

American Antarctic Mountaineering Expedition

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I N 1935 Lincoln Ellsworth sighted a mountain range in western Antarctica on his trans-continental flight. He named these peaks the Sentinel Mountains. During the 1957-58 austral summer, William Long and his traverse party became the first overland group to visit the Sentinels, placing a camp at the northern end of the range. Several times since the 1957 International Geophysical Year this area has been the scene of scientific exploration. As exploration continued, the Sentinel Mountains were recognized as the most spectacular and highest peaks in Antarctica.

This information stirred mountaineering circles. *The Mountain World 1960-61* published a picture of the Vinson Massif and, at 16,860 feet, proclaimed it the highest peak in Antarctica. Independently and very nearly simultaneously this generated interest among two groups in the United States on opposite coasts. A little research showed that the Vinson Massif was unclimbed. The whole range was untouched save for the low-level probes of geologists. What an incentive! Quickly team members were organized and a prospectus was submitted to appropriate government offices. One group approached the problem of obtaining permission and support with a scientifically oriented program while the other appealed strictly from a mountaineering standpoint. Both of these were soon shelved somewhere in the confines of Washington politics. The time was not ripe.

In September of 1966 Nick Clinch received a phone call from Bob Bates. The American Alpine Club had been contacted by the government and was being allowed to place an expedition in the field that same fall; Nick was drafted to lead it. A marriage of the two original groups was effected with five members invited from each group: Pete Schoening,

PLATE 1

Photo by Samuel Silverstein

Wahlstrom and Evans on the summit of MOUNT OSTENSO.

Bill Long, Charlie Hollister, Sam Silverstein, John Evans, Barry Corbet, Julian Ansell,* Bob Lee, Dick Wahlstrom and me.

So in late September word went out to the members of the American Antarctic Mountaineering Expedition—1966 that the time was finally right and very short. Jobs and arrangements were delegated and equipment lists were discussed and shuttled back and forth from coast to coast. Phil Smith of the United States Antarctic Research Programs Office, working in Washington, D. C., had the job of coordinating and obtaining support from the various government agencies involved: the Department of Defense, the Department of the Navy, the State Department, and the National Science Foundation. Most details were ironed out save one: money. Finally about two weeks before departure date, The National Geographic Society granted the expedition financial support, and sighs were audible as preparations swung into high gear. At this point Bob Lee dropped out of the expedition and Eiichi Fukushima, as alternate, took his place. Equipment was collected and boxed, and Bill Long and I headed to New Zealand on November 27 to purchase food. This was completed very rapidly with the help of Norman Hardie, a Himalayan veteran, and as far as Bill and I were concerned, all went well. The others were not so sure; several last-minute shipments were temporarily lost en route, and Pan American threatened to scuttle our plans by going on strike.

By Friday, December 3 everyone had arrived in New Zealand. The following morning we boarded a Navy C-130 transport plane at Christchurch and our complete expedition of ten men and equipment was together and on the way at last. About 30 hours were spent repacking and organizing at McMurdo Sound, where we picked up four cases of steak and a motorized toboggan. Both of these were a welcome addition to our already large pile of stores and equipment.

Excitement increased as we left McMurdo for the mountains. At any time one or more of us could be found in the cockpit watching for a ripple in the flat snow below. Finally the mountains came into sight and grew in size and detail as we approached. Cameras clicked madly as our pilot wheeled the big transport around the mountains. Here were our peaks! Beautiful pyramids of rock, long glaciers and impressive faces laced with ice fingers and capped by corniced summits. A wall of mountains eighty miles long loomed before us.

* Julian Ansell was rejected by the Navy for medical reasons just hours before his scheduled departure. We were all very disappointed at having to leave a good friend as well as one so instrumental in obtaining permission for our expedition. Julian had worked hard and was more than deserving of his place on the expedition.

After two circling passes of the range we began to descend to the plain for a landing but a cloud layer covered our appointed site and we were forced to return 450 miles to Byrd Station to await clearing. After a quick tour of Byrd's tunnels and facilities and a short nap, we were back in the air again. This time the fog had retreated and we were able to land at about 7,500 feet. Admiral Bakutis and the C-130 crew took photographs, wished us well, taxied off and we were left by ourselves. I think we all felt isolated and small at that moment, but at the same time we were deeply impressed by the mountain range 20 miles before us. From the air the peaks had been spectacular; here on the plain they were overwhelming. Rising abruptly from the flat plateau, this was the most beautiful range I had ever seen. For a while we looked—then the work began.

Air Base was set up and the gear was organized, relocated and then reorganized. John Evans and Pete Schoening went off to find the fuel that had been cached a few days earlier. The rest of us busied ourselves around camp. When they returned a few hours later, empty-handed, we all began to realize the magnitude of our surroundings. Another search party left, and it too returned without fuel. Now the problem began to become acute. We not only couldn't find the fuel that would enable us to get our gear to the base of the mountains with a minimum of effort and time, but we were burning the white gas for our stoves too fast. So we started man-hauling the sleds while a final attempt was made to find the motor gas. Six of us pulled a 1000-pound sled about seven miles before quitting for the night, exhausted. Sacrifices to the god of lost motor gas must have been made while I slept that evening because just as we were starting to pull again at the traces in the morning, our motor toboggan drove into sight with Nick riding cowboy-style astride a barrel of gas. The barrel was set up as the world's loneliest gas station; with our sled hooked onto a heavier one, off the toboggan went with 2500 pounds of gear.

That night, December 9, Vinson Base was set up and the sleds returned to Air Base for another relay. The same evening a rope was fixed to a col at 11,000 feet, and a camp was established there and inhabited by a reconnaissance party of Sam Silverstein, Dick Wahlstrom and Eiichi Fukushima. They pushed a route through the icefall to the Vinson-Shinn saddle at 13,800 feet and returned. Up to this time the weather had been perfect, but on the evening of the 15th a storm started to blow. Within three hours Base was a shambles. Two of our tents were flattened and gear was strewn about the glacier. The storm continued off and on until the 17th. When it finally cleared, it had left its mark. Some

of our gear could not be found, everything was disorganized, and we were left with an insecure feeling about the fickleness of Antarctic weather that was to last until the end of the trip.

After the storm, progress resumed on the mountain. On December 17 Pete Schoening, John Evans, Barry Corbet, and Bill Long moved past Camp II and set up Camp III at 14,800 feet while Eiichi, Charley Hollister and I moved to Camp I. Then on December 18, as we three moved up, we met the descending advance party. They had climbed Vinson! The next day we climbed the peak and on the 20th Nick, Dick and Sam made the ascent. In three consecutive days all members of the expedition had climbed our primary objective—the highest mountain in Antarctica. We could now look for other objectives.

Mount Shinn was obviously the next one. From Camp II a shelf led to the upper slopes of this 15,750-foot peak. On December 21 Charley, Sam, Barry, and Dick made the first ascent in unsettled weather. The next day the weather was worse, but Bill and Pete managed to make the climb from Camp I. The following day the weather improved and so John, Nick, Eiichi and I returned to Camp II and made the ascent on December 24. The weather was miserable; the great summit view which the others had described was limited to 30 feet or less, with the wind at 50 m.p.h. Returning to Camp II the four of us spent Christmas Eve singing carols to the Antarctic silence and on December 25 continued on down to Base for a Christmas dinner of steak.

December 26 was a "picnic." We sledged northward along the Nimitz Glacier in order to study Mount Tyree (16,290 feet). All the possible routes looked "interesting" and we chose one that ascended Mount Gardner (15,380 feet), dropped into the Gardner-Tyree col and then climbed the northwest ridge of Tyree. It seemed energetic but we thought it would go.

By December 28 Base Camp had been moved to a site under Mount Gardner, and a fixed line strung up the 4000-foot gully leading to the plateau that sweeps up to the summit of Gardner. On the 29th John, Charley and I made a reconnaissance trip to Camp II at about 14,400 feet, under the summit of Gardner while the rest relayed and stocked Camp I. On December 30 Camp II was occupied and on the 31st John and I left that camp for, we hoped, the summit of Tyree. Our route passed about 100 feet below the top of Gardner and so we climbed to that spectacularly corniced summit on the way. The descent to the Gardner-Tyree col looked easy, but we had a rude surprise. Instead of the gentle snow traverse we expected, the slopes were steep and of very hard ice. Crampons would not bite and the entire route had to be belayed from

rock pitons driven into the ice since our Salewa screws would not start in the brittle ice. The climb to the col took many hours longer than anticipated. It was obvious that a camp would have to be set up at the col before another summit try was launched. We returned to Camp II to find a full house—seven men in three two-man tents.

The next few days were stormy and cold. Great snow plumes ten miles in length flew from the summit of Tyree. Winds at our camp were about 30 m.p.h. with the temperature at about minus 30° F. On the 2nd of January Barry and John tried to fix ropes down a 500-foot cliff that permitted access to the glacier leading to the col but gave it up because of the difficulty in hauling loads over the route. The rest of the party climbed Gardner that day.

On the 3rd of January, John, Barry, Eiichi and Bill made a carry to the col. John and Barry remained there as the assault team. Everyone except the support party of Dick and Sam returned to Base. On the 5th John and Barry attempted the two-and-a-half mile ridge of Tyree directly from the col but gave it up quickly as too hard and too slow.

They started again early on January 6 by a different route. Angling left on the north side of the ridge they traversed broken rock and snow to a gully that gave easy access to the ridge crest about 1000 feet above the camp. From here they could follow the ridge to the summit pyramid. The ridge forced them towards the right onto the south face that drops for 8000 feet to the plateau. They angled right and up, leap-frogging over fourth and fifth-class rock and snow. They continued in this way for fifteen leads.

At six P.M. on January 6 Eiichi, Pete, Bill, Nick and I stopped the motor toboggan to make our scheduled radio contact. We were on our way north along the range to try Long Gables (named for Bill Long and his brother Jack, another Antarctic veteran). Barry's voice came through the radio clearly. It was obvious that he was having trouble talking to Dick at Camp II. Finally we heard, "Look on the summit, you lunkhead!" Tyree had been climbed! We were ecstatic but could not relay our feeling to the summit pair due to the caprices of radio communication. What an expedition! We had now climbed the first, second, third and fourth highest peaks in Antarctica and were not through yet. Elated, we continued on to camp beneath Long Gables (13,620 feet).

Our first choice of route on Long Gables went up a steep, broken glacier that led to an airy col between Long Gables and Mount Anderson. This route was quickly abandoned because of wind-slab conditions, and an alternate was chosen. We decided to try long ridge that led for 5500

vertical feet directly to the southwest side of the summit. A camp was set up at the base of this ridge and on January 8 we made our first summit probe. Climbing over broken rock and snow we ascended to within 500 feet of the top. Here we were turned back by high wind and low visibility. After fifteen hours of steady climbing we were again in camp. For two days the weather was unsettled and we were afraid that there would not be another chance. The date set for our pick-up, January 15, was drawing close. But at eleven P.M. on January 11, with clear weather, we started off. Antarctic climbing had its advantages—continuous sunlight made it possible to begin a climb at any hour.

Following the alternate route we quickly reached our previous high point. From here we swung left on fourth-class rock across the west face and onto the more gentle north ridge of Long Gables which we followed to the spectacular summit. This peak was a beautiful problem in alpine climbing: a devious route, steep snow, broken rock containing fourth and fifth-class steps and a badly corniced summit. After returning to camp we packed up and headed for the glacier below to be picked up by Barry and Dick at midnight and returned to Gardner Base by motor toboggan.

As it turned out, we were not the only ones climbing that night. Charley, Sam, John and Dick had started up Mount Ostenso at six P.M. on the 11th, and had just returned from the summit (13,710 feet). They had climbed a 6000-foot slope and gully system to the top of what they claimed was the best-looking summit in Antarctica. Everyone was elated. Our success had extended beyond our fondest hopes, leaving us with six first ascents in a wild and beautiful area.

We relayed the equipment to Air Base and awaited our flight back to civilization. The plane pickup was made during a lull in a period of bad weather on January 17. Take-off gave us all a scare since the snow was soft and our plane was barely able to limp into the air with its JATO bottles exhausted. The rest of the flight to McMurdo went smoothly enough and on January 18 we were typical tourists at McMurdo, taking pictures of the penguins and sampling the wholesome concoctions of the Officers' Club at twenty cents a round. The New Zealand Alpine Club gave us a lawn party on our arrival in Christchurch and from there we went our separate ways.

Some went home immediately while others traveled in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, but I am sure we all felt very much the same—our adventure had been a tremendous one. Only on reflection could the entire experience be appreciated. The beauty of Antarctica and the rugged isolation of the Sentinel Range was indelibly impressed on our minds.

The quality and function of our equipment left us no complaints. Food could not have been better, nor cooperation more perfect. But most of all, the experiences that our ten-man society gained from sharing our efforts and our triumphs have left us with a feeling of unity that will endure.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Sentinel Range, Antarctica.

FIRST ASCENTS: Vinson Massif, 16,860 feet, December 18, 19 and 20, 1966 (whole party).

Shinn, 15,750 feet, December 21, 22 and 24, 1966 (whole party).

Gardner, 15,380 feet, December 31, 1966, January 2 and 7, 1967 (whole party).

Tyree, 16,290 feet, January 6, 1967 (Corbet, Evans).

Long Gables, 13,620 feet, January 12, 1967 (Long, Schoening, Fukushima, Marts).

Ostenso, 13,710 feet, January 12, 1967 (Evans, Wahlstrom, Hollister, Silverstein).

PERSONNEL: Nicholas B. Clinch, *leader*; J. Barry Corbet, Eiichi Fukushima, Brian S. Marts, Peter K. Schoening, Dr. Samuel C. Silverstein, Richard W. Wahlstrom, Dr. William E. Long, John P. Evans, Charles Hollister.

