



## AAC Publications

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### **Pirrit Hills: The First Technical Climbs**

Antarctica, Pirrit Hills

**IN JANUARY 2018 a team of five from the elite Groupe Militaire de Haute Montagne (GMHM) visited the Pirrit Hills, an isolated group of sharp granite peaks, around 13km in length, sitting on the icecap around 160km south of the Antarctic Logistics & Expeditions (ALE) base at Union Glacier.** Arnaud Bayol, Antoine Bletton, Didier Jourdain, Seb Moatti, and Dimitry Munoz had planned to visit the Organ Pipes in the Transantarctic Mountains, but, upon learning another team would be going there, they sought an alternative objective.

The Pirrits (81°08'S, 85°28'W) have been visited several times over the last few decades by geologists and others working with national science programs. However, they had never seen a party of technical climbers. Mt. Goodwin was summited by a pair of geologists in November 1992. Mt. Axtell, a subpeak of Mt. Tidd, was climbed in 2013 from the east during geological sampling. In the 2015-'16 season, Mt. Tidd itself was climbed from the south up an easy snow slope, after approaching relatively high on snowmobiles.

The GMHM have an impressive history in Antarctica, with a fast, unsupported ski to the South Pole in 1996, the third ascent of Mt. Tyree (4,852m) by a new route in 1997, first ascents and new routes in the Sentinel Range, and technical rock routes in Queen Maud Land.

This season, after flying to the range with ALE, Bayol, Jourdain, and Munoz started things off on January 12 by taking on one of the most distinctive features in the range: the Tafone Pillar (as they called it) on the east face of Mt. Turcotte (1,959m). A remarkable feature of granite faces in this range and elsewhere in Antarctica is the *tafoni*: hollowed-out sections creating climbable scoops and edges of all shapes and sizes. These formations are created primarily by differences in salinity and temperature that cause the rock to weather this way, more so than the incessant winds that strafe the range. The French trio named their route Corrasion (600m, TD, 40° snow ramp to seven pitches of rock up to 5c). From the summit, they made a rappel descent of the north face and traversed through a col back to the east side.

Also on January 12, on Mt. Tidd (2,244m), Bletton and Moatti worked their way up ice runnels and mixed ground in the broad couloir on the left side of the north face, creating Coming in from the Cold (800m, TD WI4 M4). The next day the pair returned to make a 1,000m ski descent of the southwestern side of the mountain. This terrain (up to 45°) is likely the same as that climbed by the first ascensionists in 2013.

On the 15th, Bayou and Munoz put up an easier route on the right side of the north face of Tidd, named ARDI (800m, D), while on the same day, over on the northeast side of Mt. Goodwin (2,181m), a ramp and slanting gully system was climbed by Bletton, Jourdain, and Moatti to give Three Little Birds (700m, TD WI4 M4).

On the 18th, Bletton and Moatti took an easier way up Mt. Turcotte, climbing the straightforward north face by a route they named Paradis Blanc (450m, D+ 70° snow and ice). As a final effort, on the 19th, Jourdain and Munoz ventured up Mt. Tidd once again, attempting one of the most attractive features in the range, climbing to just under half-height on the left pillar of the north face.

The French then returned to the ALE base at Union Glacier by kiting, benefiting from the prevailing southerly winds that blow toward the Ellsworth Mountains. By choosing areas suitably oriented to the usual winds, future climbing teams may be able to undertake expeditions that would be prohibitively expensive using aircraft access—another example is found in the Trans-Antarctic Mountains report below. However, in addition to the extra skills and risks of kiting in Antarctica, such expeditions will need to take into account fickle winds, unpredictable routes, and time lost accordingly.

The GMHM trip to the Pirrit Hills was a gem of an expedition—skilled and experienced alpinists climbing interesting new routes up impressive peaks, in a beautiful and stark area most people had never heard of. They made the most of their short time, on a budget far less than it could have been, and ended on a note that should point the way to future adventurous, low-impact expeditions on the continent.

– **Damien Gildea**, with information from Didier Jourdain. Gildea, from Australia, is author of *Mountaineering in Antarctica*.

## Images



Three-dimensional climbing on the “tafoni” of Corrasion, east face of Mt. Turcotte.



Remarkable rock on the Tafoni Pillar, the first ascent of the east face of Mt. Turcotte in the Pirrit Hills of Antarctica. This wonderful weathering is caused largely by variations in salinity and temperature.



The gully system of Three Little Birds on the northeast face of Mt. Goodwin.



Penetrating the amphitheater of Coming in from the Cold on the north face of Mt. Tidd.

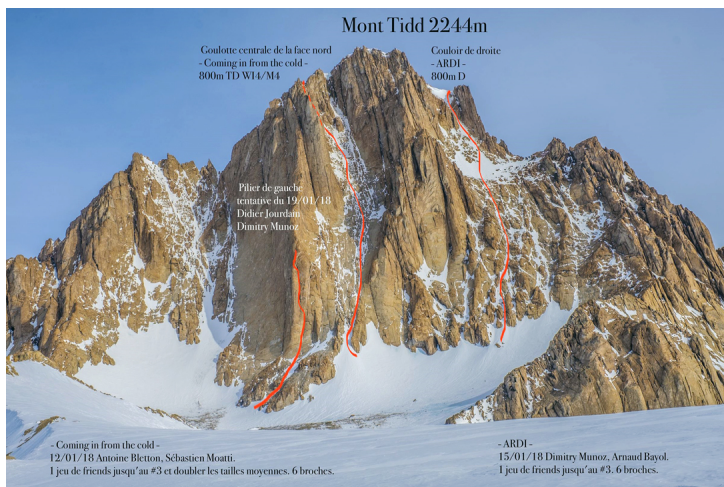


The isolated Pirrit Hills from the northwest. The three main peaks visible are (left to right) Tidd, Turcotte, and Goodwin. Pirrit Hills is something of a misnomer, as the Pirrits are far from "hills" and have a vertical elevation of around 1,000m.

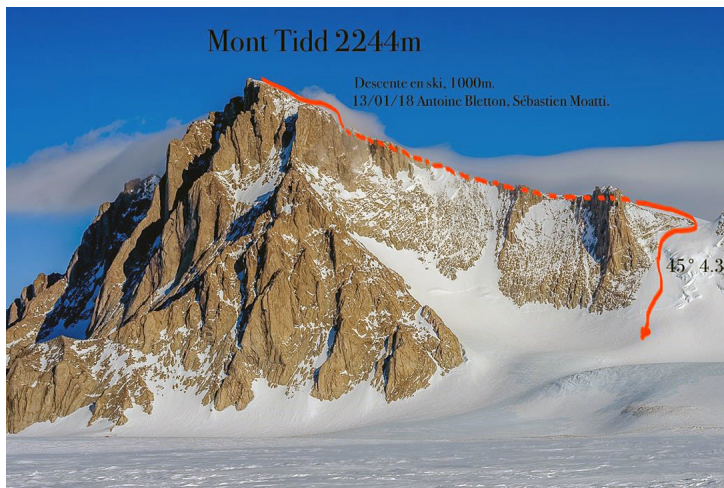




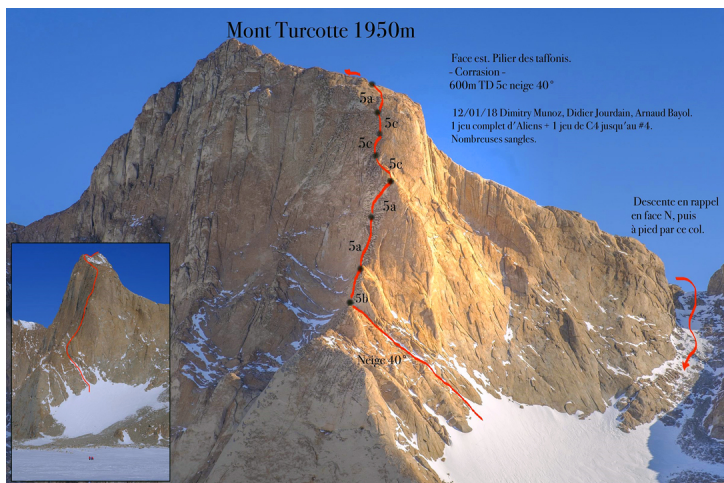
Three Little Birds, the northeast couloir of Mt. Goodwin.



The north face of Mt. Tidd showing, from left to right, the north pillar attempted by Didier Jourdain and Dimitry Munoz, Coming in from the Cold, and ARDI.



Mt. Tidd from the west, showing the route of ascent and ski descent of the southwest flank.



The east face of Mt. Turcotte and the route Corrasion on the Tafoni Pillar.



The north face of Mt. Turcotte. Visible on the left, in profile, is the upper section of the Tafoni Pillar on the east face. To the right is Paradis Blanc.

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