

Mountaineering in Antarctica

A survey of Continental climbing

by Damien Gildea, *Australia*

Antarctica has been hailed as the mountaineering destination of the 21st century, and not entirely without reason. In addition to containing almost every conceivable type of mountaineering challenge, Antarctica has that other great allure—numerous unclimbed mountains and incredible potential for new routes. With nearly half of the 4000-meter peaks yet to see an ascent, dozens of 3000ers similarly virgin, and many areas still to be trod by humans, the continent holds years of challenges. Big wall routes and technical ice climbs abound on lower peaks, and the ski-mountaineering potential of many areas is well beyond the demand of current adventurers.

Of course, access remains the largest obstacle to mountaineering in Antarctica. Although there is always talk of government-supported tourism, currently the only realistic option is the well-known private air operator Adventure Network International (ANI). ANI can, for a price, provide air access to all the mountain areas in Antarctica—and given the size of Antarctica, the location of some of its major mountain areas and the relative lack of man-made infrastructures for transport and shelter, air access remains the only feasible option at this time.

This article gives a basic overview of past mountaineering in Antarctica, but it also tries to give some indication of future challenges and interesting objectives. Only the major areas in Antarctica are dealt with here, though notable mountaineering has occurred in the Prince Charles Mountains in MacRobertson Land, the Executive Committee Range and Ford Ranges of Marie Byrd Land and the Shackleton Range of West Antarctica.

ANTARCTIC PENINSULA

Historically, the Peninsula area, including the South Shetlands, South Orkneys and other islands, has been one of the most traveled and climbed mountain regions in Antarctica. Though Argentines, Chileans, Americans and, more recently, Ukrainians have all made a number of worthwhile ascents, almost all of the significant mountaineering done here has been the work of personnel employed by the British Antarctic Survey (BAS), formerly known as the Falkland Islands Dependency Survey. Much of the BAS climbing was done either in the course of surveying, geological work or field training, but the most significant climbing was done unofficially, for recreation—and, due to official aversion to and overt prohibition of recreational mountaineering by base personnel, was almost always unreported. Thus, records of first ascents, even of major peaks, are rare and open to error.

Mountaineering here, as in Victoria Land, benefited from the presence of experienced and keen mountaineers working as safety and field personnel in support of the science programs. In the 1960s, these mountaineers included the Scots John Cunningham, who led the 1964 first ascent of the Peninsula's highest peak, Mt. Jackson (3184m), and Bugs McKeith, who accomplished a huge amount of climbing on smaller Peninsula features at quite a high level of technical difficulty, often solo. In the 1970s, the now well-known British alpinists Rob





Collister and Roger Mear also traveled the mountains of the Peninsula. Collister was involved in a strong attempt on the difficult Mt. Wilcox (1981m) and in the 1971 ascent of the 1200-meter north face of Blacklock Island.

In more recent years, the Peninsula has been a popular destination for yacht-based climbers, who have made a number of first ascents and repeat ascents of significant peaks, some by technically difficult routes. A number of such ascents have been reported in this journal and elsewhere, but particularly of note is the 1996 first ascent of Mt. Foster (2100m). This, the highest point of the mountainous Smith Island in the South Shetlands, was a coveted prize that had beaten at least two previous attempts. A Canadian/New Zealand crew on board the yacht *Northanger* made the ascent, one of a number of notable climbs made from this vessel in recent years. It was in attempting to reach Smith Island for climbing in late 1977 that one of the century's most celebrated exploratory mountaineers, H.W. Tilman, along with his crewmates aboard *En Avant*, lost his life at sea.

More recently, in January, 1999, an Australian expedition aboard the yacht *Tiama* accomplished some of the most notable climbing in the region in a number of years. Kieran Lawton, Julie Styles, Geoff Moore, Robyn Clelland, Roland Eberhard and Chris Holly, inspired by a fine photo by Gordon Wiltsie, made the first ascent of Pilcher Peak. The team climbed the south ridge after skiing in with sledges to the glacier on the east side of the peak. However, the peak in this photo is not the true Pilcher Peak, but a sharp peak on a ridge leading up to the plateau that constitutes the spine of the peninsula. The real Pilcher Peak (as indicated on the map) stands out to the north of the plateau and was summited by the entire group on January 16. The other, smaller ridge peak was then christened "Wiltsie's Peak," and was attempted by Styles and Lawton. They climbed for four days in poor visibility on the south

LEFT: On the Calley Glacier, Danco Coast, Antarctic Peninsula. The pointed peak was mistakenly referred to as "Pilcher Peak" in various captions; it was renamed "Wiltsie's Peak" by the 1999 team that attempted it. GORDON WILTSIE

ridge but were forced to turn back a mere 50 meters from the summit due to horrendous snow conditions. The party then skied back to Brialmont Cove where they made another three first ascents on peaks, including a rock spire. After leaving Brialmont Cove, the expedition then visited Booth Island, where Styles, Lawton and Eberhard climbed a steep ice couloir on the south-western side of the southernmost peak on Booth Island—almost certainly a new route, though possibly not the first ascent of the peak.

As to future objectives, there is a large number of inland peaks, many over 2000 meters, that would require an extended journey by ski for access. In addition to first ascents of less accessible peaks, the future here will undoubtedly see more technical routes added to peaks that have already been climbed. This has already occurred on Mt. Scott (880m), a popular objective above the Lemaire Channel, and there is enormous potential for this type of development on the strikingly featured peaks of Wiencke Island. There are still some attractive unclimbed peaks on Elephant Island, while a ridge on Mt. Parry, Brabant Island, has a vertical rise of over 2400 meters—straight out of the sea! It is one of the biggest features of its type in the world, and it is unclimbed.

SENTINEL RANGE

Here, the continent's highest peaks sweep up from the ice in soaring arêtes, tempting couloirs and gigantic faces of steep rock and ice. With the five highest peaks in Antarctica, all of them over 4500 meters (Vinson Massif, 4897m; Mt. Tyree, 4852m; Mt. Shinn, ca. 4700m; Mt. Craddock, 4650m; Mt. Gardner, 4587m), it is no wonder that the Sentinel Range has been the focus of most of the continent's private mountaineering over the last 15 years.

Though most of the major peaks were climbed for the first time by the government-supported, Nicholas Clinch-led 1966 American Antarctic Mountaineering Expedition, the majority of climbing activity has, in more recent times, been centered on guided ascents of Vinson Massif, particularly as one of the Seven Summits. At the end of the 1998-'99 season a total of over 300 individuals had reached the summit, with repeat ascents, mainly by guides, taking the overall number of ascents to just over 400. Vinson Massif has now been soloed, traversed, descended by both ski and paraglider, climbed by a husband-and-wife team, climbed without an ice ax and climbed in as little as nine hours from base camp.

Mt. Shinn, Antarctica's third highest mountain, has also proved a popular addition for Vinson climbers, but by far the most significant mountaineering has taken place relatively recently on the other 4000-meter peaks of the range. In late 1997, a large couloir on the rarely traveled eastern side of the range was the route of the third and fourth ascents of Mt. Tyree—first by a strong French party, who were then followed a month later by the renowned American climbers Conrad Anker and Alex Lowe. Both the second and third ascents of this peak were by new routes, the second having been the relatively well-known tour de force of the American Terrence "Mugs" Stump. Stump was actually working for the U.S. government as a Safety Officer for scientists operating in the area, and, though not well-publicized at the time, there was a certain amount of consternation in official circles at his "extracurricular" activities.

In November, 1989, Stump soloed a new route on the intimidating west face of Tyree—over 2500 meters of steep rock and ice climbed on-sight, unroped and in a single push. Shortly before this, he had soloed the similarly difficult southwest face of Mt. Gardner, the continent's fifth highest peak, making its third ascent. Arguably a decade ahead of their time, these were the biggest, hardest climbs that had ever been done in Antarctica. The fine style in which they were executed was not only a tribute to Stump's alpine abilities, but an important standard by which future ascents in the range could be judged.



"Pic Gryzka" near Mt. Tyree in the Sentinel Range, first climbed during the 1997-'98 season by a French team. The proposed name commemorates Jean-Marc Gryzka, who was killed during the trip. P. DE CHOUDENS

The early 1990s saw notable additions to the range by, among others, the well-known American climbers Jay Smith and Robert Anderson. In December, 1994, the Swiss super-alpinist Erhard Loretan, veteran of some of the most outstanding ascents of 8000-meter peaks ever accomplished, soloed the first ascent of Mt. Epperly (4359m), the continent's eighth highest peak. He returned in 1995 to repeat this route for a film, but not before making the first ascent of a less prominent peak of 4360 meters that lies between Mt. Epperly and Mt. Tyree. Loretan ascended this unnamed peak alone via a reasonably difficult couloir on the southwest face. This peak received its second ascent in January, 1998, by Conrad Anker, again solo, by a new route on the southwest face.

January, 1996, saw the celebrated French alpinist Catherine Destivelle and her partner Erik Decamp shun the crowd on Vinson Massif and climb two new routes much further to the north. They began with the first ascent of the attractive smaller peak Mt. Viets (ca. 3700m) by a moderate route on the south face. Two days later, they ascended a 4000-meter-plus peak to the north of Mt. Viets by a much more difficult route on its west face. While posing for the summit photo, Destivelle plunged through a cornice. The fall resulted in a badly broken leg and other injuries. For 15 hours, the pair performed an amazing self-rescue, using a torturous combination of rappelling, down climbing and lowering to reverse the 1500-meter route of ascent, after which Decamp returned Destivelle to their tent, tending her injuries for three days while they waited for suitable weather for an air evacuation by ANI.

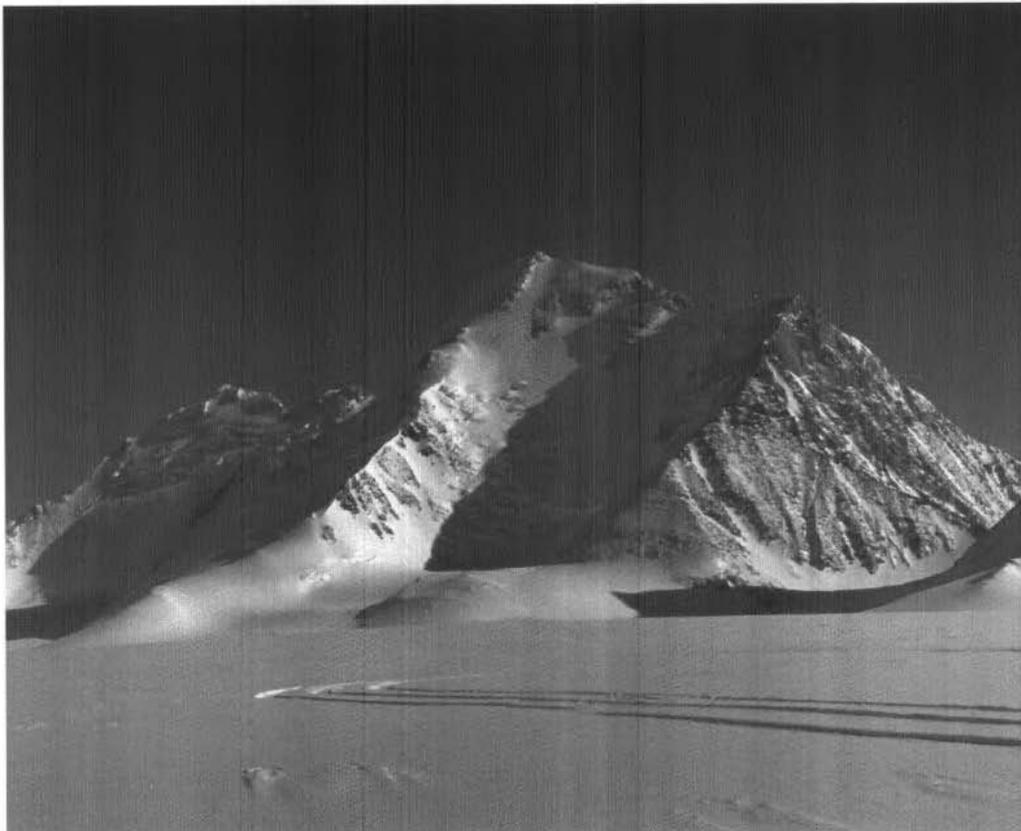
The 1997-'98 season saw strong performances from a French Groupe d'Haute Montagne party who made, among other ascents, the first ascent of the fine peak Mt. Shear (4050m) and the striking, unnamed 3950-meter rock pyramid near Mt. Tyree. The French proposed the

name of "Pic Gryzka" for this latter peak for one of their party, Jean-Marc Gryzka, who was killed during the trip.

The range also witnessed some fine climbing by Finland's most accomplished Himalayan climber, Veikka Gustafsson, and his compatriot, Patrick Degerman. This pair made the first ascents of both Mt. Bentley (4145m) and Mt. Davis (ca. 3950m), a rapid fourth ascent of Mt. Gardner, and first ascents of two unnamed peaks, one of them ca. 4050 meters, situated between Mt. Anderson and Mt. Bentley. At the base of Mt. Gardner the pair found a food cache left by the 1966 party, which had made the first ascent of the peak.

The recent 1998-'99 season brought some less than perfect weather conditions, leaving many potential Vinson climbers languishing in Punta Arenas, Chile. Nevertheless, Conrad Anker and Dave Hahn managed to make the fifth ascent of Mt. Gardner via the route of first ascent, finding two food caches from the 1966-'67 expedition in the process. Anker also unsuccessfully attempted the west ridge of Mt. Epperly with the well-known American, Jim Donini. It was up to Rodrigo Mujica and his client, Bob Elias, to pioneer some first ascents, which they did, above the Embree Glacier in the northern Sentinel Range. In the last week of November, Mujica and Elias climbed an unnamed 3400-meter

BELOW: *The peaks around the Embree Glacier, visited for the first time in the 1998-'99 season. From the left: the north and northeastern aspects of Mt. Anderson, Mt. Bentley, Mt. Davis, Mt. Hale, and "Natalie Peak."* RODRIGO MUJICA



peak they christened "Natalie Peak" and the next day another unnamed peak of 3200 meters they dubbed "Kristen-Jule Peak." Both ascents involved moderate climbing over mixed ground in high winds and very low temperatures. These two peaks are directly north of Mt. Hale (3595m). Mujica and Elias also made a strong attempt on a sub-peak of the impressive Mt. Todd, turning back only 200 meters from the summit after covering some interesting mixed terrain and steep ice. This adventurous pair were almost certainly the first people to visit the area and certainly the first to do any mountaineering here.

So what remains? The obvious challenges are the unclimbed 4000-meter peaks of the range. There are two, Mt. Anderson (4157m) and Mt. Giovinetto (4090m), neither of which are easy snow hiking. Other high unclimbed peaks here include Mt. Press (3760m) and Mt. Todd at the northern section of the main range and Mt. Morris, closer to the action between Mt. Shear and Mt. Ostenso (4085m). New route objectives include the unclimbed east face of Vinson Massif, an ascent of Mt. Tyree from the south—possibly as part of a "grand traverse" of Vinson Massif, Mt. Shinn, Mt. Epperly, Mt. Tyree and Mt. Gardner—and what is perhaps the grand prize of the range, the unclimbed south face of Mt. Craddock (4650m). This face features in one of the color photos in *The Antarctic Mountaineering Chronology*, but is incorrectly captioned as Mt. Slaughter, a fine, smaller peak that received its long-awaited first ascent in December, 1998, by Guy Cotter of New Zealand and Terry Gardiner of the United States. These possible routes are just the more obvious options, barely taking



into account the eastern side of the range, which, partly due to more difficult access and slightly higher avalanche danger, has seen just a small handful of ascents.

A recent development of some significance in the Sentinel Range—and to a lesser extent in Droning Maud Land—is the climbing of relatively minor peaks and their subsequent naming by the summitters. This has been happening for some time with regard to sub-peaks of Vinson Massif, but it has more recently been seen on some of the higher unnamed peaks of the range. Whether some of these peaks even deserve their own name is unclear, although there is no set policy as to what actually constitutes a separate “mountain” or “peak.” Suffice it to say that some names given are more appropriate than others. There are official policy structures such as those set out by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, whose Advisory Committee on Antarctic Names determines whether a name proposed for a feature becomes officially accepted. Other nations, such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom, have similar structures to name features in their Antarctic territories. While the ethical integrity of most climbers in naming certain peaks cannot be questioned, the chances of such names becoming accepted has, for various reasons, proven slim. Naming peaks after oneself has never been widely respected, and naming features after commercial sponsors or products will ensure rejection by most in the climbing community and will certainly do so amongst the relevant authorities. Antarctic naming policy can be found by contacting the USGS at <http://mapping.usgs.gov/www/gnis/antex.html>.

The other increasingly pertinent point on nomenclature is the name of Vinson Massif. Regardless of one's personal or otherwise definition of a “massif” or “peak” or “mountain,” the name of the highest mountain in Antarctica is Vinson Massif. It is not Mt. Vinson, Vinson Peak or any other variation, no matter how well-intended. The proliferation of these erroneous alternatives seems to be not so much a deliberate agenda geared toward changing the existing name, but more the result of either authorial laziness, geographical ignorance or the editorial “dumbing-down” of seemingly foreign or unusual terms for a mass market.

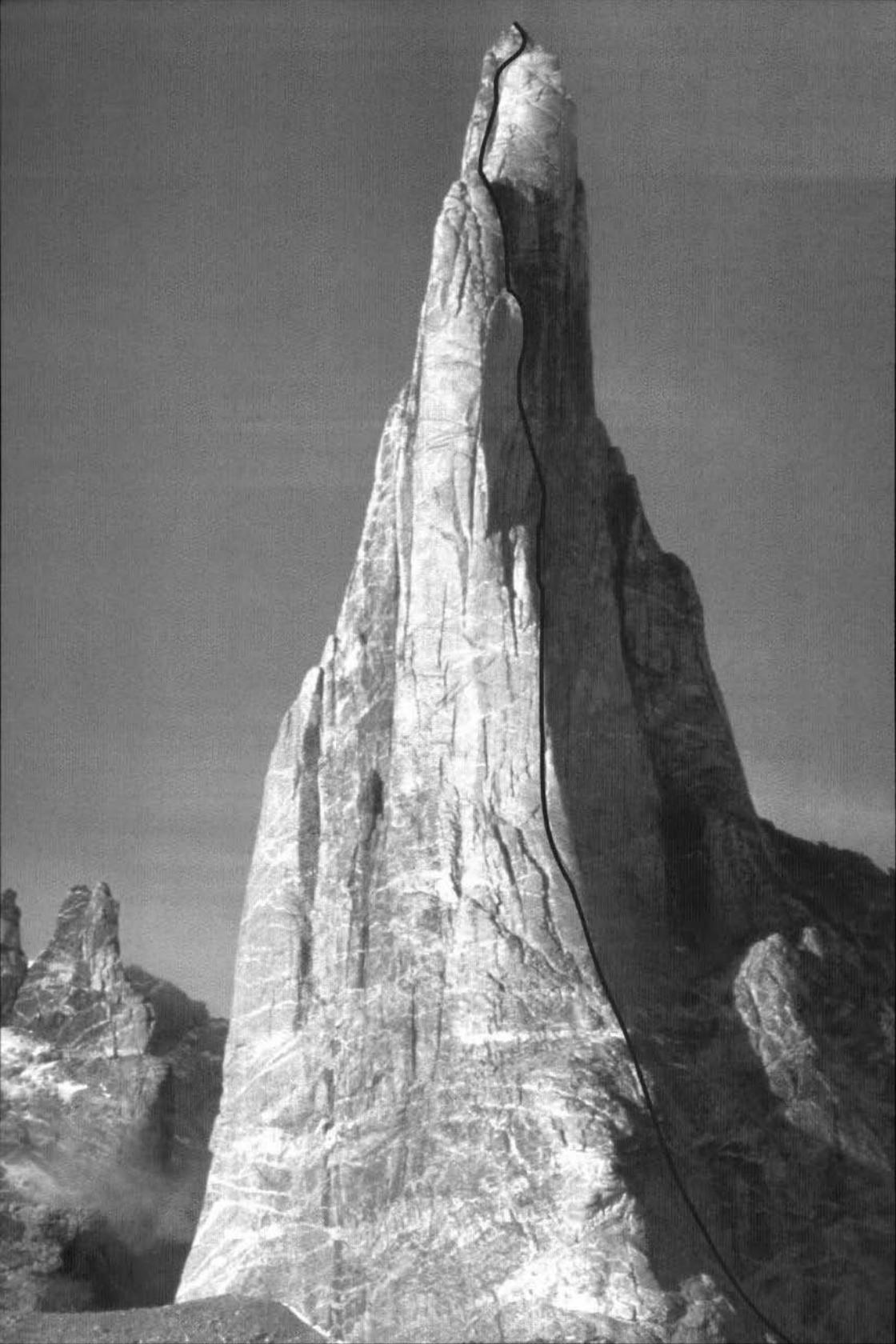
DRONING MAUD LAND

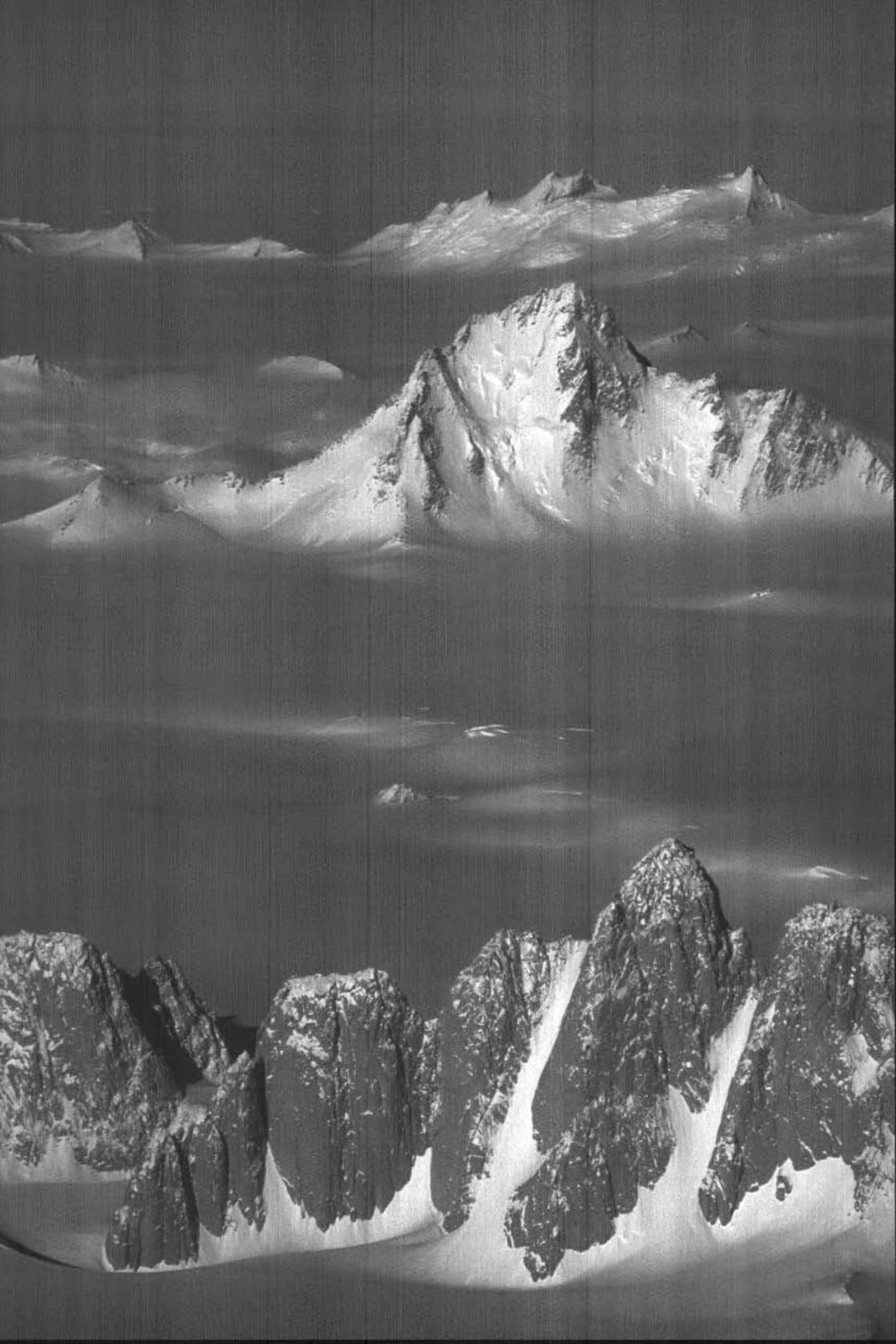
One only has to look at a selection of Gordon Wiltsie's stunning photos of this region to see that there is the potential for hundreds of major big wall routes. Peaks that have already seen major big-wall routes include Ulvetanna (2931m), Kinnanna (2724m), Rakekniven (2365m), “Rondespiret” (2427m) and Trollslottet. Though a few photographs of these spectacular spires had been published in scientific journals in the past, it was the spectacular 1994 publication, *Queen Maud Land, Antarctica*, by Ivar Erik Tollefsen, that drew the attention of the world's climbers to this area. Tollefsen's expedition, the first private mountaineering expedition to the area, made a total of 36 ascents. These included a number of technical big wall routes, though the bulk of the less technical ascents were made during ski traverses.

Quite a large number of ascents have been made on lower and/or easier peaks. Prospective first ascensionists here should bear in mind, however, that many of the less difficult peaks may well have had ascents by scientists any time in the last 50 years. ANI access to the region is very good and, thanks to their current logistical support of the South African national Antarctic program, also regular. Aircraft land on a blue-ice runway in the area known as Blue-1, which is in sight of the better-known peaks of the region.

RIGHT: The 800-meter “Ronde Spire” (Rondespiret), showing the 1996 Norwegian first ascent route.

IVAR TOLLEFSEN





TRANSANTARCTIC MOUNTAINS—MAIN SECTION

Since the 1950s, several scientific parties have traveled in these mountains, though relatively few ascents have been made. More recently, U.S. scientists have reached a number of high points by helicopter, but they have not necessarily ventured to the summit of the peak on which they were working. Two of the main summits that have been climbed by scientists include Mt. Markham in 1985 and Mt. Kirkpatrick in 1991. To date, no private mountaineering expedition has entered the main section of the Transantarctics—the Queen Elizabeth Range, the Holland Range and the Queen Alexandra Range.

In stark contrast to Droning Maud Land, some of the highest peaks here are, when seen from certain vantage points, not even distinguishable as peaks. Many are just an area high point on the northern escarpment of the polar plateau. In aerial photographs taken from southern perspectives, they appear as large, flat expanses of bare snow and ice rising to an almost imperceptible summit peak, while from the north they impress as enormous walls of jumbled icefalls, snow fields and rock faces. Many such faces are well over 2000 meters high, though rarely very steep. Access to these faces is often up long, severely crevassed and broken glaciers of a gigantic scale. Some of the lower peaks are better featured, but there are no Antarctic Cerro Torres or Walker Spurs hidden away in these icy realms. The real adventure lies in the potential for traveling over terrain that has never felt a human foot and in reaching the summits of the more than half a dozen unclimbed “4000ers” that remain here. There are some impressive features, however, such as the northwest ridge of Mt. Mackellar (4297m) and the east face of Mt. Miller (4160m); both are unclimbed 4000ers. For mountaineers, access is the issue here. Government logistical support of private mountaineering expeditions is always a possibility for the future, but, realistically, at present the answer is again ANI.

TRANSANTARCTIC MOUNTAINS—QUEEN MAUD MOUNTAINS

In mountaineering terms, by far the most interesting section of these mountains is the area surrounding the Scott Glacier as it flows from the ice cap down to the Ross Ice Shelf. Correspondingly, this area has also seen considerably more climbing activity than the rest of the Queen Maud Mountains, both by government and private expeditions. Ascents were made in this area as long ago as 1908, by members of Shackleton's party, 1911, by members of Amundsen's party, and 1929, by members of Byrd's party. In the early to mid 1980s, further climbing was undertaken here in the course of scientific work, much of which involved the American alpinist Mugs Stump as he assisted his brother Ed and others in geological work on some of the most interesting peaks of the Scott Glacier area. Highlights included the 1980 first ascent of The Spectre, the most prominent spire of the Organ Pipe Peaks; the second ascents of Mt. Zanuck (2525m) and Mt. Pulitzer (2156m) in 1985; and the first ascents of Mt. Borcik (2780m) and Heinous Peak (ca. 3400m), the latter by a single-push, 20-hour ascent of the very difficult 2500-meter high east face. (Rock samples were collected all the way, of course.)

The highest peaks of the Queen Maud Mountains have seen comparatively little mountaineering activity: no private mountaineering expedition has visited the area, and the only ascents have come from government scientists. One such scientific foray, however, involved one of the 20th century's most impressive but least-known pieces of mountain travel. In January, 1962, the Briton Wally Herbert—later to make his name reaching the North Pole—and three New Zealanders, McGregor, Otway and Pain, used dogsledges to traverse great distances in this area and climb at least 11 major peaks, nine of them over 3000 meters. The

highest of the peaks is Mt. Fridtjof Nansen (4070m), the first 4000-meter peak to be climbed in Antarctica as well as the most southerly 4000-meter peak on the continent. They were the first to retrace Amundsen's route down the Axel Heiberg Glacier as well.

TRANSANTARCTIC MOUNTAINS—VICTORIA LAND

It is probably in the various ranges of Victoria Land that the greatest amount of climbing on high peaks has been done by government personnel—almost exclusively New Zealanders. Dogsledge traverses of the 1950s and 1960s produced dozens of ascents of high 3000ers and the second Antarctic 4000-meter peak to be climbed: Mt. Lister (4025m), in December, 1962. More recently, helicopter access to areas further away from Scott Base has allowed the tradition of making ascents to continue when possible. This is aided by the fact that the New Zealand program has historically drawn its field staff from experienced mountaineers, many of them guides such as Rob Hall and Gary Ball. A number of big peaks have seen repeat ascents, such as Mt. Lister and Mt. Huggins (3735m) in the Royal Society Range, and, of course, the famous volcano Mt. Erebus (3795m) on Ross Island, which has proven to be a popular outing. Mt. Erebus remains the only major Antarctic peak to have had a winter ascent, by the Briton Roger Mear, in June, 1985. Though records of ascents are by no means comprehensive, this has more to do with the sheer amount of climbing done than any desire to suppress such information.

There are no unclimbed 4000ers left here, but a number of big 3000ers remain unclimbed, as do countless peaks of lesser height. Particularly interesting are the mountains of the Admiralty Range. Attractive objectives here include the possibly virgin Mt. Sabine (3720m), the daunting east face of Mt. Herschel (3335m), which forced a 1967 party led by Sir Edmund Hillary onto a less difficult route for its first ascent, and the attractive big peaks of Mt. Black Prince (3406m), climbed once with difficulty, and Mt. Ajax (3770m), which is probably unclimbed. Here, Mt. Minto (4165m) saw its first ascent in February, 1988, by an Australian party who man-hauled their supplies from the coast, having sailed there from Sydney. As for the other big peaks, Mt. Adam (4010m) was climbed by New Zealanders in 1981 and 1991, but Mt. Royalist (3640m) may well be unclimbed. On many subsidiary peaks and ridges, 2000-meter-plus faces sit unclimbed above huge glaciers not always conducive to travel on foot. For those willing to make the effort, this area of Victoria Land would seem to be one of the more promising Antarctic destinations for big, interesting, unclimbed terrain that is relatively accessible to private mountaineers.

SOUTH GEORGIA

The relatively small island of South Georgia holds some disproportionately huge mountaineering objectives and has seen a considerable degree of mountaineering activity, both by government scientists and private mountaineering expeditions. Two ranges, the Salvesen Range and the Allardyce Range, constitute the spine of the island. Mt. Paget (2935m) is the highest peak of the latter, and has seen a number of ascents, although significant new route potential exists, particularly on the northern side. South Georgia's fourth-highest peak, Sugartop (2325m), has had at least two ascents, but one of the most impressive ascents in the mountaineering history of the island was the first ascent of the second highest peak on the island, Nordenskjöld Peak (2355m). The Frenchman Christian de Marliave executed this daring ascent solo in early 1988 while based aboard the yacht *Damien II*. The highest unclimbed peak on South Georgia is Mt. Roots (2280m), which has repelled at least five attempts, the highest getting to around 2000 meters. Together,

Nordenskjöld Peak and Mt. Roots, when viewed from the north, present an attractive, if somewhat difficult, smorgasbord of unclimbed alpine terrain. At present, most mountaineers will find that access to the island for any useful period of time is by chartered yacht only, an option that does, however, allow the possibility of boat transport between base camps, thereby increasing the choice and accessibility of objectives.

Wherever one climbs in Antarctica, it would do well to keep in mind the less-desirable effects of mountain tourism in other parts of the world and actively work to ensure there is no repeat of those mistakes. Organizations such as the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators (IAATO) only provide guidelines and monitoring. It is up to individuals who choose to travel adventurously in Antarctica to be responsible for their own safety and environmental impact. Long may it be so.

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