



## AAC Publications

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### **First Ascents in the Salvesen Range**

Antarctica, South Georgia

**On September 17, Henry Chaplin, Caradoc (Crag) Jones, David Lund, Skip Novak, Stephen Venables, and I left the yacht Pelagic Australis to attempt a 15-day ski traverse across the rarely visited Salvesen Range in the southeastern part of South Georgia. Crag, Skip and Stephen hold a long-term fascination with the island, and have more first ascents than anyone else. For Henry, David and me, it was our first visit to this mythical land of majestic icy peaks, rising straight out of the turbulent South Atlantic.**

We pitched two tents at the junction of the Harmer and Jenkins glaciers, just to the south of Starbuck Peak (1,434m), our first objective and the dominant summit of the area. Disappointingly, the wind increased overnight and developed into a five-day storm, which battered our tents with 160km/h winds and buried them in 150cm drifts. On the fifth night the snow turned to rain, and next morning we woke to a spectacular sight of pristine white mountains shedding their storm clouds.

We were a classic case of a team being stronger than the sum of its individual parts. South Georgia demands a wide variety of yachting, small boat, skiing, survival, mountaineering, and technical climbing skills, and although not all of us were experts, between us we covered the spectrum of requirements. Having never sailed before, and with only rudimentary skiing ability, I was very much a passenger until it came to putting on crampons. Throughout the five-day voyage from the Falkland Islands, it had been made clear that if we were lucky enough to find ourselves in a position to attempt Starbuck Peak, then the team would initially look to me to find a route.

As a reconnaissance, Henry and I skinned up to the broad shoulder on the mountain's northwest flank, and we were irresistibly drawn toward the virgin snow peak to the north. Although it was late afternoon, the weather was calm, and for all we knew this might be the last climbing opportunity we would get, so we set off at pace toward the summit. A final easy ridge of wind-blown rime took us to the top of Peak 1,318m (54°44.173'S, 36°11.474'W), which lies 600m to the south of Black Crag South (1,245m), climbed by the 1955-'56 Carse survey expedition. During the descent we noted a spiral ramp up Starbuck's north and west faces, and on the east face a steep, tapering gully leading to the top. If these features connected we might be in with a chance.

Next morning, September 23, all of us, climbing in two ropes of three, set off from the shoulder toward the start of the ramp on the north face. The ramp gave five pitches of exposed snow and ice climbing across the west face, interspersed with an awkward mixed section of Scottish 5, and led to a sharp notch on the southwest ridge. Fortunately, a narrow ledge led around the south face to within sight of the gully on the east face. Until this point the climbing had been relatively straightforward, which was just as well because the soft metamorphic rock was very friable, and the few cracks expanded when pegs were placed. The only reliable protection was ice hooks placed in narrow cracks, or better still, a Pecker hammered into a blank seam.

We downclimbed to a ramp of 70° poorly consolidated snow that led up and right to the mushroom-encrusted summit ridge. I tried four different lines until I found a streak of snow that had been hardened from occasional drips from a rocky overhang. I wriggled up a hidden ramp below the overhang to emerge beneath the summit mushroom, which succumbed to massive excavation. The 40m pitch would not have been out of place on a Grade VI thin face route on Ben Nevis. One by one the team climbed the remaining spectacular 20m of rime to the tiny summit.

We descended through the night and reached our camp at 1 a.m. Later that afternoon, Henry, Stephen, and I made the first ascent of the attractive twin-summitted snow peak (ca 1,000m, 54°44.792'S, 36°15.173'S) that lies 2km southeast of the shapely Avalanche Peak (717m) marked on Carse's survey map. The following day we moved camp to the broad col at the head of the Spenceley Glacier, to the east of Mt. Baume, and next morning Stephen, Henry, and I climbed Icing Peak (1,461m), which lies just east of the col and was first climbed by the 1955-'56 expedition.

Crag, Skip, Stephen, and I decided to attempt Mt. Baume (1,912m), the highest named unclimbed peak on South Georgia, by the northeast face, the line of a 2005 attempt by a British team. We started climbing at midnight on September 27 with a view to reaching the snowfield, which comprises the upper two-thirds of the face, at first light. Unfortunately, the climbing on the lower rock spur, which neatly bypasses the hanging seracs on the right, was more difficult than expected. Crag led several Scottish Grade 5 mixed pitches, and we emerged on the snowfield in the full heat of the day. After a careful ascent of the steep, convex face in bottomless sugary snow, we gained the summit ridge in midafternoon, with the 30m summit tower, resembling the nose cone of a rocket ship, looming ahead.

Fortunately, a huge flake of rime had curled around to create an icy tunnel up the back of the tower, and we took turns standing carefully on a tiny apex of snow. It was a spectacular climax.

The descent took all night, and we arrived back at the tents after a 27-hour push. Unlike Starbuck, which was very Scottish in nature, the climbing on Mt. Baume was more alpine, and we rated the 700m route TD. Meanwhile, over on Mt. Pelagic (1,650m), to the northwest, Henry and David had made its second ascent, following the 2005 line up the north ridge on skis, before Henry skied off the summit.

On the 28th, with supplies running low, Henry and I left camp at 6 p.m. for a nighttime attempt on the attractive 1,800m peak that lies 4km southeast of Smoky Wall, on the north side of the Spenceley Glacier. After climbing four pitches of bulletproof ice to gain the northwest ridge, we found it was severely corniced and returned to camp.

Next day we skied down the Spenceley Glacier and over Ross Pass. Rather than continue down the detritus of the lower Ross Glacier, we spent three more days (including one stormbound in tents) traversing the Webb and Cook glaciers to reach St. Andrews Bay, where the Pelagic Australis met us on October 2.

The expedition had been extraordinarily successful. We traveled 65km over 16 days, summited four unclimbed peaks, and repeated two others. Undoubtedly we were lucky with the weather, but Stephen's genius was to organize the trip for early spring, when glacier travel is easier and the weather gods are most likely to be benign.

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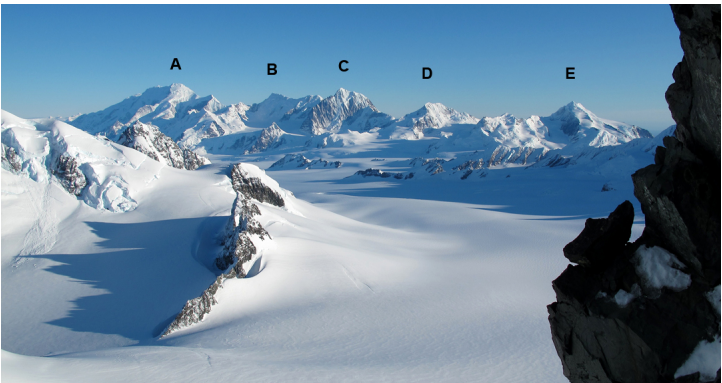
## Images



Mt. Baume (1,912m) from the Spenceley Glacier to the east.



Starbuck Peak (1,434m) from the Novosilski Glacier to the northwest. The 2016 route of ascent spirals counter-clockwise around the mountain, climbing the north, west, and east faces.



The Allardyce Range seen from Mt. Baume. (A) Paget (2,935m, the highest peak on South Georgia, and technically the highest on British soil). (B) Roots (2,270m). (C) Nordenskjold (2,355m). (D) Kling (1,845m). (E) Brooker (1,880m).





Crag Jones and Simon Richardson below the icy summit tunnel of Mt. Baume.



Unclimbed peaks of the Smoky Wall group (1,840m) on the northeast side of the Spenceley Glacier.



Henry Chaplin on the summit of Starbuck Peak. The view behind is to the southeast; the snowy peaks visible lie south of Drygalski Fjord.



Crag Jones on pitch five during the first ascent of Starbuck Peak. Behind him the Risting Glacier flows down to Drygalski Fjord.



Skip Novak, belayed by Crag Jones, sets off on pitch four of Starbuck Peak.

## Article Details

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