Charlie Porter, 1950–2014

Charlie Porter and I crossed paths only briefly, in his adopted home of Tierra del Fuego. His greatest climbing achievements were all in North America, most notably in Yosemite. I have only visited the Valley once, climbing just a single easy pitch on El Capitan; the bigger, icier mountains of Alaska and Baffin Island I know only by repute. However, if, like me, you started climbing in the early '70s, even in Britain—nurtured on the determinedly international news pages of Mountain magazine—you couldn't help knowing about the cheery, whiskery man in the beret who reminded one aspiring big-wall climber, Sibylle Hechtel, "of a teddy bear: messy, sweet, a little round and burly, and utterly huggable."

Charles Talbot Porter was born in Nashua, New Hampshire, on June 12, 1950, and grew up in Peperell, Massachussetts, where his father was a doctor and his mother the well-known author and illustrator of children's books Barbara Cooney. His formal education ended when he graduated from prep school in 1969, by which time he had already become a keen mountaineer, hitching west in the summers to climb in the Canadian Rockies and the Cascades. He had also, in a little-publicized incident, led the rescue of a group of students stranded in Huntington Ravine on Mt. Washington, for which he was awarded a Carnegie medal.

In 1969 he visited Yosemite for the first time, jumping straight in at the deep end with an ascent of the Nose with Bugs McKeith. But it was his solo first ascent of Dawn Wall route in 1972 that really sparked the Porter legend. At a time when the trend was for short, hard free climbs, Charlie followed his own star, attracted more to the grueling journey up the big wall, absorbed in the patient creative artistry of hard aid climbing. On the Dawn Wall he demonstrated his dogged determination when, after dropping one of his haul bags on the first day, he carried on for another nine days, sleeping each night in a hammock improvised from slings and his remaining haul bag.

A few weeks later he was back up on El Capitan, making the first ascent of the Shield. His partner, Gary Bocarde, recently recalled the infamous Triple Cracks pitch, where he had to watch from a hanging belay, tied to a single quarter-inch bolt and Lost Arrow peg, while above him Porter worked his sequence of 35 tied-off Rurps. "To keep things light-hearted on his insane lead, I yelled, 'Don't fall, Charlie, as you'll zipper the pitch and take us both to the ground!' though I was only half-kidding. He just laughed."

The legend grew, with Tangerine Trip and Mescalito (1973), Grape Race and Horse Chute in 1974, and Excalibur in 1975. But Porter was too energetic, too creative, too curious, too much of an explorer simply to remain year after year in Yosemite. He had bigger, gnarlier fish to fry, particularly in the far north. In June 1974, with Bocarde, Michael Clark and John Svenson, he climbed the 800-meter southwest wall of the west summit of the Moose's Tooth, in Alaska, lugging a gigantic moose's antler all the way up the wall to leave enshrined on the summit, just for the hell of it. The following winter he drove the British Burgess twins up to Canada in his beat-up VW van to join his Nose companion, Bugs McKeith, on the first ascent of a world-classic ice climb, Polar Circus. Having improvised his own pitons in Yosemite, here in the Canadian Rockies he wielded his own homemade ice axe with radically angled pick.

Charlie the inventive improviser was always ahead of the times, and in 1976 he upped the ante on his continent's highest peak: Denali. The Japanese team that was patiently sieging the Cassin Ridge, preparing daily fresh vegetables in their pressure cooker, was astonished by the ruddy-faced young

American who rushed past them, alone, carrying just a 20-pound pack. A violent headache forced him to bail on the first attempt, but after a day's rest he went back up. Then, abound 19,000 feet, "I felt my lungs bubbling, so I took a bunch of diuretics, and when I got to the summit I peed all my body liquids out. I didn't feel too good, but I made it down okay. That was the first time the Cassin had been climbed in alpine style—in other words, not coming down the fixed ropes. Those Japanese looked over and said, "Very good technique!"'

That near miss from what was probably pulmonary edema may be the reason that Porter never went to the Himalaya. Had he done so, perhaps he would have become a global climbing celebrity. But even if he had put up big new Himalayan climbs, he wouldn't have told the world much about them. He seems genuinely to have been uninterested in the trappings of fame, never providing detailed reports of his achievements. Hence we have only the sketchiest details of his Cassin climb and of what was probably his most ambitious achievement of all: the solo first ascent of the north wall of Mt. Asgard, on Baffin Island, in 1975. It has been called the world's first Grade VII, but what makes the legend live on are the more human details: a photo of Porter approaching the wall with a monster rucksack, the repeated attempts culminating in nine days alone on the wall, the cutting open of his leather boots to accommodate feet swollen by trench foot and frostbite for the long walk out over the Arctic tundra…

His last big Alaskan climb was the first ascent of Middle Triple Peak in the Kichatna Spires, with Russell McLean, in 1976. Three years later the pair visited Chile, to attempt the east face of the Fortress, in the Paine group. They didn't succeed on the climb, but for Porter that was just the beginning of a whole new life of exploration. He had taken with him a kayak converted for rowing, with sculling oars and a sliding seat. In this minimalist craft he set off alone on an odyssey lasting over a year, rowing hundreds of miles through the Patagonian channels, finishing off by rounding Cape Horn. As a purely sporting achievement it was impressive, but for Porter the voyage was something more than that. In the spirit of the one of those eclectic, self-taught Victorian naturalists, Porter recorded everything he saw, including the archaeological remains left by the vanished Indian tribes of Patagonia.

Porter was entranced by Patagonia and after that solo voyage of 1979–1980, he made Chile his home, settling eventually in the world's most southerly harbour, Puerto Willams. He did, though, return to Massachusetts to take delivery of a 42-foot steel ketch, which he renamed Gondwana and sailed down to Patagonia to use as a floating base for visiting scientists. For the next three decades he devoted his life to scientific research in Patagonia, with occasional forays to more distant outposts such as South Georgia, first based on Gondwana and later on his bigger yacht, Ocean Tramp.

On one occasion, rather than charter out his boat to scientists, Charlie took aboard a group of climbers, which was how I met him in 1995. Jim Wickwire had invited Tim Macartney-Snape and me to join him and his old friend John Roskelley on a trip to Monte Sarmiento. At the last minute Jim announced that our transport would be provided by the legendary big-wall climber turned sailor, Charlie Porter. What follows is a brief impression of that trip, adapted from an article first published in Alpinist magazine shortly after Charlie's death.

Gondwana was moored at Ushuaia, the welded superstructure of her doghouse ungainly and eccentric among the sleeker yachts tied alongside, but—as we learned during the next few days motoring into the wind up the Beagle Channel, enjoying the scenery in spacious, sheltered comfort—eminently practical. Her owner was equally practical, always busy with compass and charts, or fiddling with ropes. He was an old sea dog dipped in salt water, and took a dim view of us landlubbers, calling Wickwire, Roskelley, and me "The Three Stooges." Only Tim was allowed to touch halyards and mooring lines, or to drive the Zodiac—thanks, perhaps, to his Australian air of backcountry competence. "What d'yer reckon, Tim," the skipper would mutter. "Verrry interesting, hunhh, Tim? Glacial carving from the Pliocene, with maybe some later deposits from the Holocene. Hmmm, yeah...verry interesting."

Charlie was an Olympic talker. His conversation, punctuated by frequent gravelly chuckles, was the soundtrack to our voyage. At first it seemed a strange paradox that this famously private person, notorious for shunning the media, should be so garrulous. But then, I thought, if you spend that much time alone, you must have a lot of saved-up conversation. Hermits can actually be very talkative. And even if no one was listening, Charlie carried on anyway. Ashore one day, waiting for him to catch us in the dripping rainforest, we heard him long before he arrived, muttering contentedly to himself. "Hmmm, very interesting...secondary growth colonizing alluvial deposits...or maybe remains of a medial moraine... ahh, mmm...the pink flowers...Philesia buxifolia...." It was the talk of a born enthusiast, a polymath who could turn his mind to anything. He loved Patagonia, and in particular Patagonia's southernmost archipelago, which Magellan had named Tierra del Fuego.

Now I wish I had listened harder—wish that I had got him to talk more about his extraordinary solo canoe journey down the Patagonian channels; wish I had tapped into his encyclopedic knowledge of the former native tribes, whose abandoned camps and middens he had discovered. He was a self-taught archaeologist. And glaciologist. And climatologist. And botanist—showing us the bittersweet calafate berries and the peppery leaves of the canola tree that the Indians used to chew.

Sometimes the talk turned to climbing. Looking up through a rare gap in the clouds, Charlie would point out some untouched buttress—"Like the Walker Spur, hunhh, Tim?"—lurking in the Darwin Range. Very occasionally he would reminisce about the glory days in Yosemite. One scurrilous story ended with Charlie's red stubbly face creased in mirth, laughing triumphantly, "… and Ron Kauk couldn't reach the bolt!"

Meanwhile, we voyaged through one of the world's most elemental wildernesses. Charlie showed us the magical cove of Caleta Olla, where the shingle strand was fringed by Nothofagus—the southern beech trees—turning autumnal gold and amber. As Charlie had predicted, black-and-white hourglass dolphins danced flirtatiously round the Zodiac as we motored ashore to stretch our legs on the encircling arm of ancient moraine that formed the cove. A couple of days later, continuing west, we spent a long, gray, squally afternoon thumping hard across the exposed expanse of the Bahia Desolado. It really was desolate, the steel-gray sea barely distinguishable from gray mountains. But then Charlie took us into a secret refuge. Each time Gondwana appeared to be heading straight for the mountain a narrow passage would appear between the rocks—another improbable twist in what was actually a maze of sheltering islands—until we finally anchored in a totally calm, apparently landlocked haven, surrounded by forest. The following night he took us into another hidden fjord to tie Gondwana to huge steel bolts in the cliff face normally used only by the Chilean navy.

We rounded the Brecknock Peninsula, felt briefly the vast swell of the Pacific, then headed back east to Monte Sarmiento. While Jim, John, Tim and I reconnoitered the approach, Charlie stayed and fussed over his precious Gondwana, only joining us after he'd put out multiple anchors and ran shorelines to nearly every tree in the rainforest.

A few days later, during a very rare afternoon of bright sunshine, the five of us dug a ledge for our high camp, right beneath the unclimbed south face of Sarmiento, which we had only now seen for the first time. Despite the sunshine, the wind kept gusting, vicious and unpredictable. During the descent to our lower camp, Jim was caught off balance and smashed against a rock, spraining his ankle. The following morning he announced that it was too painful to continue climbing. So we set off without him for what we hoped would be our summit attempt. The grayhounds, John and Tim, raced ahead. Charlie and I followed more slowly, stopping to put on crampons at a slope of bare ice. As I started off again, Charlie shouted through the wind, "That's right, I'll follow behind, Venables, then I can catch you when you fall off."

The Patagonian wind was up to its usual tricks, sneaking capriciously over a ridge in violent unannounced gusts. Between blasts, I suddenly heard Charlie shouting from below. But this time he wasn't joking, and when I got down to him he was hunched up, right hand clasping his left shoulder, teeth clenched in pain. Like Jim the day before, he had been flung off the mountain by the wind.

Skittering toward a big drop, unable to brake on the glassy surface, he had grabbed at the edge of a small crevasse with his left hand, saving himself but dislocating his shoulder.

By evening we were all back with Jim at the low camp, discussing what to do. We knew that the longer a dislocated shoulder is left the harder it is to put back. From here it would take us at least two days to reach the nearest hospital, in Punta Arenas. We had no strong painkillers, but John and Tim both had extensive paramedic experience, and Tim had relocated shoulders. So Charlie agreed to subject himself to what was bound to be a very painful experiment. Ever practical, he instructed Jim to sit on top of his legs. My job was to hold down his head while, in the absence of a leather strop, he clenched his teeth on a strip of beef jerky. Then the paramedics stood over his tethered body, grasped his right arm, counted to three and gave it a determined yank, ignoring Charlie's jerky-muffled shrieks as they rotated the limb and tried to locate the correct position.

They failed, but after a short pause Charlie agreed to a second attempt. And then a third. And a fourth. And so on, until we decided to have a break for supper, before continuing into the night, each time hoping desperately that it would work. Charlie was a big, burly fellow. It took all my strength to hold him down, and I could feel his neck bulging with the strain and the pain. Yet after each interlude he was able to face up to more pain, stoically sticking the shredded strip of beef back between his teeth as he braced for the next bout. Here, before us, was the quiet stoicism of the man who had once spent all those days alone on Asgard.

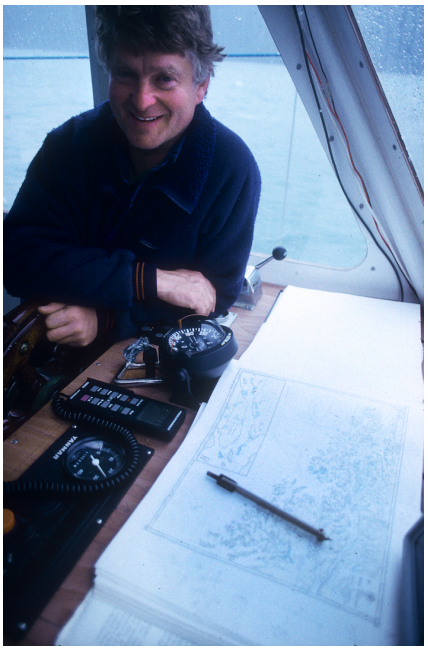
In the end, John and Tim could not get the shoulder back. So in the morning we all set off down through the forest, Jim ignoring his sprained ankle and carrying an extra load to help Charlie. Back on board Gondwana that afternoon, Charlie prepared to set sail, one-armed, across the Beagle Channel. His cabin boy, who had been guarding the boat, was there to help him, along with Jim, whose ankle precluded going back up the mountain. But, having endured so much already, Charlie really wanted safety in numbers: He wanted all of us, Tim in particular, to help him sail to Punta Arenas. We wanted selfishly to go back and climb the mountain. In the end it was a long, hard look from Tim that seemed to clinch it, and Charlie agreed magnanimously to sail with a minimal crew, leaving the Zodiac for the three climbers to return ashore.

We parted company, and soon the only sounds were the dwindling thrum of Gondwana's engine heading north into the twilight, and the dip of our oars rowing back to Sarmiento. Three days later, on the only completely fine day of the whole expedition, Tim, John and I reached the West Summit. Two days after that, Jim returned in a fishing boat to collect us, reporting that, after an initial investigation in Punta Arenas, Charlie had headed north to Santiago to have his shoulder fixed.

I never saw him again, but over the years friends would occasionally mention meeting Charlie in Ushuaia or Puerto Williams or South Georgia, either with Gondwana or his new, bigger boat, loquacious as ever, delivering an ever-expanding repertoire of stories to anyone who would listen—or anyone who would not listen—always busy ferrying climbers and scientists around that unique southern landscape of sea and mountains that he had made his home. He had become an inseparable, seemingly permanent, part of that landscape, so it was a huge shock to all of us when he died from a heart attack, aged just 63.

—Stephen Venables

Images



Charlie Porter briefly relaxes aboard Gondwana in 1995.

Charlie Porter at the helm of Gondwana, 1995.

Charlie Porter attempting Monte Sarmiento, Tierra del Fuego, Chile, in 1995.

Charlie Porter makes room for Tim Macartney-Snape to bail, exploring Tierra del Fuego in 1995.

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