Elephant Island

C. H. Agnew of Lochnaw yr

Elephant Island, Sea Elephant Island, lies at the eastern end of the South Shetland Islands off the Antarctic Peninsula in latitude 61° South. It was first sighted in the late eighteenth century and was thereafter visited occasionally by the sealers of the nineteenth century in search of the Fur seals for their valuable coats and the Elephant seals for their blubber. The very steep coastline of cliff and glacier prevented any exploration inland and it was not until Shackleton's ill-fated Trans-Antarctic Expedition landed and survived on Point Wild in 1916, that any party stayed on the island for any length of time. Indeed Shackleton's party made only one brief sortie inland, which was soon turned back by the heavy crevassing of the Furness glacier.

The island is twenty-five miles long by eighteen miles wide at the western end, tapering to a long pan-handle in the east. This is mainly a mountain ridge rising to 3000 ft with numerous impressive summits, while the western end is a raised ice-cap at 2500 ft with many nunataks and mountains rising to 3500 ft, including the island's two highest peaks. The main glacier, nicknamed the 'Flog' or Frightfully Long 'orrible Grind, divides the island east from west with its seven-mile wide snout and has ice-cliffs 400 ft high falling straight into the sea. The remainder of the coast line, particularly in the north and west, is steep crumbling cliffs, often 500 ft high, divided or overhung by glaciers falling straight into the sea. The south is more heavily glaciated, but the cliffs are a little less ferocious. The coast line, together with the almost continuous cloud cover and strong winds reported by Shackleton and other passing ships has given the island a reputation for inaccessibility and an inhospitable climate.

On 4 December 1970 this island, bathed in sun, greeted the members of the 1970–71 Joint Services Expedition, who were passengers in H.M.S. *Endurance*. The party's aim was to climb, explore and carry out a preliminary scientific survey of the island and in addition survey and map the group of islands for the Directorate of Overseas Survey. Every second year the Joint Services Expedition Trust sponsors an expedition and this year's, under the leadership of Commander Malcolm Burley, to Elephant Island had been selected for sponsorship.

Having arrived at Elephant Island after a two-week journey from Great Britain by way of an R.A.F. flight to Buenos Aires and then in *Endurance* to the island, we had to complete two tasks before landing the expedition. The first was to reconnoitre the proposed triangulation stations for the survey, the second to fly ashore the four food and store depots on which we were going to base ourselves. This work got underway immediately with *Endurance's* helicopters flying almost non-stop, until the task was completed four days later.

In addition Malcolm Burley took the opportunity of landing a party on Clarence Island to try to climb its highest mountain. This island, a near neighbour of Elephant Island, rises about 5000 ft from the sea and is most impressive with beautiful snow fluting on its main ridge from which glaciers tumble into the sea. John Hunt, George Bruce and I were flown ashore early in the afternoon of 4 December. We set up our Base Camp and then climbed up to 1400 ft and established a higher camp. Here we had to wait for a break in the weather before we could make our attempt on the summit. This came at midday on the third day and we set off at once, climbing as fast as possible up the easy snow slopes leading to the main ice-fall. We managed to find a route through this despite encountering one or two uncrossable crevasses and eventually came on to the upper snow fields. At no stage was the climbing difficult although route finding was a constant problem, particularly as we entered the cloud again at 4500 ft. From here we followed our instinct, always climbing higher; first through a sérac belt, then over a bergschrund until we felt we had reached the summit plateau. Crossing this we suddenly found ourselves standing on a very large cornice overhanging the east coast. This high point, at about 5300 ft by our pocket altimeters, we assumed was the summit as the ground appeared to fall away in all directions. We followed our footsteps back to the camp and spent a night here before packing up and going down to our base tent the next day. We were then taken aboard *Endurance* and returned to Elephant Island.

While I was on Clarence Island the remainder of the party flew in the stores and established the depots including the Base Camp on the Flog glacier, leaving the surveyors under John Elder on the ship. This party remained on board until the end of December, working on the survey traverse of Elephant and Clarence Islands and then joining this survey to King George Island over a hundred miles west of Elephant Island. This work took up all their time and was often delayed by the bad weather, before they finally finished at the end of December, having visited numerous outlying islands.

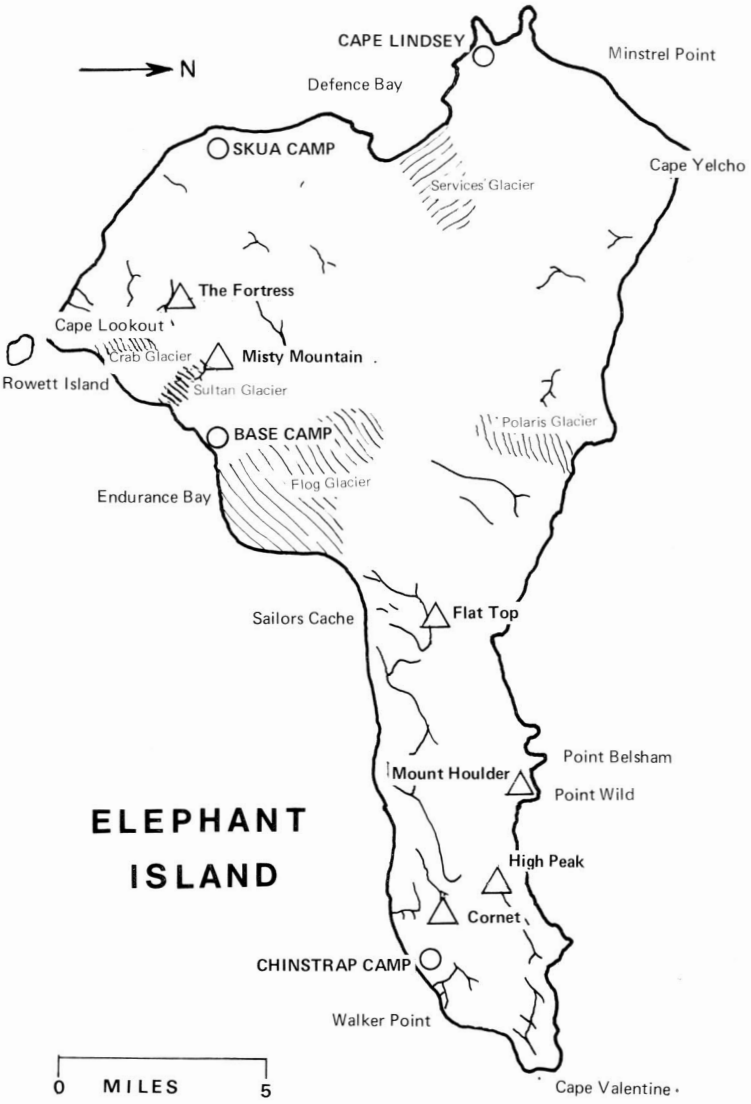
The rest of us on Elephant Island now spent three weeks exploring in the area of Base Camp, climbing the mountains and setting in train our various scientific programmes. Rob O'Brien spent a rather trying two weeks putting in stakes on the Flog glacier to measure its movement and ablation. He eventually had eighteen miles of stakes at 500-yd intervals over the glacier, and these had to be measured frequently to find out how fast the surface was melting.

The climbing at this end of the island was rather disappointing as most of the peaks are easy snow summits. John Hunt and I found one good route on Misty Mountain, climbing it by the South face on New Year's Day. The mountain overlooked Base Camp and for a long time we had planned the route, which lay up the steep snow face for 2000 ft and followed a tenuous line between the various avalanche shoots. Apart from the continuous steep snow the crux lay in climbing two snow/ice bulges half way up. This 500 ft section of 60° to 70° snow with two short vertical sections gave some very exhilarating and interesting climbing. As usual the cloud had come down soon after we started and the final 700 ft was in thick cloud.

81 *Misty Mountain.* Photo: Joint Services Expedition

The surveyors joined us at Base Camp on 29 December and after New Year the expedition moved to Skua Camp on the west coast. This camp was on a moraine above the island's largest beach and Chris Furse with his zoologists carried out some interesting studies on the bird and animal life. As a zoological area it more than fulfilled our hopes as the beaches housed 1800 Elephant seals and produced our first Fur seals, while the moraines above the beach had over fifty pairs of skuas. We also found a large colony of Giant petrels, which we had been led to believe would not be breeding on the island. These birds with their enormous wing span are beautiful in flight soaring around off the coast, but to see them run 100 yds trying to take-off is very amusing. This enormous profusion of wild life, not forgetting the Chinstrap penguins, and the moss on the moraines was a very welcome relief in an otherwise icy world.

While in Skua Camp the whole expedition climbed what is possibly the island's highest mountain. The Fortress dominated the camp six miles away rising to about 3500 ft, and we had planned to make it a day's outing for the whole party. At last after some days of bad weather and low cloud, four ropes of three set off skiing, on a glorious morning, to make an attempt on the peak. Within minutes it became a race for the summit between cloud and party and being gallant losers we were soon in the usual white-out. The route was not difficult, but climbing through the crevasses and overhanging ice-mushrooms we often found ourselves at an impossible dead end. After much back tracking we


CAPE LINDSEY
Minstrel Point
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Defence Bay
SKUA CAMP
Cape Yelcho
Services Glacier
The Fortress
Cape Lookout
Crab Glacier
Misty Mountain
Rowett Island
Sultan Glacier
BASE CAMP
Polaris Glacier
Flog Glacier
Endurance Bay
Sailors Cache
Flat Top
Point Belsham
Mount Houlder
Point Wild
ELEPHANT
ISLAND
High Peak
Cornet
CHINSTRAP CAMP
Walker Point
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Cape Valentine

eventually emerged above the cloud, just below the summit snow mushroom. We had a beautiful view from the top of the whole island covered with cloud and all the 3000 footers rising above it. We had an orgy of photography including the usual group photograph, and then a long rest just enjoying the scenery. To end this very enjoyable day we had a long ski back to camp in the clear evening.

We spent a few more days at this camp finishing off the various tasks. Malcolm Burley and David Burkitt found the remains of a three-masted wreck on the beach. This wreck seemed to be almost complete and must have come ashore in the early nineteenth century, perhaps the remains of an early sealer. The whole expedition spent an afternoon evacuating the various pieces and trying to find some treasure or at least a clue to the name of the wreck, but in this we had no success. It appeared to have been about 25 ft wide by 60 ft long with 65 ft main mast.

After this we left to move north up the coast to Cape Lindsay, our third depot. This should have been an easy day's sledging, but it eventually ended in a heavily crevassed area in white-out with Malcolm Burley advising, 'Camp here until the cloud lifts.' This it immediately did and although route finding was easier the journey was still long. Cape Lindsay is a most impressive area with two headlands reaching half a mile into the sea with massive crumbling cliffs 400 ft high. The area has been glaciated very recently and so is almost devoid of animal or plant life. The coastal scenery is magnificent with glaciers overhanging the cliffs, magnificent rock arches on the capes and glacier snouts pushing into the sea. There was very little work for us to do here except explore the coast-line north to Cape Yelcho. This we did with great pleasure as the landscape and coast-line are really very beautiful and intimidating. During our second week here a blizzard blew in from the south-west and for three days we were kept in our tents by the snow-laden winds, which soon blanketed our camp in deep drifts.

Soon after this the expedition returned to Base Camp to celebrate 'Expedition Christmas', but *en route* back Richard Roxburgh, our geologist, John Hunt, David Burkitt and I paid a quick visit to the north coast. We spent the first day going along the coast as far as we could, recording the wild life and collecting rock samples. The second day was magnificent, the first good day for a month and we spent this climbing the mountain ridge we had named the White Company. This ridge lies to the north of the Flog glacier and gave very scenic, if not very difficult climbing along its broad snow ridge. After this very pleasant interlude we sledged back to Base Camp on Christmas Eve. We ate the large dinner the next day, held a sing-song and played 'Old Maid', to mark the expedition's half-way stage.

Having explored the western half of the island we still had to visit the eastern half, which is by far the most mountainous and impressive area. Here the backbone ridge with its many fine peaks over 3000 ft, runs from the Flog glacier in the west to Cape Valentine in the east, where Shackleton first landed in 1916. Point Wild where his party spent that long winter is on the north coast

at this end. This depot had been placed on a buttress at 400 ft in the middle of a very large and noisy Chinstrap penguin rookery and these birds were forever pecking at our guylines and chattering away.

From Penguin Camp we intended first to visit the Shackleton sites and then climb and carry out the various scientific tasks. Cape Valentine was first on the list and after reconnaissance by our Gemini inflatable boat, we all went on a pilgrimage. Two small beaches, a few washed rocks and a large rockfall mark the site of this historic landing. Shackleton had cached some rations here in 1916 but unfortunately the rock fall covered the place. Despite this we set to work to look for them, but after much digging we still had not found their relics. Armed with some of the early party's photographs as we walked around we could picture the scene all too clearly.

John Hunt, our seal expert found over 100 Fur seals and evidence of a breeding colony on Cape Valentine. Fur seals were believed to be extinct after the visits of the nineteenth century sealers, but a small colony was found in South Georgia in 1926 and this has spread. We had a very exciting time trying to sex a small seal as the female and young male are almost identical. The Fur seals are very ferocious and rush at you showing (and intent on using) their very sharp teeth, and eventually we had to resort to lassooing and 'throwing' the seal.

Malcolm Burley was very keen to visit Point Wild as soon after our Cape Valentine trip as possible. He took a party of five over Avalanche Col at 2500 ft and down to the Furness glacier on the north coast. Here they had to abseil down the ice-cliffs at the snout on to the narrow beach. It was high tide and after many a wetting they arrived on the very narrow spit of Point Wild. They pitched their tents on the 10-yd wide spit among some fifty Fur seals and passed a sleepless night with the sea almost lapping the tent door and the seals prowling around. They spent the next day on the beach looking for any remains while Harry Patrick, the expedition photographer, tried to repeat all Shackleton's photographs. On the third day they came back over the col where three of the party were avalanched down the last 500 ft. Fortunately none was hurt even though they were buried.

While this trip was in progress I and three others climbed the highest peak at this end of the island. High Top rises from a narrow ridge to the final snow-mushroom at 3250 ft and gives a very enjoyable PD climb. We climbed up through a steep ice-fall over some séracs, the crux, and then across a long narrow and fragile snow bridge. Tony Rackham led this on the way up, but knocked it down on the way back, leaving a most exciting leap for the rest of us.

Now followed a period of almost continuous bad weather, which lasted to the end of the expedition. I made two trips back to Base Camp to send out radio messages, while the others remained at Penguin Camp. On one of these visits we had three days of wind gusting over seventy knots and on one day it was continuously over sixty knots. Half the party returned to Base Camp to complete the survey of the glacier stake network, while the rest of us went to Point Wild. John Hunt, Tony Rackham and I followed over Avalanche Col,

while Chris Furse, Charles Walshaw and George Bruce came a different route. We had great difficulty in reaching Point Wild as the sérac the others had used for their abseil had melted away, but we managed after a little rock climbing to get down. We climbed Mount Houlder overlooking the point on a good morning and had our final view of the north coast before returning to Penguin Camp to climb a few more peaks.

Here we stayed for five days confined to our tent before battling back to Base Camp during the first break we had had in the weather. In the deep new snow this ten hour journey took two days. Half way back we were caught in the open by the renewed attack of the wind and snow, and after being blown over numerous times and often nearly into crevasses, we spent the night at Sailors' Cache. Once back we had a further two weeks of bad weather before *Endurance* rejoined us on 19 March, to take off the surveyors to complete their task, while the rest of us wound up the scientific programme before embarking on 27 March. We all enjoyed the expedition on Elephant Island despite its reputation as the 'Hell Isle of the south' and have, I hope, contributed some useful survey and scientific work to the British Antarctic Survey's effort. We have surveyed the island group, made a scientific collection of data and specimens, and climbed eighteen of the island's mountains, but above all we all had great fun.

Members: Cdr M. K. Burley, M.B.E., R.N. (leader); Lt Cdr J. R. Furse, R.N., Lt J. F. Hunt, R.N.; Lt A. N. D. C. Rackham, R.N.; M.E.A. D. M. Burkitt, R.N.; Capt C. H. Agnew of Lochnaw yr, R.H.F.; Capt J. P. Elder, R.E.; Lt R. M. G. O'Brien, R Signals T.&A.V.R.; Lt E. C. Walshaw, R.A.; Lt R. Y. Roxburgh, A.A.C.; Flt Lt H.N. Patrick, R.A.F.; Flt Lt G. H. Jacobs, R.A.F.Regt.; Flt Sgt G. Bruce, R.A.F.; Mr J. S. Allison, B.A.S.