

## Tararua Patagonian Expedition 1969-70

Gordon Vickers

SOUTH AMERICA! To the untravelled New Zealander most countries of the world sound exotic and far away, but South America seems impossibly remote. Mention of the name conjures visions of deserts, jungles, mountains and revolutions.

One could well wonder why we should choose such a place for our venture, but how else could the drive be generated for our project? Planning had started three years before; but the last year had seen the major preparations; we yawned through many a long meeting, wrote hundreds of letters, designed, tested and modified much of our equipment and fought thickets of bureaucracy. We felt, somewhat prosaically, that as we had been bred in the bush of the Tararua ranges we could be as much at home with a slasher as with an ice axe and could navigate a densely forested ridge as well as a murk-covered glacier.

Our task would be to find a way through the bush to an ice desert ringed with unknown peaks. Others had led the way, and had even stolen the first ascents of San Valentin, highest peak of Patagonia, and Arenales, hub of the southern end of the icecap. A series of dingy photos had been made from the air and a preliminary map drawn, but most of the area remained untouched and untrodden.

The Patagonian icecaps have been described as Ice Age remnants; they display in miniature many of the features found in Antarctica. The northern icecap dips gently westward to feed huge glaciers whose snouts reach arms of the sea. To the east, fantastic scarps drop sharply from the main divide. Glaciers tumbling down these ramparts calve into lakes shaped by earlier ice. From the summit of San Valentin in the north to Arenales in the south measures 70 km. (44 miles) and the average width of the ice is about 40 km. (25 miles). The fantastic build-up of ice is due to the westerly trade winds that sweep in from the Pacific carrying a heavy burden of moisture. Again, we had battled these same storms, as the icecap lies as far south as does Fiordland and Dunedin. Many genera of plant are found in both places, including *Nothofagus*, the most characteristic tree in our alps. Our approach would be by these steep eastern scarps from Lago Leone which drained into the huge Lago General Carrera. Our equipment would be basically what we used in New Zealand, modified to withstand greater winds and more free water. We would establish permanent camps and use our specially designed tents while on the move. We foresaw logistics posing the greatest problems as we hoped to travel far from our base camp in an area where storms could pin us down for days. There were many

imponderables. Should we take a sledge? How much food went into a four-gallon tin? How many tins could we carry? How much boat fuel, how much primus fuel, how many horsepower to drive the boat into a Patagonian storm?

The last frantic weeks turned to last frantic days and soon the hour arrived for the Achille Laura to steam away from the wharf at Auckland; 12.30 a.m. on October 19, 1969. Most of those decisions were irrevocably made; now our performance depended on us alone, and how we could utilise the contents of the nine crates and the hundred-odd tins stashed in the hold. We all felt a strong sense of obligation to the organisations and individuals who had made the venture possible. We looked to the future with an optimism tempered with not a little trepidation.

Excitement lifted us from the stupor of the long voyage when the first gaunt grey teeth of Patagonia appeared over the cold rim of the sea. The journey had been an anticlimax after the fury of departure, unnoteworthy apart from the rumoured appearance of two expedition members in a male can-can. This was never substantiated but it must be admitted that four of the chorus-line knees did look familiar.

C'est, c'est Paris!

Within hours of sighting land we had passed by the awful Cabo de Pilar, guardian of the straits. The rising wind caused our last-minute washing to flap frantically and in some cases to disappear completely. Patagonia was up to expectation. Darkness quickly came as the season was early, but the moon struggled through snow showers to hint at snow-flecked hills. Down-jacketed figures strained their eyes as hard as those on the bridge until the Paso de Tortuoso was negotiated. After this, the pilot was thought to have proved his skill and all retired.

Punta Arenas. Now the impossible was reality as the Achille Laura stood motionless in the roads.

A stiff draught blew across the snowy deck. The town lay bathed in sunshine, on a hillside that sloped gently to the sea; somewhat like Timaru from this distance if a trifle more dingy. Behind us the mysterious island of Tierra del Fuego appeared as a smudge on the sparkling horizon.

On arrival at the pier we were greeted by a ragged little boy who said in halting English, 'We have no money,' and flashy youths who begged for cigarettes.

We were surrounded by wind, luggage and a strange tongue, but after the gabbled Italian of the worldly ship crew this softly spoken Castilian was pleasant on the ear. Someone hired an incredibly ragged man with an ancient wheelbarrow. We loaded ourselves and all trooped down to the customs shed. Now came the problem of paying our porter, determined as we were not to appear big spenders. The discussion spread rapidly to include everyone in the 'aduana' shed who had the least understanding

of English, recommendations ranging from a beautiful Chilean saying 'No more than twelve escudos' to a customs agent who thought E2 sufficient. (E2 approximately \$1.) We settled for E4 but when the presentation was made it was graciously refused. Eventually our man accepted E10. We later found it possible to travel by taxi from one side of town to the other for E4.

The expedition crates lay piled behind the counter and all that could be ascertained was that something would happen 'manana'. This word continued to cause us frustration until we found that, contrary to what the dictionary says, it means 'not today'. Confusion continued, people milled, languages clashed and two khaki gentlemen with riot sticks and pistols grinned at the scene. Where was our customs agent? Where can we stay? Where was Claudio? A squat man with dark glasses and no neck began stalking us with a camera. He turned out to be a news photographer and took a photo of the group during a snow shower. The result, published the next day, looked like something off a traditional Christmas card.

Suddenly a human dynamo appeared, dressed immaculately in a white skivvy, well-kept sports trousers and sports coat with discreet club badge. His shoulders were broad, his jet black hair close-cropped and his skin brown from the sun. Claudio Lucero (Cloudio), 'our' Chilean. We were to find his energy seldom left him and his immaculate appearance never. In Santiago he taught at an orphaned youths' school but spent much of his time away on various expeditions; he had accompanied the Japanese on the Arenales expedition. I doubt we could have had a more suitable companion for the icecap.

Swiftly the customs were dealt with and a truck ordered. The luggage was piled aboard and we were away, Claudio and 'el jefe' complete with suit and briefcase in the front, the others swaying in the back, all bound for the hotel Savoy. But wait, one of the khaki figures runs after us, pistol and club waving. Is this our first Chilean faux pas? Words flow and we watch in bewilderment until the carabinero shakes Claudio and me by the hand and smiles at all. He just wanted to know about the expedition and wish us well! We soon found that the carabineros de Chile were the most courteous and helpful police force in the world. They take a major part in the community of the isolated southern Chilean towns.

Our four days stay in Punta Arenas was one hectic rush. We began to realise the audacity of arriving here with E5,000 and two tons of equipment, hoping to reach the Leon Valley 500 miles to the north, and eat in the process. Living costs in Punta Arenas were high. Camping was out of the question this early in the year, especially as our crates were in customs most of the time. The first quotes we got for land transport, involving a gruelling 800-mile non-stop drive across the Patagonian desert, were in the vicinity

of E5,000 which was all the money we had. We also had to eat, travel across the lake, and what about getting our gear home? Swarthy truck operators would slip in out of the night or stop us on the street with new or varied offers. We investigated every possibility including sea and air transport. At one stage it appeared best to travel by land while our luggage went by air! ! At last, suddenly and mysteriously, we were able to fly with all our gear aboard a DC.6 to Balmaceda for about E2,000. From here a short truck journey would take us to Puerto Ibanez on the shores of Lago General Carrera where we hoped to pick up a ship. The whole thing taught us not to under-estimate the communication problem. Meanwhile the gear was cleared from customs with not so much as a cross word. Obviously we were better off than Peruvian expeditions in this respect.

Busy times did not prevent us from seeing a good cross-section of this isolated community, however. The famed Chilean hospitality was in evidence as soon as we arrived. I was introduced to the chief of the army, chief of the navy and chief of the carabineros. All helped whenever they could. Meanwhile Bob was meeting the bankers, which was helpful in our money problems. Our very good Chilean friends arranged these interviews and often acted as interpreters.

Every meal was something of an adventure as Chileans make much of eating. A hearty 'once' (on-say) of bread and hot condiments is taken about six as the main meal is not served until about ten. The restaurants don't open until after eight. Wine is always drunk; a bottle of the best costs only E8. All wines are what we could call 'dry'. We tried various tortillas or highly flavoured omelettes, king crab (a very delicate sea food), congrio (conger eel), plastel de choclo (corn-topped casserole) and many others. Even helados (ice cream) had an exotic and spicy flavour.

The appearance of the expedition and wives was the signal for the waiters to push several tables together, and often people would gather around to talk about the expedition and buy wine. Other meals the girls cooked in the hotel rooms from what they could forage in the quaint little shops.

Most of the town, including the hotel, was very like other parts of the West Coast and, like the Coast, the people had a rare warmth. Construction sites were fenced by rickety, makeshift structures and huge holes, completely unguarded, were dug in the footpath. Obviously the philosophy was that if you didn't watch where you were going, 'bad luck'. Perhaps concern with personal safety comes with a higher standard of living.

The flight to Balmaceda convinced us that we were lucky not to be travelling by land. The desert stretched brown, flat and endless. Its surface marked only by countless small lakes and patches of wind-blown snow. It was good to pass above all this while a charming Chilean hostess served chicken lunch. The weather was

murky, but we had a view of Lago San Martin looking huge, misty and unreal, with a giant glacier at its head.

Just as the deep blue waters of Lago General Carrera appeared we could see the twin humps of Valentin and Silberhorn jutting above the clouds with Hyades as a small hump beyond. Excitement ran high! We were in sight of our objectives and at last felt assured of their existence. But many more days were to pass before we set foot on the icecap with its guardian peaks.

Stepping from the plane we were hit by the eternal Patagonian wind. The airport was situated in the middle of a broad, treeless valley, around the rim of which patches of winter snow remained. Grit and dust whipped by as we wove our way towards the terminal building, a modern but simple structure. Claudio and I were promptly driven to the carabineros' post where we met the chief of the district. He recommended a truck operator and accompanied us to the man's house. The two-roomed dwelling was typical of many we were to be invited into in rural Patagonia; this one was constructed from mud-brick and roofed with hand-split shakes. The living room was dominated by a huge central wood stove behind which the daughters of the house did their chores while they devoured the strangers with curious eyes. From the smoke-blackened ceiling a bare light bulb hung precariously, and the air was thick with the aroma of roast mutton, garlic and ahi.

I thought the price of E250 rather high, but little did I realise the extent of the journey. (About 90 km. as it turned out.) There seemed no alternative, so eventually I accepted. Swiftly we loaded the huge truck and drove to the town to pick up the rest of the members. They had been whisked away by the airline officials and were being treated to a second lunch at the 'Hotel Espanol'. We reached the building by jumping the inevitable hole in the road, this time dug as part of a water reticulation scheme. Three months later when we returned we were shouted lunch at the same hotel after jumping the same hole.

After an excellent beer we were off, exclaiming at the sheer rustication visible from the high tray of the truck as it passed through the back streets of the town. Beyond, the narrow dusty road carried us through fields whose early spring green was patterned by an endless vista of burnt stumps and logs, very like some of the recently cleared land in New Zealand.

Soon we realised that the price was indeed reasonable as the truck wound through a range of high hills, crossing two passes. The second of these was deep in snow, and huge cornices, work of the eternal wind, menaced the road. Emerging from the hills, we wound down interminable zigzags to the green of the Ibanez valley, passing glacial rock formations on the way. These were made all the more remarkable by being covered with political slogans. We had noticed the Chilean love of graffiti in the towns,



The gift. Snr. Poblete and his family gather around while Dave and Claudio explain the working of the new pressure lamp.  
— John Nankervis

Snr. Sanderval and two of his sons. — John Nankervis





San Valentin from Camp 5. The route lay just behind the right-hand skyline.  
— Paddy Gresham

but the work evident on this isolated road must have kept the sparse population constantly employed. At the head of the valley the fantastic Castillo range came into sight, a most remarkable silhouette including a gendarme shaped like a toothpick and about 1,000 feet high. The chill evening wind cut through our special Patagonian parkas in a most alarming way; in fact we were seldom colder on the icecap. A silent campesino wearing nothing more than a tattered sports coat and trousers climbed aboard after hailing the truck from his shake-clad cottage. He seemed not to notice the cold and we were impressed.

By dusk we had arrived at the town, which seemed very similar to the one we had just left. The truck rolled to a stop at a small wharf on the shores of the lake where cats' paws swept across the glacial blue water. Once again Claudio and I were whisked away and soon we had permission to stay in a large shed near the wharf.

On many such interviews we knew little of what was happening; many words were exchanged, Claudio and his countrymen nodded, smiled, frowned and laughed, we shook hands and tried to laugh too at the appropriate moments. At the end of this all we knew was that we went 'thisaway'. Only later could we piece the interview together.

The floor of our shed consisted of six inches of dust, which was soon through everything. Claudio had turned his white skivvy three times before we left. The next day the Government-subsidised ferry, the Aysen, arrived and the owner was kind enough to lend us a little white cottage near the wharf, as we were to wait for his return in two days. The gear remained in the shed where we unpacked most of it and completed many last-minute jobs. As we worked the local children clustered around the shed in droves, trying their English on us and taking an intense interest in our activities. The sight of our climbing boots reduced their customary chatter to awed silence. They didn't understand what most of the equipment was for, but here surely must be the most magnificent array of boots ever! Their sheer numbers cut down the already poor light and every expedition member moved with an accompanying cluster of chattering satellites.

'No hay escuela?' we would ask hopefully.

'What is your name?' they would reply.

Towards the end of our enforced stay we explored a little further afield. Trips were made up nearby pyramid peaks on the Argentinian border and the river and lake fished with little success.

After an absence of twelve days the Aysen returned and the gear was loaded. We sailed to Chile Chico that afternoon, the ancient petrol engine aided by a monstrous, black, flapping sail. When we reached the narrows of the Ibanez inlet the wind had picked up the sparkling green water into huge waves which swept over the stern of the vessel, liberally dousing the mail sacks from Coihaique and beyond. Columns of water and spray leapt into the air as the

waves dashed against the black cliffs. Had the engine failed we would have 'gone down with all hands', which may have explained the marginally useful sail. We began to see how the wind had been responsible for delaying the Aysen for so long. Later talks to local people revealed that many had been lost on the lake, which was held in appropriate respect. Beyond the headland a string of islands gave some shelter but the expedition wives were distinctly green. Trips to the cramped lavatory were made difficult by the necessity to dodge a large bowl of fresh salmon on the floor and a carcase of mutton swinging from the ceiling. On longer trips these formed the basis of the food presented to passengers and crew by the cheerful cook.

Chile Chico was a pleasant surprise and it seemed a 'big town' after Ibanez—they even had a generator and street lights that went until midnight. Again we received an enthusiastic welcome from the carabineros who had heard of our coming by carabineros' radio. We celebrated our last evening in civilisation with a huge Chilean meal.

The next day the Aysen was due to leave at 1 p.m. for Puerto Guadal en route to the Leone Valley. We had much to do, especially as the boat-minded members of the party decided to sail the inflatable boat on the fifty-mile journey up the lake. The hectic morning ended with Al and Claudio rolling a forty-gallon drum of petrol on to the wharf just in time to see the Aysen disappearing around the point. Fortunately Ray and John, who had stayed in New Zealand to sit their varsity exams, had not yet caught us up so the drum was left for them to bring.

The journey to Guadal and on to the Leone went without hitch. The weather was perfect and we were kept entranced for eight hours as range after range of fairy-like peaks came into sight. We had been amazed by the Castillo range, but now realised that such peaks abound in this area.

As the sun set and we cut through the glass-like water we saw the silhouette of San Valentin and the lower peaks—a great moment. We slept on the wharf at Guadal and crossed next day to the Leone. Now came a bad moment when we realised that Claudio, Al and Paddy had not arrived and we had to tell the 'Pirate', as we called the villainous looking captain of our vessel, that the 'dinero' was in the 'bote inflatable'. The crew of four laughed loud and long at our embarrassment as the 'Pirate' stumped off and we hastily loaded the ancient tar-covered boat that was used to ferry our equipment ashore.

The hospitality of the Chileans had been a constant feature of the trip so far, but in the valley they really excelled. The first day Luis and Norma Sanderval, who lived in a little white adobe cottage, showed us their farm. We caught fish and sampled a curious orange fungus that grows on the beech trees. Luis treated it as a delicacy, but we found it rather tasteless.

We were quite concerned with the fate of the others in the boat, and were quite relieved when they arrived late that evening. Apparently they got only as far as Puerto Cristal the night before, where the mining community of 1,500 greeted them as heroes for crossing the big lake in such a small craft. Next day they hitched a ride across the Tranquilo Inlet in an ore ship after battling six-foot seas and turning back.

In the morning Claudio borrowed a horse and rode up the valley to arrange transport, while Paddy, Dave and Bob left to take the boat as far up the river as they could. Al and I climbed a small hill to shoot movie footage of Valentin and Hyades with their mantle of boiling cloud. The purr of the outboard motor rose from the river below as we worked.

That evening the boaters reported reaching a farm about one-third of the way to Lago Leone, after a long struggle dragging the boat in shallow, freezing water. They told of three-foot furrows in the rude cart track which appeared to make it impassable. We had yet to see the traditional ox-cart in action. Claudio had arranged for two 'carros' to arrive at 7 a.m., and their punctuality surprised us. The great carts, each drawn by a pair of huge animals and carried on five-foot wheels, crashed through the scrub raising clouds of dust. They were driven to the beach where each was loaded with a ton of equipment.

That day and the next were spent cursing oxen, hauling carts out of streams and sand traps, shooting miles of movie and still film, and admiring the fantastic scenery. Every farmhouse was an excuse to stop and sip matê tea through the communal silver straw, while Claudio held the hosts enthralled with his tales of adventure.

We camped at the Poblete farm which marked the end of the 'road'. From here horses were used and a further two days spent ferrying equipment to the lake. We made two trips a day, the horses with 200 lb. and us with 60 lb. each. The Chileans could not understand this enthusiasm, but we saved a day by our labours. We celebrated the end of load carrying with a leg of lamb roasted over the fire and garnished with garlic in true Patagonian style. The farmers refused to accept money in return for their services, saying to be part of the expedition was reward enough! We gave them what we could in the way of surplus butter, old climbing ropes, etc., and promised to bring them our food tins when empty. Claudio says these people have little equipment, and don't have many opportunities to buy it, even if they have the money. We even demonstrated the 'comprehensive medical kit' when Senorita Poblete, aged two, fell with a stick in her mouth. An aspirin in honey saved the day. As Bob remarked, every expedition has to effect at least one such cure among the local population.

Finally, when the last load had been carried, we shifted our

camp to the giant trog by the outlet of Lago Leone and farewelled our friends. Before us, vivid with colour, lay the view we had first seen so long ago in the dingy photos taken by Heim thirty years before. The approach march was over and the expedition had started.

On the morning of the 21st we loaded the boat with a few days' food and some gear. We planned to make a quick recce up the lake to establish whether our proposed route on to the icecap, first found by Heim thirty years ago, would be usable. The sun was hot and the horseflies buzzed around our heads. We approached the little side valley after about forty minutes and were pleased to see a bush-covered moraine terrace on which we could camp. We landed and wended our way up the 200-foot wall to the terrace, which was carpeted with moss and dotted with trees. Near the lake were the remains of a campsite and from the campsite another view sprang into life from the pages of Heim's book. Further along, under a large trog, was a fireplace and the rotting remains of crates. One was marked 'Dr. Arnold Heim Baraloche'.

Never had we expected the Leone to be as salubrious. The air photos had led us to envisage barren, rocky slopes so we had brought fuel for use at base camp, but here wood abounded. The park-like forest was threaded with tiny melt-water streams tinkling through the grass. We sucked nectar from the bright red flowers of a graceful shrub and gnawed the stems of giant rhubarb plants which grew eight feet high.

This day the tents were hastily erected, using Heim's iron tent pegs, and parties dispatched for a preliminary reconnaissance. Alan, Claudio and I took the boat to the head of the lake where the characteristic lines of icebergs began their majestic parade. After some movie-making we scrambled up a gully on the northern side of the glacier snout to come out on a level section above the first icefalls. Here the ice was chaotic. To reach the icecap either of the obvious saddles, through which the ice poured, would involve long hours of tedious packing. We began to see why Heim had bypassed the glacier. Only Claudio disagreed; having been born in the treeless north of Chile and having done most of his climbing in the bare mountains near Santiago he did not feel at all at home in the bush.

'Same to the rabbit,' he said!

Meanwhile Bob and Paddy found their way to the neve of the north branch of the glacier where they stumbled on the remains of another of Heim's camps, the six-foot windbreak of stones still intact.

The decision was made that night to go all-out for the Heim route, so Paddy and I made a start on ferrying the bulk of the supplies up the lake while the others made a concerted effort to reach the col. The end of the day found them back at camp, burnt

to a crisp and convinced that the distances were deceptive. They had been to the bottom of the col but had not scaled the last thousand feet.

In the days that followed a comfortable base camp shelter was built against the trog, and a track cut through the bush to Camp I. We placed this camp on Heim's upper campsite, and consequently it was often referred to as Heim's '. As a last attempt to avoid the bush route, and also to investigate the cols either side of Mocha, Bob and I had done one last recce up the base-camp stream. The lower valley was pleasant and infested with duck so tame that we were tempted to stalk them with our ice-axes. We sidled waterfalls by frictioning up huge granite slabs and scrambled around the melt lake. Here progress was slow as we climbed over the biggest boulders we had ever seen. The route was obviously not suitable for packing but made a pleasant trip. We returned via the bush route from Camp I after frictioning up more gigantic slabs to Peak 1350.

The bulk of the icecap food had been carried to Camp I when we saw the orange fly appear that was to signal Ray and John's arrival. They were picked up next day, November 29, and were impatient as they had waited a day before we saw their signals. A congenial afternoon was spent swapping stories and discussing the adequacy of the signal system.

Next day packing went on as usual, but four stayed at Camp I to make another effort to reach the col and verify its suitability as a packing route. When we arrived the day after to join them they reported that the 6,000-foot col used by Heim was cut off, but the 7,000-foot one to the north of it was passable. On the other side a twelve-kilometre 'ski run' would land us at the foot of the Salud Glacier. We decided to place two well stocked snowcaves on the col from which we could make sorties on to the icecap, but could escape to the east in continual bad weather.

Every stage of load-carrying had its compensations. On the haul through the bush it had been rum and tang cocktails, with genuine glacier ice, which we sipped around the base camp fire while we watched the bergs calve off. From Camp I we carried skis to the foot of the col, a journey of about three hours. Then followed a fast, exciting run back to camp, dodging between crevasses on the way.

Back at camp we bathed in the sun-warmed waters of a melt pool, the temperature of which rose to 70° F. on one occasion. The weather was not always good, however, and one carry was done in a Ruapehu-style blizzard. A local clearance in the afternoon allowed us to have our usual bathe while cloud boiled all around.

Camp II was established on December 5, when Bob, Paddy, John and Ray caved about 600 feet below the col on the eastern side. The rest of us carried loads to the site, then returned to

Camp I. Next day high winds prevented us from moving up but the others made a trip to the food dump below the col when the wind dropped in the evening. We arrived on the 7th and found the snow had a rubbery consistency which made digging tiring. Our work was enlivened by the groaning of the ice as it inched downwards. The site was ideal and we were able to quench our thirst from streams of melt-water while we admired panoramic views of the Leone Valley.

Further plans were delayed when a really bad storm struck, confining us to the caves for four days. The entrances were soon closed by drift except for small holes we kept cleared for ventilation, but we were comfortable and food was plentiful. On the fifth day the weather made a typically dramatic Patagonian-style clearance, and by 3 p.m. the sun shone from a clear sky.

We all set out gear to dry and left to carry twelve days' food to the top of the col. About an hour above the caves we had a good view of the route to follow and there we dumped the food. Dave had been trying his ingenious little sledge, made from a marker pole and an opened-out food tin, and as a result we decided to construct seven more for the morning. The evening was spent frantically sorting gear, making sledges and preparing for the early start. Next morning we were away early, despite a sunrise that lit the place up like a neon sign and despite a dire warning from the assistant weather prophet.

The sledges were loaded with about 60 lb. of gear at the dump, leaving about 45 lb. in our packs. Down a steep sustrugi slope we went, learning all the possible limitations of the little sledges on the way. Ray had a modified design we called the 'Viking' with long, sweeping, snow-pole runners designed for minimum friction. However, the operator spent more time adjusting the rigging than actually pulling the sledge. The roughly-cut edges of the tins earned for the sledges the name 'the sledges of the thousand knives' as ropes and fingers suffered numerous lacerations. The final blow to the 'Viking' came when the thousand knives cut the tensioned members of the delicately balanced structure which promptly twanged to pieces.

We stopped for lunch a few hundred feet above the icecap which now stretched before us — a vast, flat, waste of snow. After lunch we spent an hour of sheer exasperation dragging the sledges around a shallow sidle to save those few hundred feet, but when we rounded the corner we were confronted by an icefall which caused us to descend anyway. The heat was by now intense so we stopped by a curious little lake in the ice which we named the 'Waterhole', blew up our lilos, and went to sleep. This procedure Claudio found most irregular and even we had cause to regret it when the weather made a sudden change later in the day. We left the 'Waterhole' at 5 p.m. and climbed a gentle slope where the ice flowed down from the graceful peak of Torre. From the top

of this rise we could see a spur of Torre separating us from the Salud Glacier, which we reached in three hours. The little, and as we thought, sheltered corner seemed an ideal campsite with a large glacial lake and gently sloping moraine beach, especially as now the sky was dark and wind rising.

The truth that sledge hauling is the hardest work one can do was impressed upon us by now as we crashed, exhausted, six in the two tents and two in a shelter made from a nylon fly. Those few who woke during the night reported heavy rain and wind, but most were only aware of the blue sky when we awoke at 9 a.m. to find the storm had vanished as fast as it had come.

At this point we decided that four would set off up the Valentin Glacier with snowcaving gear and establish a camp at about 8,000 feet from which to climb, the other four bringing up food and returning the next day to stay. Owing to the hard day before, the party got away between 11 a.m. and 12 noon, the food packers in the lead. We travelled up a ramp which showed us a huge icefall with a possible route up the middle. Time wore on and we had lunch at about 6,000 feet. We were very conscious of the fact that San Valentin was still over 7,000 feet above us. Just as those in the lead approached the top of the icefall where a route had to be found across a monster crevasse, the murk moved in and the rain started. We retreated to a little platform but were reluctant to dig in as the site wasn't good and the snow soft. Claudio suggested that we build a snow house. We compressed snow with skis and cut blocks with the shovel. In two hours a respectable shelter with rafters of skis and a roof of nylon flies was finished. The other four departed, saying, 'We'll be back up tomorrow unless the weather's really bad.' Three days later they had not reappeared and we were becoming alarmed.

The weather had been murky but with partial clearances during which we had located an airy snowbridge, crossed it and pushed on to form a small food dump at 7,000 feet. We could not imagine why at least two had not been up, as after all they were only 1,000 feet and three kilometres away. Also, the group contained the most extreme 'travel-in-any-weather' enthusiasts. Claudio and I donned skis and fifty minutes later were at the camp to find all well and hear stories of terrible storms that blew the tents down and a lake that rose twelve feet, causing the re-siting of both tents. All this took a lot of swallowing as we had only experienced at most strong breezes. Our shelter would never have stood up to a gale. However, this did seem to explain the roaring noise we heard from the top of Torre Peak. The lesson seemed to be that odd corners can suffer from very intensive local winds. Also, on the way home we noted that the lake had disappeared altogether, so its level did seem to be rather variable. Anyway, the 'Torre Corner' boys packed then and there and pitched the tents next to the shelter that night.

Murk persisted the next day but Ray and I took advantage of a clear patch to recce a route up the next icefall which took us to the neve proper at about 8,500 feet.

The number of small breakthroughs we experienced in this area was disconcerting, but this day I found myself standing on the edge of a crevasse in a perfect white-out, my skis half into space and my pole biting on air.

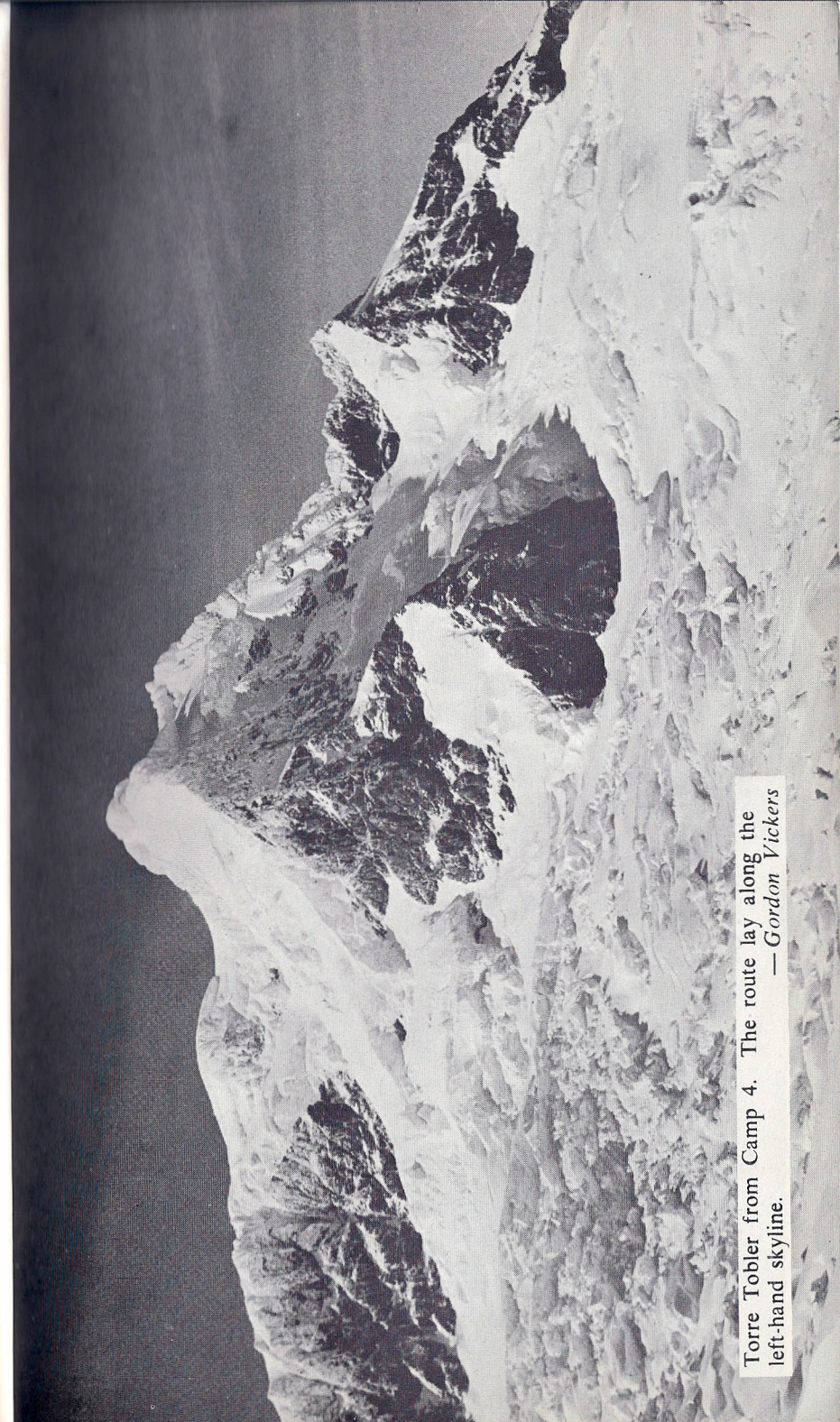
After dinner the mist lifted in great streamers from the peaks in the sunset — probably the most beautiful thing we had seen in Patagonia.

A complicated day of double packing, roping across the airy bridge and picking up food and equipment from dumps all over the glacier followed, but we ate our evening meal at Camp V at 8,500 feet, surrounded by a majestic panorama from the nameless and numberless peaks in the corridor to the far south to the 'ice Colossus' of Valentin in the north. We had thought this description a bit overdone, but from this distance the peak was certainly impressive and the glaciers it fed reached 13,000 feet to the sea.

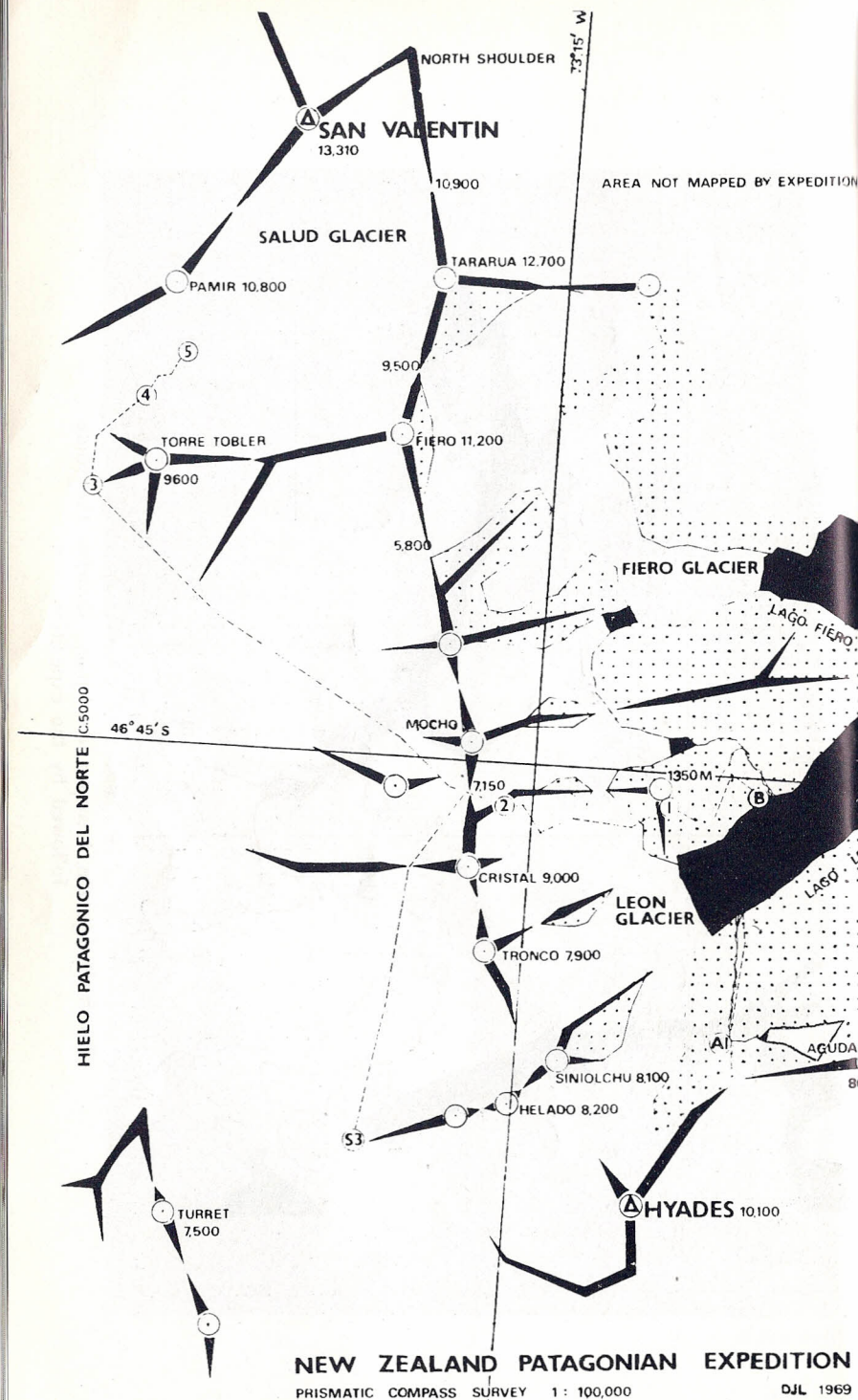
Ray, Claudio, Alan and I elected to tackle the unclimbed south-west ridge of Valentin, while the others were to look at Tararua and Fiero. The sunset and photography kept us from our early night but we still left by 5.30 a.m.

Our first climbing day — it was December 19, about one and a half months after the '80 days' of the expedition started . . . a sure demonstration of how much time and effort an expedition spends getting there and getting home again.

We quickly skinned up to the col at the foot of our ridge where we donned crampons and reached about 11,200 feet on a small face. Here we were forced on to the ridge which consisted of the most incredibly hard ice. Al moved up a few yards and then came back, saying he'd climbed a few yards of stuff like this in the Alps, but 2,000 feet of it just wasn't on. We retreated and looked at the Argentinian route through a serac field but thought it dangerous. Then I remembered a possible route that I'd seen from down-valley. The geography is very complex and we are still trying to work some of the details out. We ran around the corner, trailing an exceedingly dejected Claudio whose English never allows him to follow the action at such times. We had long ago concluded that getting a Chilean to the top of Valentin was the main aim of the expedition as far as the Chileans were concerned, as the only people to have climbed *their* mountain were the hated Argentinians. Claudio could see the only climbing day and only opportunity slipping away. We hurried on now, realising that it was a long way through soft snow and we should have brought our skis. But yes, there was the ridge that should take us to the north peak from where we could turn south to the main peak. But it seemed to consist of the same hard green ice



Torre Tobler from Camp 4. The route lay along the left-hand skyline.  
— Gordon Vickers



all the way along. We turned harder left as we saw a steep snow face sandwiched between active ice cliffs and the head of the out-de-sac between this ridge and the east face of the mountain. Lateness (it was 11 a.m.) urged us to hurry on, but we were panting with the altitude.

We stopped for a quick feed, and then carried on at a more rational pace as distances were deceptive. However, now we had a plan and even Claudio cheered up as we plugged on up through soft sustrugi powder and ice avalanche debris. The wind had risen slightly and we were annoyed to see fifteen minutes later that Tararua had developed a huge hogsback. At the bottom of the snow slope the altimeter showed us to be back at the same altitude we had reached on the south-west ridge. By 1.30 p.m. we reached the col between the north peak and the main peak only to realise we had lost the mountain for this day.

Most of the icecap had disappeared under a sea of tumultuous cloud and the first black billows were boiling down the summit ridge towards us. However, we plodded on to the north peak, twenty minutes away, believing we could be the first to reach it. Summit formalities were short and we groped our way back to the col. The billowing clouds contained ice particles which coated us 'a la Father Christmas' and abraded uncovered eyes. Retreat was far from pleasant as the snow slope was very steep with slots at the bottom, visibility about fifty feet, and the wind strong. Below this we had to stumble halfway round the mountain to our skis, after which followed hours of careful navigation over the huge and featureless neve of the glacier. By 8.30 p.m. we were in a maze of slots that we could cross on skis, but that opened out below so that you felt your stomach clench as you looked into the blue depths. However, we reckoned we were at the same altitude as camp, and eventually roused the others with shouts.

We were pleased to find that they had split into two groups and climbed Tararua and Fiero. Paddy and Dave had cramponed to the summit of Tararua, second highest peak in Patagonia, and were returning when they met the other two. Bob and John had quickly cramponed to the vast summit plateau of Fiero where they lost one another for an hour. The climb had been short, so they decided to return to the col between Tararua and Fiero and attempt Tararua. The storm struck before they reached the summit. The two parties groped their way back to camp where they had been for some time when we arrived.

Again we waited for the weather but on the 23rd Dave woke us just after midnight to say that the weather was good, but looked as if it would not hold for long. Dave, Alan, John and Bob set off for Torre with hopes of filming the ascent; Paddy and I set off for Valentin by the eastern route, while Ray and Claudio went to

try the south-west ridge again, hoping it to be in better condition. After our last experience we all took full bivvy equipment and extra food.

By 5 a.m. we reached the snow slope to find it covered with intensely cold powder. As we proceeded up the now familiar route the hogbacks could again be seen on the distant peaks, but this time we were just a little ahead of the storm. Ray and Claudio appeared below us, having decided to join us for the inevitable difficult return. They were chased up the cul-de-sac by small ice avalanches which sent clouds of powder snow into the air. The race with the storm was on again, it being important for me to reach the top in clear weather to make various mapping observations. Our breath rasped and our boots, which had been wet for days, were like wooden clogs. Several hundred feet below the summit the first wisps appeared and we arrived at the summit simultaneously with the usual masses of cloud. Ray and Claudio arrived a few minutes later and we waited while Claudio buried flags and cards from the expedition. We then impatiently dragged him down, complaining that he had not had time to savour the summit.

Amends were made once we had found the route off the summit ridge when we stopped for food and a round of hearty 'abrazos'.

Descent followed the familiar pattern, except that we came out of the cloud at 10,000 feet and had an enjoyable run back to camp. The others weren't there so we retired to catch up on lost sleep.

At 5 p.m. I was awakened by the wind tugging at the tent and the sudden feeling that the other four were not back. This time it was our turn to worry as we set up a line of ski poles from the camp. Finally they arrived out of the storm, all-in, at 7 p.m., having been away sixteen hours.

In order to reach the saddle between Fiero and Torre they had turned south high on the neve of the Salud Glacier. Crevassed regions had forced them to climb nearly as high as the peak during this detour. They reached the saddle after a long, exciting ski run through the moonlight, the frozen snow rasping on their skis. The ridge had given enjoyable exposed climbing until the final summit cap was reached. Here a wall of cauliflower ice blocked further progress. This obstacle appeared to be surmountable by a slanting gully but several attempts on it were unsuccessful. The cauliflowers consist of a soft, fragile deposit over hard ice which breaks away and causes enough difficulty, but a further problem is created by the fact that it absorbs all sound, making communication impossible. At last Bob backed his way up an enclosed tube of ice, a lead which was inevitably called the Gunn Barrel. The storm caught them as they started to descend, and when they reached the glacier they were not favoured with a partial clearance as we had been. A navigational error landed

them in a hopeless maze of slots, but eventually they backtracked and were able to locate the camp.

The successful ascent allowed us to implement a plan first formed soon after we had seen the graceful peak — we decided to change the name from 'Torre' to 'Torre Tobler' in memory of Thor Tobler, the first leader of the expedition, who was killed while attempting Mt. Tasman in February, 1968. The filming had been a success and provided a complete record of one of the ascents made by the expedition.

With one day's food left we had now to withdraw, but the day was again fine (as were most of our packing days) and we were tempted by the sight of the only unclimbed peak remaining — Pico Sur, about 10,800 feet, just above our camp. Finally we decided to send Ray and Claudio off while we broke camp and packed their packs. As we approached our airy snow bridge we saw them on the summit. An hour was spent crossing the slot as the bridge had collapsed, and in fact the glacier was so bad that we hardly dared step off our skis into the porridge. Ray and Claudio caught us up at Torre Corner where we all rested from the exhausting business of ski-ing with 80 lb. packs and ate our one remaining tin of food. As the evening was fine we carried on to the 'Waterhole' which we reached at midnight.

After a minimal breakfast the next morning we started the long plug up to the col. Fortunately the sky was overcast and the snow stayed reasonably hard, but that same sky was a lurid apricot colour; we felt we were leaving the icecap just in time. The prospect of finding the col in a white-out did not appeal. We reached the cave site by 2 p.m. but much digging was necessary to locate the caves. The food was welcome but the cave did not tempt us to stay as the roof had been reduced to half its former height and the air smelt dank. We decided to press on to the luxuries of base camp, but in view of the large number of slots that had opened in the glacier we elected to travel down our escape route — the ridge to Peak 1350. The exhaustion of the party showed in every move as we slipped and slithered down the rocks, then wearily ski-ed the last stretch of the glacier to Camp I. My ankle was abominably painful so I was glad to change into my light boots before limping after the others down to base camp where we arrived at dusk to savour the smell of the wood fire and relax in our shelter in the bush.

Time slipped easily by while we rested in base camp. The weather was dull and storms were raging on the icecap so we felt no twinge of conscience during this idyll. I discovered that my ankle contained a deep-seated infection, providing just the opportunity Ray had been waiting for. For a year he had trained part-time in a hospital casualty department and under expert medical directions had assembled his 'comprehensive medical kit'. Now he came into his full glory with scalpels, anaesthetic,

swabs and bandages. I staggered away under the influence of a wide selection of antibiotics and pain relievers, condemned to hobble around camp for the next six days wearing an old overboot. The incident served to show the usefulness of such precautions, as without them I could easily have had to return to civilisation and disrupted the whole expedition. Most members had suffered a host of minor injuries, often unnoticed until clothes were stripped off for the first time since our bathe at Camp I. Almost all had lost weight, an exception being made in the case of the party's billy scraper. A growing lad, of course, he needed more, but the surprise is that so much nutrition was available from aluminium scrapings.

Other sedentary occupations included a massive refurbishing of the radios which had never gone very well. Components were pirated from a third set we carried, the work being done under primitive conditions. Trial substitution of components was the only method available in the absence of test instruments; all soldering was done with a small bit carefully tended over a fickle primus. Radio amateurs, both in Chile and New Zealand, had arranged a line of communication from Cayhaique to Wellington. A feature of the trip had been the repeated attempts to reach our Cayhaique contact, Hector Carrillo. Once contact was briefly made, but on most nights two powerful Argentinian stations would drown our weak signals. It appears only one message ever left the icecap. Its origin and mode of transmission remain a mystery to this day, but as received by the wives in Chile Chico it said, 'Send more sun cream.'

Dave worked diligently to produce a map from the compass bearings he and others had taken. The accuracy of the method was surprising, with the error on the position of some peaks being less than 100 metres. Claudio decided to rename Pico Sur, which he and Ray had climbed, 'Pamir' for his club in Santiago. We decided to name the glacier separating Pamir and Tararua 'Salud'! as an expression of the bond the expedition had formed between the two clubs.

Christmas dinner was eaten one day late, leaving most of the members literally groaning after a surfeit of tinned goodies and wine. There was even enough left over for a Boxing Day dinner as well.

An aura of accomplishment killed the pre-Christmas fire of the party—we felt we had done enough to justify our presence. The pressure to fulfil our obligations was off so we looked to the second half of the trip as more of a climbing holiday.

On December 31 the weather showed signs of improving so we split into two parties. Part 2 (the snow-bump boys) went back to the snow caves to finish filming the climbing sequences while Part 1 (the bush babies) went down-valley with mail. There we found wild strawberries in abundance and were given a hero's

welcome by the local people who seemed to have lost the slight reserve they showed before, now they had had time to get used to us.

When we returned (Claudio, Paddy, Ray and myself) we reached the south-west corner of the lake for climbs of Aguda and Hyades, as well as the possibility of crossing a col to the Rio Seler. We hoped to find routes to the southern parts of the icecap from there. We were convinced that this area was worthy of another expedition, and so wanted what information we could gain on the approaches and perhaps contact the people who lived in the Seler.

One day in the south-west corner of the lake fired our enthusiasm for more. Ascending a ridge on the south side of the Leone Glacier, we had located another of Heim's camps. The prospect of climbing Hyades from here seemed poor, but the rock spike of Aguda, reflected in the thousand tarns, beckoned us. The country was beautiful, with gnarled beech trees, soft grass and mountain flowers. The site (A1 on map) was the best we had stayed in yet. We had even startled a rare Patagonian deer as we climbed the chaotic riverbed that led to the upper basin.

The morrow dawned a little misty but we set off, knowing we had a long day ahead as the camp was only at 3,000 feet and the peak was about 9,000 feet high. Steep, exposed, snow slopes brought us to the west ridge by 10 a.m. but still the murk prevailed. We ate and trundled huge boulders until at 1 p.m. the mist suddenly lifted and the day was perfect. We had scrambled up the first step in the ridge; now we tackled the much more formidable second step. Snow-filled gullies on the south side took Ray and I on to the top of the step while Claudio and Paddy continued up a snow gully on the south side. From the top of this step a sloping ledge took us on to the middle of the north face where we made fast time up a series of gullies and ledges. The climb was now all we could wish with firm rock, exhilarating exposure and grandstand views of the main divide. As we reached the top of the gully system the other two appeared below, much to our relief, having abandoned their gully by making an extremely exposed traverse across the ridge. We now took to a rib to the right which we found extremely difficult so we moved left along a tiny ledge. As I moved to join Ray my foothold broke away in a sickening manner, but I managed to hang on. Ray called 'rock', but a few moments later the stunning words, 'Claudio has been hit and looks bad,' were shouted by Paddy. Ray and I immediately double-roped down the difficult section we had just climbed, then carried on carefully down the gully to the others who were about 300 feet below.

We found that Claudio had been hit just above the knee—his leg appeared badly bruised and he could only stand on it with difficulty. An x-ray taken much later showed that the knee had

been dislocated but had fortunately relocated itself. Swiftly, as it was now 6 p.m., we arranged abseils and many rope-lengths later we were off the peak. One had to climb down most of the pitches as we did not have enough slings and pegs to leave them behind. It was now 9.30 but we carried on slowly down the easy rock to the snow where we decided to descend via the Soler col to avoid exposed slopes. By midnight the long Patagonian twilight expired, so we crawled under some large boulders to sleep, aware that we were still at 5,700 feet. The weather held but our bivvy was not comfortable enough to stop us from carrying on down at first light, to arrive in camp, extremely tired and hungry, at about 10 a.m.

Claudio had done very well with one leg stiff and painful. We ate breakfast and crawled under boulders to sleep because, ironically enough, we were now sweltering under the blazing sun.

We made good contact with Party 2 that night. They had climbed Helado and Hyades, but we only got the full details later.

They had finally established the position of their camp when the mists lifted on the afternoon of the day after their arrival. They left at 3.15 for an attempt on Siniolchu, skinning east to a col on the ridge. From the col 700 feet of delightful crampon climbing took them to a summit of about 7,200 feet. Here they realised they had climbed the peak we had named Helado.

Siniolchu lay half a mile to the east. The descent was a memorable ski run of over a thousand feet and finishing at the camp. One of the main objectives of the southern excursion was the ascent of Hyades, the only officially named peak in the area apart from San Valentin.

On January 7 they rounded the western end of the Siniolchu ridge and ski-ed into the vast area where the icecap merges into the southern branch of the Leone Glacier. Leaving their skis at the foot of the peak, they made a fast crampon ascent of the mountain. On the summit the inevitable storm had struck and it was back to the familiar compass plod through the white-out.

We in Party 1 were lulled into thinking the weather had broken, so were surprised to wake later and find a perfect day. Paddy, Ray and I breakfasted at top speed and shot off for the south ridge of Aguda. We made fast time up the steps of two days before, then crossed the neve from the west to the south ridge. The rock began at 7,800 feet and carried on interspersed with snow aretes to the summit, which we now measured as 8,600 feet. This meant we were only 300 feet below the summit two days before. We realised our idea of using the south ridge as a fast way off would have been no good as the ridge was long and slow. We made a photographic panorama from the summit which commanded a view over most of the northern part of the icecap, then hurried down as we did not wish to spend another night out.

We decided that evening to return to base camp and start preparations for the trip back to civilisation. We had seen the

Soler col and decided it could be crossed. The extent to which the bush was burned suggested that the Soler valley was farmed. Contact with the people could have been desirable, but our interpreter would not have been able to come with us. This meant leaving a few days ahead of schedule but there was no time to move into a new area to climb.

Attempts at communicating with Party 2 were frustrated by poor radio conditions. Later we found they had ascended Siniolchu, the last major peak in the area, and made an exploratory ascent of Turret, the peak on the northernmost end of the corridor.

Bob and Alan were put through their paces on some of the most severe ice climbing we had encountered. Sidling under Helado, they gained the west ridge of Siniolchu by a steep face on its northern side. The summit seemed surrounded by ice overhangs, but they found a weakness in the form of a corkscrew series of delicate ramps. They completed the top section on the face above Lago Leone, then traversed by descending the north ridge to the top of a rock step. From here they regained their skis by a steep drop on the northern face.

Meanwhile John and Dave ski-ed south-west on the icecap to climb Turret and gain our best view to the south. The peaks looked beautiful and demanding, and the corridor was accentuated by a carpet of mist on its floor. On the return they made a wide arc to the south to confirm that there was a low-level route to the corridor from the eastern side.

We in Party 1 set out to return to base camp that afternoon, moving very slowly with Claudio across a large bush-covered moraine terrace. This forest was enchanting, with huge trees completely devoid of undergrowth apart from lush grass and thousands of Patagonian orchids. We prolonged the trip back across the lake by drifting with the currents until the horseflies had gone for the day.

On January 12 we dismantled base camp and took a boatload of gear to the bottom of the lake. Party 2, who had been at Camp 1 doing final work for the film, came down the same day and were picked up by Paddy for a farewell tour of the lake.

An attempt next day to take some final shots from the lake resulted in the loss of our faithful Zodiac boat. Things got away to a bad start when Alan slid into five feet of water while clutching his beloved camera. The camera was saved by his prompt action, but soon afterwards we ran aground on a sharp spike of moraine. Due to her unsinkable construction the Zodiac was able to limp back to the trog where she was drawn up on the beach — a fitting last resting place. Before coming into our service she had spent some years as a rescue craft at Nandi airport, Fiji, and was now at the end of her life.

We were well received by the Pablete family, who once again provided horses to carry our gear. We spent several days here, rediscovering the taste of roast lamb and fresh bread.

On the evening that the ox-cart arrived we had a grand feast at which a sheep and much bread disappeared. The valley was now rich with produce as the summer crops were ready and wild fruit grew everywhere. This was in contrast to our journey up the valley when most foods were scarce. The mutton was accompanied by an enormous salad and rough red wine mixed with wild strawberries. Throughout the festivities storms again raged on the icecap. Was the weather really that much better than we had expected, or were we just lucky?

The trip down-valley was much less eventful than expected, largely due to the skill of the oxen drover. Senor Ruben Sanderval made a striking figure mounted proudly on his horse, the long bamboo drover's pole carried with all the dignity of a medieval knight. We made many stops at the little farms while Claudio told tales of fresh adventures and we all drank the inevitable mate tea. The people were most surprised and not a little unbelieving when they were told San Valentin was not a volcano as the often present snow plume had led them to believe.

We were lucky to board the 'Aysen' the day after reaching the river mouth, thus having a few days to do essential expedition wind-up work in Chile Chico, where the expedition finally disbanded.

That the area seemed particularly suited to the New Zealand mountaineer had been one of the main attractions for us, and, already, less than one year after the expedition, club members are forming a second expedition with the aim of exploring and climbing on the southern part of the icecap. Is it possible that this corner of the world's mountains could become the special preserve of our club?

Expedition members: Alan Bibby, Paddy Gresham, Bob Gunn, Dave Launder, Claudio Lucero (Chile), John Nankervis, Ray Vickers, Gordon Vickers (leader).

#### Summary of ascents made:—

Tararua 12,700 ft.	December 20 1969	Launder, Gresham. By easy frozen snow slopes from col to south.
Fiero 11,200 ft.	December 20	Gunn, Nankervis. By easy snow slopes from col to north.
San Valentin 13,310 ft.	December 22	Gresham, Lucero, G. and R. Vickers. Steep snow and serac field to summit neve; easy slopes to summit.

Torre Tobler 9,000 ft.	December 23	Bibby, Gunn, Nankervis, Launder. By ridge from col to east; steep arete with some mushrooms; summit cone by steep ice tunnel with artificial pitch at bottom.
Pamir 10,800 ft.	December 24	Lucero, R. Vickers. Easy snow until last 300 feet where exposed traverse to north and sharp arete led to summit.
Crystal 9,000 ft.	January 2 1970	Bibby, Launder, Nankervis, Gunn. Easy frozen snow to vertical 60 ft. schrund, then moderate snow and ice to summit.
Mocha 8,000 ft.	January 2	Bibby, Launder, Nankervis. West face; easy frozen snow.
Helado 8,200 ft.	January 6	Bibby, Gunn, Launder, Nankervis. By west ridge; frozen snow and ice.
Hyades 10,100 ft.	January 7	Bibby, Gunn, Launder, Nankervis. By basin to north-west, then easy snow to summit.
Sinolchu 8,100 ft.	January 8	Bibby, Gunn. Traverse from north face to west ridge and descent by north ridge and north-west face. Very steep frozen snow on descent.
Turret 7,500 ft.	January 8	Launder, Nankervis. By east face, easy rock and snow to summit.
Aguda 8,600 ft.	January 8	Gresham, G. and R. Vickers. By glacier to 7,800 feet on south ridge; then poor rock and short snow aretes to summit.

All climbs were first ascents except San Valentin which was made by a new route. All heights plus or minus 100 feet. All names except San Valentin and Hyades subject to confirmation.