

The South Georgia survey 1955/56

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THE SOUTH GEORGIA SURVEY 1955/56.

We are indebted for this very interesting summary to Mr. L. Baume, a member of the South Georgia Survey 1955/56, and son of our old friend Mr. A. C. Baume.

South Georgia lies just within the outer fringe of the Antarctic, this southerly region of the globe being defined as that which lies southward of the Antarctic Convergence — the line along which the cold northward-going Antarctic surface water sinks beneath the warmer sub-Antarctic water.

Though possibly first sighted in 1502, it was not until 1775 that South Georgia was claimed by Captain Cook in the name of King George III. Resulting from Cook's report on this "savage and terrible" island, sealers and then whalers came to South Georgia for fur skins and blubber; by 1874 the fur seals had been practically exterminated. The first whaling station was established on the coast in 1904 and today there are 3 such stations operating during the season.

The Blue, Fin and Sperm are the most commonly caught whales in the seas around South Georgia. The Blue is the largest mammal in the world, reaching an approximate maximum length of 100 ft. The Sperm, unlike the first two, is a toothed whale and lives mainly on a diet of squids.

The minute unicellular diatoms found in these cold waters are consumed by the shrimp-like krill, *Euphausia Superba*. The krill is in turn consumed by baleen whales, penguins and antarctic birds. Four species of penguins are found on South Georgia: the King (a bird of superb plumage), the Gentoo, Ringed and Macaroni. The birds include, among many others, 4 species of Albatross, several petrels, the South Georgia teal and 2 land birds.

Mention must also be made of the seals. Most prolific are the elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina*). An adult bull may attain a length of up to 20 feet and may weigh as much as 3 tons; he has a proboscis which he inflates when angry. Also found are the leopard seals, a few Weddells and Crab-eaters, and the occasional rare Fur seal. Only adult bull elephant seals may be hunted for their blubber.

All this varied wild life is concentrated on and around the coast, along most of which stretches a narrow belt of coarse tussock grass (*Poa flabellata*). Above this coastal fringe rise steep rocky cliffs and precipitous mountain sides, covered by eternal snow and ice. From these desolate and frozen heights innumerable glaciers flow down and plunge into the ice-spattered sea.

It was to explore and survey this major mountainous island, approximately 120 miles long and an average of 15 miles wide, that the South Georgia Survey 1955/56 (of which I was a member) left England in August 1955 under the leadership of Duncan Carse.

There were still 4 major gaps in the island to be closed and therefore the expedition was divided into 4 separate journeys. Our 3,000 lbs of gear were man-hauled on 3 Nansen-type sledges; we carried four 2-man tents of special design and the sledging rations were packed in 24 man/day boxes. Food was cooked in melted snow over a small primus stove. Included in each food box were 2 packets of Swiss Knorr soups

to give a little variety to an otherwise monotonous diet. Other articles of Swiss manufacture which were used throughout the expedition were Longines chronometers and watches, Heuer split-timers, Trima skins for skis, Mischabel ice-axes, a Thommen aneroid and a Kern reserve theodolite.

The first journey lasted 60 days and during this time a very complete survey of the central and north-western areas was carried out. The route followed by Sir Ernest Shackleton across this part of South Georgia in 1916, after his ship the "Endurance" had been crushed by ice, was traced and mapped for the first time. Numerous first ascents were also made in the course of our survey work, one of 6,331 ft. being the highest mountain yet climbed. We had one very anxious moment when a sledge carrying vital gear disappeared on its own into the mist; it was fortunately found again about 2½ miles away and some 1,400 feet lower down — relatively undamaged! Another serious setback nearly occurred at the head of the Grace Glacier when we were hit by a storm of hurricane force whose violent gusts reaching 125 m.p.h., battered and bombarded us for over 60 hours. Two of our four tents were so badly damaged during this blow that they became untenable and those inside were forced to seek shelter elsewhere.

The second and third journeys were slightly shorter. Christmas and New Year were spent in the tents and a few extra 'goodies' were available to celebrate the occasions. The third journey, down in

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the southern part of the island, afforded us the greatest scope for exploratory work; it was a land of wide sweeping glaciers and jagged mountain ranges whose summits, reaching up from the seracs and precipitous rock faces, towered thousand of feet above us, half hidden in a turbulent and cloud-swept sky. After hauling our sledges over a 4,000 foot pass we made our way down towards the Novosilski Glacier from where a trig. station was later carried out from the top of a 7,200 ft. peak, the greatest height ever reached in South Georgia. When camped at the head of the most southerly Glacier flowing into Drygalski Fjord, we were assailed by a violent blizzard which blew steadily and unremittingly for 8 days and nights, burying our tents beneath heavy drifts of snow and putting us well behind our schedule.

We left Base Camp at the beginning of March for our fourth and last journey. Our route up the Neumayer Glacier was undertaken in a race against bad weather and time and the going over the heavily broken and crevassed glacier was the toughest we had yet encountered. However, within 5 days we were encamped on the Kohl-Larsen Plateau (2,860 ft.) and, after being laid up for 48 hours by a fierce blizzard, we awoke on the morning of the 14th to a fine and clear day. While three men went off to do a nearby survey, the remainder of us started to move camp. About midday a wind sprang up and a certain amount of drift began to blow, so we pitched tents. Shortly before the others were expected back, the five of us went out to meet them; the weather rapidly worsened with fierce winds and blinding snow. We missed each other and then, on making our way back to camp, we failed to find our tents. By evening, having been lost in the blizzard for some three hours and with darkness not far off, we realized that our survival in the open could only be a matter of hours — it was imperative to find some shelter. Shortly afterwards we found and entered a crevasse in a glacier where we spent the next 15 hours, without food and with a difficult problem to solve. Next morning, though the storm was still raging, we decided to make for the coast about 15 miles away. Buffeted by strong winds, half suffocated by swirling drifts, floundering through deep mounds of accumulated snow, we nevertheless managed to force a way across and, despite falling through innumerable hidden crevasses (we were without ropes), to reach the coast that evening alive.

The other three had in the meantime reached the tents but, after waiting two days for us in vain, had given us up as lost and made their way down to the coast too. So we eventually met up and while one party returned to the Plateau to complete the survey and salvage most of the equipment which had had to be abandoned there, the others returned to Base Camp to pack up and make ready for our departure.

On March 31st we sailed round to Leith Harbour (the British whaling station) and there went aboard the tanker "Southern Garden". Three days later we sailed away and before long the rugged coastline of South Georgia, our home for many months disappeared from view. Three weeks later we called in at the Cape Verde Islands to refuel and then we were once again on the high seas, heading into warmer weather. On May 6th we steamed up the busy Thames estuary and that same evening tied up in Tilbury Harbour.

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