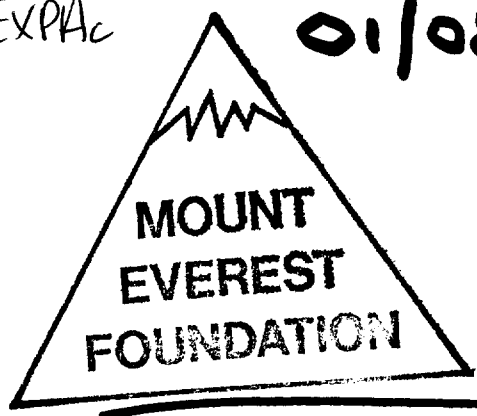


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The British Darwin Range Expedition

2001

Final Report

Introduction

The aim of our mountaineering expedition of just two climbing members –Andy Parkin and Simon Yates – was to attempt a new route on an unclimbed peak in the Cordillera Darwin range of mountains in Chilean Tierra del Fuego. If time allowed we also wished to explore other mountaineering objectives for future expeditions.

This extensive range of heavily glaciated mountains lie on a peninsula in the S.W. of the island (see Map1). The area is virtually uninhabited and this combined with a lack of roads for access, maps for navigation, information on objectives and a reputation for foul weather conditions have kept climbing visits to a minimum over the years. The Cordillera Darwin are some of the most remote, inaccessible and infrequently visited mountains in the world outside of the polar regions. Access is from the sea and therefore in order to visit the area you need a boat. Once on land approaches have to be made through a terrain of bog, dense forest and glacial rivers before awkward moraines and glaciers are even reached.

In the summer of 2000 Celia Bull contacted Simon, following a suggestion he had made to her previously about visiting the mountains of Antarctica or Tierra del Fuego aboard her yacht Ada II, which was anchored in the Falkland Islands. Celia wanted to sail her yacht across to mainland S.America and to spend some time exploring the channels of Tierra del Fuego. She was happy to combine her own plans with that of a mountaineering expedition and so Simon and Andy started to cast around for a climbing objective.

In Britain all Simon's enquiries seemed to get directed to one man – Dr David Hillebrandt, who is something of an authority on the region. It was he who suggested visiting the mountains above the Estancia Yendegaia and came up with a specific objective. He provided Simon and Andy with a photograph of what he called The East Face of Monte Bove (see Photo1). Monte Bove had been climbed just twice before, but the face was unclimbed. Further investigation led Simon and Andy to believe that the mountain was probably Roncagli III (unclimbed peak), but they would be unable to confirm this until they had seen the mountains for themselves.

A simple plan was devised. The team would fly from Britain to the town of Ushuaia in southern Argentinian Tierra del Fuego, join Celia on the yacht Ada II, sail east to enter Chilean territory at Puerto Williams before sailing back west again along the Beagle Channel to reach the Bahia Yendegaia. With the yacht safely anchored at the Estancia Yendegaia the team would be able to establish a base camp further up the valley and attempt to climb the mountain.

Summary of Events

- 2/2/01** Andy Parkin and Simon Yates fly out of Heathrow accompanied by Elaine Cave and Jane Yates.
- 3/2/01** The team arrive in Ushuaia and meet up with Celia Bull on her yacht Ada II in the town's marina.
- 4/2/01 to 7/2/01** Making preparations to the yacht and buying supplies for the journey.
- 8/2/01** Sailed the yacht to Puerto Williams on Navarino Island.
- 9/2/01 to 10/2/01** More preparations to the yacht and gaining necessary permission from the Chilean Navy to sail in their waters.
- 11/2/01** Sailed from Puerto Williams and were forced to take shelter in Puerto Navarino in the face of strong westerly winds.
- 12/2/01** Wind too strong to leave Puerto Navarino.
- 13/2/01** Left Puerto Navarino and sailed to Bahia Yendegaia anchoring at the Estancia.
- 14/2/01** Equipment taken ashore and supplies sorted at the Estancia.
- 15/2/01** Hired the Estancia gaucho – Jose – to carry loads on horseback to a base camp. Rode horses along the Yendegaia valley until the Rio Niemeyer was reached, which was followed to a base camp in the forest. Celia, Elaine and Jane returned to the yacht, while Andy and Simon made a reconnaissance of the Bove Glacier.
- 16/2/01** Simon returned to the yacht to collect his forgotten sleeping bag, while Andy prepared a shelter at the base camp.
- 17/2/01** Simon returned to the base camp on horseback with Celia, Elaine and Jose. Andy finished shelter.
- 18/2/01** Andy and Simon carry loads up on to the Bove Glacier and make a stash below the wet section of the glacier.
- 19/2/01 to 21/2/01** Resting at base camp in indifferent weather.
- 22/2/01** Returned to cache of gear and continued up the Bove glacier to set up a camp below our objective.
- 23/2/01** Started early and climbed through the day in deteriorating weather before bivouacing in a poor snow cave.
- 24/2/01** Began climbing in late morning after an appalling night, but the weather began to improve. The summit was reached at 6-30pm in clearing weather. The route was then abseiled through the evening to regain the camp on the Bove Glacier.
- 25/2/01** Walked down the glacier to the base camp.
- 26/2/01** Returned to the Estancia.
- 27/2/01** Jane and Elaine left on the cruise ship Terra Australis. Went to clear the base camp on horseback but were unable to cross the Rio Niemeyer.
- 28/2/01 to 2/3/01** Andy painted on the yacht while Celia, Jose and Simon went on horseback to explore the Lapataia Valley to the east.
- 3/3/01** Returned to and cleared the base camp.
- 4/3/01** Tried to sail west from Yendegaia, but had to return due to strong westerly winds.
- 5/3/01** Sailed west to Caleta Olla.
- 6/3/01** Walked above the Caleta to look at Monte Frances.

7/3/01 Sailed west to Bahia Pia and spent the afternoon exploring the climbing possibilities from this fiord.
8/3/01 Sailed to Bahia tres Brazos on Isla Gordon.
9/3/01 Sailed back east to Caleta Olla.
10/3/01 Sailed to Puerto Williams.
11/3/01 Clearing yacht in Puerto Williams.
12/3/01 Andy and Simon left Puerto Williams aboard the yacht Mago.
13/3/01 Arrived in Ushuaia.
14/3/01 Day in Ushuaia and preparing to leave.
15/3/01 Andy and Simon catch flight home.
16/3/01 Arrive Heathrow.

The Expedition

The team comprising Andy Parkin, Simon Yates, Jane Yates and Elaine Cave arrived at Ushuaia Airport at the early evening on Saturday 3rd February after a long and arduous series of flights from London. After finding a hostel to stay in we made our way down to the town's marina's to try and locate Celia Bull's yacht. With a perfect sense of timing Ada II came into the harbour and moored on the yacht club pier.

Over the following four days a great many chores were carried out on the boat, which was cleaned and restocked with food, fuel and water. In addition Andy and Simon bought supplies to use in the mountains. Our time in Ushuaia was prolonged further by the discovery of problems with the yacht's engine. Once the engine was repaired we were ready to sail.

On Thursday 8th of February we sailed for Puerto Williams on Navarino island. After the delays it was nice to be moving and sailing along The Beagle Channel, even if it was in the opposite direction from where we ultimately wanted to be. We reached the port that night and spent a wonderful evening in the Mecalvi – a bar inside the sunken ship, which acts as a pier.

In the morning we did yet more shopping and Celia went to obtain the necessary permission from the Chilean Naval authorities. Although we wished to travel west from Ushuaia, because we intended to spend time in Chile we had to enter through Puerto Williams, which is the Chilean administrative centre for the area. Celia duly returned with the ZARPE – permission to travel through Chilean waters in the Beagle Channel, subject to a series of conditions and restrictions.

We tried to leave Puerto Williams on Saturday, but the wind was too strong. We finally left on Sunday 11th February and soon began to encounter strong winds in the channel. The headwinds slowed our progress west to virtual standstill. We sought shelter in Puerto Navarino almost opposite Ushuaia on the south side of the Beagle Channel. It was still too windy to contemplate returning to the channel the following day.

On Tuesday 13th February the channel was calm and we made rapid progress west, before turning into the Bahia Yendegaia and dropping anchor at its head – a 100m offshore from the Estancia Yendegaia. The setting could hardly have been more

idyllic, with the whitewashed farm buildings standing at the head of the fiord, surrounded by densely forested mountains. We secured Ada with further lines to an old pier on the shore and then introduced ourselves to the estancia's resident gaucho – Jose Alvarao.

The following day we made an exploratory walk up the Yedegaia valley to a point where we thought the Rio Niemeyer branched off. Jose said he would be able to get our kit up to where we wanted to site base camp on horses. Then we shuttled some of our food and supplies ashore in the dinghy and began making them into loads to go on the horses.

At lunchtime on the 15th we all left the estancia on horses, with two extra animals carrying our kit and supplies. After about three hours riding up the main valley we crossed the Rio Niemeyer and entered a dense southern beech forest. The going was slow and several more river crossings were made before an area of beaver dams blocked any further progress. Andy and I looked at each other, fearing that our base camp was still a long way from the mountain, which would force us to ferry loads further up the valley. The horses were unloaded and Jose and the girls left. We immediately set off on a reconnaissance and were amazed to find that after a short section of difficult going through the beaver dams a good trail led through the forest to a point where the river forked. We followed the rightward fork up a steep ravine and soon saw the snout of a glacier. Despite looking improbable we found an easy way up the ravine and on to the snout. After a scramble the glacier levelled out and we could see Monte Bove and the peak we had come to climb. The rest of the approach looked straightforward and we had only walked for 1.5 hours above our base camp (see map 2). We returned to the camp happy. However, the feeling soon vanished when I discovered that I had left my sleeping bag on the yacht.

After a cold night in my tent sleeping in spare clothes and a bivouac bag, I began the walk back to the estancia. Walking back down took only a little longer than riding up, although I did get a lot wetter crossing the river. The others were surprised to see me come through the hatch on the yacht. We all rode back to the camp in the forest the following day and I was delighted to see Andy had built base camp hut from timbers and the roll of polythene brought for that purpose.

On Sunday 18th February it rained all morning before clearing and allowing us to make a carry up on to the glacier. Once above the snout we moved easily up the gently angled ice, which was virtually free of crevasses and debris to the head of the dry section of the glacier. We stashed our climbing kit, tent, stove, gas etc under a massive boulder and returned to the base camp.

Low pressure and indifferent weather confined us to the base camp for the following three days. Then we decided we would go up regardless and get a feel for the mountains and our route.

On Thursday 22nd the weather was showing no signs of improvement, but we left anyway carrying our personal gear and food for five days. When we reached our stash at the boulder we loaded up our rucksacks further and headed for the upper part of the glacier (see Map 2). Not long afterwards it was necessary to rope up and we went though a moderately crevassed section of the glacier, before it levelled out. The

weather had cleared and we were treated to full views of our chosen mountain and the route we wished to climb. The eastern side of the mountain sported a prominent buttress that dropped right to the glacier. The buttress was steep, but offered many lines up systems of icy runnels, which led to a very steep rocky headwall at the top, capped with rime (see Photo 2). As we prepared a camp on the glacier we spotted a couloir splitting the upper headwall of the peak, which looked like it would provide a climbable way to the summit. We set our alarms for 2am and went to sleep.

We were away at 4am, leaving the tent along with some spare food and gas on the glacier, intending to bivouac above. We crossed the bergsrund at the base of the buttress at first light and moved quickly up snow slopes to the right of a nose of rock. A little higher the ground steepened and we continued moving rightwards following the line of least resistance into a broad couloir. We roped up and it began snowing. Spindrift avalanches started pouring down from above. I led a difficult pitch across to the right side of the couloir and up a steep corner. By now we were both very cold and wet. Andy led a particularly difficult traverse back left to regain the centre of the couloir above its steepest section. Above there were many pitches of steep insecure snow and ice climbing between interconnecting runnels, as the avalanches continued to pour down. As the light began to fade we were forced to dig a snow hole into a small cone of snow next to a belay. Eventually an 'L' shaped chamber was dug, which we could sit inside to escape the worst of the weather. Our feet protruded outside and were continually swept by avalanches.

The night past slowly and somehow we slept. At first light the weather was no better and we realised a pool of water had formed under us during the night. We were now both soaking, but felt we should carry on. By the time we started climbing again the morning had almost passed, but the weather had begun to improve. After two pitches the sun came out and Andy suggested leaving the bivouac gear and going for the top. We debated the question for a little while, as we would then have to abseil the face and we had initially planned to descend another ridge. However, once we were freed of the weight of bivouac gear we began to move much quicker and the decision felt like the right one. Andy led two long pitches to below the headwall, which overhung as we had suspected. A steep gully, which gave a superb pitch of climbing cut through the feature. I had the pleasure of leading the gully and then Andy continued to the top, which he reached at 6-30pm on Saturday 24th February.

The summit was windswept, covered in rime and shrouded in mist. Slowly the mist began to lift, revealing the Cordillera Darwin in all its glory. We never had a complete panorama as such, but by patiently waiting different views appeared in all directions. To the north were the three summits of Roncagli, to the south the squat mass of Monte Bove, to the south west Monte Frances and Italia and in the distance the north west fork of the Beagle Channel sparkling in the evening sunlight. We soaked up the views for a full hour before turning our attention to getting down.

We abseiled from the summit ridge, following the line we had climbed up through the evening, continuing after it became dark. When we reached the steep section in the broad couloir which had given us problems on the way up we abseiled straight down, hoping to gain the glacier quicker than following the traversing line we had come up. We soon found ourselves on an open snow slope, which we down climbed until two

abseils were needed to clear a band of seracs at the base of the face. Then we walked back across the glacier to our tent arriving at 2-30am.

After a late start on the Sunday we slowly made our way back down the Bove Glacier. The weather deteriorated once more and we soon found ourselves walking in pouring rain, once again wetting all the kit that we had managed to dry during the previous days sunshine. We finally reached the base camp at 8pm.

The Monday dawned fine and we were able to dry all our wet clothing and equipment. Then we sat around waiting for the girls, who were due to pay a visit. When they had not arrived by 3pm I decided to set off for the estancia. About half an hour below the camp I met them all in the forest. We decided there and then to go down and return to clear the camp the following day. Jane and I rode down while the others went to collect Andy. That night we had fantastic celebratory/farewell meal, as Jane and Elaine were due to leave in the morning.

On Tuesday 27th February the cruise ship Terra Australis arrived in the bay for one of its weekly visits. By talking to the naval authorities in Puerto Williams asking if they could return separately from the yacht and then writing to the shipping company two weeks previously Jane and Elaine had secured a lift to Puerto Williams. We took them out to the boat and said our goodbyes. Then we rode back up the valley to clear the base camp, but were unable cross the Rio Niemeyer, which was in spate.

Jose was busy until the Saturday and not able to accompany us to retrieve the base camp. I decided to go on a hunting trip with him and Celia in the Lapataia Valley to the east, while Andy opted for staying on the yacht and doing some painting. From the 28th February to 2nd of March we had a fantastic time riding and fishing and then crossed back to Yendegaia in a ferocious storm to discover Andy had been up all night, wondering if the yacht was going to be blown from its moorings.

As planned, we returned to the base camp on the Saturday, took down our shelter, packed up all our belongings and refuse and made sure the camp was left spotless. Then we returned to Yendegaia. That night we had a final farewell meal with Jose and made plans to leave the following day.

We did leave on the Sunday, but were beaten back by 35 knot winds in The Beagle Channel. On the Monday we tried again and managed to battle our way westwards in the face of stiff westerly winds. That night we dropped anchor in the beautiful bay of Caleta Olla.

On the Tuesday we walked up through the forest at the back of the bay to take a look at the south face of Monte Frances.

The following day we motored further west to Seno Pia and explored the western fork of this remarkable fiord, where mountains stood high above steep granite walls and two glaciers dropped straight into the sea. Andy and I frantically took photographs and recorded notes on mountaineering objectives for the future. The potential was immense.

On Thursday 8th March, after looking at the eastern fork of Seno Pia we motored west for the last time intending to explore Seno Garibaldi. A strong headwind prevented us from getting that far and so we crossed to the south side of The Beagle Channel and sought shelter for the night in Bahia Tres Brazos on Isla Gordon.

We began our journey back east in terrible weather, which continued all day. It was nice to be actually sailing after much use of the motor to go west, but by the middle of the afternoon we had all had enough, so we pulled into Caleta Olla to escape from the battering.

On Saturday 10th the weather was no better, but Celia wanted to get back to Puerto Williams to prepare Ada II to be left at the port for the winter. Amazingly, the weather gradually improved and we had the joy of sailing back along the channel aided by a 35 knot tailwind. It was a memorable day as Ada II surfed down the front of waves under full sail. It took just a few hours to cover the distance from Yendegaia to Puerto Williams, a journey that had in effect taken three days going in the other direction. It was nice to reach Puerto Williams, but it was also the end of the expedition. We retired to the Macalvi Bar and then a nightclub in town to celebrate in suitable style.

After a hard days work, stripping the yacht of sails and rigging and cleaning up Andy and I arranged a lift back to Ushuaia, as Celia was staying at Puerto Williams waiting to take up an offer to crew the yacht Darwin Sound back to Mar del Plata.

On Monday 12th March we said our goodbyes to Celia and boarded the yacht Mago II, captained by 'Mono' - an Argentinian sailor very much at home on the sea. We crossed The Beagle Channel and spent a very pleasant night at the Estancia Remilino. That night it was rough at the mooring and as a result we started for Ushuaia at first light. It was lucky because as a result we witnessed one of the most amazing sunrises I have ever had the pleasure of seeing, including a clear view of the eastern side of the Cordillera Darwin. Then to our surprise Celia passed us on Darwin Sound, who had had to return to Ushuaia to refuel. At the port we had to say our goodbyes all over again.

After a full day of being tourists in Ushuaia Andy and I flew back to Britain on Thursday 15th March. We arrived at Heathrow the following evening.

The expedition had been an amazing success, an experience we all hope to repeat at some time in the future. It had started as nothing more than an exchange of ideas through emails between Celia and Simon. Once the location of the yacht had been finalised, we sought a climbing objective. The team left with open minds and very limited knowledge of the mountain and how to reach it – the maps of the area are notoriously inaccurate.

We were lucky in climbing our objective in a number of respects. Only after we had made the decision to go did we find out that we would be able to use horses to get supplies to the base camp. This saved us a lot of time shuttling loads. The site of the base camp itself was determined by how far Jose could take the horses, not any decision on our part. In fact the camp and its relation to the Bove Glacier turned out to be perfect, as did the approach up the Bove Glacier. Finally, our decision to keep

climbing through during the first day of the climb through truly awful weather was crucial to our success. We could have waited a very long time for a window of perfect weather!

The peak was not Monte Bove as Hillebrandt had suggested in Britain, but to the north on a ridge linking Bove with the Roncagli summits. On the summit the team could see the three Roncagli summits to the north forming a definite chain. The peak we climbed lay between this and Monte Bove and marked the watershed between the Bove and Dartmoor Glaciers. The peak was somewhere between 2000m and 2300m in height. Both the face and the mountain were unclimbed.

The route is 900m alpine ED VI in grade (see Topo). The climbing felt very Scottish in terms of climate and conditions, but Yates and Parkin, who have both spent time previously in the Paine and Fitzroy areas of Patagonia found the weather in this part of Tierra del Fuego to be much better than those regions.

If, as suspected the peak is un-named the team would like to call it Monte Ada.

Budget

Expenditure

Flights	£1430
Food and supplies	£1090
Yacht running costs	£850
Hotels and restaurants	£300
Horses	£300
Insurance	£200
Film	£200
Buses and taxis	£100
Administration tel/faxes etc	£50

Income

Mount Everest Foundation	£1000
British Mountaineering Council	£1200
Polartec Challenge Award	£2020
Personal contributions	£300

TOTAL

£4520

£4520

Acknowledgements

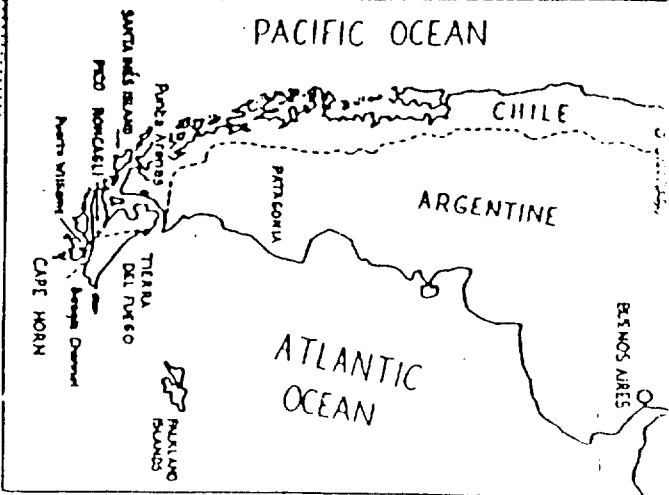
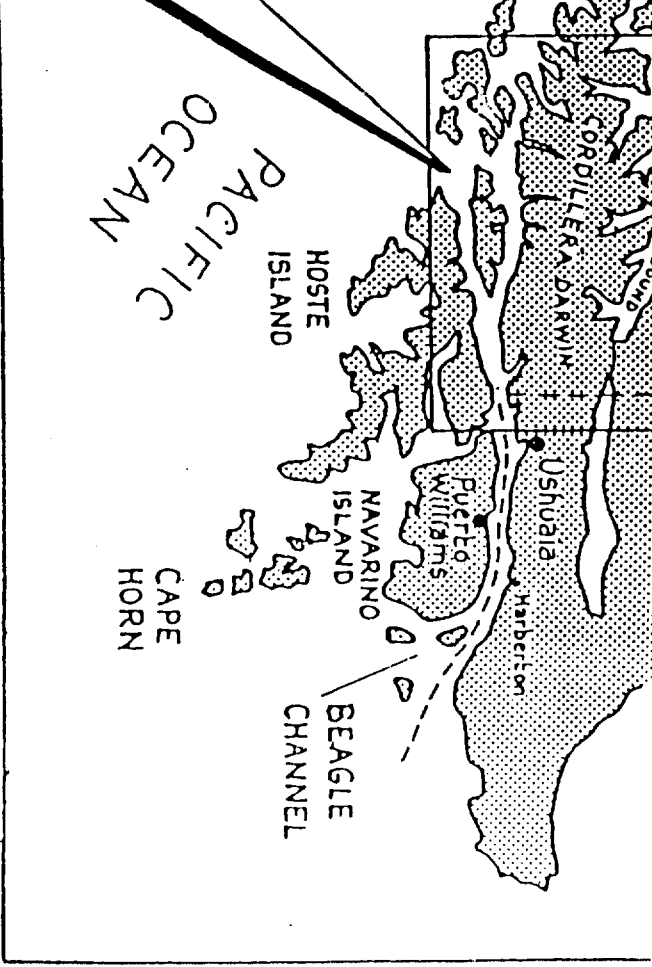
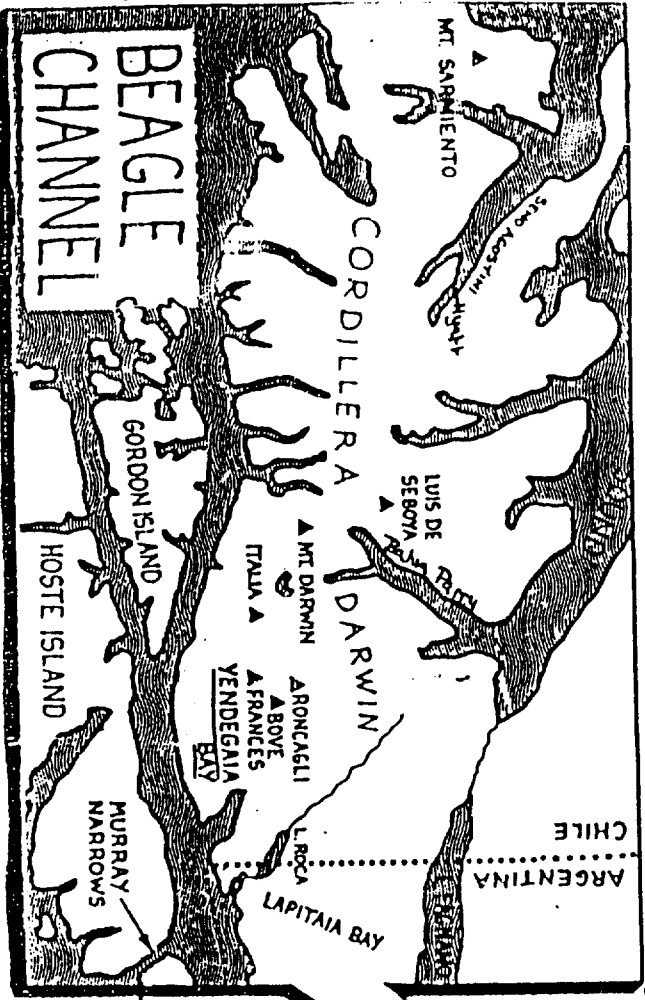
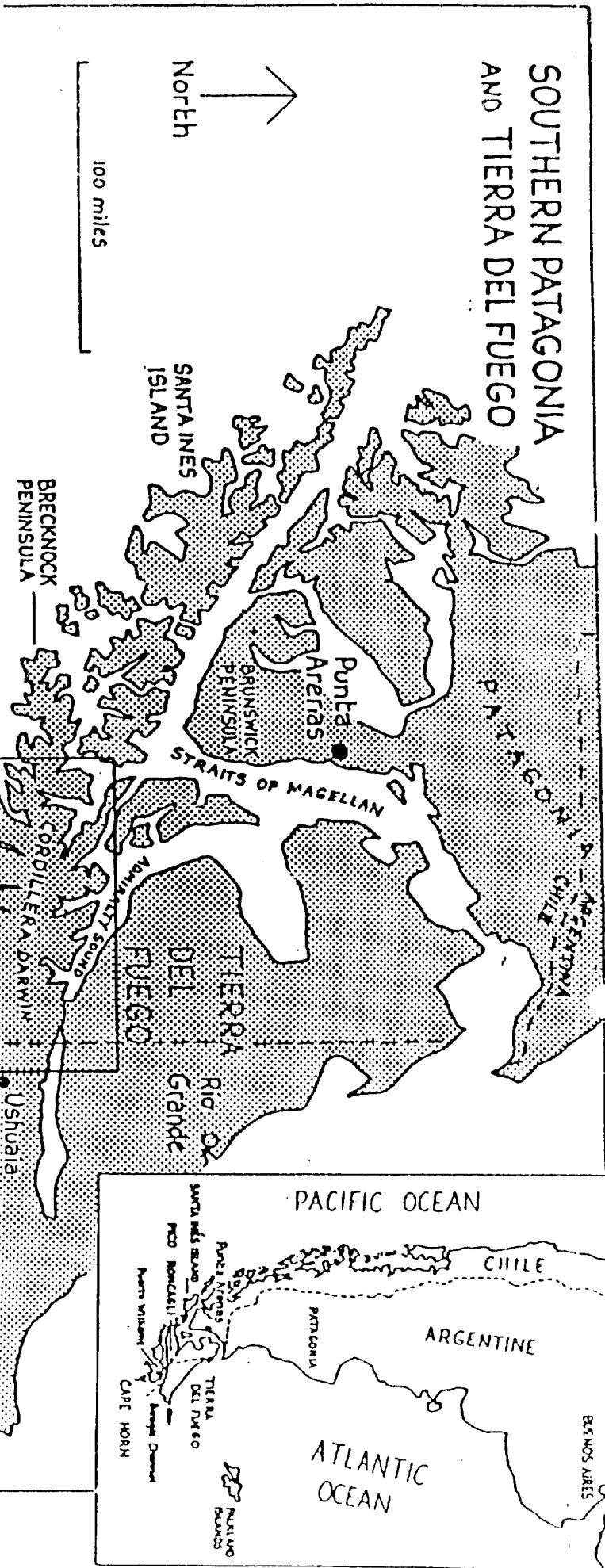
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The British Mountaineering Council.
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SOUTHERN PATAGONIA AND TIERRA DEL FUEGO



Map 1

Photo 1

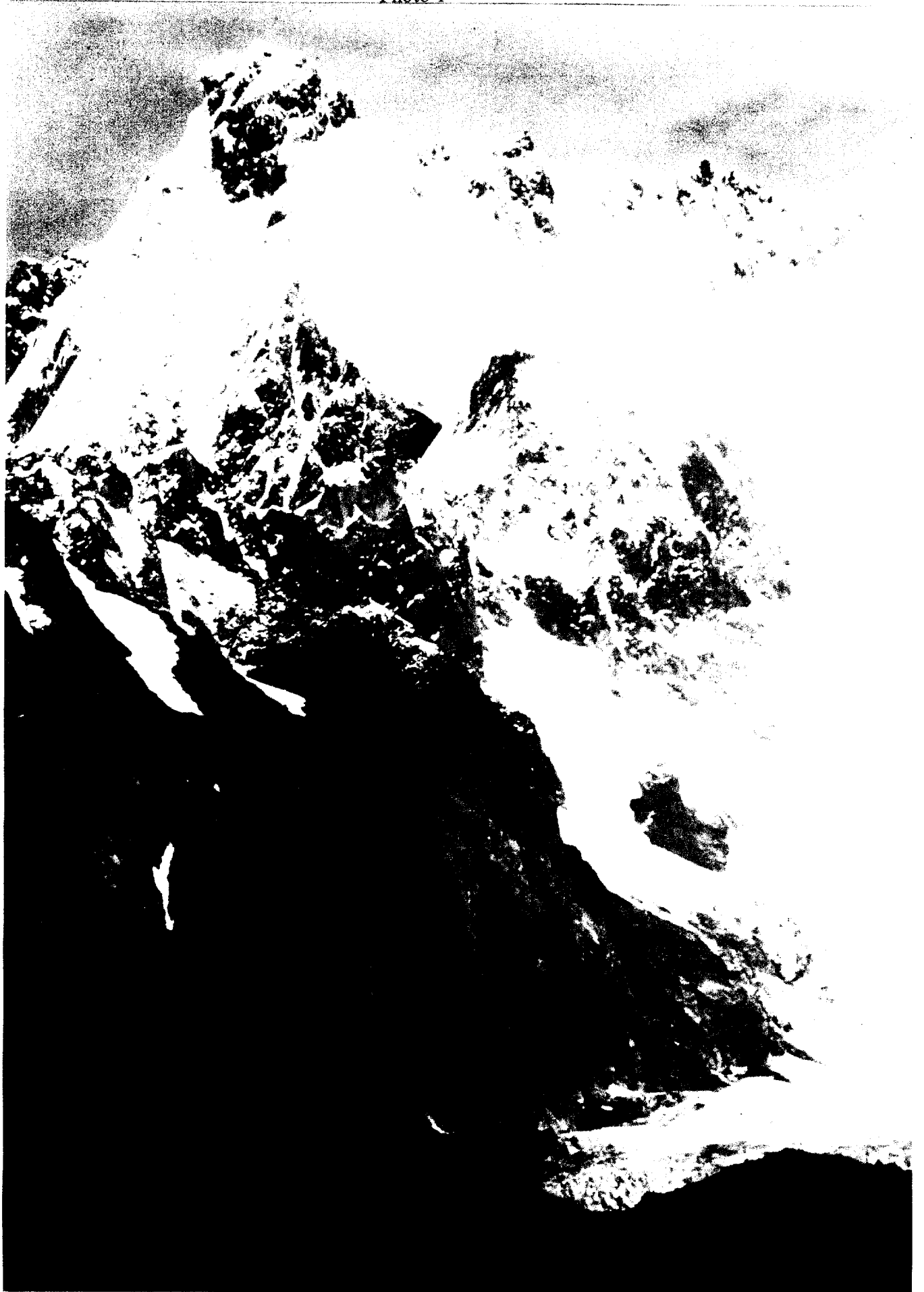


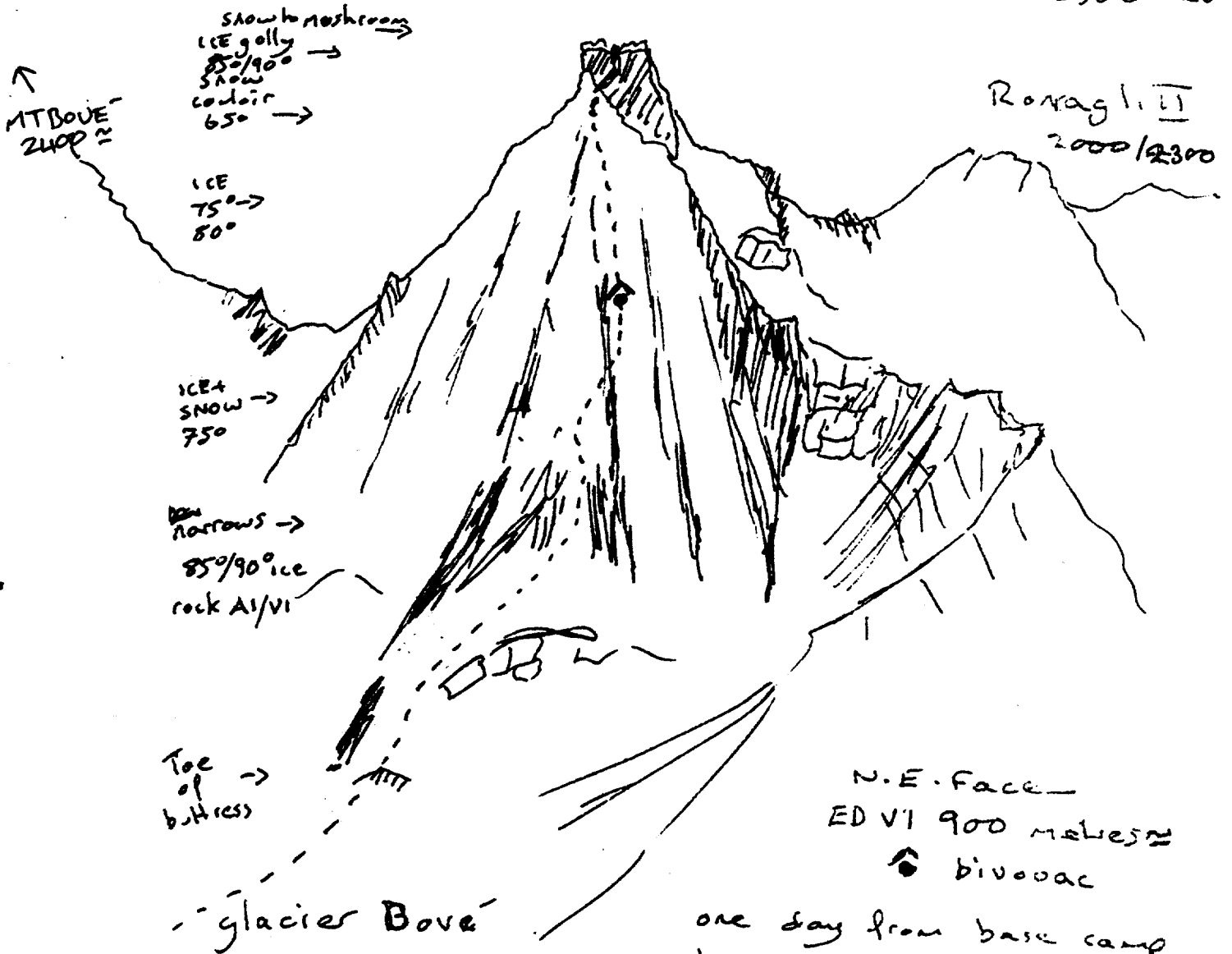


Photo 2

UN-NAMED SUMMIT OR:

Topo

Roncagli III 2000 metres
≈
2300 met



one day from base camp to upper glacier basin of Bove glacier. Two days up and down to basin caps altitudes uncertain due to barometric variations snow and ice/rime conditions unstable except in upper part of face

SIMON YATES AND ANDY PARK
23/24 February 2001
1st ascent of mountain