

Antarctica

ELLSWORTH MOUNTAINS

—SENTINEL RANGE

Vinson, summary of the 2006-7 season.

There were 100 ascents of Vinson (4,892m) out of 130 attempts. This success rate of only 77% is statistically the worst on record and contrasts strongly with 2005-6, which had the most summit successes with 149 out of the 153 attempts. Failure to summit last season was mainly due to bad weather, particularly in the first few weeks, but there is also a consensus that Vinson clients are becoming progressively less competent and less experienced.

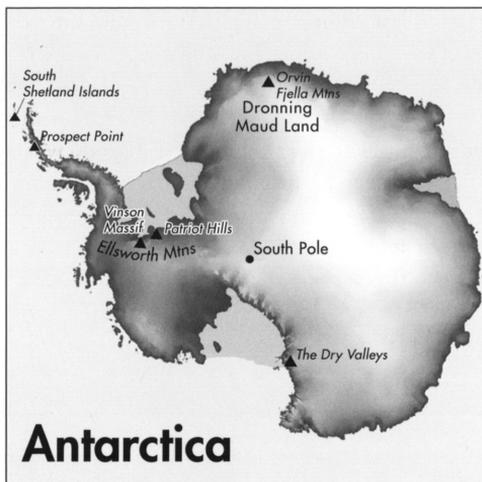
Some are now simply not up to the ascent, especially in less than ideal weather. As in previous years, several poor decisions by guided groups led to situations that really should be avoidable on this mountain. The weather was almost never really bad but was regularly quite poor. Usually one can expect several spells of very good weather lasting around five days or more. However, these never happened and good weather rarely lasted longer than two days. Two guided groups required assistance, one as a result of a crevasse fall and associated hypothermia and frostbite, and the other for a case of pulmonary edema. The seracs on the southwest face of Shinn were again active, calving onto or near the Normal route in the cwm below the Vinson headwall on at least three separate occasions. A serac at the top of the headwall itself also fell early in the season, disintegrating down the middle of the slope to the left of the ascent route.

The total number of individual ascents of the continent's highest summit is now 1090. This does not include repeat ascents: Dave Hahn, for example, has climbed it on 25 occasions, so the total number of ascents must be well over 1,100.

DAMIEN GILDEA, *Australia*, AAC

Sentinel Range, various first ascents and GPS Work.

During the season I led my fifth expedition to the Sentinel Range, and as on previous trips the aim was to climb and re-survey a number of the highest peaks, in order to increase and refine the geographical knowledge of Antarctica's highest mountains. The main objectives for this season were the first ascent of Mt. Rutford, a newly designated high peak to the south of the Vinson Massif, followed by climbing from the Embree Glacier at the very northern end of the range. After this we hoped to climb the remaining two virgin 4,000m peaks.



Eiichi Fukushima, John Evans, Sam Silverstein, and Brian Marts back at Vinson base camp in December 2006 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their first ascent of Vinson. *Damien Gildea*

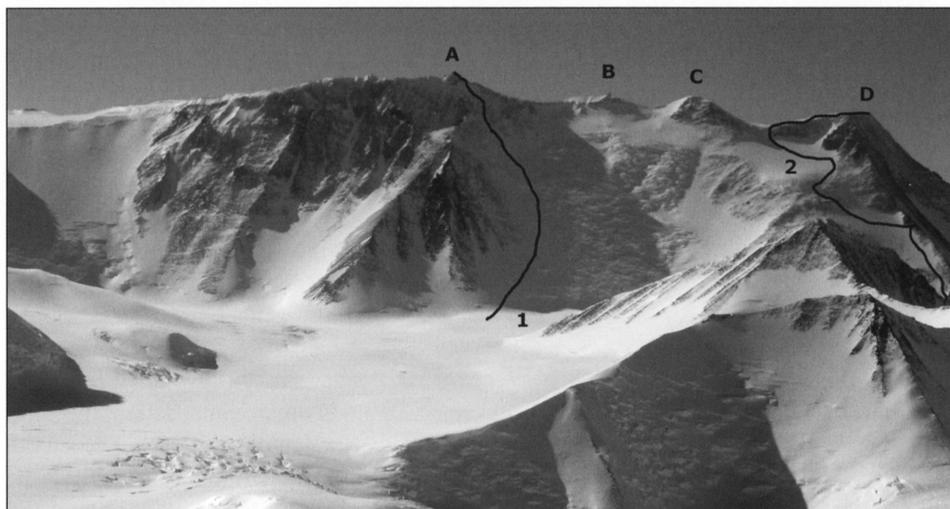


Peaks at the northern end of the Sentinel Range. From left to right: Bentley (4,137m), Sisu (ca 4,050m), Anderson (4,144m). Marked is the route taken by the Omega expedition on the first ascent of Anderson via the west face. In the lower section the solid line marks the route followed by Brown and Gildea, while the dashed line is that taken by Paz Ibarra and Rada. Sisu and Bentley were climbed in 1998 by Patrick Degerman and Veikka Gustafsson. They followed the left side of the snow/ice slope between Bentley and Anderson, then traversed Sisu to reach Bentley. *Damien Gildea*

On November 26 we skied south from Vinson base camp with sleds containing food and fuel for 12 days. After reconnoitering two possible routes down to the Nimitz Glacier, we followed our third option, passing across the Cairns and Tulaczyk Glaciers, through two easy cols, and down into the Zapol Glacier. From here, the icefall leading down to the Nimitz was straightforward, requiring just a short section near the bottom, where we lowered sleds. From here we skied around to the Nimitz and up to the base of the Gildea Glacier. We camped here for four days in poor weather, unable to see our route up through the crevasses of the Gildea. On December 1 we finally made our way east up the glacier for 11km to camp at ca 2,450m near the foot of the north ridge of Mt. Atkinson.

During the afternoon of December 3, we made the second ascent of Atkinson, Jed Brown and I needing just a couple of hours to climb an easy line that slanted up the north face to the north ridge. We left the GPS on the summit in high winds. Camilo Rada and Maria Paz Ibarra ('Pachi') followed us a few hours later, taking a more direct line up the ridge and retrieving the GPS, which later showed that Atkinson is 3,192m, over 100m lower than previously thought. The first ascent of Atkinson was by Robert Anderson and Joseph Blackburn in December 1992.

After three days bad weather we headed for Mt. Slaughter. This peak was first climbed in 1998 by Guy Cotter and Terry Gardiner via a couloir on the north side. The south side is less steep, though all the ridges require some classic, moderate technical climbing. Jed and I took different lines up the south face, but mine ended at a difficult section on the east ridge, so I was forced to down climb and traverse across to Jed's line in the center of the face. The climbing was never difficult but steepened toward to the top, following some shallow gullies and rock ribs. Pachi and Camilo followed the line later that day. Slaughter was previously thought to be around 3,600m but proved to be 3,444m.

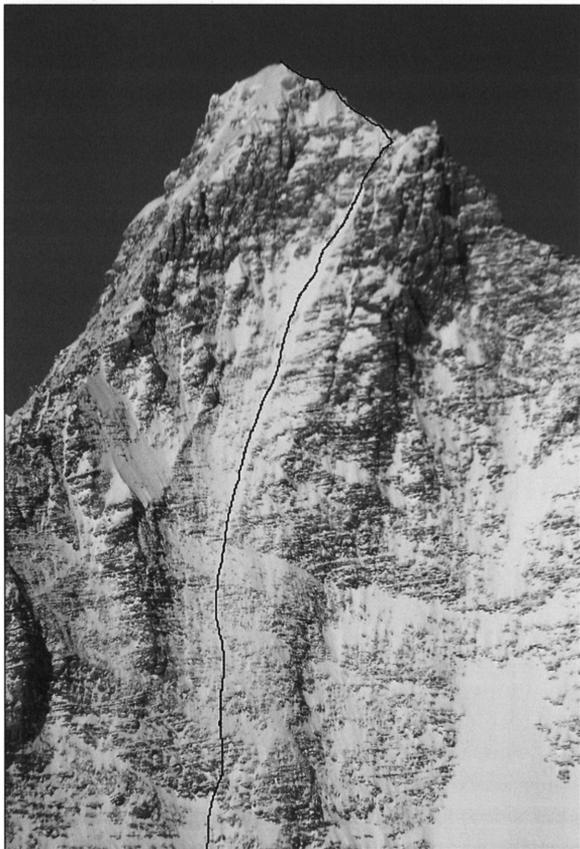


The Craddock Massif in Antarctica's Sentinel Range, viewed from the west. (A) Rutford (4,477m), (B) Bugueno Pinnacle, (C) Rada (4,402m), and (D) Craddock (4,368m). (1) Jed Brown, solo (December 9, 2006), first ascent of the mountain. Repeated by Paz Ibarra and Rada. (2) Chaplin-Gildea (December 7, 2005), new route and second overall ascent of the mountain. Repeated the next day by Bugueno and Rada. *Damien Gildea*

After another day of strong, cold southerly winds, we set off for the west face of Mt. Rutford on December 9. I soon realized I had not suitably refueled or recovered sufficiently after my overly-long ascent of Slaughter, and was not feeling as strong as I would like. I turned back after crossing the bergschrund, while Jed powered on, climbing 2,000m of mostly snow and ice in four and a half hours to make the first ascent in perfect weather. Camilo and Pachi repeated the line, meeting Jed on the way down after he had also walked across to the small virgin point of Bugueno Pinnacle.

Rutford is the highest point of the newly designated Craddock Massif. We had seen this high, sharp point numerous times during our ascents of Vinson in previous years, and while we initially thought it might be higher than Craddock to its south, we eventually decided not. However, after making the second ascent of Craddock in December 2005 and gaining a new perspective on the topography, we realized that this sharp point *was* higher than Mt. Craddock and everything else in the massif of which Craddock was a part. In the process of producing our new topo map of the range, I discussed this issue with the USGS and they decided that the whole big feature would be named the Craddock Massif. The highest point would be named Mt. Rutford, after Robert Rutford, a U.S. glaciologist who did a lot of significant work in the area. Rutford is 4,477m, making it the sixth or seventh highest mountain in Antarctica, depending on the accuracy of Mt. Elizabeth's published height of 4,480m.

Having extended our stay, we were now out of food, so had to leave immediately. Through cold weather and low visibility we made a 14-hour ski journey back to Vinson base camp and spent the next two days resting. On December 14, Jed soloed a 1,500m new route on the main west face of Vinson. Conjugant Gradients, which lies between Jay Smith's Linear Accelerator to the left and the Dave Morton-Todd Passey route Purple Haze to the right, wanders up the easy rock and snow of the lower face before climbing more rock as the face



Situated south of Ostenso, Mt. Morris was first climbed and measured (3,793m) in January 2007. Brown, Paz Ibarra, and Rada's southwest face is marked. *Damien Gildea*

steepens. It eventually gains an obvious short couloir high on the face, visible from the Branscomb Glacier. Jed followed this couloir, topping out near Branscomb Peak around seven hours after leaving base camp. He then walked across to the main summit of Vinson, reaching it just before midnight and was back in camp six hours later.

As we all wanted to maintain our acclimatization, the same day Camilo and Pachi headed off for a single push up Mt. Shinn and I went to look at lines at the left end of Vinson's west face. In perfect sunny weather I reached Low Camp in two hours and spent a cold night there alone. Late the next day I climbed a minor new route on the rock rib that splits the face above Low Camp. The route was 1,000m of mostly steep snow, easy ice and, higher, fun rock climbing. It is a more direct, mostly independent, version of the route climbed by Spaniards Miguel Angel Vidal and Maria Jesus Lago in 2004. I reached the top of the

face in high winds after about four hours climbing, spent some time checking out the new VHF radio repeater installed there, then descended by the steep snow slope at the far northern end of the west face. This slope, which narrows to a fin higher up, has previously been mooted as a possible alternative to the regular Vinson route, which takes the cwm and "headwall" just to the north. I believe the upper slope is probably too steep for most modern Vinson clients, particularly in descent, though given the increasing objective danger of the normal line, some strong groups may want to consider it. The slope is shorter than the normal route, possibly less windy and enables you to place high camp an hour or more above the traditional site at Goodge Col.

Meanwhile, Camilo and Pachi had climbed a new route on the southwest face of Shinn (4,660m), which they named *Soleil de Media Noche* (Midnight Sun). Their route gained the lower left side of the face, across from the old site of C2, and climbed through a narrow mixed couloir that required a rope in places. This led to somewhat easier ground, which they traversed up and right, frontpointing unroped, to gain the big obvious shoulder reached on the Normal route up Shinn. They followed this to the top, completing only the third route on Antarctica's

third highest mountain and the first not to have the advantage of going from Vinson's High Camp on Goodge Col.

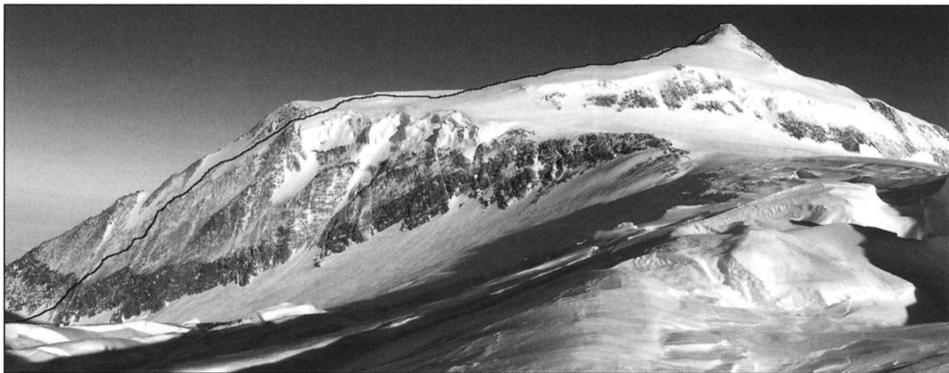
Back at base camp we were able to spend some time with the guys from the 1966 expedition, who had returned to celebrate the 40th anniversary of their first ascent of Vinson. We then loaded our sleds with 30 days of food and fuel, and took a spectacular flight 50km north along the range to land on the beautiful Embree Glacier. Only two teams had visited the main part of this glacier before, making some minor ascents and attempting Mt. Bentley. Camped in the upper cirque at 2,450m, we spent the next five days in poor weather, placing the GPS on some nearby minor rocky points and going for short skis up and down the glacier. Christmas Day turned out nice and we made the first ascent of a small peak on the southern wall of the cirque. This wall is a long ridge running northeast from Mt. Anderson toward Mt. Press and contains a number of small peaks. We thought the one we headed for was the highest, going on photos taken from far to the south in previous years. However, once on top we found this was incorrect and at least two other tops were higher than ours. The route was straightforward, up a ramp into a couloir of soft snow and then onto a very corniced hanging summit. The GPS was placed slightly to the south on a lower rock outcrop, which was found to have an altitude of 3,368m.

After two days of bad weather, during which we retreated from the base of Mt. Todd, the 29th was better, so Jed and I set off in the afternoon for Mt. Bentley. The northeast ridge had been almost climbed by Wally Berg and Bob Elias in 1999 but they stopped a short distance from the summit. Climbing unroped up independent vague lines atop the ridge, we wove around and over several rock patches, until gaining the easy-angled rocky wall beneath the summit. Here Jed stayed more to the right on mixed ground, reaching the summit well before me: I went to the left on bad steep snow. The summit ridge is quite narrow and corniced, and I found it challenging in the strengthening winds. Pachi and Camilo waited until next evening before repeating the climb and retrieving the GPS in perfect weather. Bentley later proved to be 4,137m, only 8m lower than its official USGS height.

Pachi, Camilo, and Jed celebrated New Year's Eve with an ascent of the beautiful Mt. Press, northeast of our camp, climbing the west spur to south ridge. We had seen Press the year before, while descending Gardner and thought it looked much higher than its altitude on the map of 3,760m. In fact our GPS data showed it is actually lower at 3,732m.

Jed spent the first day of 2007 narrowly avoiding being taken for a ride on a slab avalanche he triggered on the west face of Mt. Todd after we retreated from crappy conditions on the west ridge. We abandoned Todd and on January 3, packed the sleds and skied northwest to a col that we hoped that would lead us out of the Embree. The west side surprised me by being steeper than we imagined, so we spent an hour or two lowering the sleds 150m straight down the slope to a small cirque, its floor a sea of sastrugi. A couple of hours hauling brought us out of the cirque into more open terrain, where we camped the night in beautiful weather.

Over the next two days we took our time covering 18km of rolling sastrugi to reach the cwm west of Mt. Anderson. Anderson is the highest and southernmost peak of a massif that has Bentley to the north and a peak unofficially named Sisu in the middle. With Rutford climbed, Anderson was now the highest unclimbed mountain in the Sentinel Range and a long-held objective of mine. Patrick Degerman and Veikka Gustafsson had climbed Bentley and Sisu in January 1998, using the left side of the steep snow and ice slope between Sisu and Anderson. We considered using this slope to gain the north ridge of Anderson, but found it considerably threatened by a huge serac in the middle. We had also become increasingly wor-



Looking north at Shinn (4,660m) from a point near Goodge Col, the pass between Vinson and Shinn. Marked is Soleil de Media Noche on the southwest face (Paz Ibarra-Rada, December 2006). The Normal route follows the gentle snow slopes from the col around to the shoulder on the left where it joins the marked route. *Damien Gildea*

ried about the avalanche danger on particular slopes with certain aspects. On the flight in we had spied a couloir cutting through the west face, reaching a notch on the west ridge. Jed proposed this route as a safer and more aesthetic alternative to the north ridge and eventually I agreed, though somewhat worried about the possibility of being turned back high on the route by difficulties we couldn't see from below.

My fears turned out to be groundless and we climbed the route on January 8. The lower mixed face was ca 800m high, after which ca 450m up the easy slanting couloir took us to the notch. We roped up for the face above, but the climbing was straightforward: there were pitches on good positive rock, interspersed with easy mixed ground and sections of terrible snow. Jed bypassed the biggest and steepest rock step via a sneaky back alley requiring just one rock move. The actual summit was a short steep pinnacle atop a knife-edge ridge and required a few body lengths of easy rock climbing. We were on the summit at 4 a.m. after 13 hours of climbing.

We descended by a mix of rappelling and down-climbing, meeting Camilo and Pachi on the way up. We had a chat about the route and they decided to take an easier option up the ice slope, bypassing much of the lower mixed wall and making things a bit quicker. This day, January 9, was the hottest I have experienced in eight Antarctic expeditions over the last six years. While we were initially surprised to discover hard water ice on the lower mixed wall, we later realized this whole wall literally runs with water on hot days: you could actually hear it from a distance, running under and between rocks. This wall, which is really the north face of the west ridge, catches a lot of sun during the hottest part of the day, yet is sheltered from much of the wind.

After resting on the 10th, we left camp late on the 11th in bad weather and sledged for several hours before camping northwest of Mt. Viets. The next day Camilo, Jed, and Pachi placed the GPS on the USGS satellite point nearby and also on the summit of a small peak between Viets and Pk. 4,111m that turned out to be 3,119m high. The next day we sledged further south and into the valley west of Mt. Giovinetto, the last unclimbed 4,000m peak in the range. Here we spent six days in poor weather, waiting to climb.

On the 20th the weather was perfect, so we set off for the west face. I soon found snow conditions were far from ideal, and with a worsening knee problem retreated low on the face

while Jed continued. He reached the summit without problem and even walked some way south along the ridge to be sure he was on the highest point. Pachi and Camilo repeated the route in the early hours of the next morning and were back by midday on the 21st. The measured height was 4,074m and all the mountains above 4,000m in the Sentinel Range have now been climbed.

Running short of time, we left camp later that evening and sledged around into the cirque beneath Mt. Morris. Although less than 4,000m, Morris is a good-looking peak with no easy way up. Late on the 22nd Camilo, Pachi, and Jed set off in poor weather, climbing an obvious shallow couloir on the southwest face. They reached the summit around midnight, after climbing through continuous bad weather. The descent proved as long as the climb, but all were back in camp later the following morning. The measured height was 3,793m.

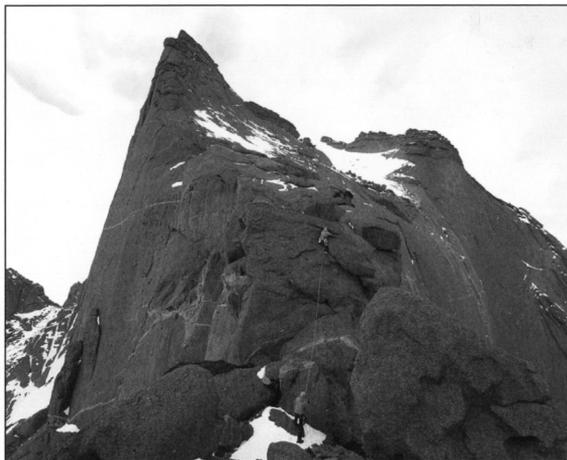
We began skiing out at 2 a.m. the following day in cold and windy weather with poor visibility. We spent around eight and a half hours traveling 22km, much of it ploughing through fresh snow sometimes 30cm deep. This was the greatest accumulation of snowfall—not just drift—I have ever seen in the range. After safely descending the steep slope down on to the Branscomb, we hauled up the last section and reached Vinson base camp at 10:30 a.m. on the 24th. That night we were collected by Twin Otter and after my customary five-day wait at Patriot Hills, we flew out to Chile in the early hours of January 30. The expedition had achieved all its main objectives in term of GPS work and climbing, making 12 ascents, all of which were either first ascents of peaks or new routes.

DAMIEN GILDEA, *Australia, AAC*

QUEEN MAUD LAND

Fenriskjefte mountains, *Ulvetanna*, north face, and other ascents; *Holtedahl* mountains, six first ascents.

Stein-Ivar Gravdal, Trond Hilde, Ivar Tollefsen, and I visited the Orvin mountains in Queen Maud Land from November 2 through December 10. In the magnificent *Fenriskjefte* mountains we climbed the north face of ca 2,960m *Ulvetanna* (ca 960m, 21 pitches, 5.10 A4) in 16 days, November 5-20. We climbed in capsule style, fixing the first four pitches from a tented camp on the ground, before moving onto the face and establishing three portaledge camps on our way



On the northwest ridge of *Store Gruvletind* (2,254m), *Holtedahl* mountains, during the first ascent. *Stein-Ivar Gravdal*

to the summit. The climb follows a thin line slightly to the left of the center of the wall, ca 150m left of the other, more obvious, line attempted in 1994 by Thomas Cosgriff and Trond Hilde, who only got four pitches (150m) up before aborting.