous slice of ice calved off the big glacier east of our cove. We watched it happen – maybe it was 200ft high and at least 250yds long. It collapsed into the sea and set up a wave that had the *Pelagic* rising and then falling onto its keel so that it was tilted at 45 degrees. That had us worried, but the boat and its contents handled the situation admirably – even food on the Gymballed* cooker was not upset. The boat has a retractable 7-ton keel which enables it to survive such happenings and also to go into the shallowest of waters.

On 4 December it rained heavily all day, like a monsoon. Hamish and Joanna remained on board and the rest of us humped loads up to the campsite via a steep gully and finally onto a glacier before turning south into our hidden valley. We set up camp in a clearing between clumps of stunted beech. Emma and Alex went on down leaving us to retrieve gear from the previous dump, sort out tents, and make plans to move further south towards our mountain.

Unfortunately our four-man Gore-Tex Ferrino tent leaked. We were glad to leave camp (at 1600ft) in better weather for our *c*6000ft peak three miles further south. For two miles we tramped along the left side of the snow-covered glacier to the foot of our mountain. From here we wondered which way to go and after watching séracs break off down the right side of a split buttress, decided to go for a rocky ridge with steep buttresses higher up. We moved up a wide snow couloir right of the ridge, and then left over the top of it to the first of the two steep buttresses. We climbed the first with

* A type of cooker working rather like a gyroscopic compass.



Left

31. Heading due south. Doug Scott takes his turn on watch. (*Doug Scott collection*)

Below

32. Sarmiento, 2235m, framed by Julian Freeman-Attwood and Skip Novak, seen from 'Poltroon'. (*Doug Scott*) (p83)



some difficulty (grade V) until rain stopped play. We abseiled down the 500ft of interesting climbing and got back to the tent soaked for 7.30. We spent the next day drying out between periods of heavy rain. Each morning when we awoke we found our snow shoes, ski poles and various other items scattered over a wide area. The culprit turned out to be a friendly but sometimes naughty Fuegan fox who gave his name to our hidden valley, now known as Fox Camp.

On 7 December the weather improved during the afternoon so we moved camp to the foot of the rocky ridge. At 3.30 next morning we headed off up our steps which were partly covered by an inch of fresh snow. In three hours we reached the foot of the hard climbing, now somewhat harder being verglased and covered in powder snow. By 8.30am we were on top of the first buttress; a walk across an intervening snow arête brought us to a second buttress (300ft IV/V, overall about TD inf). Above the rocks there was about a mile of easy-angled snow leading to the summit which we reached by about 1pm. The weather was still brilliant and there were fantastic views all around, with Sarmiento dominating the west and Buckland the north. In the east we could see the main Darwin mountains which, compared with Sarmiento and Buckland, looked rather flat and heavily glaciated. We chose the name 'Mt Pelagic' for our peak,* although we couldn't be sure it had not been climbed before by Jack Miller's American group which came this way during a remarkable visit in 1966. Jack reported in the 1967 *American Alpine Journal* that they climbed the second highest peak in the group. There seemed to be two other summits higher than 'Mt Pelagic', so maybe our ascent was original.

Julian got out his geo-positional systems machine and pinpointed Mt Pelagic at latitude 54° 31.129' S by longitude 70° 31.821' W. Frank remained on the main summit brewing up and taking photographs as Skip, Julian and I went east to climb a minor frosty concretion of a summit which we called 'Mt Poltroon'. There was hardly any wind and almost complete 360 degree visibility. Not only was it an uplifting experience to be up there after so much cloud and rain, but it was also good to check out the geography of the area and to get everything into perspective. Sadly, as it turned out, this was our only really good day in the whole month. However, it was a most inspiring day revealing much of this part of the world – we realised that it had hardly been touched and that we were surrounded by peaks that no one had even been to. Of the mountains immediately to the north of the Agostini Fjord only Buckland had been climbed; all the others, from Buckland to Mt Aosta, were not only unclimbed but no one had even attempted them. We returned to Fox Camp at 8pm. It rained all night and all of the next day as we packed up and moved on down, leaving our friendly fox stalking ashey-headed geese.

The 10th of December was another wet day down in 'Triple Glacier Bay', as we called it. We climbed an 'island' that splits a big glacier coming

* See Editor's note on page 89.

down from the east of our peak. We came across nests of skua eggs on the open hillside and passed a cliff in our Avon boat where shags were precariously nesting on an almost sheer rock face that put our bivouacs to shame. Eventually we crossed the Agostini Fjord to fetch up in Enchantment Bay on the north side of the fjord. It was well named – a sheltered haven with flowers all around the coastline and with geese and goslings, small fish darting around in the rivers and bigger ones jumping about in the salt-water bay. We put out a long drift net and next morning pulled it in full of fish, mainly hake and mullet. The weather was squally and the cloud was down so we went back into the Agostini Fjord and motored up into Hyatt Fjord, passing the Terra Australis – a floating hotel of a cruise ship showing the tourists the fjords and glaciers.

We proceeded east by motor and 'poled out gib', first into the Hyatt Fjord but not as far as the map indicated because it was blocked by a bar of sediment covered in stunted beech. We went up the Serrano Fjord where, occasionally through gaps in the cloud, we could see to the east huge snow-covered mountains rising up from glaciers running down to the sea. These mountains had also been visited by Jack Miller and later by Douglas Crombie-Anderson (UK) during his 1977-78 expedition.

As we were re-entering the Agostini Fjord, Alex spotted two French climbers camped by the water's edge on a heavily vegetated peninsula. We motored out in the Avon to investigate. They were Dr Emmanuel Cauchy from Chamonix, with whom Hamish had climbed previously, and Parisian Nicolas Tingasson. They came on board for dinner and told us their story. They had hired a fishing boat at some considerable expense to take them to the Agostini Fjord. They had been dropped at night, in a hurry, at a very inconvenient place. It had taken them several days to hack through the low-lying forest to reach the glaciers. Consequently, because of that and the bad weather, they had only climbed one minor peak. They were now awaiting a vessel connected with Punta Arenas University to take them out.

We left them in camp and headed back to Enchantment Bay. The next morning we discovered by radio, much to our and their relief, that the French lads had been picked up and taken out as planned. As for ourselves, we wondered what to do next. Obviously Sarmiento was the gem, but the weather was never settled enough for us to make a serious attempt at it, knowing that it was a very difficult mountain and that the two summits had only ever been climbed once despite many attempts nearly all by Italians. The first ascent had been made by Italians Carlo Mauri and Clemente Maffei in 1956 and it was Carlo Mauri and party who had made the first ascent of Buckland ten years later. We decided we would attempt something in the Buckland/Aosta group. We had various maps, the most detailed being the Professor Louis Lliboutri (Grenoble) map of Tierra del Fuego, but we were still never quite sure what we were looking at. All the nautical and sketch maps seemed to conflict with each other, so we decided to go for a bit of a recce. This proved inconclusive on account of the

cloud and the next day, in heavy rain, we walked some way up a foresummit of Buckland before giving up for the ocean.

On 14 December we set off to pursue one of Skip's quests: to plot as many safe havens as possible around the Tierra del Fuegan fjords. Consequently, we went all the way up the Martinez Fjord before fetching up for the night in the bay east of Sarmiento. There we found a group of Chileans from Punta Arenas University engaged in measuring receding glaciers. They confirmed as true a story we had heard about the 'red tide' phenomenon: from time to time various shellfish become poisonous to the human digestive system and it is strongly recommended that no one should eat them. On one occasion a Chilean navy boat had come across a fishing boat proceeding in an erratic fashion: all on board, except for one small boy, had succumbed to the poison and were dead.

After entering and leaving various fjords, inlets and bays we headed off west and then south towards the Beagle Channel. This was a wonderful journey, often in horrendously bad weather and heavy rain, but always magnificent especially down the Cockburn Canal through the Brecknock Passage and a complex group of islands including Basket Island. We proceeded at 6-7 knots under sail, admiring huge 1500ft-high clean rock buttresses plunging down from the Tres Picos, which were actually eight peaks reaching 1840ft. This was the best bit of rock for climbing we saw on the trip. Here the forest cover was much less and the bare rock, well named 'Desolada', revealed the exposure of this coast to the Roaring Forties. After about 100 miles of sailing we switched on the engine to enter the Seno Ventisquero, a fjord with huge icebergs moving down it and out into the open channel. Skip had been here before and had taken a client to climb a peak immediately above our mooring – a pleasant rocky inlet overhung by trees, with waterfalls and streams pouring down.

Next morning it was oppressively warm owing to a katabatic compression, where the cold air descends off the glaciers and is compressed in the narrow fjord creating energy and warmth. After filming huge chunks of ice calving off from the glaciers, we headed east towards the main Beagle Channel, sailing all the way into the Garibaldi Fjord where the cruise ships go to view the most impressive glaciers of all. As there seemed no obvious way through the thickest jungle we had yet seen on the steep-sided fjord, we returned to the main channel and eventually checked out the rarely-visited Fiordo Chueco. As far as we knew, the only climbers to have been up here were two Alaskans in 1991 who climbed a number of peaks to the north of the fjord head. They had travelled up the fjord in little more than an open boat with an outboard motor. Normally only small boats could make it up this fjord but with *Pelagic*'s lifting keel it was possible to cross the shallow moraine bar. This was the most impressive of all the fjords we explored, with giant kelp, 200ft long some of it, wafting in the currents. We saw all manner of sea birds, ashey-headed geese, kelp geese and steamer ducks paddling their way across from island to island. There were

sea lions and fur seals basking on rocks and Fuegan foxes seen in forest clearings and around the camp that we established near the fjord head.

We stepped on shore at the NW end of the fjord, north of the great glacier, again calving off huge chunks of ice. We then ferried gear up to a camp 500m higher. By now we had become more adept at coping with the terrain, which was sometimes like a combination of Rannoch Moor bogs and Malaysian jungle. Around Buckland we had been almost totally immobilised by the dense undergrowth. Now we made good progress to our camp by avoiding the jungle and taking a circuitous route round the bottom of a glacier coming down from the west. We had set our sights on a peak marked as 2100m on the Grenoble map, lying midway between the Chueco and Garibaldi Fjords.

On 19 December the weather was almost continually bad, with very heavy rain – sometimes as heavy as any monsoon I've been in. On 20 December Skip and Frank went down to the boat for more food, whilst Alex, Julian and I reconnoitred a way around a big rock buttress via a reasonably-angled but heavily snowed-up couloir to get about 2500ft above sea level. It was again very wet but not continuously so, and in moments of brightening weather the magic of this pristine forest with its vast variety of lichens, mosses and fronds could be fully appreciated. This really is a wonderful wilderness area and always will be. No one would want to live here permanently – not with the weather – and the stunted beech are hardly worth the trouble of exploitation. Long may it remain the same little oasis of primeval forest cover, one of the few areas left in the world where man can find such peace and energy. How beautiful the world must once have been.

On 21 December we moved our camp via the couloir up to a ridge at 4000ft. At 4pm that evening it started to rain and rained continuously for 18 hours. Next day there were a few breaks as the wind got up but then the rain came back, turning to sleet and snow. The waiting game continued throughout the 23rd, with heavy falls of wet snow. With Christmas Day approaching, we agreed to go out and attempt our peak, no matter what, on the 24th. But by then the snow if anything was worse and very deep and dangerous, so we retreated, taking everything with us back to *Pelagic*, and motoring down the fjord into the Beagle Channel and eventually into Yendegaia Bay for the night. On the shore was an estanzia with huge abandoned shearing sheds. In the back country there were 7000 head of cattle at this most westerly settlement of Tierra del Fuego, with only a caretaker and his wife in residence.

We left the bay and sailed out straight across the Beagle to Kanasaka Estancia where we had our Christmas dinner with Eugenio Martinez, his wife Estelle and their three children. Eugenio's father had built the Estancia in 1920. Hamish and Eugenio went out into the bay to collect giant spider crab, a football match took place outside and, after dinner, cricket until midnight. On Boxing Day we left Kanasaka for Puerto Williams. It was a beautiful morning with good visibility as we travelled back up the Beagle

Channel to the high mountains at the eastern end of the Cordillera Darwin, including Mts Bove and Roncagli. The latter had recently been climbed by David Hillebrandt's British expedition, after several attempts by David over the years. He had passed on to us a lot of information about Tierra del Fuego and the French map. Everywhere we went, local people greeted Skip with enthusiasm and enormous repect. He is well known throughout Tierra del Fuego.

After we docked the crew rushed up on deck shouting '*English Rose IV*, *English Rose IV*'. I came up to see *English Rose IV* arriving, with John Ridgeway at the wheel and his family up on deck holding the rigging as they docked alongside us. Boxing Day evening was spent eating a huge meal on board *English Rose*. She had just sailed down through the Panama Canal and down South America, from Kinlochbervie in the NW Highlands. They were then proceeding south to the Antarctic Peninsula.

On 27 December I left Skip and the crew to fly over the Darwin Mountains from Ushuaia to Punta Arenas. Skip, Hamish and Frank were due to take a party of Germans climbing on South Georgia. The rest of us were to make our separate ways back home after finally docking at Ushuaia. That perfect day over the Darwin Mountains confirmed my suspicions that this trip would prove as unsettling to me as it had on the day we climbed our peak; for again I saw that there is much to do down here in Tierra del Fuego.

Summary: In December 1994 Doug Scott joined an expedition based on the yacht *Pelagic*, owned by the skipper James (Skip) Novak. From Punta Arenas they sailed due south down the Straights of Magellan towards the western end of the Cordillera Darwin range. On 8 December they reached the summit of a *c*6000ft peak in the Cordon Navarro which they named 'Mt Pelagic', though this may possibly have been climbed already by Jack Miller (US) and party in 1966. Other members of the climbing party were Julian Freeman-Attwood and Francis McDermot. After climbing the main summit, Novak, Freeman-Attwood and Scott went east to climb 'a minor frosty concretion' which they called 'Mt Poltroon'.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Evelio Echevarría has consulted the Instituto Geográfico Militar in Santiago about geographic names in Chile and Tierra del Fuego. He writes that the Instituto has rejected all names of mountains and mountain features bestowed after 1965 unless they conform to certain rules relating to the geography or to the tradition of the country. Doug Scott emphasises, however, that the names 'Pelagic' and 'Poltroon' were applied to these mountains as a matter of convenience and should not appear on any map unless they are endorsed by the authorities.