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WOMEN'S PATAGONIA EXPEDITION 1997

**Objective: Bonington/Whillans Route (ED 6/A2) on Torre Central,
Paine, Chile
January to February 1997**



**Team: Celia Bull (UK), Geraldine Westrupp (UK), Donna Raupp (USA).
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Report published: 1 April 1997**

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SUMMARY

We attempted to make the first all female alpine ascent of the 1963 Bonington/Whillans Route on the Torre Central (2454m) in the Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile. We were a three woman team; two British and one American. We established our base camp at the Campimento Japones and an advance camp at Bonington Cave in the Valley of Silence. We approached the Torre Central from the West via a 1150m snow couloir that led to Col Bich (1850m). We had 28 potential climbing days in January and February 1997. We were hampered by severe weather conditions and our high point was at Col Bich. We experienced only one full day and two half days of good weather. The conditions in the gully varied dramatically between snow, ice, rock and water. We fixed 250m of ropes up to Col Bich. The climbing to the Col was mixed Scottish winter III (it varied from rock VS to a 55° snow slope). We planned to climb the route in two days with a bivvy on the shoulder at 2250m. Speed became paramount as stable weather was infrequent and short lived. Donna Raupp decided to leave the expedition due to the bad weather. Geraldine and I adapted our plans and decided to go as light as possible, carrying only duvet jackets and no stove. We tried to bivvy at the start of the fixed lines but were forced down by storms. We were unable to get back up the gully. Geraldine returned to the UK and I was joined by Alison Thomas (UK). We cleared base camp but were unable to retrieve the gear from the Col.

DIARY OF EVENTS

- 05 Jan Celia arrives in Puerto Natales.
- 06 Jan Make arrangements to enter park.
- 07 Jan Park administration. Paid \$300 for climbing permit.
- 08 Jan Food and supplies shopping.
- 09 Jan Donna arrives in Puerto Natales.
- 10 Jan Meet Gerry who arrived on 9/1. Bill Hatcher arrives.
- 11 Jan Bus to park. Arrange horses. Donna & Bill to Japanese Camp. Celia and Gerry to Torres Camp. Horses don't arrive at Torres.
- 12 Jan Horses arrive at Torres Camp. Load carrying to Japanese Camp (Base Camp, BC). Blizzarding.
- 13 Jan Carry load up to boulder stash at base of gully. Horizontal rain.
- 14 Jan Raining. Load carries from Torres Camp to BC.
- 15 Jan Raining. Gerry took load to Bivvy Cave. Celia did load from Torres Camp to Base Camp.
- 16 Jan Went up gully. Decided to fix to Col Bich. Fixed 150m.
- 17 Jan Took more equipment up gully. Started snowing at 3pm.
- 18 Jan Rest and drying day at BC.
- 19 Jan Set up Advance Base Camp tent at Bonington Bivvy Cave.
- 20 Jan ABC - Winds. Donna and Bill to BC.
- 21 Jan ABC - Winds » winds and rain.
- 22 Jan ABC - Winds. Celia went to BC for supplies returning pm.
- 23 Jan Climbed gully. Reached Col Bich. 3pm started snowing.
- 24 Jan Snowing and windy.
- 25 Jan Snowing/sleeting. Descend to BC.
- 26 Jan BC and raining. Gerry and Celia return to ABC in evening. Donna goes to Puerto Natales for more supplies.
- 27 Jan ABC - big storm. 10pm clear and still.
- 28 Jan ABC - Raining. Descend to BC.
- 29 Jan BC - raining. Donna returns from Puerto Natales. 10pm clear night.
- 30 Jan BC - rain turns to snow.
- 31 Jan BC - rain. Big fiesta. Donna decides to leave the expedition.
- 01 Feb Gerry and Celia head up to ABC - snowing but OKish.
- 02 Feb Head up gully with bivvy gear. 2pm blizzards - flee to ABC.
- 03 Feb 1 to 2 metres snow fell overnight and still snowing - flee to BC with tent. Leave food and stove in cave. Snow destroying BC - flee to Puerto Natales to dry out and eat salmon.
- 04 Feb Gerry changes flights and buses and gets 2 extra days, (international flight non-transferable).
- 05 Feb Bus to park and walk to ABC. Lovely day, lovely views. Huge halo round sun.
- 06 Feb ABC - advance bivvy cave - bad weather - snow etc.
- 07 Feb ABC - raining. Celia goes to BC for fuel. Refugio burnt down with equipment and food from all expeditions lost. Borrow fuel and return to ABC. Gerry checked out stability of gully with all the snowfall. Picked up crampons and axes.

- 08 Feb ABC - big winds and snow. No chance of climbing now. Pack up ABC and descend to BC.
- 09 Feb BC - windy and rainy. No chance of retrieving gear from Col Bich so go to Puerto Natales.
- 10 Feb Celia returns to park with Alison Thomas to try and retrieve gear and clear BC. Gerry returns to UK for work in Scotland. Americans Dave Nettle and Bean Bowers climb Bonington/Whillans route on Torre Central.
- 11 Feb BC - bad weather. Pack out rubbish.
- 12 Feb Attempt to go up gully. Helped by Strappo Hughes. Conditions too dangerous.
- 13 Feb Bad weather. Pack out rubbish.
- 14 Feb Bad weather. Celia and Alison leave Paine.
- 15 Feb Bad weather in Puerto Natales. Celia starts journey back to UK.

The Start

I first saw the Torre Central four years ago when I climbed with Paul Pritchard and Leigh McGinley on the Torre Norte in Paine. I was struck by the clean granite rock split by immaculate cracks. Descending the Monzino Route to Col Bich I had a good look at the Bonington Whillans Route and liked what I saw. I have wanted to return ever since then to try to climb it. Late in 1995 I started making plans to come to Patagonia for 6 months with my partner, Paul Pritchard. We decided to climb together on one route but find our own goals and partners for further climbs. I enjoy and feel far more challenged personally when I climb with women. I immediately looked to find females as climbing partners. I had two projects in mind: Bonington/Whillans on Torre Central and Whillans Route on Poincenot in the Fitzroy massive, Argentina. These were both routes that I felt confident technically although I reserved judgement on the weather variable.

Geraldine Westrupp is my regular climbing partner at home. We had climbed in Pakistan together on Trango Tower as members of an all female expedition, in Scotland during the winter months and countless routes in Wales, Peak, Cornwall etc. We know each others foibles and know that we operate well together in undesirable conditions. Originally we planned to climb on Poincenot in November/December 1996.

I had more difficulty finding a partner for January/February 1997 for Central Torre. My good friend Cris Ann Crysdale, USA, who I had climbed with on Bhagirathi II, India, and Zodiac in Yosemite was unable to take time off school, work etc and sadly suggested other possibilities to me. Donna Raupp was a mutual friend who I had first met in Telluride, Colorado with her photographer partner, Bill Hatcher. She is a nurse and went to Trango Tower in this capacity with Todd Skinner's successful 1995 expedition. She was impressed with the idea of all women expeditions and expressed an interest in participating in such a venture. I contacted her and soon photos and topos of the Torres del Paine were flying across the Atlantic.

Momentarily I contemplated new routing as there are still many superb unclimbed lines on these mountains. Two reasons decided me against this; firstly I wanted to go light, alpine style rather than weighed down with reels of static rope and massive aid racks and secondly if we were to climb alpine style I did not feel confident on unknown ground in such an environment. After reading all the information I sent her, Donna said that she was prepared to wait through three weeks of bad weather but after that, if the prospect for climbing seemed slim, she would want to leave. This wiped out any ideas for new routes I had in my mind.

In August 1996 Gerry told me that she could not afford to go to Patagonia until January. I was in Slovenia at the time and told her that if Donna was happy climbing as a three I would be delighted to have Gerry along on the Torre Central. Gerry talked with Donna and it was a done deal and so we started the preparations for our Women's Patagonia Expedition '97.

In November Donna telephoned me and told me that Bill Hatcher, photographer and her partner, wanted to come along on the trip to take pictures of our all women expedition. Gerry and I had no problem with this. We both knew and liked Bill from Pakistan and were happy to welcome him along. He planned to climb with us as far as Col Bich, the start of the difficult climbing, and then head

round to the east side and take pictures from there of us climbing on the mountain. It was up to the three of us to take pictures on the route itself. We were happy with this because a photographer on the route itself would have complicated matters logistically and as an all female team.

Climbing Fee and Insurance

Since I was last in Paine, a climbing fee has been introduced. Louise Thomas recommended us to sort out the administration of this fee before leaving for Chile with CONAF (Corporación Nacional Forestal, Av. Presidente Bulnes 285, Santiago. Tel. 61.313.000 - 4. For Paine contact address; Jose Menendez 1147 Punta Arenas, Region X11, Chile). Noel Craine, who was also planning an expedition to Paine, contacted the British Consulate in Punta Arenas. They was most helpful and soon after enlisting their help we were informed that both expeditions would be permitted to climb on receipt of \$100 (US) per person and a valid health and rescue insurance policy.

When we arrived in Paine, Noel and I went to park administration to pay our fee. Administration is in the park itself, some 40km from the Laguna Amarga entrance. We were not asked for our insurance policies. In the event of an air rescue, army helicopters are flown in from Punta Arenas. Other climbers who had just turned up and paid to climb were unaware of the need for insurance. The fee seems to change yearly at the moment while CONAF decide what their best policy is. The park wardens are climber friendly but they are also around at base camps so would spot people trying to avoid payment. It is a small community where everyone knows each others business.

Sponsors

We applied to various companies for assistance and we were very kindly given equipment by the following companies: Lowe Alpine UK, Troll, TerraNova, Extremities, Boilé, Fuji, Kodak, Uvostat, Proctor and Gamble, and Buffalo. Many thanks to our sponsors. We wish we could have climbed the Torre. Maybe next time!

Grants

We were awarded £300 from the Mount Everest Foundation and £500 from the British Mountaineering Council. The Foundation for Sport and the Arts wrote us a very sad letter to say that due to the collapse of the Pools (thanks to the National Lottery) they were in receipt of less than 10% of their previous budget and therefore were unable to support any post October 1996 grant applicants. This is a terrible shame because the Foundation has been the backing behind many projects domestic as well as international and their loss will be sorely felt. Polartec Award also wrote to say they were only able to fund two expeditions that year, due to the fire but they would be back on track for grant applicants of 97-98. Lion Equipment are starting a similar award which should be available from this year.

Supplies

We bought all our food and camp supplies in Puerto Natales. We were assisted

greatly by Cristian Fortaleza, who runs a trekking agency and hostel "El Mundial". Topos are available from his shop, opposite the church on the park, and from the park office at Laguna Amarga park entrance. Food prices are comparable to home and, excepting vegetables, the choice is adequate, unless you are boycotting Nestle. White gaz and blue gaz are available but not Epigaz. Shipping gas is costly and time consuming, better to use what is available in Puerto Natales. We did cook a lot on wood but with increasing numbers using the camps this was probably not a good idea and being fuel sufficient for the expedition's stay would have been more forest friendly, though not fossil fuel friendly!

Many expeditions sell equipment to the agencies when they leave Paine and in the event of losing or forgetting an essential item, most things can be acquired, at a price. All our equipment was transported to the park on the public bus (6,500 pesos return). Private buses cost upwards of 50,000 pesos and are unnecessary. There are approximately 500 pesos to the British pound. However US dollars fetched upwards of 400 pesos so I recommend people to take dollars instead of pounds.

Horses

We hired six horses to carry our equipment to Torres Camp, an hour from our Base Camp at Japanese Camp. They were booked and paid for three days in advance but were not available when we arrived in the park. We paid \$32 (US) per horse and each horse carried 60 kilos. The guachos took great care with our gear and not a single egg was broken on the journey up! There are two places you can hire horses from. The Estancia is expensive on paper but a Swiss Expedition got a very good deal from them after a chat over beer. The company we hired from were half the dollar price but expensive on time.

Weather

The Patagonian weather was the major hazard we faced as it put a stop on climbing in no uncertain terms. There was a lot of snow, even at base camp with is unusual during the summer months. The route was often plastered in snow and ice but we experienced trouble in the approach gully with the variable conditions. Wind and storms hampered our climbing time. In 28 possible climbing days we experienced one whole good day and two half days. We managed to get all our equipment to Col Bich, to the start of the harder climbing, but were unlucky not to get any more weather to climb even one pitch more. There is a problem remaining psyched and ready to climb when the weather is so atrocious and unpredictable. It can have bad effects on peoples psychological well-being, which, to climb successfully, must remain intact. Eventually we were forced to accept that retrieving our equipment from the notch would be a bonus. The bad weather continued through to Geraldine's departure. It did not relent on my return to the park with Alison Thomas to retrieve the gear and we were unable to get up the gully to our gear. I was forced to leave Chile without the rack. A very galling experience. Noel Craine and Simon Nadin kindly retrieved our equipment some weeks later when they were forced to give up their own climbing plans after a big storm stripped their fixed ropes.

Team

In retrospect we were not a good team. We did not gel as a three and there were personality differences that became irreconcilable. I would question climbing as a three on such a route. Once Donna left the expedition, after three weeks of bad weather, we could concentrate far better on an alpine style idea. We would have less gear and less people to move up and down the route. The unpredictable weather necessitated a quick escape and two people would move far faster than three. It is also difficult when two members of the team know each other so well and are very good friends, leaving the third feeling possibly alienated to some extent. The objectives of the members appeared different too. To Gerry this was a very important climb and her time in Patagonia was for that purpose only. If she hadn't had work commitments she admitted that she would stay until she'd done it. Donna, on the other hand, was interested in climbing the Torre, but not to the detriment of her holiday. Gerry and I had been working together in Wales to bring this expedition to fruition and we very much viewed it in the same light. Donna, on the other side of the Atlantic, had not been party to this so did not have that bonding preparation and hence had to make up her own priorities about the trip. It was unfortunate but we have all learnt from the experience.

The Route

The Bonington/Whillans route is the original way up the Torre Central. It is given a grade of ED 6/A2. It is approached up the central gully from the west to Col Bich. From here it climbs a series of cracks, slabs and dihedrals to reach the shoulder 200m from the summit. The route then follows cracks and corners round on the east face to reach the summit.

The conditions changed with alarming frequency; one moment a clean warm granite rock climb and the next a snow plastered, icy crack Scottish winter desperado. It is one of the most exposed routes on the Torre, susceptible to the the winds that are forced through the notch at incredible speeds. We were extremely aware of the power that the Patagonia winds had over our objective. Retreating in winds was the worst of our fears as the route has many flakes and cracks for the rope to get snagged in. It was with this in mind that we made the decision to fix ropes up to the col. The ground below the col changed so dramatically from a difficult rock scramble to iced and snowed up mixed ground that we wanted to be secure that we could get down from the col quickly and safely. We very much felt the climbing on this route was within our capabilities. However we were not prepared for the level of unpredictable weather. Good weather was counted in hours rather than days. Occasionally the barometer readings told of unseen highs that had passed over within an hour or so.

In retrospect I feel we would have been better off, or at least have experienced more climbing, on the east face of the Torres fixing a route from the ground to the summit. Although the routes are technically harder they are protected from the westerly weather and one can climb in quite poor weather. However that would not be the Bonington/Whillans Route on the Torre Central or an alpine climb which is what we went to Patagonia to do and is still a very attractive prospect - in 100 years time!

The Fire

On the night of the 6th/7th February the refugio at Japanese Camp burnt to the ground nearly taking the forest with it save for the efforts of six climbers in base camp at the time. The alarm was raised at 2am and the six worked furiously and frightened for 4 hours until they got the blaze under control. Many expeditions had equipment stored in the hut. All the fuel and food was burnt and there was a mass exodus as climbers went to town to replace their stocks. Tents, climbing equipment and clothing were also lost. Without the refugio expeditions will have a miserable time. The smoky fire provided heat to warm discouraged souls, dry their clothes and cook their food and a place for all the suffering climbers to congregate and bolster each other through the dreary bad weather days.

CONAF came to clear up and investigate the fire on the afternoon of 7th February. The forest had been meticulously swept and all the burnt remains either buried or packed up in to rubbish bags. They would not allow a fire to be built until Administration had judged what should be done regarding the park's policy on climbers' huts. We heard on our way out that they were going to tear down all climbers' huts. This fire was another incident in a long history of hut fires. The authorities are concerned that the forest will burn one day and destroy the park itself.

BUDGET

<u>Expenditure</u>	£
Travel - International and domestic	2760
Equipment	250
Food and stores	400
Permit fees	200
Horses	150
Insurance	660
<u>Miscellaneous</u>	<u>60</u>
<u>TOTAL EXPENDITURE</u>	<u>4500</u>
<u>Income</u>	£
Mount Everest Foundation	300
British Mountaineering Council	500
<u>Personal Contribution</u>	<u>3700</u>
<u>TOTAL INCOME</u>	<u>4500</u>

Note

We hope to make some money from articles we write about this expedition but as of yet we have no publication plans.

ADDRESSES

Mount Everest Foundation, W H Ruthven, Gowrie, Cardwell Close, Warton, Preston, PR4 1SH

BMC, 177 - 179 Burton Road, Manchester M20 2BB

Polartec Performance Challenge, Malden Mills Industries, inc. 46 Stafford Street, PO Box 809, Lawrence, MA 01842, USA

Lyon Equipment, Dent, Nr Sedburgh, Cumbria, LA10 5QL

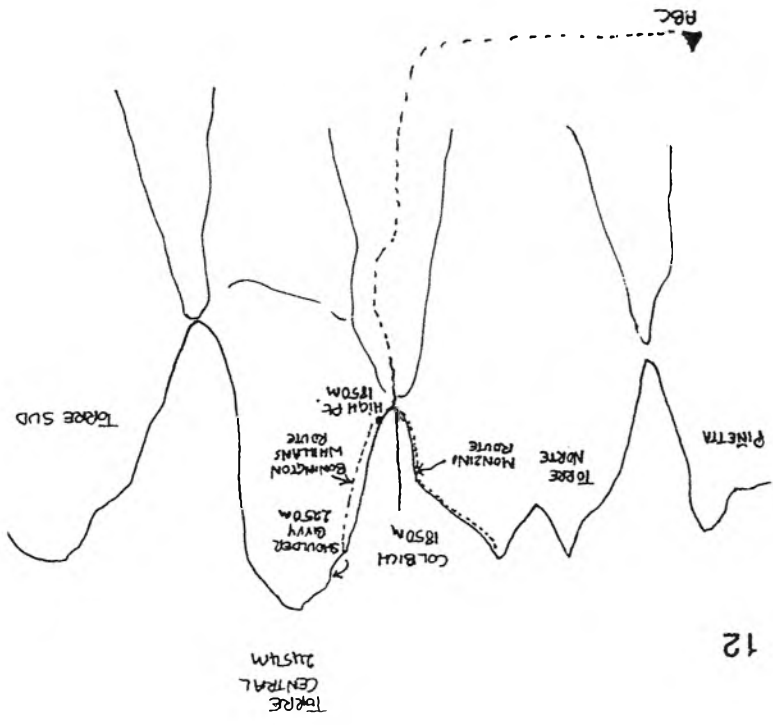
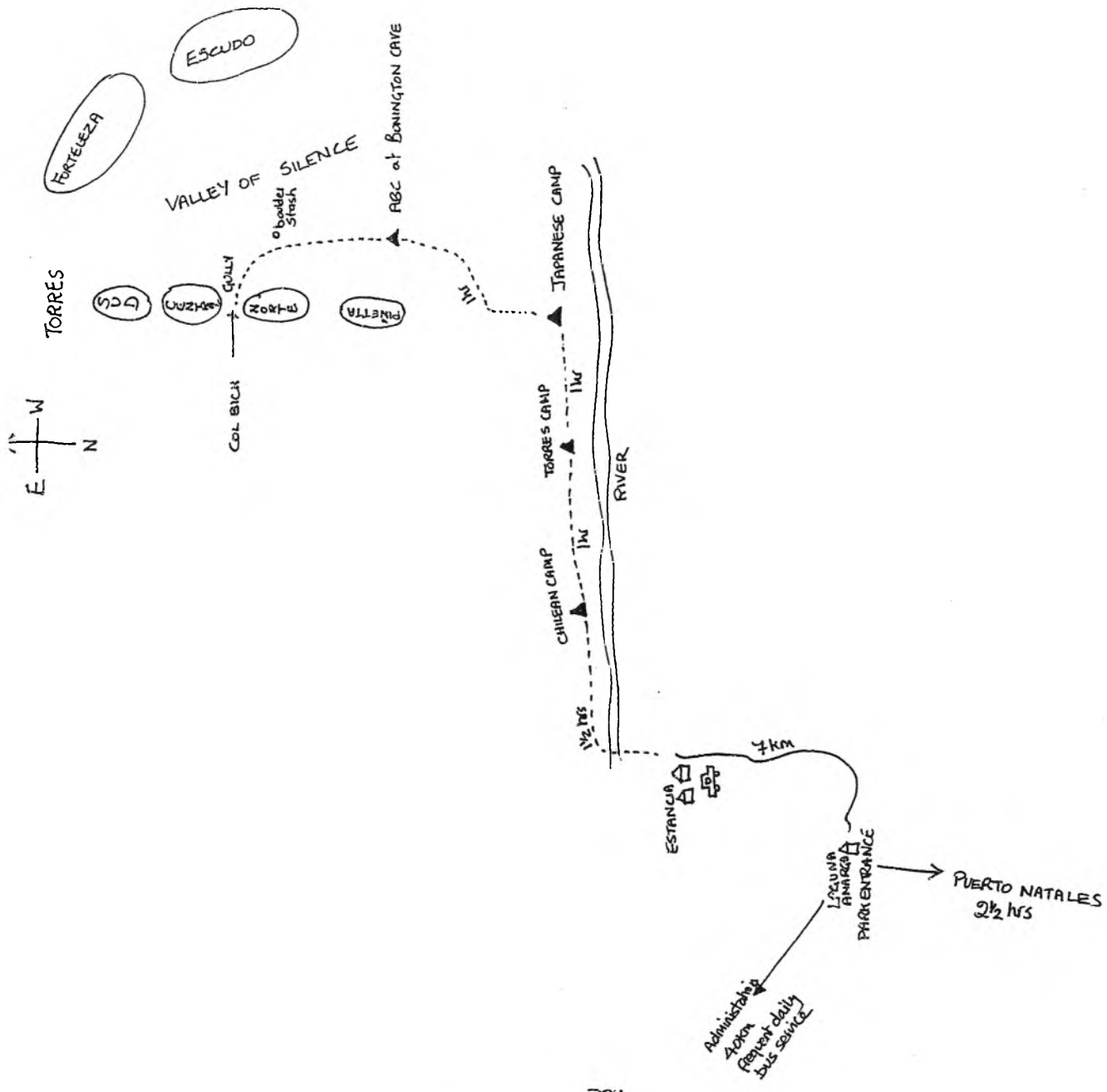
Conaf, Jose Menendez 1147, Punta Arenas, Region XII, Chile

Foundation for Sport and the Arts, PO Box 20, Liverpool, L13 1HB

Welsh Sports council, Marilyn Godfrey, Sophia Gardens, Cardiff, CF1 9SW

Cristian Fortaleza, Fortaleza Guiding, Arturo Prat, Puerto Natales, Region XII, Chile.

Horses, tel. 56 61 412911 or fax. 56 61 241371



MAP

CLIMBING RESUME

CELIA BULL

Age 31, British, Climbing Instructor.

2 Alpine seasons. Scottish Winter IV. Rock Climbing E5 6A. Aid climbing A3 eg. Zodiac 1996 female team.

Greater ranges: 1985 Imperial College Mount Kenya Expedition. 1988 Morocco, Jegel Toubkal winter ascent. 1991 Kachkar Mountains, Turkey, solo trip. 1993 Patagonia - Fitzroy & Paine area, eg. *The Cornwall* - North Tower of Paine (new route with Pritchard and McGinley. 1993 India, Garhwal, Bhagarathi II. 1995 Pakistan, Karakoram - Trango Tower.

GERALDINE WESTRUPP

Age 44, British, Mountaineering Instructor/Guide.

10 Alpine seasons, eg Walker Spur (summer), N. Face Courtes (winter). 10 Scottish Winter V6, eg. *Sticil Face*. Rock climbing E3 5c.

Greater Ranges: 1989 Pakistan Karakoram - British Women's Gasherbrum II Expedition. 1995 Pakistan Karakoram - British Women's Trango Tower Expedition. 1993 India Ladakh - Kang Yutze 6120m, Regani Mallo, N. Ridge 6000m, Dzo Jango East & West 6100m, all solo ascents. 1993-96 several 6000m peaks in Nepal, India Pakistan, Equador & Peru.

DONNA RAUPP

Age 34, American, Mountain Guide and Nurse.

Climbed extensively in North America. Rock climbing 5.12. Mountain routes include: Long's Peak - The Diamond (D-7 *Casual route*) Zion - *Moonlight Buttress*, Washington, Cascades - Mt Stuart - NE Ridge. Wind River Range, Wyoming, Pingora, Wolf's Head, Haystack. Canada Rockies - Athabasca-N.Face, Mt Fay-N face, Wapta Traverse(ski mountaineering), *Weeping Wall*, *Guinness Gully*, *Professor Falls* (ice). Bugaboos - Snowpatch Spire, McTech Arete. North West Territories - Lotus Flower Tower. Mexico- El Trono Blanco-S.Face. Pakistan - Trango Tower (support and expedition nurse).

CONCLUSION

It was a very disappointing expedition. The weather was constantly wearing away at our enthusiasm and dulling the edge that can be essential to succeeding on a climb. What feels so upsetting now is that we spent so much energy on keeping up our psyche and trying to put aside our differences and we never even got a chance to climb. After Gerry left and Ali and I tried to retrieve the gear from the Col the effort to remain positive about the expedition was difficult. As the days sped by and the gear remained at the notch I felt maddened by the place and vowed never to return. However from the safety and comfort of my home, the knowledge that our equipment was brought down by kind friends, and the distance from the Patagonia storms I can look at my pictures and envisage another trip in the future. It is a beautiful place: camp sites in beech forests full of parrots, granite spires and condors and uncrowded cliffs. The positive side of the weather problem is that it does help to protect Patagonia from the overuse, and problems that come with that, that other areas like the Alps and Yosemite experience. Although the idea of climbing on Paine's granite spires is very popular, sitting in a tent in the rain for months on end is not, and probably never will be.

We would like to thank the following for their support and help: MEF, BMC, Lowe Alpine UK, Troll, Terranova, Bollé, Buffalo. Extremities, Uvistat, Proctor and Gamble, Fuji, Kodak.

Special thanks to Alison Thomas for her hard work and to Noel Craine and Simon Nadin for retrieving our gear from Col Bich.