

A Midsummer Walk: The Ascent of Mount Vinson, Antarctica

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Introduction

Mount Vinson (4897m), of the Sentinel Range in the Ellsworth Mountains, is the continental summit of Antarctica. It was discovered by U.S. Navy aircraft only in 1957 and named after Congressman Carl Vinson of Georgia, who had encouraged the U.S. government to support Antarctic exploration in the 1930s-1950s. It was first climbed by an American Alpine Club expedition led by Nicholas Clinch on 17th December 1966, the last continental summit to be ascended. The second and third expeditions to the mountain were in 1979 and 1983. Antarctica is the fifth largest continent, ahead of Europe and Australia. It is the coldest, the driest, the highest and the windiest landmass in the world. The mean annual temperature is -57°C , ranging from slightly below freezing in January along the coast, to the lowest-ever temperature recorded in nature of -89.2°C .

The Worst Lost Luggage Story in the World!

Our party, consisting of myself, two other Cairngorm Club members, Robin Howie and Peter Bellarby, with three Englishmen and two "Himalyan Kingdoms" (now Jagged Globe) guides, arrived at Punta Arenas (PA), the town at the "bottom" of Chile, via Buenos Aires, a stunning aerial view of Aconcagua and a seven hour wait in Santiago. We had expected a day's rest in PA before leaving for the Antarctica, little realising the problems facing the Adventure Network International (ANI) flight to Patriot Hills ($80^{\circ}\text{S } 81^{\circ}\text{W}$). The Hercules plane was to land on a wind-scoured blue-ice runway, the hardness of this ice making landing possible. The visibility had to be perfect but, more importantly and far more difficult to predict, the wind had to be less than 15 knots, as the pilots could not brake to slow down or manoeuvre. The flight took eight hours, and if the plane took off, went all the way and failed to land, the profits of ANI were virtually wiped out for the whole season. We were about to start a very long unscheduled wait in PA. What an exciting place it was: visits to the local cemetery, the rundown and unused (it was summer after all) ski centre and of course the immensely interesting town museum. We did see the local Magellanic Penguins on a spit of land that had a very strong resemblance to the wind-blasted Scottish Outer Isles and a most amazing experience, for a climbing holiday, of a guided tour of a British naval frigate. At least Robin could practice his Spanish.

On the fifth night we left Chile. We were now nine, having been

joined by a very experienced climber from America, Martin Adams, who had been involved in the Everest disaster in 1996. We were under instructions to wear full down clothing, our insulated climbing boots and to carry our sleeping bags in our hand luggage, in case we had to make an emergency landing en route. The flight went quite quickly. We excitedly took turns to view the scene from the cockpit window, as we flew into the sunrise and 24-hour daylight. The orange glow on the horizon slowly replaced the dark navy of night as we headed towards the sun. An endless sea of cloud drifted beneath us for hours, till I suddenly realised that the "clouds" were actually the snows of the Antarctic Peninsula, scarred with grey crevasses. It looked big and white and very unforgiving.

The landing was breath-taking and noisy, the plane bouncing along the rutted surface, before sliding to a precarious halt on the icy runway. Silence. A long silence. No rush to stand and make a grab for the luggage as on a normal flight, for nobody dared move. The ANI staff on the ground were insistent that they would remove my rucksack from the plane, whilst I was to concentrate on the hazardous journey over the ice to the large tent that acted as restaurant and airport lounge. I felt a little uneasy, parted from my sack with its all-important, specially made 3/4 length sleeping bag, but felt reassured when I saw it leave the plane and join the other kit bags on the waiting sledge. **THAT WAS THE LAST I WAS TO SEE OF IT FOR TWO WEEKS.** I have yet to understand how a rucksack, labelled clearly with the name of Rhona, was removed by a German camera team (all male) heading back to South America!

So there I was, in the coldest continent on earth, with no sleeping bag, no crampons, no goggles, no hill rucksack, only a thin pair of gloves and no film for my camera (the least of my worries). The nearest shop? Well, only on the next continent, a few thousand miles away. At the start I was a picture of calm and restraint. Even when they told me that it had never happened before (except to the luggage of an already dead paraglider who had had an accident jumping out of a plane at the South Pole). After all, there was nothing that could be done about it. The Patriot Hills staff seemed to be more upset than I was, and wandered the base in search of spare clothing and equipment. Some of it was excellent. The crampons were lethal to anything unfortunate enough to come within their vicinity. I received professional slide film and very comfortable high altitude gloves, but the rucksack had been up Vinson four times already (and looked it), and the Chinese sleeping bag was not, in my opinion, fit to deal with a Scottish winter, far less one of the coldest environments in the world. My initial calm was now turning to anger and concern. My worst nightmare was being realised. I was in this most desolate of places with inadequate equipment and without the comforting safe haven of a proper cold-weather sleeping bag.

The Vinson Massif: Base Camp to Camp 3

We then transferred to a Twin Otter for the one-hour journey to Vinson Base Camp. I was in no mood to appreciate the views of the Ellsworth Mountains, mountains mostly unnamed, unknown and unclimbed. A flight that should have been full of excitement and anticipation was tainted with anxiety and dread (having several long-standing leg injuries did not help either). I wanted home on a holiday that I had only just begun and that had cost an enormous amount of money. The landing was very impressive, as we sprayed our way to a stop on powdered snow on a gentle upward slope, framed by steep mountains and encircled by hidden crevasses.

Vinson Base Camp was at approximately 2300m, in the middle of the Branscomb Glacier at 79°30' S 86° W. Also at the site were an American team and an Israeli/New Zealand/French group. We pitched our tent on platforms levelled out in the snow. Preparing food was a long, laborious act, requiring us to first cut snow blocks and build a kitchen area, then cut more blocks to boil water for drinks and to rehydrate the food. That night I fell into a long exhausted sleep. The temperature in the tent was not too bad, only -2°C.

The next day's task was to take supplies using sledges up to Camp 1½, which was (logically) between Camp 1 and 2. The setting up of this stage was to give us a rest day at Camp 2, before the most difficult part of the climb, ascending the headwall of the Branscomb Glacier. We were roped together to safeguard against crevasses, which occurred where the glacier turned an acute left on its approach to the headwall. Unfortunately the weather was not inspiring - the cloud was down, the light completely flat, the views nil. It felt like walking in wet cement, with a white blindfold and a heavy rucksack, in a large freezer. I wished I was anywhere else but there.

At Base Camp the following morning, things did not start well. Robin felt awful and I was sick. Robin is very sensitive to high altitude but then rapidly acclimatizes, but I am usually reasonable till over 4500m (see note 1). The expedition leader had to persuade us to continue to Camp 2 saying it would help the others to reach Camp 3. The weather was the same as the day before, with no discernible horizon. This gave the interesting illusion at Camp 1¾ (!) of the American camp with its orange tents floating in the air, the snow blending perfectly with the white sky. Camp 2 was at 3220m, two to three hours from our food dump at Camp 1½, situated in a large wind-scoop to the right of the Branscomb Glacier, and tucked in close to the flank of the unseen Vinson. On arrival I felt better (note 1) but Peter looked tired and short of breath. It was very cold: -19°C outside, -11°C in the tent. That "night" I was wearing three pairs of socks, a full layer of thermal underwear, fleece *and* down salopettes,

Karrimor windbloc jacket, down jacket, hat, and gloves, whilst in the Chinese sleeping bag and lying on two Grade 5 thermal mats.

The following are extracts from my diary:

Saturday 28.11.98

Cairngorm Club dinner tonight! Very cold at this camp site but enjoyed the rest day socialising around the tents. Then suddenly the wind increased, the snow blew up and within minutes the other tents only yards away were almost impossible to see. Fortunately Peter was in our tent when the storm broke. He increased the temperature inside to -8°C and I became a female sandwich filling between the 2 men.

Sunday 29.11.98

Next day blew the same. Simon, our expedition leader recorded an outside temperature of -23°C , before he gave up, fearing he might lose a body part if he persisted. The Americans lower down the mountain thought the wind speeds were 20-30 knots. Movement at the camp was very difficult. It was impossible to see/locate the toilet pit - mark you the exposure of any body part to the elements risked frostbite. "Bodily functions" were performed in the tent using pee bottles. I got in a panic at one stage when I thought my urine had frozen in the bottle and that I would have to carry it all the way up the mountain and back to Patriot Hills before I could empty and reuse the container! Our two leaders, Simon and Dave, worked hard to melt snow and provide hot food in their tent, whilst we took turns to deliver it. I remember doing a round of tomato soup lasting five to ten minutes and shivering in my "sleeping bag" for 30 minutes afterwards. Spent time watching a stalactite grow to four inches above my head during the day.

The Antarctic Cairngorm Club entertains itself by playing word games.

I am reminded frequently that it was my suggestion to come here! I tell them to ignore my suggestions in the future!!

Monday 30.11.98

Day 3 of the storm. Weather is everything here. I can understand how Scott was fatally trapped in his tent before Ten Ton Depot. The wind chill and poor visibility makes thought of travel impossible. Later on the visibility much improves though it is still windy. Getting warmer in the tent - my stalactite has disappeared and I can cope without my down jacket whilst in the tent.

Tuesday 1.12.1998

We arrived at Camp 2 on Friday "night" and have been trapped here since. Have hardly walked more than 100 meters all that time - surely a record for inactivity.

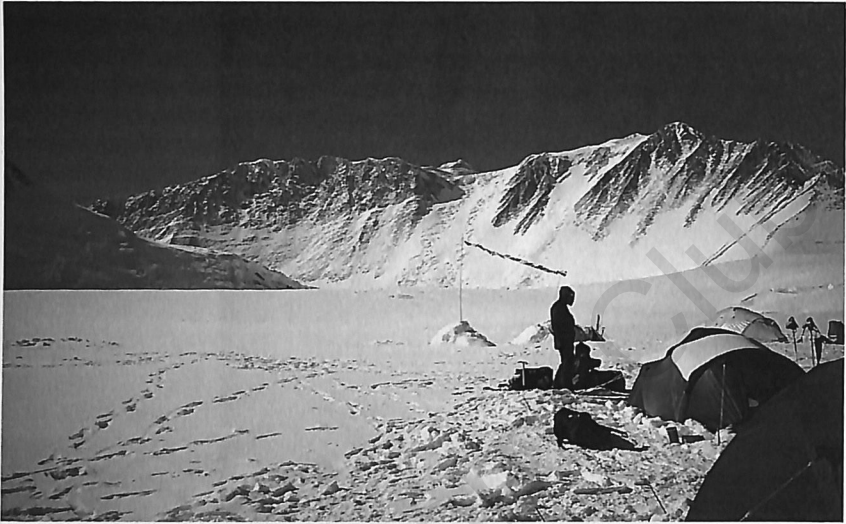
On Tuesday the weather appeared more settled later on, so we broke camp and load-carried up the headwall of the Branscomb Glacier to Camp 3. This was the steepest part of the whole climb, involving snow slopes of up to 40 degrees and quite a long period below huge seracs, zigzagging between deep crevasses. One GREAT advantage of the lost luggage was the imminent demise of my rucksack, as Dave removed stuff from my sack, as he had done on every day and gave it to the others to carry! The heat on the lower slopes was surprisingly intense and, combined with the heavy sacks, the pace settled into a sweaty crawl. The views higher up were spectacular, for now we were above the valley walls and looking down on to the vast Antarctic plateau. A sea of white was speckled with isolated peaks, most broad domes though some were jagged and formidable (Pyramid Peak is just that). As soon as we hit the flat plateau between Mts. Shin and Vinson, the wind appeared, dropping the temperatures like a stone.

We set up camp at 3650m on the lower slopes of Vinson (yet unseen), overlooking the big bulk of Mt Shin (at 4667m the 3rd highest mountain) with its conical top. I could not be bothered to change clothing after we pitched the tents and ended up shivering violently. Even several hours in Peter's huge Grade 5+ sleeping bag *with* Peter failed to get me completely warm (see note 1).

The ascent of Mount Vinson, Wednesday 2.12.98

Good weather. In fact our guides were uttering the warm word, for the first time in the holiday. We were in our two teams - the young fit men led by Simon "the A team", and "the B team" with Dave Walsh, the older men and me. We slowly climbed the 30-degree slope above the camp, reaching the long valley leading to the summit of Vinson. This was our first view of the hill and somehow, bearing in mind it is the continental high point, it appeared rather benign. It reminded me of a flattened Ben More and Stobinian with a wide bealach between two summit ridges, the left one being the highest.

I was just starting to feel the first signs of altitude (i.e. shortness of breath) when conditions changed. The wind suddenly appeared from nowhere, whipping up the snow and leading to severe wind-chill. Dave and I did not have any problems, I having been (over) cautious about exposing any flesh, from the very start of the expedition. However, John discovered his gloves were too small and Peter had to remove his boots to get on his overtrousers. Dave looked on in amazement at the chaos around him and said "we cannot continue like this!" Absolutely astonished!! Absolutely delighted!!! The perfect excuse to go down, get off the mountain and get back a.s.a.p to Patriot Hills. What I had been wanting since I had lost my sleeping bag. However, as we descended back to Camp 3 I could not believe the thoughts in my head. Dave was "doing"



Mount Vinson from Base Camp

the Seven Summits. He had only the Carstenz Pyramid and Vinson left (note 2). How could we leave Antarctica without getting him up this hill?

Whilst "the A team" struggled up Vinson in 50mph winds, we relaxed in the windless and "warm" Camp 3 and for the first time soaked in the holiday atmosphere. But thoughts of a second attempt on the hill would not go away. The next day there was no doubt that Dave was keen to try again. Three of us set off, Dave, Robin and I, encouraging ourselves with the thought that this was only a Munro (1200m ascent), the same as any good winter hill day in Scotland. Ahead, going at a very similar pace, was the American group of four. After the initial steep climb from High Camp the slope eased, but then increased as it approached the upper corrie leading to the bealach between the two tops. At this point we came across the hardest ice I have ever felt - blue and totally unyielding. But when was the last time it was in its liquid state? I was by now starting to feel the altitude, as was Robin. The route up to the col was marked by wands, and the aim was to keep going for two to three wands distance and then rest. We zigzagged up the 35-degree slope leading to the bealach, getting increasingly confident as we got higher. We were entertained by the American team who bawled and cursed at each other all the way up this section.

We rested just before we crested the ridge and prepared for the "inevitable" onslaught of the elements. Nothing happened - no noise, no wind. In fact higher up I had a bite to eat *without* wearing gloves, an

action which yesterday would have risked frostbite. The first part of the ridge involved easy scrambling, then it rose gracefully to become a wide bouldery slope topped by an apparent cornice. The pace was now slow, aiming from one boulder to another. Our pace dropped to 15 paces and stop, then 10 stop, 10 stop, 10 stop, till we stood under what I had hoped was the final slope. One final short heave over the cornice and we were there, about eight hours after we had set off from Camp 3. Dave could not contain his delight.

We seemed to be on top of an extensive high plateau, with numerous isolated peaks sticking out of a sea of white. It seemed as if it would be possible to launch yourself from the top of Vinson and ski easily for miles on low angled slopes, only Mts. Shin and Tyree (the later having the reputation of being the most difficult peak in the continent) rising harshly from the undulating vastness. And it felt *warm*, in spite of the -17°C temperature. We could relax, eat, take pictures and enjoy the vistas. Yesterday's party had only managed a touch of the summit ski stick before fleeing from the wind. Dave re-lived his Everest success, again with a "B team". I could not believe I had been successful after all the anxiety that preceded the climb.

As usual I was quite scared of the descent, believing that I would be pulled off my feet by the stronger men in their haste to get down. But in fact the downclimb was very easy, the hard snow between the upper corrie and the lower valley showing unusual shallow linear lines on its surface, probably from pressure differentials at the boundary of the two types of slope. Slightly over 11 hours after leaving, we arrived back at the camp.

Descent, Patriot Hills and Hypothermia

As we descended in one push back to Base Camp, the main problem was again excessive heat at the base of the headwall of the glacier and the impending collapse of my overladen rucksack. Luckily the weather was now perfect, giving us magnificent views of the Matterhorn-like Mt Tyree. I had a tent to myself at Base Camp but despite wearing every stitch of clothing I was still cold (note 1). The next day was glorious - brilliant blue skies with the tiny cone of Vinson clearly visible in the distance directly above the east wall of the Branscomb Glacier. The air felt warm for it was completely calm. A perfect Antarctic day.

Due to our group size, we had to do the flight to Patriot Hills in two separate journeys. I did not mind staying behind as it gave me time to catch up with my diary and soak up the dramatic atmosphere beneath Antarctica's highest mountain. Unfortunately there was a long delay turning round the second flight, as the French skiers were still on a neighbouring mountain. All our equipment was packed in the plane as we waited for them to descend. Not only was I getting increasingly impatient with the wait, but was feeling hungry as we had eaten very little since

breakfast. Suddenly I felt very tired, and in desperation for rest, lay down in the snow (this is not as stupid as it seems as the Base Camp hut seemed quite cold and all the tents etc. were packed in the plane). I felt warm, pain-free and happy, and briefly wondered if this was exhaustion/hypothermia, for I had hardly eaten or stopped since climbing the mountain 3 days before. The next thing I remember was being teased for missing the flight call. I wanted to get up but my brain seemed to be unable to send messages to my limbs. My legs felt like chunks of wood detached from my body, and the 10-20 yard walk to the plane was far worse than anything on Vinson, far worse than any marathon.

I still felt weak as we arrived at Patriot Hills but was determined that I was going to walk *all* the way back to the mess tent. A strong wind buffeted the camp and seemed to sap my strength even more. As I opened the door of the mess tent, I was greeted with reassuring words from a down-clad Susan (note 4), the American woman on the climb. Suddenly I collapsed into a shivering wreck. The penny dropped - HYPOTHERMIA. At last united with my proper sleeping bag, I tried to eat/shiver it away, but hot drinks, four hot-water bottles, two sleeping bags and several duvets later I was still struggling. Familiar symptoms from the climb to Camp 3 appeared. I felt tingling in my extremities, whilst cold patches, particularly on my back and trunk, flitted about my body. Episodes of breathlessness and nausea swept through me, associated with bouts of intense shivering. I was reassured by the Base doctor, ironically Dr Neil Kennedy, a Banff GP, that these peculiar sensations were the effect of the cold on my body biochemistry and the result of re-diffusion of blood of varying temperatures. The nausea was the first to go, then the shortness of breath. Last to disappear was the tingling, which noticeably moved up my body as I improved, till it became a claustrophobic sensation of heat (note 5) around my face and head, creating an intense desire to shed clothing. About four hours after it had started, I had stopped shivering and was deemed safe to move to a warmer part of the tent. Warmer? I felt extremely hot (note 5), but was in no state to argue, as I was bodily lifted next to the cooker. The change of position had an immediate and devastating effect (note 6). The shaking returned but with more violence. I could not prevent myself moaning like a wounded animal, with the intensity of the muscle spasm. I felt that I would blow up with the heat, my hands and head seeming to be on fire. The ghastly waves returned time and time again, until very slowly (after about two to three hours) they drifted away and my inner heat settled.

That morning the hottest place in Antarctica was the Patriot Hill mess tent. I still felt quite cool, but the others sweated over their breakfast. I was eventually transferred to the medical tent where it took a full day for my temperature sense to return to normal. At times I was convinced they were overheating the room, only to see the frost on my breath as I exhaled.

We had three more days at Patriot Hills, our plane toying with weather fronts, damaged parts and then more weather fronts. Some became quite hooked on Scrabble, others read and caught up with journals. We visited the nearby crashed DC-6 plane, wandered briefly around the wind-scoured icy surface and looked in wonder at the white line that was the distant horizon. How can people bear to walk for weeks/months towards this nothingness? Strangely, when it came time to leave, I really found it quite hard. The purple glow on the Patriot Hills seemed to emphasise the eerie magic of this beautiful yet unforgiving place. I felt privileged to have been touched by its moods, in storm and in silence, witnessed by so very few on this earth.

Perhaps, after all, I could almost forgive myself for coming.

NOTES

1. I suspect I was suffering from chronic mild hypothermia at Vinson Base Camp and at Camp 3, hence the brief episodes of nausea and shivering.
2. David Walsh completed the Seven Summits on the Carstenz Pyramid in 1999.
3. Once I had lain down on the snow at Base Camp, I would have drifted into unconsciousness, unless helped by others. Once on the downward slope of hypothermia, the victim loses the will to help himself. On the hills this is extremely dangerous.
4. This was a visual hallucination. Susan could not have been present as she was at that moment flying back to Chile. She was dressed in the clothing she had worn on Vinson summit day. It is common for hypothermia victims to suffer visual illusions.
5. I did not feel cold. Hypothermia victims are often found stripped of clothing.
6. Change of position induced a relapse, probably due to stirring of cold blood around the body. It is unwise to move a hypothermia victim.