

Roncagli—Tierra del Fuego

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THE CORDILLERA DARWIN is a relatively unexplored alpine range about 140 miles from east to west and 40 miles from north to south on a peninsula on the southwest side of Tierra del Fuego. It is cut by fiords from the north and south with glaciers that tumble into the sea. It bounds the northern side of the Beagle Channel in Chile. The peaks rise to 8000 feet, the highest being P 2470 (8104 feet). This lies inland from the second highest, Monte Darwin, which is visible from the coast and was for a long time thought to be the highest. The area was visited by Eric Shipton in 1962 and 1964. Ours was the fifth British expedition into the most accessible eastern end of the cordillera via Yendegaia Bay, close to the Argentine border and the town of Ushaia. However, access from Argentina has not been permitted for many years.

Following a very successful trip by Iain Peters and me in 1988, we thought we knew the key to a route up impressive Monte Roncagli, which had been described as the most desirable unclimbed peak in the Southern Hemisphere. We two planned a return visit to retry Roncagli in 1990. Unfortunately Peters had to drop out, but Julian Mathias and John Mothersele were able to join me. The expedition was supported by the British Mountaineering Council and the Mount Everest Foundation.

In 1988, Peters and I flew south from Punta Arenas to Puerto Williams and then approached the mountains after a wait of several days. One of us got a lift on a Chilean naval gunboat, which collected both of us a month later, while the other went on a 40-foot yacht, which was being sailed around the world by a British couple. In 1990, Capitán Arturo Wilson of the Chilean Navy and his staff in Punta Arenas were prepared for our arrival and within 24 hours of our flying in, we were welcomed aboard the *Yelcho* by Capitán Santiago Murphy. The voyage went through the Magellan Straits, out into the Pacific, through Desolation Bay and down the Beagle Channel. In eighteen hours we passed through some of the world's most famous marine scenery, where the Italia and Francés Glaciers tumble into the Beagle Channel. We paid a small amount to the ship's mess funds for the transport and the ship made a two-hour diversion to drop us at the Estancia Yendegaia.

With the exception of the small police (*Carabineros*) post on the northeast side of the Yendegaia Bay, the *estancia* is the only habitation in the whole of the Cordillera Darwin. Since the border has been closed for years, the *estancia* is

totally dependent on sea transport. Until recently, it was owned by Don Miguel Serka, who lived in Punta Arenas, and always allowed it to be used as a starting point since John Earle's visit in 1979. It was run by five gauchos and a manager. Don Miguel had died since our last visit and his son, also Miguel, now lives at the *estancia* and is putting a lot of work into developing tourism in the area. We were soon welcomed by him and offered hospitality by his staff. He also proposed the use of two horses to transport our first day's walk at \$30 per horse per day.

It is about a five-hour flat walk up the Stoppani valley from the *estancia* to a sheltered campsite beside the snout of the Stoppani Glacier, known to previous expeditions as *Casa Gringo*. It followed an old track and crossed several dubious bridges over side streams. A more interesting river crossing on the walk-in was accomplished on the back of Miguel's horse, but repeated crossings on the way back were cold and a wading stick and rope were sensible precautions. We wound through trees, across beaver dams and over a flat rocky expanse to Casa Gringo, which lies below a small ridge running down from Pico Cóndor. Miguel and his friend Vicente González of Punta Arenas had joined us for the walk-in and all our equipment was carried on two horses for the first day. It was a treat to watch them handle the horses and ride in wide-brimmed hats wearing chaps and ponchos on beautifully tooled saddles, leading the pack horses with rawhide ropes.

We had a great evening sitting around the fire chatting over a bottle of whisky cooled with glacier ice. They elected to join us the next day climbing to Base Camp at *Foxes Glade*, five hours of hard walking from Casa Gringo, and even offered to carry loads. Initially, the second day's walk followed the true right bank of the retreating Stoppani Glacier for an easy hour. We then swung west up a side valley, marked by cairns dating from John Earle's 1979 expedition. Next, the way was barred by *Guanaco Flats*, where we were forced to wade braided stream crossings. From there, it was a steep pull on a guanaco path up onto a lateral moraine on the true right side of the Dartmoor Glacier (named by John Earle) and on its crest for three hours to the furthest glade in the hidden valley on its left, known as Foxes Glade after a silver fox seen here on a previous trip. It has been used as Base Camp by several expeditions.

After a cup of tea, the journey back to Casa Gringo took two and three-quarters hours. It was sad to say goodbye to Miguel and Vicente the next day as we shouldered two weeks' food and left a reserve dump hanging in the tree at Casa Gringo.

Feeling fit but tired, I was not too sad to wake to rain on our first morning in Foxes Glade and spend the initial part of the day lying in my tent relaxing. That afternoon, the wind suddenly hit with typical Patagonian ferocity. I felt that Roncagli had lured us on and I was glad we had some bad weather to keep us on our toes. Over the next four days the weather played with us.

In 1988, Iain and I had made three determined attempts on Roncagli. The obvious northeast buttress had been avalanche-prone and wet, with constant stonefall. An attempt on its ridge using an approach up the icefall to its left had

ended when a massive crevasse barred the entrance into the cwm above the level of the buttress. Another attempt failed, after a revealing view during the first ascent of Cerro Ohi had shown the north ridge of Roncagli to be a feasible route. We had tried this over two days and had seven hours of climbing in the dark to try to make the best of poor snow conditions. We stopped close to the top when bad weather, hunger and fatigue forced us to retreat. A third attempt failed in lashing rain even lower on the ridge. In 1990, we planned to establish a camp on the glacier behind the obvious rognon and near the col, just before the start of the climbing on the ridge. This would enable us to stay high to make full use of good weather. In addition, we hoped to have an equipment dump on the first shoulder to protect the retreat and to let us sit out any of the notorious Patagonian storms.

After several temporary breaks in the weather, we finally left Foxes Glade on January 13 with five days' food and all our climbing equipment. The lower icefall to the left of the rognon was in dangerous condition. Despite keeping well to the left, we had to squeeze through a nasty rock-and-ice trench, exposed to falling debris, before independently taking to the deceptive rock on the left, from which we extracted ourselves with considerable difficulty. From there a direct line led up the centre of the glacier. We crossed two interesting chasms and when the way was blocked by a third steep-sided impasse about fifty metres across, we wound our way to the right through flat-topped ice blocks with dubious snow bridges before heading up the back of the rognon to the site of our camp. Suddenly I dropped seven metres into a deep crevasse. As I was about to ask for a rope end, John and Julian attempted to pull me out and through overhanging snow at the edge of the crevasse. After much pulling, hauling, climbing and swearing, one hour later I arrived back on the surface with pack and all. We reflected on the difference between the theory and practice of crevasse rescue.

John led on and in three-quarters of an hour we were digging a site for the tent and getting the stove going for the evening meal and to rehydrate.

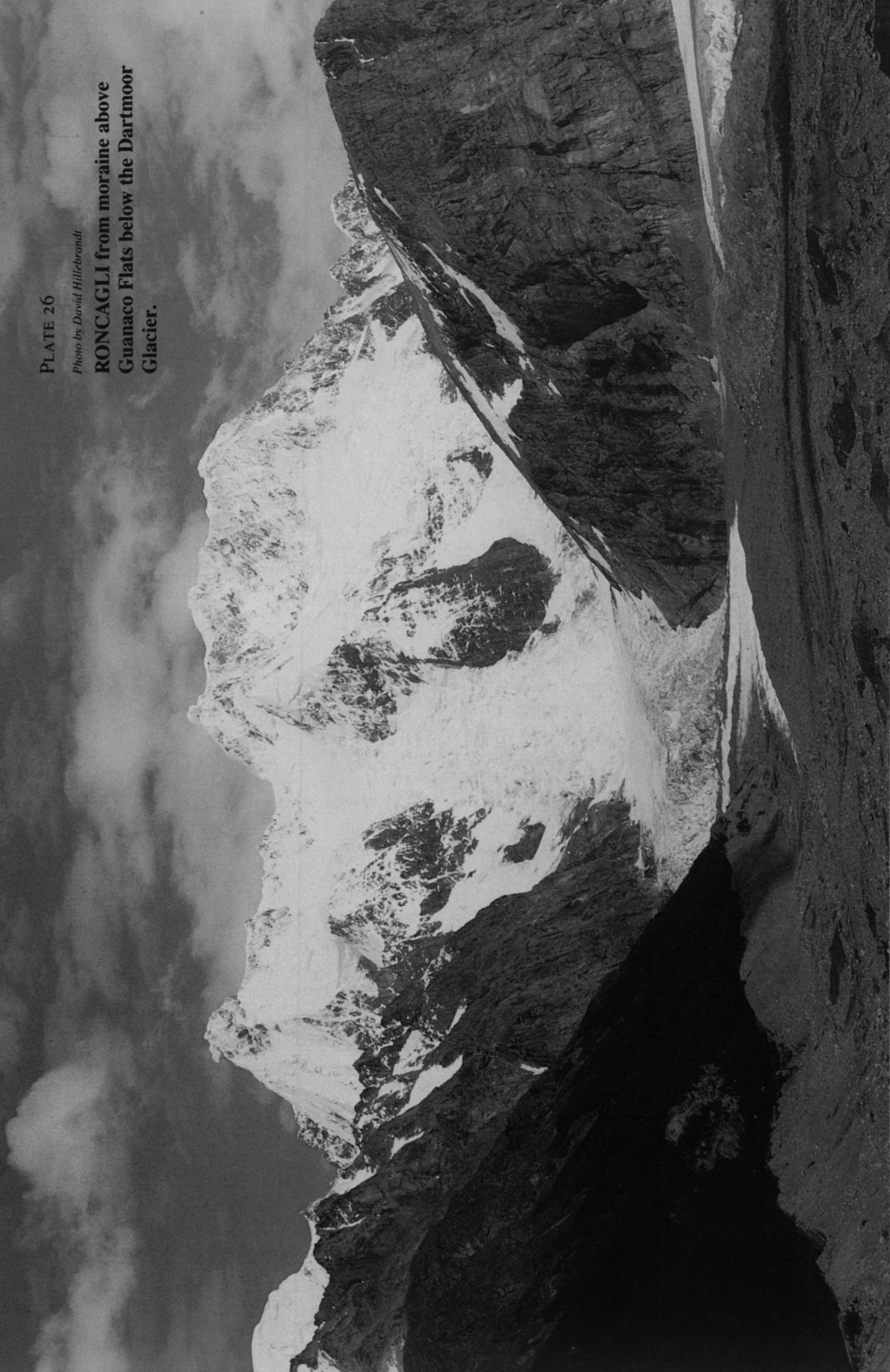
We did not notice the obvious drop in temperature until I got up at 4:30 A.M. to start a brew. The snow was good quality frozen névé, virtually unheard of in this area. At 5:30, we were off on a cold, cloudy and moderately windy day. We reached the col in a half an hour, crossed a crevassed area and moved up an easy névé slope to the bottom of a rock step that formed the base of a gully to the right of the main ridge. I led one simple rock pitch and then we unroped and zig-zagged up easy but loose rock and continued up a gully filled with firm snow at a moderate angle. One or two simple moves on water ice at its top were necessary. At 9:30, we emerged on the lowest snow shoulder and moved up to a rock outcrop to sort our gear in the welcome cold wind that was keeping the snow in such good condition. Two days' food, fuel and bivouac gear to safeguard our retreat were dumped here.

Above an easy snowfield, we scrambled through a couple of rock bands to where the ridge narrowed, still at a low angle and, thanks to cloud cover, in good condition. When it steepened, we continued to move together. Julian kicked steps with his crampons, which I further cut and John made into buckets

PLATE 26

Photo by David Hillebrandt

**RONCAGLI from moraine above
Guanaco Flats below the Dartmoor
Glacier.**



to facilitate a retreat. There were no belays and nowhere on the narrow crest could we change the lead. We all used an axe and a long-shafted hammer, often plunging them in to the full as the snow got softer. It was narrow enough for us to ponder which way to jump if the snow gave way under one of us. We tended to use the right side of the ridge, zig-zagging between cornices. In the whole of Julian's lead, he found only one nut placement. About fifty metres further on, he dropped below the ridge crest to get a proper belay from a rock- and an ice-peg both driven into the same crack. We gathered there at one P.M. for a bite to eat.

John led back to the narrowing, corniced crest. After some two rope-lengths we were forced onto the steep north face. He led across the face, moving down and around a rock rib on poor snow with dubious protection. I led through up what looked to be the final 50 metres to the top. As always, it turned out to be further than expected, at least another 50 metres to the top. We moved together to reach the summit at five P.M. The barometer on John's watch registered 2290 metres or 7513 feet.

We stopped about five metres below the top of the obviously unstable summit mushroom. Visibility was less than 50 metres, so we are uncertain whether the middle or north top of Roncagli is higher, but the double-corniced ridge to the middle peak did not attract us. We were also well aware that the climb was only half over. The descent would be taxing.

We set off in the cold wind. It had started snowing soon after we left the top and got heavier on the descent. It would have been silly to think that Roncagli had no tricks left. In mist and snow with 25 metres of visibility, we were constantly vigilant, ever thankful for the bucket steps in the now softer snow.

At nine P.M., we reached the equipment cache and dusted the snow off it. Despite the late hour and the knowledge that the gully with its loose rocks would be covered with fresh snow, we stopped for half an hour to eat a little. The snow was now slushy. Soon after ten P.M., we picked our way over the terraces of loose rock that led down to the snowfield below. John abseiled the final steep section and sheltered under the overhang. I altered the ropes slightly to ensure that they would run well. They rested on some small loose rocks but my tired brain did not appreciate that they, in turn, kept some bigger blocks in place. As I commenced the abseil, Julian screamed. I looked up. A block, half the size of a loaded rucksack, spun towards my head. I felt a numbing squash on my helmet. My arms and legs still worked and, fearful of blacking out, I slid down and clipped into a belay. In such a remote area, serious head injuries present no problem; nothing can be done.

The delay meant that we never found our old tracks across the glacier. John led carefully in the mist as I followed his head torch constantly flicking from side to side. We were too tired to risk any more crevasses and climbed into our tent at one A.M. Three hours later, I woke John to check the sticky fluid trickling down my head. It was just blood from a superficial cut rather than fluid from my ear, which could have indicated an open fracture. The headache lasted three days. I now have an honourable duelling scar from Roncagli.

We woke to blasting spindrift and were not ready to move on until midday, using up a lot of food and fuel rather than carrying it down. As the sun appeared,

we picked up some of the old tracks and avoided the worst part of the icefall by a full 50-metre abseil next to a waterfall; fresh memories had me twitching. Foxes Glade was a haven. Bad weather the next day ensured a lazy day with time to ponder these “big little mountains.”

By careful planning, some skill and a lot of luck, we had climbed our objective within two weeks of leaving the United Kingdom. We had allowed six weeks for the trip. Most of the other peaks that can be approached from Foxes Glade had been climbed by previous expeditions. With this in mind, we were tempted by the better weather at Casa Gringo and so made the long carry down.

Two years previously, when descending the Stoppani Glacier, I had noticed a hanging valley on its east side. Julian elected to approach this via an extremely cold and unpleasant river crossing and a journey over glacier rubble. John and I chose a route back up the side of the glacier. We crossed the Stoppani by a complex route on good ice. Finally, we were all camped just below tree line in this delightful hanging valley.

The next day we set off up a stream bed on the north side of the valley. As the slopes opened, we scrambled up and along a long ridge which swung east, crossing snow patches to arrive in four hours at our second summit. This was another first ascent; we called it País de Gales.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Eastern Cordillera Darwin, Tierra del Fuego. Ascents: Cerro Ohi, 2000 metres, 6550 feet, first ascent, via south ridge from the Armada de Chile Glacier, February 7, 1988 (Peters, Hillebrandt).

Pico Aus, 1585 metres, 5200 feet, first ascent, from the north, February 3, 1988 (Peters, Ryder, Hillebrandt).

Cerro Cóndor, 1402 metres, 4600 feet, January 25, 1988 (Hillebrandt).

Roncagli attempts by northeast buttress and north ridge (Hillebrandt, Peters).

Roncagli, 2290 metres, 7513 feet, first ascent, via north ridge, January 14, 1990 (Hillebrandt, Mathias, Mothersele).

País de Galles, 1585 metres, 5200 feet, first ascent, via southwest ridge, January 20, 1990 (Hillebrandt, Mathias, Mothersele).

PERSONNEL: David Hillebrandt, Iain Peters and Australian Ros Ryder in 1988. David Hillebrandt, Julian Mathias and John Mothersele in 1990.

Note: A full report with many details is lodged with the Alpine Club, Royal Geographical Society, the Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council. For copies, contact David Hillebrandt, Derriton House, Derriton, Holsworthy, Devon EX22 6JX, England.

Summary of Mountaineering Expeditions to Tierra del Fuego to 1990

AAJ=American Alpine Journal, New York

AJ=Alpine Journal, London

Acab=Anuario, Club Andino Bariloche

RM=Rivista Mensile, Club Alpino Italiano

S=Sangaku, Japanese Alpine Club

Z=Zeitschrift des D. und ÖAV

1832-4 Captain Robert Fitzroy and Charles Darwin landed on Tierra del Fuego on 12.16.1832 and 1.29.1834.

1869 Italian expedition to Monte Sarmiento with Domingo Lovisato.

1898 British attempt on Sarmiento with Martin Conway.

1913 A. de Agostini and A. and A. Pession made 1st ascent of Cerro Olivia (1270 meters, 4187 feet) on 3.1.1913 and attempted Sarmiento. *Revista Chilena de Historia y Geografía*, #6, 1913 pp. 396-404, Santiago.

1933 G. Fester made 1st ascent of Cerro Cotorra (1510 meters, 4954 feet). Z 1938 pp. 234-8.

1937 H. Teufel and S. Zuck made 1st ascent of Monte Italia (2350 meters, 7710 feet) on 3.24.1937 and of Monte General Ponce (2040 meters, 6693 feet) in February, 1937 and with G. Fester and R. Jakob of Cerro Piedrabuena (1650 meters, 5414 feet). Teufel and Zuck also climbed three peaks (Luisa, Miguel and Serka) between 1000 and 1500 meters (3281 and 4922 feet), which from their names must have been on or near the Estancia Yendegaia. *Revista Geográfica Americana*, #50 pp. 327-332, Buenos Aires.

1948 D. Munzimayer climbed Cerro Olivia in February 1948. *Acab* 23 p. 111.

1952 T. Duplat and A. Johannensen climbed Cerro Olivia in July, 1952. *Acab* 21 p. 53.

1953 E. Colli and A. Jazin climbed Cerro Olivia on 1.4.1953. *Acab* 22 pp. 23-6.

1956 Carlo Mauri and Clemente Maffei made 1st ascent of Sarmiento (2235 meters, 7333 feet) on 3.10.1956. (Agostini's expedition.) L. Carrel, C. Pellissier climbed Monte Italia 3.10.1956. L. Barmasse, Carrel, Pellissier climbed Cerro Olivia on 3.21.1956. *RM* 3-4, 1957 pp. 77-86 and 7-8, 1958 pp. 203-214 and *Acab* 25 p. 11.

1962 Eric Shipton with Eduardo García, Cedomir Marangunic and Francisco Vivanco crossed the Cordillera Darwin from a base on the Marinelli Glacier and made the 1st ascents of Cerro Yagán (2100 meters, 6890 feet), P 2470 (8104 feet.) (The latter seems to be the highest mountain on the island. Shipton confused it with Monte Darwin.), Monte Luna or Darwin II (2350 meters, 7710 feet) and Cresta Blanca or Darwin III (2300 meters, 7546 feet). *AJ* 1963 pp. 259-63 and *AAJ* 1963 pp. 514-5.

1964 Eric Shipton with John Earle, Peter Bruchhausen and Claudio Cortés made the 1st ascent of Monte Bove on 2.25.1964 and of Monte Francés on

PLATE 27

Photo by Julian Mathias

**Hillebrandt on the Northeast Ridge of
RONCAGLI.**



3.1.1964. Altitudes in the Cordillera Darwin have not been accurately determined. Andean authority Evelio Echevarría gives Bove as c. 2300 meters or 7546 feet and Francés as 2150 meters or 7054 feet. In Shipton's book *Tierra del Fuego—The Fatal Lodestone* Bove is given as 8100 feet and Francés as 7900 feet. In Earle's book *The Springs of Enchantment* Bove's height is 7054 and Francés' is 7033 feet. *AAJ* 1964 p. 222.

1966 Americans Jack Miller, Paul Dix and Roger Hart and Argentine Peter Bruchhausen approached the cordillera from the north and climbed in the Cordón Navarro. They made the following 1st ascents: Cerro Ahnikin (1859 meters, 6100 feet), Cerro Ona (2286 meters, 7500 feet, Dientes de Tiburón (1747 meters, 5730 feet), La Vela (1783 meters, 5850 feet), Filo Helado (1826 meters, 5990 feet), Cerro Casi (1611 meters, 5450 feet). *AAJ* 1967 pp. 326-333.

1966 Italians Carlo Mauri, Gigi Alippi, Casimiro Ferrari, Cesare Guidice, Guido Machetto and Giuseppe Pirovani made the 1st ascent of Buckland (1800 meters, 5905 feet) in February, 1966. *AAJ* 1967 p. 400.

1966 Japanese led by T. Tujii took time from their botanical and geological work to climb three peaks in the Cordón Navarro: P 1860 (6103 feet), P 1840 (6037 feet; at the western end of the Cordón Navarro) and P 1840 (6037 feet). *AAJ* 1967 p. 400 and *S* 1967 pp. 13-14.

1966 Japanese led by Kentaro Takagi climbed Cerro Olivia. *AAJ* 1967 p. 400.

1969, 1971 and 1972. Italians led by Giuseppe Agnolotti made three unsuccessful attempts on the west summit of Monte Sarmiento. *AAJ* 1970 p. 179, *AAJ* 1972 p. 181 and *AAJ* 1973 p. 478.

1970-1 New Zealanders Nick Banks, Peter Radcliffe, Michael Andrews, Neville Bennett, Murray Taylor, Peter Janes and Dick Heffernan approached the north side of the cordillera via Bahía Parry in late 1970. They climbed two unnamed peaks northeast of Monte Darwin of about 7200 and 6500 feet, Monte Darwin (2447 meters, 8028 feet), "Pico Jano" (2286 meters, 7500 feet), "Año Nuevo" (2195 meters, 7200 feet), "Pico Tridente" (1677 meters, 5500 feet) and P 1768 (5800 feet). They made a determined attempt on Roncagli's west ridge. *AAJ* 1974 p. 202 and *New Zealand Alpine Journal* 1972.

1971 South Africans climbed Cerro Alvear (1371 meters, 4500 feet). *AAJ* 1975 p. 188.

1973 South Africans Gregory Moseley, his wife Ineke and Brian de Villiers on February 25 made the first ascent of Pico Gemini via the northwest ridge from the Stoppani Glacier *AAJ* 1974 p. 198.

1977 South Africans Richard Smithers, his wife Heather and Bob Reinicke climbed several peaks above Bahía Brookes. *AAJ* 1977 p. 235.

1977-8 Combined sailing-mountaineering expedition led by Douglas Crombie-Anderson sailed from UK to Tierra del Fuego. From a Base Camp at the eastern end of Seno Hyatt, they moved south onto the glacier and climbed Cerro Cuchillo and six other peaks. *AAJ* 1979 pp. 256-7.

1978 New Zealanders Sue Parkes and James Jenkins climbed three peaks at the head of the Valle Lapataia between it and the Stoppani Glacier. *AAJ* 1978 p. 587.

1979 Britons John Earle, Iain Peters, Don Sargeant and Dave Harber via Yendegaia explored the Stoppani Glacier area and made the 1st ascent of Pico Cóndor (1402 meters, 4600 feet), Pico Sentinel (1402 meters, 4600 feet), Caledonia (1402 meters, 4600 feet) and did a new route on Gemini (1829 meters, 5600 feet). *AAJ* 1980 pp. 600-602 (includes map).

1981 Britons Iain Peters, Rowland Perriment and Maggie Clark approached Roncagli via Yendegaia, doing botanical research. *Vegetation Notes, Tierra del Fuego 1981* by Iain Peters (private publication).

1982 Iain Peters, Don Sargeant, Paul Butterick and Maggie Clark went to the Roncagli region via Yendegaia.

1984 Welshmen Alan Hughes and Paul de Mengel kayaked to Seno Agostini and climbed two small peaks. *AAJ* 1985 pp. 242-3.

1984 Chileans traversed the Cordillera Darwin from the north of Seno del Almirantazgo via the Cuevas and Roncaglia Glaciers to the Beagle Channel on the South. *AAJ* 1985 p. 243.

1986 On December 8, 1986, Italians Daniele Bosisio, Marco Della Santa, Mario Panzeri and Paolo Vitali made the 1st ascent of the west peak of Monte Sarmiento (2210 meters, 7251 feet). *AAJ* 1988 p. 178.

1987 Geoff Bartram, Michael André, Peter Getzels and Steve Armstutz climbed Monte Darwin and paddled to Puerto Williams. See "Climbs and Expeditions" section of this *Journal*.

1988 Britons Iain Peters, David Hillebrandt and Australian Ros Ryder entered the region and climbed as noted in the *Summary of Statistics* given above.

1990 Britons David Hillebrandt, John Mothersele and Julian Mathias climbed Roncagli and País de Galles as noted in the *Summary of Statistics* given above.

1990 Japanese expedition to Darwin group. See "Climbs and Expeditions" section of this *Journal*.

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