

THE REPORT OF
THE BRITISH CAPE RENARD TOWER EXPEDITION
ANTARCTICA 2000

[Compiled by Skip Novak, Crag Jones and Julian Freeman-Attwood.]

The expedition was grant aided and sponsored by:
The Mount Everest Foundation
The British Mountaineering Council
Aerolineas Argentinas



Expedition members:-

Caradoc (Crag) Jones (Marine Biologist / Mountaineer) UK
Skip Novak (Race sail Captain / Mountaineer) UK
Julian Freeman-Attwood (Mountaineer / Forester) UK



The Pelagic under sail off Graham Land



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AIMS OF THE EXPEDITION

To attempt the first ascent of the north face Cape Renard Tower 747m located on the west side of the Antarctic Peninsula in Lat South 65.01 / Long West 63.46.

An attempt on this objective was made by the same climbers in 1996. The main summit was climbed for the first time by the west face in 1999. (Stephan Glowac).

THE APPROACH AND VOYAGE OUT

(by Julian Freeman-Attwood)

One of the great problems in climbing on the peninsula is getting to the chosen mountain. Whilst an air flight can be arranged through ANI for parties wishing to climb around Mt Vinson or in Queen Maud Land and other parts of the continental interior, it is a boat that you need for the Antarctic Peninsula.

The yacht 'Pelagic' (Latin: 'of the sea') is one of a handful of vessels that visit this region and was built by the well known Whitbread round the world Captain James 'Skip' Novak, for the purposes of combining sailing and mountaineering. To facilitate navigation in shallow or uncharted waters, the vessel was built with a lifting keel comprising some 7 tons of steel encased lead. The boat is a 54ft long Bermuda rigged cutter and is well able to cope with the horrors of the Southern Ocean.

Crag Jones and Julian Attwood flew from Heathrow to Ushuaia (Tierra del Fuego) via Buenos Aires arriving 10th February 2000. The Pelagic was anchored in Ushuaia harbour and during the next 3 days we were fully occupied in buying food and getting the vessel ready for sea including stowing and lashing all gear in the fore-peak ready for the 600 mile crossing of the notorious Drake passage. The passage is that part of the Southern or Antarctic Ocean which divides Antarctica from Cape Horn.

Skip Novak arrived 2 days after us but the vessel was actually skippered by his extremely talented friend and sailor, Hamish Laird. Others on board included first mate Emma Ellis and 4 members of the Rosenfeld family from the USA. (husband, wife and two young sons).

The final pair to come aboard were two butchered and skinned sheep which were hung high on the back-stays to dry and cure for later eating.

For those who suffer from seasickness, the Drake is a place to be recalled (if you have crossed it before) with loathing. Whilst our passage was straight forward by the standards of the seas thereabouts, there is always a large swell and a gale 8 is quite the norm. We passed Cape Horn on the 14th February and arrived at the South Shetland Islands (namely Deception Is) on the 17th February having done watches of 3 hours on followed by 6 off. On the 18th and 19th we made the last 200 miles south to our objective.

THE FIRST ATTEMPT TO LAND

(by Skip Novak from web site article.)

February 20th:- Yesterday we were foiled in our attempt to land at the base of the Cape Renard Towers, let alone climb them. At 1600 coming in from the north down the Gerlache Straits we sighted the shoreline of the cape at 3 miles. The top was shrouded in mist on what was otherwise a windless day. The plan was to disembark Julian Freeman- Attwood, Caradoc Jones and myself with ten days of supplies underneath the 750 meter high spire to set up a base camp, while Pelagic then continued on her cruise along the peninsula with the Rosenfeld family.

The Cape Renard Tower is actually an island, not long ago surveyed as having been "attached" to the mainland of Antarctica, but in fact only by a receding glacier. Otherwise known as 'Una's Tits' this double spire is a rock monolith capped with snow white nipples. We are not sure who Una was (*see below*) but if we get up this thing, we aim to find out - and congratulate her for the inspiration. It is well known as the most dramatic feature on the Antarctic Peninsula, and is certainly the most photographed. It has been climbed twice before, once by a Canadian team who climbed the rock on the east face, but didn't summit, and last year by the famous German climber Stephan Glowac and his team. They climbed the west face and did reach the summit of the highest of the two towers. It is recognised to be the hardest rock climb ever done in the Antarctic. Our route would follow a new line up the north face. Since arriving in Antarctic waters three days ago, the three man team of this Anglo/Welsh/American expedition (I'll leave it to you to figure out from the names who comes from where - not difficult!) has been organising our gear and raiding the food supply on Pelagic separating a mountain of provisions into small loads. We would have to toss the gear from the inflatable dinghy into the arms of a waiting man on the shoreline rocks. This is a precarious position just below high tide mark and at the beginning of a small glacier that steeply slopes up to the vertical rock wall which will be the beginning of our climb.

Skipper Hamish Laird and myself went in with the dinghy to make a recce of the landing while First Mate Emma Ellis jogged Pelagic around some 150 meters from the shore. A slight westerly swell was running, but it seemed tenable. If the sun had been shining it would have been quite different, but on this day a light but wet snow was falling and the top of the route had disappeared into the mists, while the ice cold cauldron of 0 degree seawater swirled around us in circles - not a welcoming sight. Hamish and I returned to Pelagic while Julian and Crag, wearing climbing harnesses had readied the gear on deck.

The drill for landing is to get one man on shore, have him belay himself to the rock, then throw a rope down into the dinghy while sacs are tied in and hauled up. Julian managed to make the leap of faith and busied himself with the belay, while Crag and Hamish returned to Pelagic so we could load up. In the short space of time that transpired, the westerly swell that was just acceptable to a safe landing, increased to such an extent that Julian's ledge was now being washed by every crest. It was clear to all of us that making an attempt at landing was out of the question. Gear would find its way into the sea, and maybe worse. While Julian was jumping around on the ledge dodging waves, Crag and Hamish donned life jackets and motored in with one for Julian. Tossed ashore he quickly got it on and after several tries, always with the risk of the dinghy being swept up onto the ledge and capsizing. He managed to jump at the moment the wave crested, but while in mid air the wave had washed out again and

like a circus clown, he dropped from a great height into the bottom of the inflatable boat taking out Crag and Hamish along the way like bowling pins. All back on board safely, we motored through the picturesque Le Maire Channel, known to aficionados as "Kodak Valley," but the dramatic peaks that line this narrow gut were still socked in with a snow fall from the west. Destination Peterman Island in the Penola Straits for shelter. Tomorrow is another day, in this mountain land where getting to the mountain is probably more than half the battle.

(NB Una is alive and well, apparently living in Australia)

THE LANDING AND ATTEMPT

(by Crag Jones from web site article.)

The following day the westerly swell persisted making the landing at the cave site untenable. We moved around the ice front to the NE to the one spot where the collapsing ice wall is breached by a tenable line of ascent.

A long pitch up this enabled us to fix a rope for the next morning. We returned, then climbed back up the rope and hauled 20 loads up the wall on to the top of the seracs. We set up camp on the top. The anxiety caused by the continuous collapses from either side gradually subdued as it seemed for once we had made *'another fine mountaineering decision'* (as we say in the trade) by choosing the most stable looking site. We did have visions of floating off down the Le Maire Channel waving the Pelagic a wistful cheerio!



J.F-A in front of expedition base camp.

The first night's strong winds made us think we might have to dig a 'bolt-hole' snow cave in the event that the tents were blown off the mountain; an experience we had all suffered on various previous adventures, most notably in South Georgia. However by the next day the wind dropped and we decided not to waste the energy.

We then established a traverse across the glacier to the lip of the 200 ft ice cliff from where a narrow ledge system led across the rock face to join our original 'direct start' from the cave site of 1996. From the ledges there followed two more days of steep and difficult rock climbing to reach the toe of the massive 'couloir' (or ice gully) that cleaves the face. We established fixed ropes on all this section so that we could both return to camp and re-ascend to our high point as soon as possible.



The north face of Cape Renard

After some bad weather Caradoc and Skip climbed back to the toe of the couloir by 7am on our 'big day'. We climbed the couloir in 13 hours. Great care had to be taken at belays to stay out of the line of fire of the sporadic projectiles that were visited upon us. There was one vertical ice pitch of 20m guarding the entrance to the snowfield the ended the couloir. It was just above this point that Crag and Julian had reached in 1996.

From here we followed the ramp line up rightwards that cuts across the upper walls. As night fell we prepared for a cold bivouac without sleeping bags. In a protected corner we excavated a bench seat out of the ice and Caradoc managed to cunningly position Skip next to the hanging stove. This was fired up at intervals during the night to produce various interesting concoctions. The boost to morale levels is at least as important as that to the energy levels.

There was a stunning sunset over the sea of cloud beneath us. Only the highest peaks of the islands to the NW (Anvers Is and Wiencke Is) plus those of the peninsula pierced this cloud plain, to glow red in the last rays of the sun.

A cold grey morning witnessed our slow efforts to make hot drinks and struggle out of our plastic bags without dropping boots or any thing else that might prove useful. Still fearful of the promised bad weather we decided to press on. The first pitch proved to be an awkward grade V piece of ice. It was probably the last thing needed on a full stomach but soon got us warmed up.



Skip abseiling 3 pitches below the couloir

We knew from photographs that there was a danger of the ramp line running out into a steep wall. For this reason we first explored possible traverse lines lower down to the right. These either ended above overhangs or ran out into major expeditions of their own right crossing the entire face. We were forced to continue up the ramp line for another two pitches. The climbing became increasingly difficult. We were hoping there would be at least a line of holds if not a ledge that continued into the corner we were aiming for. These did not materialise and we ended up faced with a blank wall leading into a blank corner which stopped us in our tracks. Without any major logistical backup to retreat to, there was no choice but to concede defeat and start the long painful hazardous decent.

It would take us 15 rappels to return to the top of the fixed ropes. With limited equipment only a single anchor point can be used for each stage. Great care had to be taken to choose these carefully. Placements had to be dug out of the ice. The first man down would test the point with a back up in case of failure. The second man down takes off the back up and descends on the single anchor. We had to halt half way down under an overhang in order for a barrage of falling ice to subside.

On reaching the fixed ropes there were three more rappels where all the lines had to be cleared so that no ropes were left on the mountain. After many tiring and awkward manoeuvres we regained the ledge line as darkness fell. A weary plod with heavy loads back across the glacier and we reached base camp by 11pm.

The bad weather broke next day as we returned to clear more ropes from the ledge system. (N.B. We also managed to retrieve a rope Julian and Crag had unfortunately had to leave on the face during our 1996 attempt. Thus the mountain was completely cleared.)

In heavy snow we packed up camp in the afternoon and lowered the loads down the ice cliff to the waiting dinghy. A final abseil and we were soon back for a warm welcome aboard the Pelagic.

WIENCKE ISLAND

(by Crag Jones from web site article entitled 'Ending on a high note')

After the failure on Cape Renard we returned to the yacht but not in time for "Tea 'n' Medals" as we say back in blighty. This is not a good state of affairs for a mountaineer. All that graft and nothing to show for it. Perhaps not quite as bad as running aground but not far from it. Some remedial action was called for and sharpish! We had only a few days left before we would have to prepare for the dreaded Drake Passage once more. Our glorious Captain had deftly manoeuvred himself on to a cruise ship and vanished over the horizon to the waiting arms of his loved one. This left me and Jules 'Freewheeler' Attwood to try and salvage something from our sorry and soggy state. Hamish took it upon himself to once more test our moral fibre by ejecting us from the warm bosom of the good ship Pelagic onto a cruel shore at Dorian Cove.

There we were able to regroup in the B.A.S hut and asses our options. Fortunately we had been able to avail ourselves of the Pelagic's mountaineering skis and sledges. After a days rest which included a wonderful evenings hospitality aboard the yacht 'Shantooti' we set off to explore the Wall Range which sits majestically where the keel should be on an upturned boat. Jules was not as convinced as I regarding the safety of routes on the west side of the range where some huge breaking cornices could be seen all along the ridge. The line of approach would have to be judged carefully.

We progressed with that unique British brand of incompetence that inevitably arises whenever their mountaineers and the beastly continental ski things attempt some form of collaboration. The French have a name for it, something along the lines of 'La Methode Anglais'. Though speaking as a Welshman I never thought that Celts and skis were meant to go together in the first place?

Freewheeler was in his element 'man hauling'. I could see his goggles nostalgically misting over as he strode determinedly towards an awaiting crevasse and an heroic fate for one befitting Scott's inheritance. At least we were not going to starve to death. Indeed, with the amount of rations we were hauling, the greatest hazard facing us was being run over by our own sledges. The sledge turned left just in time forcing Jules away from his preferred end.

After a short journey we ended up at the crest of the Harbour Glacier. We had toyed with following the Thunder Glacier around to the far east side of the range. However Dave Burkitt at Port Lockroy had told us that Greg Landreth off the Yacht Northhanger had run into badly crevassed country around there, so with the time available we decided to stick to the west side.

As far as we could tell from the index in the latest mountaineering chronology and local discussion, the highest point of the Wall Range was unclimbed and a worthy target to go for. * see End Note below.*

We placed the Gemini tent out in the open and lashed an extra 20m of guy line through the crosspiece on the tent poles and attached all guys to pieces of engine hose buried in the snow as 'dead men'. Both of us had had tents destroyed and / or buried in Antarctic storms before. This one was going nowhere.

The main part of the Wall Range refused to clear until evening. There then followed a 'lively discussion' on to what was to be the objective. Freewheeler refused to succumb to the argument that the tantalisingly technical options were the safest due to secure belays. We settled on a long open couloir the apex of which broke through the massive 'keel' via a crafty dogleg ramp. FW seemed content that the keel would stay in place?!

A very lazy start saw us skiing across the broad open glacier to the foot of the couloir. One awkward step saw us across the bergschrund and we continued solo for the 1500' to the crest of the ridge between the two main summits. Visibility was worsening as we climbed higher. At the crest a biting wind limited the amount of time we could hang around. FW was not happy. The first section was an intimidating lope out on to something akin to a house roof. The only problem was you could not be sure whether you were on the ridge tiles or the gutter trough. The distinction was

critical but the white of the snow ran seamlessly into the white of the clouds. It felt very exposed. FW ranted and raved. I reciprocated with some raving and ranting. We backed off and climbed back behind the cornice for some shelter.

I reasoned that there were periodic breaks that would allow us to progress under control. We could also retrace our steps in the event of visibility being bad on a return journey or a retreat. FW had become immune to this impeccable piece of logic. We waited for an hour. The breaks continued in the same vein. Each one revealed a worrying series of white elephants bottom disappearing off up into the heavens.



Crag on the summit ridge of Mt Italia / Harbour Glacier below.

I decided to 'have a look'. FW said he would hold the fort until my return which he indicated would either be immediately or never. I could see that the exposed position eased after this first hummock. The high winds necessitated an 'a cheval' manoeuvre in the name of caution. I then set too at as fast a pace as I could manage. The weather streaming in from the west was not a solid wall. My steps did not appear to be filling in too quickly behind me and I could still discern my line of retreat even when everything turned into a white limbo. I pressed on. As each rounded rise was surmounted a few more appeared above. The reassuring site of Jules was consumed by the boiling broth below. The ridge was turning into something of a fantasy land. Not too technically difficult but spectacular. I was beginning to enjoy myself and just hoped the top would arrive soon.

Suddenly a crevasse cut right across the crest of the ridge. It's a rare feature but one you sometimes get on a heavily glaciated mountain. I ventured across the floor, it was solid enough. In fact it provided a perfect 'catchment' area if I fell off whilst climbing up the opposite steep wall. It was just a case of positioning yourself correctly so that you did not spill out of the worrying outlet at either end.

The wall was about 20' high and adorned by rococo rime encrustations. Ice axe shafts driven in horizontally provided weird but sound placements. If I could not reverse the manoeuvre I felt a well aimed jump would be acceptable. A couple of easier steepenings eventually gave way to a large gently rounded area which felt suspiciously like the summit. I had been climbing for approximately an hour. I waited to see if the breaks in the weather revealed anything above me. Nothing appeared. I could see nothing below either. I continued along the far side until it started to descend in a long whale back. I felt as confident as I could that it was indeed the summit so elected to get the 'hell out of Jackson' asap. The return went smoothly. I even managed to down climb the step with less difficulty than I had feared. The wind screeched by. I crouched low and kept my legs apart. It was prime terrain for tripping over your crampons. The welcome site of Jules reappeared from the depths.

He was happy that I had topped out. We set too for the decent. We decided to rope up for the first three pitches down the steep exit ice from the couloir. I went first placing running belays which Jules removed on his decent.

Although much too steep for mistakes we decided to untie the rope from between us as belays would be unlikely to hold either of us. We front pointed downwards independently for the remaining weary 1200' to the glacier. A few minor powder snow avalanches swished down from above. We could see them coming and could step aside until they had passed and continue on our way. Eventually we reached the skis and skimmed across the rolling smooth surface back to the tent.

Freewheeler suffered an uncharacteristic fit of domesticity and soon had a tasty supper concocted. The wind howled from the Neumayer Channel over our glacier through to the Peltier Channel but we dozed content in the knowledge that it was all downhill from now.

END NOTE

Subsequent checks have revealed that this summit had in fact been climbed at least once before by members of the well known Italian climbing group 'The Lecco Spiders' in 1976. They had christened it Monte Italia. (1097m) It appears they had traversed to it from the neighbouring summit which they had climbed using siege tactics under difficult weather conditions.

The next day revealed the summit ridge in all its glory and the features allowed a clear confirmation that the summit had been reached.

THE DRAKE AGAIN

(by Julian Freeman-Attwood)

The Pelagic returned to Wiencke Island to pick us up on 6th March and we had a memorable last evening with Dave Birkitt and Rob Downie at the Port Lockroy base. This had still been an abandoned rubbish tip in 1994 and 1996 but since then the two of them have transformed it into a visitor centre where a great many cruise ships now stop.

On the 7th March we sailed to the USA Palmer Base on the south side of Anvers Island to wait for better weather. This never came and the following day we had to retreat to Port Lockroy. On the 9th we managed to beat our way up to the Melchior Islands about 50 miles north where we knew there was a sheltered anchorage. Gales continued on the 10th but the following day a reasonable weather scenario for the next 3 to 4 days persuaded us to chance our hand at the Drake.

A good crossing put us at Cape Horn on the 14th March where we toasted Neptune in a mild gale 8, with a bottle of Champagne. On the 15th we arrived exhausted back in Ushuaia at the end of another memorable expedition.

WILDLIFE

We were fortunate to see much wildlife in the Beagle Channel, the Drake and the Peninsula.

Species seen included:- Killer Whales, Hump backed Whales, Minke Whales, Dolphins, Leopard seals (particularly at Port Lockroy where we saw several Penguin kills at close quarters), Weddell seals, Crabeater seals, Elephant Seals and Fur seals.

Of Penguins we saw Adelie, Gentoo and Chinstrap.

Of birds we saw Wandering Albatross, Black Browed Albatross, Sooty Albatross, Blue eyed Shags and Giant Petrels.

RUBBISH DISPOSAL

In accordance with the Antarctic Treaty and our Foreign Office Permit, all rubbish whether organic or inorganic, was returned to the Pelagic and ultimately to South America. The only exception to this was human waste disposed of on the glacier.

WEATHER

In general we found there were less clear days than in previous years but conversely there were fewer days of high wind in 2000. It does seem to be the consensus that the Peninsula is getting more precipitation now that 10 years ago.

SPONSORS

We would like to thank the **Mount Everest Foundation** and the **British Mountaineering Council** for their support. Without them and their continuing support of British exploratory expeditions, there is no doubt that our expedition would not have taken place.

We would also like to thank **Aerolineas Argentinas** for their keen air fare prices and for waiving excess baggage charges. Our thanks particularly to Carol Peterson in the London office.

Crag Jones would like to thank **Cotswold Outdoor** for their continued support.

'The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.'

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ANTARCTICA 2000

ACCOUNTS
EXPENSES

Travel	
Air fares 3 x Aerolineas Argentinas ex Heathrow.....	£ 2070-00
Sailing vessel 'Pelagic'	
Ushuaia to Antarctic Peninsula return.....	£ 3750-00
Food	
Food extra to that on sailing vessel.....	£ 300-00
Gas	
.....	£ 54-00
Kitchen hardware	
.....	£ 58-00
Hotels and food Ushuaia	
.....	£ 219-00
Airport tax Ushuaia	
.....	£ 16-00
Telephone	
In UK.....	£ 25-00
Insurance	
.....	£ 534-00
Report	
Photos, photostats and folders.....	£ 40-00
TOTAL.....	£ 7,066-00

ACCOUNTS
INCOME

Mount Everest Foundation.....	£ 750-00
British Mountaineering Council.....	£ 950-00
Member's contributions:-	
Julian Freeman-Attwood.....	£ 3000-00
Crag Jones.....	£ 1676-00
Skip Novak.....	£ 690-00
TOTAL.....	£ 7,066-00