

BRITISH SOUTH GEORGIA EXPEDITION 2013

MEF reference 13/18

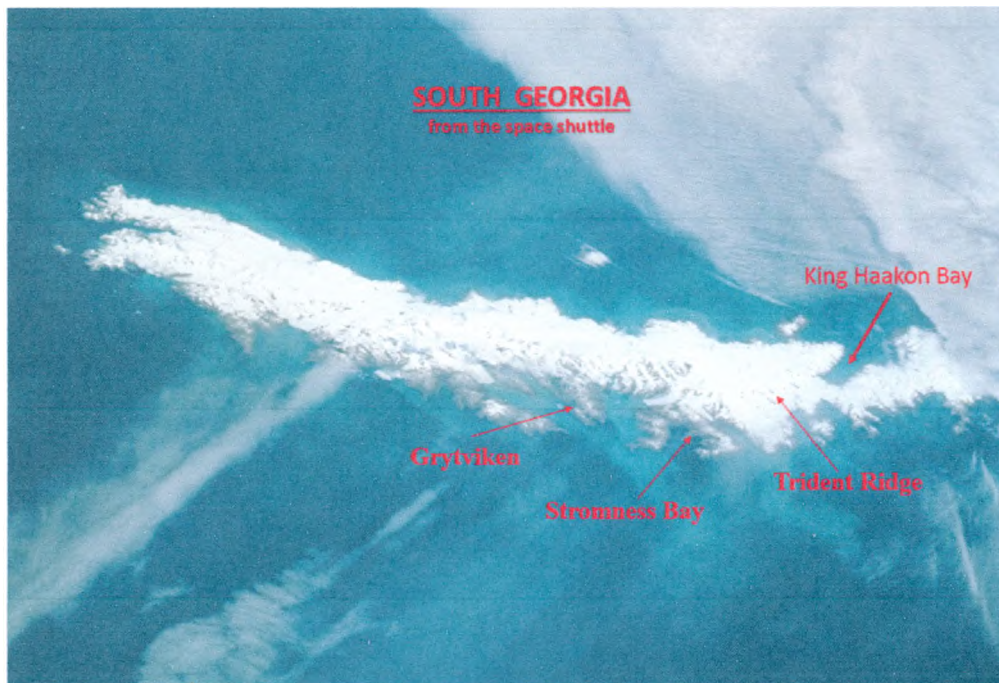
Grant aided by:-

The Mount Everest Foundation

plus personal contributions from the expedition mountaineering team:-

Julian Freeman-Attwood

Ed Douglas



The intention of the expedition was to attempt the first ascent of one of the Trident peaks at the confluence of the Murray Snowfield and the Crean Glacier in the northern section of the island's Allardyce range. This ridge line crosses at right angles the route taken by Sir Ernest Shackleton in his traverse of the island in 1916, which followed his boat journey from Elephant Island. The east side of Trident ridge was where he, Worsley and Crean famously glissaded down onto the Crean Glacier.

Ed Douglas and Julian Freeman-Attwood had been invited to South Georgia on the sailing vessel 'Pelagic Australis' by its owner Skip Novak. Skip was formerly a round the world race sailing captain and built his first vessel, the original 'Pelagic', in 1988 and his second the 'Pelagic Australis' in 2003. They are both Antarctic expedition vessels, single masted cutters with lifting keels. On board during this trip were 6 other passengers, 5 of whom both Ed and I were to assist Skip as unpaid guides over the Shackleton traverse, a route undertaken on 4 previous occasions by Skip. At the end of the traverse it was the intention that the three of us went back up to the Trident via Possession Bay to climb. This bay was where the island was first landed on by Captain James Cook in 1775 and who named the land after George III. This was Skip's 8th trip to South Georgia and my 4th trip although this northern end of the island was unknown to me.

Skip's guests were Cam Lewis (round the world sailor), Gretchen Scott, Giorgio Bertone, Michael Spencer, Larry Rosenfeld (also a round the world sailor) and his wife Amy Drinker. These last two had previously sailed with me and Skip to the Antarctic Peninsula in 2000 along with Caradoc Jones to attempt Cape Renard Tower. The skipper was Magnus Day and the first mate Laura Hampton. Thomas was an extra deck hand.

A cracking 800 miles, force 8 /9 downwind sail from Port Stanley, twin headsails 'poled out' all the way, brought us directly into King Haakon Bay after 4 days, on October 18th. We anchored close ashore the eastern side of the Vincent Islands, an illusionary shelter in anything except relatively settled conditions which didn't last long.



Skip Novak surveys Pelagic Australis and the twin headsails, on the 2nd day out from Port Stanley.

The strong westerly flow, that we had rode in on from Stanley, persisted for the next four days making the traverse start unattainable. Horizontal driven rain, sleet, and then snow understandably dampened enthusiasms. Starting out wet with no visibility is not an option and in spite of having GPS positions from previous traverses, a necessity is to have reasonable conditions and visibility at least to get safely established on the expanse of the Murray Glacier. Eventually on October 20th we mustered the will power, in spite of the weather, to cache the skis, pulks, camping gear, provisions and fuel at the snow line near the ice of the Shackleton Gap. We had enough for at least five nights out.



Up to Shackleton Gap and start of Murray Snowfield.

Early on October 22nd, we made a break for it in windy but clear conditions during a frosty and brief southerly shift that brought new snow down to the waterline. All went well on day one ascending to the level of the Murray, needing hartscheisen (ski crampons) on icy, wind scoured lower slopes. We continued on across the Murray and half way to the Trident, then thick weather arrived with a westerly shift bringing more snow. In spite of having a GPS position for the Trident Camp, the vague appearance of a rock buttress was a false target and we wound up too far right on the edge of the wrong windscoop, so moved around left and made camp just below the middle col of the ridge (it is recognized that Shackleton, Worsley and Crean took the left hand, higher col for their passage).



On the Murray with Shackleton's landing place, King Haakon Bay, behind

So far so good, but that night it continued to blow strong from the west bringing at least 300mm of snow and it was clear this would make the downside of the Trident a wind slab avalanche risk. To safely descend the Trident with a mixed group, requires a long process of lowering off the pulks, 180 meters at a time (3 x 60m ropes tied together anchored by a snow stake), digging out ledges, bringing everyone down the rope on a prussic because of crevasses on the slope, and then repeating this game three times to reach the flat on the Crean Glacier. Given the weather conditions, poor or nil visibility and the time this would take on a potential avalanche slope this was deemed unacceptable, so we made the decision to descend back onto the mid Murray and call in Pelagic Australis for an eventual pick up in Assistance Bay (the southerly end of Possession Bay) as the weather forecast that night was more of the same for the next 48 hours at least.

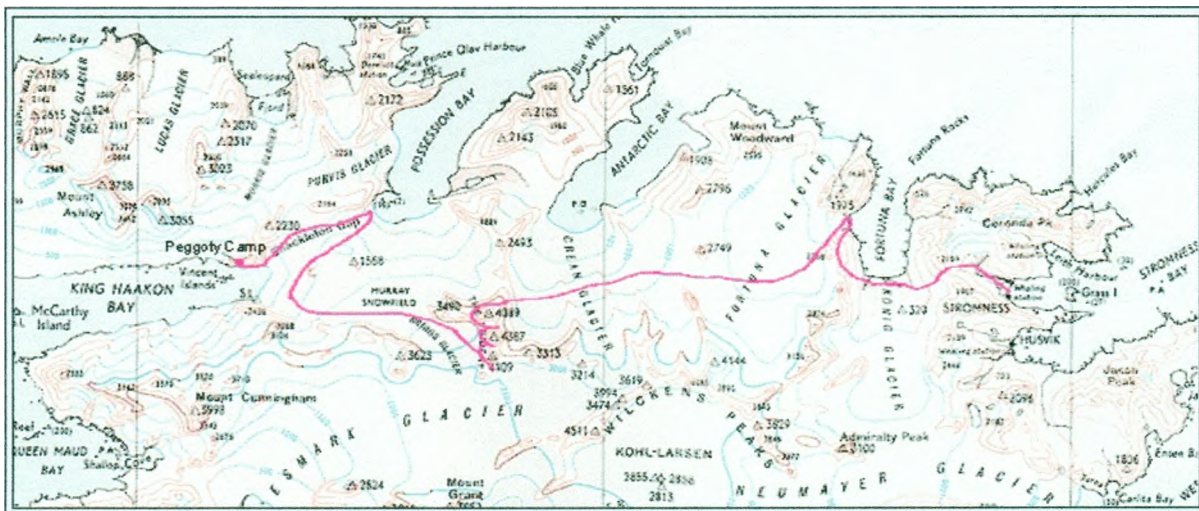


Camp above Assistance Bay East

During a camp above the east arm of Assistance Bay we experienced a hard night of very strong south westerly and katabatic winds accelerating over us giving tent busting conditions and most of us had little sleep. Easing slightly by morning, the weather kept us tent bound the following day and during the evening the wind slacked off for a relatively quiet night on the 24th.

By this time Pelagic Australis had motored around the northwest tip of the island in thick weather and was at anchor in Cook Bay near the whaling station of Prince Olaf. After a visual recce of a possible descent route by the sailing crew, albeit in less than clear visibility, we left the campsite at 1000 meters. We descended a snow ramp down to the eastern arm of Assistance Bay to the waiting dinghy.

(NB For future reference this eastern arm is not a desired exit (albeit a quick one from the Trident) as it is threatened in the final part by ice cliffs which are only revealed when well down the slope and when one is already on avalanche debris emanating from it. It is better to go farther west around Glacier Point and down to the western arm of Assistance Bay from the classic Shackleton Gap. This is an important point, as the eastern arm appears double from the map, but one enticing ramp on the right (as viewed from above) leads to an impassable ice cliff and our ramp on the left was indeed threatened from seracs as mentioned.)



Shackleton's route across South Georgia 1916

Back on board, we spent a windy night in Cook Bay, and then scuttled off to Fortuna Bay to continue the traverse without the Trident descent. On 27th October we skied up the Fortuna Glacier from Anchorage Bay, going up and over the Breakwind Gap with fine views of Mt Stanley and the Great Nunatak that was the steering beacon for Shackleton, Worsely and Crean when they crossed from the Trident. We looked back west and could easily see the ground we had missed to traverse. We skied up to, and cramponed over, the Breakwind Gap in zero visibility which later cleared giving less than safe skiable snow conditions further down the gully. Snow patches on the grassy lower slopes happily linked together which brought us right down, on our skis, to the beach at Whistle Cove (within Fortuna Bay.)



Emerging through Breakwind Gap

(Note:- The reason Shackleton chose Breakwind Gap was because of the difficulty of descending to Fortuna Bay by the way we had easily ascended from there. Plainly in 1916 the glacier here ended in ice cliffs to the sea rather than the straightforward snow slope behind the beach that is encountered today. It was from Breakwind Gap that he heard the steam whistle from Stromness Whaling Station and was able to ascertain where he was, due also to particular rock striations on a headland within Stromness Bay which he recognised. It is further worth pointing out that, without good visibility at the particular period for the whole traverse, Shackleton would have had the severest difficulty in locating Stromness and but for that piece of good luck, his story might well have ended differently.)

From the end of Fortuna Bay we crossed the glacial outfall of the Konig Glacier and continued to the east over the ridge linking Fortuna and Stromness whaling station, passing the Crean Lake, en route to the top end of Shackleton Valley. This leads down to Stromness Bay. The waterfall which Shackleton's party roped down can easily be avoided. In reasonable weather the Pelagic Australis hove into view soon after we arrived.



Giorgio Bertone and Cam Lewis cross glacial outfall in Fortuna Bay

After our pick up, Magnus and crew piloted us around to the flesh pots of Grytviken and King Edward Point, the administrative base for the island. This bay is a haven for small craft with a substantial jetty at the whaling station and plenty of free roaming space on shore with much to see. After a day drying out we made an ascent of Mt Hodges behind the whaling station. The summit of which gives fine views from the Three Brothers to the north all the way round to Mts Nordenskjold and Kling to the south.

Shackleton's Grave was visited, now with Frank Wild's ashes alongside. This monument and the fish biology lab are run by the British Antarctic Survey. Our custom guided tour was pre-empted by two bull elephant seals battling for the harem in front of the lab's porch which brought most of the base personnel out to watch the bloody spectacle.

With regard to our kind assistance from the MEF:- It was extremely unfortunate that, with the delayed start from Port Stanley of 2 days, the wait in King Haakon Bay of a further 3 days and a weather prolonged traverse of the Shackleton route, had left no time to go back up (as planned) to attempt our climbing objective on one of the unclimbed Tridents (photos of which below).



One of the Trident Peaks from the Murray Snowfield



Tridents looking west from the Crean Glacier

On the 1st November we headed home. The wind blew force 7 to gale 8 on the nose (almost unwaveringly so) and meant that a battering voyage home across the 800 miles took in excess of 5 days.

We would particularly like to thank **The Mount Everest Foundation** and also **Skip Novak** whose boat was the magic carpet that transported us to a very special island.

Also our thanks to:-

Magnus Day (Skipper)

Laura Hampton (1st mate)

Pat and Sarah Lurcock (The island's government representatives)

The British Antarctic Survey (King Edward Point)



Report compiled by J. Freeman-Attwood

Cwm Pennant, North Wales, 2013