
SIMON YATES

Short and Very Sweet

Alpine-style on Mount Vancouver's south-west ridge

Having climbed a significant new route on the west face of Mount Alverstone in 2005, Paul Schweizer and I were keen to return to the remote Wrangell St Elias Range on the Alaskan-Yukon border. We knew the routine, had seen some good-looking objectives, and the spring climbing season worked well around Paul's academic commitments. I booked flights to Whitehorse in the Yukon and we were on our way. Then the problems began. At a late stage of planning we discovered that our proposed route – the compelling west ridge of Mount Hubbard – had been siege climbed back in the 1970s. We needed another objective. Wrangell activist Jack Tackle suggested we look at Mount Vancouver. It was a good tip. Paul was soon drawn to the huge south-west ridge of Good Neighbor Peak – the southern summit of this large, complex mountain. Amazingly, it had not been climbed or even attempted. Or so we thought.

To climb the route we needed to be dropped off by ski-plane in a glacier basin to the south of the peak – nominally in Alaska. Since our previous visit some misinformed bureaucrat had decided to bring in a raft of regulations concerning bush pilots crossing the border. The Canadian operator we had used previously from Kluane Lake would not land us in the US, as he had in 2005. We had become unwitting victims of the US 'War on Terror'. Ideally, we now needed to fly in from Yakutat, but could not change our flights to Whitehorse from the UK without prohibitive cost. Our only other option was to cross the land border from the Yukon into Alaska and take the longer (and more expensive) flight in from Haines.

We left the UK on Friday 24 April and after a monumental day of travel arrived in Whitehorse in the middle of the night. A day's shopping and packing was all that was required in the Yukon capital before transferring to Skagway on the Alaskan coastline the following morning. Our pilot – Paul Swanstrom – kindly flew over from Haines to pick us up, saving the ferry journey across the fjord. He also brought news of impending good weather and said he would fly us into the mountains next day. By Monday lunch time we were on the glacier at the base of our route, somewhat jet-lagged, basking in spring sunshine from a clear blue sky. We set up our base camp and slept. Events seemed to be turning our way at last.

The following day was frantic. We examined the ridgeline through binoculars as the sun continued to shine. It all looked do-able with the exception of a headwall of rime flutings at the top, which were impossible to fathom from such distance. The forecast was good for the week, adding urgency to our actions. We sorted gear and food, agreed on a rack and



22. Mount St Elias, the Seward Glacier and Mount Logan from Mount Vancouver.
(*Simon Yates*)



23. In profile, Mount Vancouver's south-west ridge, the line of Yates and Schweizer's ascent. (*Simon Yates*)



24. Paul Schweizer starting up Vancouver's south-west ridge. (*Simon Yates*)

finally packed. I spoke with my wife Jane on the satellite 'phone and told her to expect us to be on mountain for four or five days.

At 4am on Wednesday 29 April we were woken by the alarm and began our climb. A 30-minute walk across the glacier led to a broad couloir leading up to the ridge. We roped up to cross the tricky bergshrunn and then soloed simultaneously, hoping to reach the ridge before the sun hit the walls above the fall line we were climbing. It was not to be, but we did manage to clear the narrowest section before the rays arrived and sporadic stone-fall began. The widening upper slopes soon turned into a flog as the heat melted snow underfoot and drew precious water from our skin. We rested on the col at the base of our ridge and marvelled at the panorama to the west – the vast Seward Glacier with Mount St Elias and Mount Logan on either side.

Some gentle trudging up the initial undulating section of the snowy ridge soon brought us to mixed ground. We roped up and would stay that way until the summit. Following the line of least resistance – generally to the left of the crest – we made steady progress. By late afternoon we began looking for a tent site, but the terrain offered none. As time passed we started to consider less than perfect options. Luckily we regained the ridge and late in the evening hacked out the first of what would be a succession of knife-edge snow ridge tent platforms.

Our second day brought more mixed climbing and long traversing sections on ice to outflank a steep buttress on its left side. Later we rejoined the ridge and excavated another dramatic campsite.



25. On the ridge towards the end of Day Three. Mount Cook (or Boundary Peak 182) beyond. (*Simon Yates*)

The morning began with an exciting horizontal section along the corniced ridge. I followed Paul to what he described as an Alaskan belay – he was sat astride the crest. We continued uneventfully before stopping mid-afternoon below an imposing rock tower. Getting around this was obviously going to be one of the key sections of the route. It was not something to start on late in the day.

Day four was pivotal. Having already done a long upward traversing section of ridge, a retreat in the event of a storm was already looking problematical. The steep east side of the ridge – the most direct way to reach the base camp by abseil – was a no-go, threatened by a band of séracs from above. The western aspect offered little more solace – relatively gentle slopes into a chaotic glacier, followed by a massive hike around a group of lesser peaks in order to be re-united with our duty-free. We approached the tower with some apprehension and traversed leftwards over hard ice. Paul led a tricky section of mixed climbing into a basin and let out a shriek of delight having discovered a thin ribbon of perfect ice, hidden from sight below, that led up a narrow gully to slopes above. I moved quickly up the gully knowing that our way off the mountain now lay up and over the top. Pitch followed pitch, first of ice and then of deepening snow with the rime headwall looming menacingly above. Late in the afternoon we reached a shoulder and dug our final tent platform. The weather was holding, but ominous lenticular cloud caps had formed over Logan and St Elias during the day.



26. Day 4, Paul Schweizer on mixed ground above the tower. (*Simon Yates*)

We regained the ridge crest in the morning. The exposure was sensational as we followed a cornice fracture line to below steep ice slopes that led up to the rime headwall. The feature was bizarre – a mass of strange, feathery, wind-blown formations, some massively overhung. However, there appeared to be weaknesses and we headed for the most obvious central one. It began as a couloir of very hard ice, which Paul struggled to lead under the weight of his rucksack. He belayed early and I ditched my sack before continuing above. The couloir entered an almost completely enclosed tube of ice and rime – it was more akin to caving than mountaineering – before opening out into a small basin. Above were two narrow, parallel runnels. I placed an ice-screw and set off. A superb series of moves led up the right-hand feature with a wild pull into the left one. Another basin led to a small wall, before a final pull brought the summit plateau. The central and north summits of Mount Vancouver lay in front of me. I let out a scream. Five days of climbing had led up to this point (probably 3000m in total) and somehow our route had saved the best until last. You dream, you plan, you save, you pack, travel, pack some more and finally climb in the hope of sublime moments like this. The miscommunication that followed, as I tried to haul my rucksack on one rope and bring up Paul on the other, hardly mattered. They arrived eventually. Paul's face filled with joy, as he came over the top to join me.

'I'll never do anything better,' he said simply. I had been thinking exactly the same since pulling onto the plateau. In Paul's opinion the route was harder and better than the Cassin Ridge on Denali that he did years ago.

We wandered around, soaking in the moment and the astonishing views

for a few minutes, before making our way up onto a knoll of rime just above our finishing point to take summit photographs. Then pragmatism returned – it was time to begin our long descent.

After a few hundred metres of gently angled, but heavily crevassed snow slopes following the east ridge, we dropped to a col where we called it a day. That night the wind increased and we awoke to snow. We passed the day in our sleeping bags – the mountain hidden in cloud and the tent buffeted by wind. You need visibility to get off these big complex peaks and navigate back to base camp through complicated glacial terrain. Thankfully during the second night the storm blew itself out and allowed us to continue.

The day back to our base was a prolonged affair. We had hoped to descend by the Centennial Route, but the speed of our approach had meant that we were unable to go and look at it before starting the climb. As a result we continued down the east ridge rather than taking a spur off it to the south. The ridge ended in a hideous band of séracs, forcing us to regain height before starting a long series of abseils off its south side. We then crossed a glacier and climbed to a col, only to face a further two abseils to another glacier below. An icefall lay between base camp and us. We weaved our way through it until a deep crevasse barred the way. There was a way around, but it was going to involve a long walk back down the glacier. Instead we opted to jump. I belayed Paul as he made the dash and two-metre leap. Then, having hauled the rucksacks across, I took the jump. We arrived back at camp at 10pm having been on the go for a solid 14 hours.

I immediately made a 'phone call home. Jane was emotional, but very relieved at our return. She had contacted Paul in Haines and was preparing to instigate a search and rescue operation.

A storm moved in during the night, confining us to camp. I spoke with Paul in Haines and he told us to call when the weather improved. We were glad of the rest – our first since leaving the UK 12 days earlier.

On the fourth morning the cloud began to disperse and after a couple of satellite telephone calls Paul informed us he was on his way. We were still packing when he arrived. With perfect bad timing a bank of cloud began to drift up the glacier as we loaded the plane. We frantically dragged the remaining gear across the glacier and stowed it inside. Paul hastily started the engine and then gunned the machine for take-off, but nothing happened. One of the plane's skis was stuck in the snow. It was soon freed by digging, but the cloud was now upon us. We all got out of the plane and sat on the glacier, Paul Schweizer and I feeling stupid for not being ready earlier.

An hour later the cloud lifted sufficiently to fly. The plane accelerated slowly down the glacial basin, skipped a shallow crevasse and finally became airborne over the icefall. Then Paul Swanstrom made a steep turn back into the cirque. I assumed he was aborting the take-off, but he had other ideas, banking the plane into another tight turn after the skis made a brief contact with the snow. With the turn completed the plane began to



27. Paul Schweizer approaches the flutings guarding Vancouver's summit plateau.
(Simon Yates)



28. Looking down through the flutings on the top pitch of Yates and Schweizer's route.
(Simon Yates)



29. Paul Schweizer on the south summit (Good Neighbor Peak) with Mount Logan beyond. (*Simon Yates*)

increase speed and height as we headed once more back over the icefall. Paul had used the manoeuvre to gain altitude to clear a bank of cloud rising up the glacier below. It was an incredibly committing piece of flying that seemed to mirror our own efforts, a fitting finale to a very special climb.

Postscript: Two months after returning to the UK we were stunned to learn that ‘our’ south-west ridge had been climbed way back in 1968. A 10-strong expedition from the Osaka-Fu Mountaineering Association, Japan, tackled the ridge siege-style over 13 days in May-June. Masaru Shibata and Masaichi Kimura reached the summit of Good Neighbor Peak on 10 June. That same day three other team members perished in an avalanche. A brief report of the expedition appeared in the 1969 *American Alpine Journal*.

Summary: An account of the first alpine-style ascent of the south-west ridge of the south summit of Mount Vancouver (Good Neighbor Peak – 4850m), Yukon-Alaska border, by Simon Yates and Paul Schweizer, 29 April to 5 May 2009. Approximately 3000m of climbing with a 2450m vertical height gain, up to Grade V Scottish ice and mixed with an overall alpine ED grade.

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