



ANARE CLUB JOURNAL

AURORA

March 2011

Volume 30 No. 3



HEARD ISLAND – THE CLIMBING OF BIG BEN

— By Tim Bowden

‘Heard Island is a very threatening place, the sheer malevolence of Heard Island hits you when you go ... it is essentially black and white, stark, because the black volcanic rock cliffs rise out of this grey seething sea and the wind is blowing and the birds are just floating around in the gale and screaming. The tops of these black cliffs are coated with a thick, fifty-foot or so layer of white glacier ice and this disappears up into the swirling mists that are engulfing this great mountain. When the mists clear you have a nine-thousand-foot mountain rising straight out of the sea. Now, not many places do you get a straight lift of nine thousand feet for a mountain from a place where you’re standing but to have it coming out of the sea with black cliff and then the white glaciers streaking up and the buttresses of the summit and the steep rock cliffs and the ice falls of the glaciers – it really is a most impressive place. And on the few good days, when the wind drops and the clouds clear and you sail around this thing, it is absolutely magnificent.’

(Phillip Law, 30 November, 1987.)

The ANARE station at Atlas Cove, on Heard Island, was officially closed on Wednesday, 9 March, 1955, after seven years of continuous operation. Its demise was a sacrifice to finance the establishment of Mawson station, the first ANARE settlement on continental Antarctica.

The abandonment of Heard Island was strenuously resisted by the Bureau of Meteorology, which found data from the island extremely useful. There was also a reluctance to disrupt a history of continuous observations. Phil Law had no alternative, but found it ‘a depressing task’ after so much effort had been put into the station and associated research. The huts were sealed, and emergency stores, a diesel generator, stove and radio were left in case of an emergency, or a future occupation of the station,

The Officer in Charge (OIC) on Heard Island during 1954/1955 was medical officer Grahame Budd – whose association with the island and ANARE was to continue. It was a matter of intense frustration to Budd – and other resident mountaineers before him – that it had not been possible to climb Big Ben (2745 metres), then believed to be the highest mountain on Australian territory. His year on the island in 1954 bit deep. Budd:

‘I was an impressionable age, I was only 24. And my first sight of the place was quite wonderful. I woke up one morning to find *Kista Dan* hove to off Rogers Head – and to look out at

dawn and see the red volcanic cones and the blue lights of the glaciers and the snow fields going up into the clouds, the great cliffs and the Sooty Albatross calling ... it was absolute magic. And the whole year there just reinforced that.’

The OIC of the ANARE Heard Island station in 1953, John Béchervaise, writer, mountaineer, photographer, artist, teacher and historian, was intensely aware of this magnificent unclimbed peak, the lure of which loomed exceeding large when the news came through that the world’s highest peak, Mt. Everest, had been conquered.

Many attempts had been made by ANARE expeditioners to climb the active volcano, but they were always defeated by the island’s notoriously fierce weather.



Fred Elliott emerges from an igloo above the partially excavated tent, November, 1953.

[ANARE photo by John Béchervaise.

Australian Antarctic Division ©
Commonwealth of Australia]

Towards the end of his year on Heard, Béchervaise led a party of three up the mountain. His climbing companions were Fred Elliott, a weather observer and Peter Shaw, a meteorologist. They had very little equipment and had to make their own climbing boots from quarter-inch felt, wound around their Army-issue boots. Béchervaise:

‘Then we made booties out of japara and put that on top, with great heavy rubber soles underneath. We had no sledges, so we made a sledge out of skis, and we towed that up.’

They did have ice-axes but had to

make their own tent. One thing the meteorologists had worked out was that there was no knowing when Big Ben would turn on its very occasional good days. Their radiosonde balloons revealed a ‘pretty nasty’ picture of the weather at 9000 feet, cold exposed and windy. Béchervaise and his companions worked out that the Abbottsmith Glacier was probably their best route to the mountain. They found there was an icefall on the glacier which they thought they could negotiate, and thought it a good idea to lay down a depot of food, which they could return to or take from. However when they set off in early summer, they found their depot had been snowed over and they could not find it, but they continued on anyway.

Béchervaise, Elliott and Shaw got to striking distance of the top on the tenth day. Béchervaise:

‘It was a lovely evening, there was a pink alpine glow over the snow and there were some marvellous ice formations.’

But Big Ben was not going to be so benign for long. No sooner had they put their tent up, than a blizzard started with heavy snow and completely buried their tent. They made a chess set out of improvised odds and ends and played for three days. Béchervaise:

‘We ate as much as we could, but we were then conscious of the fact that we could be short of food. So, after five days, we dug our way out. It became pretty important to become mobile. We’d put bamboo markers down for where our sledge was, and the tips of these markers were showing. We knew the sledge was about three or four feet down at this stage and on it was most of our food. We came up to the surface and, still in the blizzard, built an igloo large enough for us to sit in and have light and air. The tent was down below, at the bottom of a tunnel. We stayed in that igloo until it also became covered with snow.’

In the end, because of the shortage of food, they knew they couldn’t stay there indefinitely. So they dug the sledge out, under blizzard conditions, and started off on the homeward journey. They had been out on the mountain for fifteen days.

Crossing an icefall on the Abbottsmith Glacier, Béchervaise fell into a hidden crevasse. Béchervaise:

‘I went down about 20 feet. And, you know, you don’t feel anything – you’re just helpless and slightly annoyed that it happened. You’re just swinging there between icy walls, with the black depths below ...’

Falling down crevasses is expected, for those who try to cross Heard's heavily fissured glaciers. But on this occasion, Béchervaise was joined by the third man on the rope, Peter Shaw. Béchervaise:

'Peter came through too, and he was about 25 feet behind me, and we were both down the crevasse. But Fred Elliott did the right thing. He anchored the sledge with an ice-axe and came along and got Peter out.'

The two men then lowered an extra rope to Béchervaise, and helped him climb out. It had been a near thing, and their last serious attempt to climb Big Ben that year.



1963 ATTEMPT

Although Grahame Budd did not have time to attempt Big Ben in 1954, he was aware of growing interest in this challenge by mountaineers in Australia.

Warwick Deacock, a noted Himalayan climber, retired Special Air Service (SAS) officer and former foundation warden of the Australian Outward Bound School, also had his eyes on Big Ben, and wrote to Phil Law at the Antarctic Division in 1962, asking if he could have a berth down to Heard Island on *Nella Dan* to climb Big Ben. Deacock: 'I was a great con artist - expeditioners always are - and I tried to con my way down as a sort of hitchhiker.'

Law replied sympathetically, but negatively. Meanwhile, Deacock discovered Grahame Budd was planning a scientific trip to Heard Island with ANARE. The key word was 'scientific'. The summer party of three men would investigate the geology, vulcanology and glaciology of Big Ben, South Barrier and other unexplored areas, and would seek evidence of glacier retreat and colonisation by fur seals or king penguins. The three men would also study their own reactions to cold stress and acclimatisation, count and band albatrosses and other birds, and make regular meteorological observations. There would also be a 'scientific' ascent of Mawson Peak, the summit of Big Ben. Deacock:

'I signed on as 'Climber/Handyman', and Phil Law crossed that out and put 'Assistant Scientist'. I thought that was very nice. It gave me a certain amount of respectability. We had a sort of sub-plan to undertake vulcanology on the top of Mawson's Peak, which was believed to still be an active volcano.'

Law was sympathetic to the raw adventure of it, but had to justify the ANARE involvement. Deacock:

'We had what I call, 'the thin veneer

of science'. Nowadays isn't it the thin veneer of conservation or the thin veneer of jingoism? But actually, why not go for fun?'

Budd argued more realistically that the scientific part was no less fascinating than the mountain, because in 1954/55 he had formed the impression, although without firm evidence, that Heard Island's glaciers might be in retreat, and that there might be a resurgence of the king penguin and fur seal populations. A large part of the island was still unvisited - all the South Barrier uplands and all the inland parts around Mawson Peak. So there was a great deal of exploration to be done there - and a lot of interesting questions.

Were the glaciers temperate or polar? And what about the nature of the volcano itself? Budd proposed that a geologist and vulcanologist, Dr. Jon Stephenson, join his ANARE expedition. Stephenson had led an expedition to the Karakoram [Pakistan, India and China border], and had been the sole Australian member of Sir Vivian Fuchs' Commonwealth Transantarctic Expedition of 1957/58, during which he and a companion had become the first men since Amundsen to drive dog teams to the South Pole. The Climber/Handyman/Assistant Scientist Deacock would make up the climbing team of three - after having resigned from his job as an assistant biscuit-creamer at Swallow and Ariel in Melbourne.

Law put Budd's proposal to the Antarctic Planning Committee, which was nervous about having only three people on the island with no back up. Eventually they agreed, providing there was a base party of three at Atlas Cove while Budd, Stephenson and Deacock were working on the mountain and elsewhere.

Nella Dan called at Atlas Cove on 28 January, 1963, en route to resupply Mawson and Davis stations. The settlement was in a shocking state. During the previous decade, wind had stripped the layers of paint from the outside of the huts, rain had got in and, worst of all, elephant seals had broken in and 'painted every available surface with faeces'. Leaving Alan Gilchrist (who had been the MO (Medical Officer) on the first Heard wintering in 1948), weather observer and radio operator Nils Lied, and biologist Max Downes (both Heard Island veterans) to cope with the mess, the three mountaineers were taken further down the coast to lay a depot at Spit Bay, and then to Long Beach, where they endured the usual wet Heard Island landings, hampered by high winds and surf.

After establishing a depot of eight days food on the glacier at 1800 metres, they took advantage of a rare spell of fine weather to press on. Big Ben has a summit plateau at around 2200 metres

and the three climbers pitched camp there, knowing that Mawson Peak (the volcanic cone that forms the summit) was only about 500 metres higher. Then the weather closed in, and they were blizzard-bound for five days. The climbers were philosophical. Budd:

'Warwick likes to say that the main hazard on expeditions is bed sores. Because you make yourself at home in the tent and at last start to read the books you brought along.'

Budd had **Dr. Zhivago**, Stephenson, **War and Peace** and Deacock **The Importance of Living** by Lin Yutang. The tent was designed for two, and there was barely room for the three men to lie in their sleeping bags, which soon became wet as the temperature fluctuated from below to above freezing. Heavy snowfalls gradually buried the tent. When the light became too bad to read, the man lying in the middle held a lighted candle on his chest while those on either side took turns in reading out loud. Budd said that the opening of *Zhivago* was very prescient because of its account of the night after *Zhivago's* mother was buried. Budd:

'Pasternak's description of the blizzard, 'the air smoking with snow', was absolutely spot on ... and *Zhivago* has a horrible vision of his mother sinking deeper and deeper under the snow, where she'll never be found again. And this was odd, because a few nights later the same thing happened to us in a snow cave.'

By the fifth day, the tent was completely buried under the snow, the party was suffering mild carbon monoxide poisoning from Primus fumes, and they were nearly out of food. They realised they would have to force their way down to their depot at 1800 metres, bring up the eight days' food and wait for better weather. They marked their buried tent, and headed back down the mountain - but failed to find their cached supplies. Deacock:

'Slowly it dawned on us that we'd lost it. And what had happened - a bit like the Simpson Desert - the snow had blown like sand and a dune had formed.'

They headed down to a primitive snow cave they had made beside a pass, subsequently named 'Budd Pass', at 1200 metres. Despite their precarious situation Budd recalls the extreme beauty in the midst of the extreme violence of the weather. Budd:

'As we got down to the pass, the cloud lifted a bit and we had a view through to the far, red volcanic cliffs of South Barrier, with a patch of sunlight on them, and then a bright rainbow ... this fabulous sudden revelation. While at the same time hundred-knot gusts were exploding on



Abbotsmith Glacier (centre) and western side of Heard Island from *HMALST* [His Majesty's Australian Landing Ship Tank] *Labuan*, in February, 1949. On the skyline (from left) are the summit plateau, Mawson Peak, Budd Peak, and Budd Pass. The 1953 party traversed from the left border and climbed across Abbotsmith Glacier. The 1963 and 1965 parties climbed through Budd Pass and then alongside the western face of Budd Peak.

[ANARE Photo 233 by A. Campbell-Drury. Australian Antarctic Division © Commonwealth of Australia]

the rocks near the pass, and flinging rocks and chunks of snow all over the place.'

As the blizzard roared outside, they lay on their climbing rope and wet wind-proofs in the snow cave, while the roof dripped continually. Now wet as well as cold the three climbers huddled together like penguins. Deacock:

'Emperor penguins huddle and the one in the middle moves to the outside. So we took turns. The one in the middle was cuddled by the other two, arms and legs round, and every hour we changed. The shudders were the most exhausting things, because they nearly shook you off this little bed we'd made ... that was nature making you shiver to keep you warm.

Dr. Zhivago and the other books had been left in the top tent. They sang songs, and Deacock's remarkable memory for poetry helped pass the time. They also chewed pieces of pemmican, raw bacon and greasy chocolate from time to time to keep their internal fires going, to prevent hypothermia.

Budd recalled that Warwick Deacock had arranged to write an article for the BP oil company's magazine. Budd:

'They said, 'Oh, keep an account of your tribulations'. So whenever anything was happening we'd ask ourselves, "Could this be a tribulation?" "Oh no, you wouldn't call this a tribulation. We'll save the tribulations for when it gets really hard!"'

Deacock was not sure how long they were there, but thought it was at least 36 hours. Deacock:

'I thought it was three years. I have never been so cold.'

At 8 p.m. on their second night in the snow cave, Stephenson lit a cigarette and the air in the cave suddenly turned to fog. This was odd, but it fortunately signalled to the cave-dwellers that their air supply was blocked. Deacock:

'In a snow cave there are always drafts ... we'd gone in and made a long entrance and then dug up, which you normally do to keep warm air in. What had happened was the weather had come in and snow covered the entrance to the cave, so there was about a ten-foot [3.4 metres] tunnel, totally choked.'

They cut a new entrance, through the roof. But at dusk they discovered that 1.5 metres of packed drift snow had accumulated above the cave and was rapidly deepening. They took turns outside in the blizzard, shovelling snow away to keep the entrance clear. But by 2 a.m. they could no longer keep pace with the relentlessly deepening snow, and had to abandon the cave or be buried alive. Budd:

'We thought we'd better get out - although it didn't look too promising with a full blizzard blowing and dark, and four miles of crevassed slopes below us.'

Deacock was last out, and being the

biggest got his shoulders stuck for a while in the snow tunnel. As they emerged into the full fury of the blizzard it was imperative to get moving quickly. Deacock:

'We only had a thin Alpine rope and a small shovel [Their ice-axes had been deeply buried and lost under the snow]. I went to grab my pack and couldn't pick it up. And I nearly cried. I said, "God I'm weak - I can't get my pack up". And Jon Stephenson said, "You're standing on the strap, that's why".'

They roped up, but did not put on their crampons because they felt sure that the ice of the pass would have become covered with soft snow. Budd led off but immediately lost his footing - the pass was bare blue ice - and slid down the slope until Deacock checked his fall with the rope. They all began the difficult task of putting on their crampons in the dark and the blizzard. Budd took the longest because he had to work in bare hands - his gloves had frozen into immovable claws from holding the shovel during the final digging shift.

At the bottom of the pass they paused while Stephenson rewarmed Budd's frostbitten hands on his stomach, and the way ahead slowly became visible in the dawn light. Deacock:

'I remember trying to get Grahame's anorak and shirt down, which were frozen, but couldn't. So he had this hunk of flesh showing. And I tried to separate his mitten from its outer and that was frozen. Then I pulled it with



Big Ben from the south-east in December, 1947, with Fiftyone Glacier and South Barrier in the foreground. Budd Pass (centre) leads from the western edge of Fiftyone Glacier to Gotley Glacier beyond. The 1963 climb from Long Beach reached the pass from the left side of the photo, below the orientation cross. The 1965 climb from Capsize Beach reached the pass from the right side, via South Barrier.

[ANARE photo by P. Swan, Australian Antarctic Division © Commonwealth of Australia]

my teeth and lost my front tooth in the process. Things were a bit drastic then.'

Stephenson led off through the crevasses, with Deacock belaying him and Budd coming last with his hands inside his trousers to stop them from freezing again.

When they reached Long Beach they had no tent, they were all soaked through, and their sleeping bags were near the summit of Big Ben. Budd could not help thinking of the mountain as a 'very good chess player' which had totally outwitted them. Deacock found three large tins of pineapple, pears and fruit salad in their stores dump. Deacock:

'I opened them and we had one spoon, and we put these things in line, passed the spoon around and ate the lot. That was great.'

Grahame Budd had not had a pleasant descent. Budd:

'My frozen clothing had ridden up so my midriff was exposed a lot of the time and it was hard to push it down. I'd reached the stage where I could

hold my head up only while I was walking. The moment I stopped, my chin would thump down onto my chest. Also the flap of my pack had come loose and periodically the wind would catch it and whip it over and give me a great crack on the head. But somehow we'd never got round to actually doing anything about it, so I went on being belted over the head with this pack flap. So we stumbled on down and finally, there we were at the beach, which was absolutely wonderful – like returning to life, all those living things around us. We felt we'd stood up and walked away from our grave – and here we were back in the world of the living, with all these nice friendly penguins and seals and seabirds.'

Stephenson and Deacock built what they called 'The Wallow' out of ration boxes, fuel drums, and rocks, roofed by a waterproof sledge cover supported on a bamboo pole they'd found on the beach, and the three of them huddled beneath it like elephant seals. Their down-filled clothing was saturated. But

they had the essentials for survival – shelter, a Primus stove, kerosene and food. After a hot meal Deacock cleaned and bandaged Budd's hands, which when re-inspected two days later proved to be swollen and blistered but nevertheless usable.

In the five days until Budd's hands were safe for travel, the party recovered its strength, made scientific observations around the Long Beach area, and unsuccessfully tried to radio Atlas Cove to report that they were alive and well. They then set off to walk around the coast, via Spit Bay, back to Atlas Cove. Budd had no feeling in his hands, and all that they had to cross the glaciers were a bamboo pole, a small shovel, two-and-a-half pairs of crampons and a length of rappel line.

Ever mindful of the scientific purpose of their expedition, Stephenson geologised as they travelled, and Budd was delighted to find two colonies of king penguins breeding at Spit Bay, as well as plenty of fur seals. Even more significant, they found that every glacier was retreating – one of the earliest signs of climate change in the South Indian

Ocean.

Back at Atlas Cove, their arrival was celebrated by a great casserole of penguin steaks, marinated in claret, prepared by Nils Lied. Unfortunately several days after they got back, Deacock developed symptoms of appendicitis. As it happened, there were two doctors on hand – Alan Gilchrist and Grahame Budd. Budd had left an emergency medical kit on the island when he left in March, 1955. Deacock was put on a starvation diet of black tea for five days, and was spared an emergency operation. Budd:

‘Warwick thought it was rather bad that while he was being starved he took on the job of cooking ... It shows you should starve the artist, because he produced masses of marvellous cartoons in that time.’

Before *Nella Dan* returned from the Antarctic to pick them up they were able to complete a great deal of scientific work, including further evidence of massive glacier retreat, and proof that the fur seals and king penguins were actually breeding again on Heard Island, since being devastated by the sealers in the nineteenth century.

Stephenson, Lied and Downes had walked down to Spit Bay on the eastern end of the island to continue their field work. As Deacock had now recovered from his appendix scare, and the Atlas Cove field work had been completed, he and Budd set out to walk to Spit Bay, in order to complete the census of king penguins and fur seals on the north coast. As a two-man party without tent or radio they were somewhat vulnerable, but they were neither the first nor the last two-man party to make this journey and they considered the risk acceptable because of the scientific value of a complete census of the whole island.

In the first few hours of the journey they had such an easy and fast crossing of the glaciers between Atlas Cove and Saddle Point that they paused near the far side of the last glacier, the Challenger, for Deacock to get some movie footage. Grahame Budd:

‘Warwick wanted to get a few film shots of what it’s like cutting steps in ice and stepping across crevasses, so he fished out his spring-operated movie camera and gave it to me. He found a suitable crevasse and I sat down on the edge of it, unbelayed and



Digging out the tent entrance on the third day of the plateau camp, February, 1963. Summit of Budd Peak in the background.

[ANARE photo by Jon Stephenson. Australian Antarctic Division © Commonwealth of Australia]

still tied to Warwick by 40 feet of rope, with my pack on the ice a few yards away.

‘Warwick said, “Okay, now start filming when I say, and I’ll just cut a few steps and then step over the crevasse”. I started filming but we hadn’t fully wound up the spring, and the motor stopped before he’d finished his moves. So we had to do it again. This time the motor didn’t even start, because my frostbitten finger couldn’t feel anything and it wasn’t on the button. I thought I was pressing the button but I wasn’t. So, ‘once more’, and we carefully put the finger where it should be, under observation, and Warwick started doing his thing.

‘Through the viewfinder I saw him step across the crevasse onto a small step he’d chipped out with his ice-axe – and then the step collapsed under his weight. Before I could react the camera had captured good footage of Warwick falling backwards into the crevasse. I saw the rope streaking out after him, and I knew that the moment it came taut I was going to follow him down the crevasse. It was a bad moment.

‘And then the rope stopped running out! Hardly believing it, I looked down and saw that in this whole crevasse, which was the usual black, bottomless thing, there was one chunk of ice sticking up just big enough for a chap to land on – and Warwick had landed on it!

‘Warwick was about 20 feet down and he had every chance of being injured. But he’d landed on his back and he had his pack on, so he was bruised but otherwise quite intact. And he was able – shortly afterwards, and with a very solid belay from me – to

chip his way up the side of the crevasse, leaving plenty of blood stains on the wall, and get to the surface, and we both carefully made our way down to the Saddle Point hut and told ourselves, ‘Not to do that again! We have been rather silly haven’t we?’

‘It was a great example of the way you get over-confident – and many experienced mountaineers have been killed through doing something stupid, through sheer over-confidence and inattention. But it was also a delayed consequence of getting my hands frost-bitten a few weeks earlier, since the threefold repetition

of Warwick’s moves had weakened the ice.’

Next day, in a rainy north-west gale, they walked from Saddle Point to Spit Bay, successfully completing the census of king penguins and fur seals despite another misadventure, this time in a waist-deep flooded stream which swept them off their feet and almost carried them out into the surf.

Deacock, Stephenson, Budd, Lied and Downes were all at Spit Bay on the eastern end of the island when *Nella Dan* arrived. A heavy surf was running, and Phil Law was part of the team hauling the cargo-laden pontoon away from the beach. Budd:

‘We were going well, through manageable waves, when a huge dumper reared up close ahead. At the same time a momentary slack in the grass-line let the pontoon swing broadside to the approaching wave. “Pull like buggery!”, shouted Phil. Pull we did, but we were still at a bad angle when the wave broke over us.’

The wave jackknifed the pontoon, hurling Law into the water. Nils Lied:

‘Our Director was spotted shortly afterwards, swimming strongly towards the open sea. As he overtook and was about to pass the pontoon he was gaffed like a tuna and hauled on board, wanting to know whose hand it was that held him under for so long.’

Grahame Budd recalled that it was only when they were clear of the danger and heading for the ship that he realised that in the haste of their departure none of the Heard Island party had remem-

bered to put on life jackets.

Nella Dan called in to the French station at Kerguelen before returning to Melbourne. While most of the expeditioners on board were being entertained by the hospitable French, Budd and his five Heard Island companions were sitting in *Nella Dan's* freezer, shivering in their underpants, with thermistor thermometers taped to and inserted in sensitive bodily orifices, to complete their program of physiological experiments on human reactions to cold. Budd:

'Just uncomplainingly went through this whole series of experiments that went on for about eighteen hours while the rest of the ship were having a wonderful time with the French. I thought that really told us something about those blokes.'



1965 ATTEMPT

Both Budd and Deacock were still keen to first-foot the summit of Big Ben and continue their research program, so Deacock organised a private expedition – the South Indian Ocean Expedition to Heard Island (SIOEHI) – for the summer of 1964/1965. It was the first private Antarctic expedition to leave Australia since Sir Douglas Mawson's BANZARE (British Australian New Zealand Antarctic Research Expedition) expedition in 1929/1930. Although the expedition had no formal connection with ANARE, five of its ten members were ANARE men, and its scientific program included the ANARE project of monitoring glacier fluctuations and the population growth of king penguins and fur seals – a project which the ANARE 1963 expedition had initiated, and which was subsequently a central task of the ANARE 1969 and 1971 expeditions. The scientific program also included plankton hauls, hydrology stations, and synoptic weather observations throughout the voyage, for the CSIRO Division of Oceanography and the Commonwealth Bureau of Meteorology.

The expedition ship, dry-chartered from its owners, was a 65-foot steel yacht, *Patanela*, skippered by the veteran Himalayan explorer, Everest climber, and blue-water sailor H. W. (Bill) Tilman. Jon Stephenson was not able to join the expedition, but Grahame Budd was among the team of five climbers to be led by Deacock.

Patanela had been working as a crayfishing boat in Tasmanian waters. Accommodation was basic to say the least. The on-board toilet was taken out to make room for an Ocean Span radio. Deacock said there were sixty feet of gunwale for those that needed a toilet, an interesting experience to say the least in the tempestuous waters of the Southern Ocean. According to Deacock there were only five on board with sail-

ing experience – the skipper Bill Tilman, Colin Putt (engineer), Antony Hill (mate), Edwin Reid (radio operator), and Deacock, who appointed himself cook – the toughest job in the ship. The other crew members were Drs. Russell Pardoe, Malcolm Hay, and Grahame Budd, together with Philip Temple and John Crick. Four of the crew were quartered in the dank dark confines of the cray tank. Another group was quartered in the fo'c'sle (over which was a sign: ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE), and Tilman and Deacock were in the galley. Deacock said the living conditions were so bad that any conventional crew would have mutinied.

After an eight-week voyage from Sydney, they called in at Kerguelen to re-water *Patanela* and make final preparations for landing on Heard Island. Using timber from an old wrecked sealer dating back to 1882, they constructed two extra bunks for the four unlucky occupants of the cray tank, who had been making do with only two. The French at a nearby summer field camp invited them to a lunch of local lapin [rabbits] and plenty of red wine. There followed several hours of an increasingly hilarious *déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a wonderfully light-hearted interlude before the serious work ahead. As Tilman later wrote (on page 146 of **Mostly Mischief – Voyages to the Arctic and to the Antarctic**, Hollis & Carter, London, 1966):

'Towards four o'clock, for it had been a protracted lunch, both the weather and the guests showed signs of change, of impending dissolution. Once more we sang the Marseillaise, Grahame playing the accompaniment on his recorder while lying under the table, then arm-in-arm we went down to the beach, a swaying picture of international fellowship. The sails went up with a will, albeit a little raggedly, and as we swung round to face the entrance the oil drum raft launched off, more Verey lights soared up, and both helicopters took off, to zoom dangerously round our masts. In gathering cloud we got clear of the coast before the wind died and left us tossing in a cross sea in rain and darkness.'

They thought it would take them three days to get to Heard Island, but in fact it took only two. Budd:

'On the *Patanela* trip I had **Moby Dick**, which I was reading for the first time, and some interesting parallels came along because in a way Warwick and I were a bit like Captain Ahab. In fact Big Ben became a sort of Moby Dick, and Melville rather sets you up for this because he's full of comparisons of Moby Dick to an island – 'The wild and distant seas where he rolled his island bulk'. And there's a marvellous scene where he

talks about 'endless processions of the whale, and, midmost of them all, one grand hooded phantom, like a snow hill in the air'.

'And the first sight of Heard, with the snow hill floating in the air above the empty sea, it's spot-on. Ahab had lost a leg to Moby Dick, and Warwick and I both had our scars from Big Ben, so we had the same feeling of coming back to do battle with a highly respected opponent. We had a score to settle.'

Warwick Deacock also has a vivid memory of that moment. Deacock:

'One morning Phillip Temple, who was on watch – a Kiwi – he said, "Land ho!" And we came on deck and there on the horizon were these black, jagged needles, which are the McDonald Islands [44 km west of Heard Island]. But behind it was a sort of mist, and then above it this vast white cone with the small cone of Mawson Peak. And there was total silence, and Grahame and I said, 'We're back!'. To us, it was this love/hate affair (whatever it is) and the others said, 'My God, it's worth the voyage just to see this.' It was a marvellous, marvellous thing to see.'

Next morning they were preparing to land at a beach west of Winston Lagoon when a north-west gale sprang up and drove *Patanela* away from the island. They drifted, however, for two days, then managed to return to the island and land the shore party – who arrived sprawled on the beach under their capsized inflatable boat after dumping waves 2-3 metres high had pitch-poled it at the water's edge. The event gave Capsize Beach its name, and led Colin Putt to remark that the Big Ben climb had started *below* sea level! After the shore party had fetched a second load of stores from the ship (and endured two more capsizes), *Patanela's* reduced crew of five sailed her to Kerguelen, the nearest safe anchorage.

The five to attempt the climb were Warwick Deacock, Grahame Budd, Colin Putt, Phil Temple and John Crick. For the next week they relayed 40 kg loads over South Barrier and the Fiftyone Glacier, to eventually camp in their polar pyramid tent at Budd Pass (1220 metres), with enough food and fuel for a prolonged siege of Big Ben.

Every morning the cook of the day would begin preparing breakfast at 3:30 a.m., and everyone would get dressed, rope up and put on their crampons, and head towards Mawson Peak. If the weather was too bad they would return to the tent, to try again the next morning. Deacock said there were trade union rumblings about this, but it was thought to be their best chance of seizing the right moment when it came.

On January 25 they were climbing

through mist when the weather suddenly cleared and there was Mawson Peak. Deacock:

'We travelled five on the rope, on a tight rope. The two Kiwis, who were super climbers, tended to muck around a bit on the crevasses and I said, "No, you haven't got enough time for that." It was Heard Island climbing – you go on a tight rope and if someone falls down, you pull them up and keep going. And we went up like the head of a sewing machine, with the lead climber going down the slots and the others pulling him out on the tight rope. I nearly got hit on the head by John Crick, because I took a movie all the way to the top, with one of these 16 mm, Bell & Howell clockwork jobs. And I said, "Hang on a bit", as John was coming out of a slot and I took a film of him, you see. And he came out with ice-axe raised, and he said, "You're supposed to be rescuing me, not bloody well filming me!" Anyway, it was all on film. And we got to the caldera.

'It was an interesting thing to be back there, sentimentally. And then there was Mawson's Peak. It's a sort of boulder slab, with downward-sloping boulder slabs of ice and, underneath, the crevasses. So it wasn't just a totally easy walk. And it was very nice – with no particular discussion or committee meeting – when Colin said, "I think Grahame ought to have this lead", and we all agreed, so we plugged him in front. Surely, it was his mountain. And up he went, very well, and we got to the top about half-past one. And, of course, we had all these flags that you take, don't you? And we were hoping to sell our story to the National Geographic and everybody, you know. And so we stood around, beating our chests and taking pictures of ourselves.

Throughout the climb Grahame had been lowering thermometers into crevasses, to find out whether they were temperate or polar. Unfortunately the scientific work had eroded not only the time they could spend on top of Mawson Peak, the highest point on Big Ben at 2745 metres, but what they could see from it. As they reached the summit, billowing clouds of steam and sulphur dioxide around them, they suddenly lost all visibility as the north-west wind got going and it began to sleet. Budd:

'The actual summit was a sort of pile of snow and ice, and the crater was off to one side and we could dimly see it. There was an ice-cliff going down and sounds of fizzings and hissings and billowing clouds of steam, and there were brown deposits on the ice and the exposed rock. And as soon as we'd done the essentials of waving flags and taking photos and shaking hands and so on, we tried to get down

into the crater. A few of us roped up and headed that way, but as soon as we got near it we realised it was very dicey because the ice was all weakened by the steam, there was practically no visibility, and there seemed quite a good chance that we'd hurt ourselves trying to get down into it – and suddenly the problem of getting back to the tent, at least 5,000 feet below us, in bad weather with a rather intricate route and no visibility – this seemed to become dominant in our thoughts.

'And so we had to sacrifice the opportunity to see a bit more of the crater, for survival. And getting down was a bit tricky. I was leading and I went a bit too much to one side, and there was debate as to whether we should bivouac or keep going, but eventually, after an hour or two we found ourselves back at the summit plateau and there were some of our marker poles there, and the crevasse thermometers and so on. At that stage we had lunch, which was about 3 or 4 in the afternoon.

'We broke out biscuits and cheese and in the process of breaking marker poles earlier (so there'd be more of them) I'd cut my finger, and so I remember us eating biscuits and cheese liberally smeared with blood, and it just added an extra bit of vividness to the moment. And then we just stumped off downhill, but we were walking in the right direction and fairly well signposted by the cliffs to one side.'

Deacock:

'Grahame compassed us down and we got down safely and got back to the camp. We'd been fourteen hours, I think, by the time we got back. And we got into the tent and the weather went really bad for another two days and we just lay. By now, our down gear's all wet again, which is normal, and we were lying on our backs in our sleeping bags, pedalling (you know, cycling) and singing the ying-tong song – you know, the Goon Show, 'Ying-tong, ying-tong, ying-tong tid-dley aye po ...' Nutty as fruitcakes, but full of beans – we'd climbed the mountain. But then we had to get down. And when it came to pick up the gear – we'd got up in a couple of lifts – we couldn't carry it all. I remember Graham picking up his load with the tent, which was covered in ice, and slowly descending to the ice. So we had to dissect the loads, and we left some stuff up there, I'm afraid, including Phillip Temple's best climbing boots. But I wanted us down in one piece, I didn't think we should play around with the mountain any more. But we got most of the stuff down, and we got back very safely to the coast.'

The final fortnight of the expedition was spent in scientific work that took the expedition members as far afield as the Compton Glacier on the north coast and the Gotley Glacier on the south coast, and onto the volcanic uplands of South Barrier. *Patanela's* return from Kerguelen prompted tense discussions about risking that day's dangerous surf, but late in the day the inflatable boat was successfully launched and the shore party rejoined the ship. Five weeks later, *Patanela* was back in Sydney. Big Ben had at last been climbed, and a worthwhile scientific program had been completed.

Of a lifetime of adventuring, where did Warwick Deacock rate his Heard Island experiences? Deacock:

'Oh, *the* best experience of my life. And I'll spell that out. Never mind whether we were lucky enough to get up our mountain. It's a wonderful, wonderful place to have been to, a privilege to have been to Heard Island. I'll go again tomorrow if somebody'd send me. And I did go again, in 1969 actually, I went back. But what stood out was my mates. It was a wonderful, friendly, happy, successful expedition, with people with one common aim. You know, the conquistadors of the useless: 'What's the point?' Well, there doesn't have to be a point: we went for the fun and games. You might say it was a great adventure holiday.'

The last word on the expedition was left to Tilman, who wrote (**Mostly Mischief** page 162):

'In his famous description of a prize fight Hazlitt summed it up as 'a complete thing'. In my opinion, devoted as I am to both sea and mountains, to sailing and climbing, this expedition deserves to be so described. A long voyage, much of it in unfrequented waters, and at the end of it a remote, uninhabited island crowned with an unclimbed mountain. It was an enterprise that needed to be undertaken, one that I myself had shrunk from attempting, and that now, thanks to Warwick Deacock's initiative and drive, had at last been accomplished. From first to last we had been a happy party, each man pulling his full weight. I may have regretted not to have set foot even on Heard Island, much less on Big Ben, but that was implicit in the job I undertook. Besides enjoying every minute of it, I considered it a great privilege to be skipper of so fine a vessel and to sail with so eager, lively, and resolute a crew.'



Climbers on upper slopes of South Barrier, January 1965. Colin Putt carries bamboo poles for Polar Pyramid tent. (Southern Indian Ocean Expedition to Heard Island – SIOEHI photo)



Summit of Big Ben, January 1965 – Photo by Grahame Budd



Patanela re-embarks climbers from Capsize Beach, February 1965 – SIOEHI photo by Philip Temple.