

The Greats Icecaps II

Since the report on the first complete crossing of the HPS was published on page 88, we have received extensive correspondence from both Pablo Besser and Rodrigo Fica, members of the 1998-99 Chilean expedition, and the Argentinian, Sebastian de la Cruz, who took part in the 1993 Spanish-Argentinian traverse. The important facts of both journeys are summarized below.

The four-man Spanish Argentinian group, José Luis Fernandez, José Carlos Tamayo, Antonio Trabado and Sebastian de la Cruz, were also making a documentary film of the traverse for the popular Spanish TV adventure series, *Al Filo de lo Imposible* (winner at the 1994 Banff Film Festival). Initially, two members of the team ferried the food and equipment for the expedition from the Fiordo Calen via the Jorge Montt Glacier up on to the icecap. When this was established, the rest of the team, including a two-man film crew, arrived from Spain with the camera equipment and pulks etc. All six then moved quite quickly until they reached the Paso del Viento. There they took shelter in the Paso del Viento Hut, a small tin refuge located on the lateral moraine of the Viedma Glacier approximately 35-45 minutes uphill walk above the ice. The team spent 10 days resting at this point and were brought food supplies by a two-person support party. Then leaving behind the two-man film crew, the original four continued south, finally reaching the northern edge of the Falla de Reichert (unofficially named after Dr Frederico Reichert, the 'father' of Andean Alpinism, who in 1914 became the first to reach the Hielo Patagonico Sur), where they were stopped by nine days of bad weather.

The four explored the area and considered the Falla, a sort of 900m deep Khumbu Icefall on its northern side, impossible to cross. They, therefore, called for a helicopter and made several 10-minute flights south to transport personnel and equipment 12kms to the far side of a 2,250m mountain, subsequently christened The Bastion by Arved Fuchs's 1995 expedition (and now an official name). It was this peak that the '95 team realized would have to be traversed in order to connect north and south sides of the Falla. The Spanish-Argentinian group continued south to the Tyndall Glacier and finally made an exit down the Pingo Glacier to the Paine National Park, a total of c350kms in 53 days.

The first to descend into and reach the 'Chilean Corridor' at the bottom of the Falla was the 1995 German expedition led by Arved Fuchs. On this expedition it was the responsibility of the Chilean, Pablo Besser, to find a route down the 900m icefall on the northern side of the Falla and subsequently, when the team was forced to escape, a route out to the Fiordo Peel on the Pacific coast. One year later Besser, with fellow Chileans, Rodrigo Fica and Jorge Crossley, spent 52 days on the traverse, again reaching the Chilean Corridor and again having to escape to Fiordo Peel when Crossley was unable to continue. Unfortunately, both teams realized that reaching the Corridor was the easy part of crossing the Falla, as from that point they would have to climb over a virgin peak and descend its south flank carrying all their equipment.

The Chilean team of Besser, Fica, José Pedro Montt and Mauricio Rojas that succeeded in doing this in 1999 began their journey up the Jorge Montt Glacier on the 24th October 1998, taking nearly two weeks to ferry all their material up on

to the ice cap. Dragging pulks that each weighed 100kgs and using cross-country or sometimes telemark skis, they reached the north side of the Falla on the 10th December. There they waited for good weather but with their food almost finished and no climatic improvement after three days, they descended to the Corridor and moved across to the edge of the Garcia Glacier (named many years ago after Eduardo Garcia, a Chilean climber who died in an crevasse accident in Antarctica on the 30th January 1999 aged 60. Garcia had possibly more experience of the HPS than any other climber, having accompanied several expeditions including Shipton's 1960-61 expedition. He always maintained that the crux of the HPS crossing would be the Falla. Many other previous parties have also concurred and at least one, Jean-Louis Hourcadette and friends in 1982, began their attempt from what they considered the southern end of the HPS, the Balmaceda Glacier, in order to negotiate the most difficult section early in the trip — a proposed south to north traverse).

The team then spent a week at their camp on the edge of the Garcia Glacier, during which time they spent many days involved descending then re-ascending the 800m of ground separating them from the sea shore below, where they had previously cached a food and equipment supply. On the 24th December they climbed back in to the Corridor and began their crossing of the great barrier of mountains to the south. On the 31st they reached the summit of Bastion Este (c2,250m: the peak had another, probably higher, summit, the two tops separated by a deep ravine). Fifty metres below the top they spent nine nights in a snow cave waiting for good weather. When it finally arrived, the four down-climbed 150m to the south, made a single 150m rappel, most of which was free, down-climbed the following easy 100m section and made a final 120m rappel through either vertical or overhanging terrain. The first north to south crossing of the Falla had taken a full 30 days but unfortunately the team was forced to abandon the rappel ropes, something about which the members still feel unhappy.

After a day's rest they continued south via the Perito Moreno, Dickson and Grey Glaciers and on the 22nd January '99 reached the Altiplano de los Franceses close to the Pingo Glacier. They arrived at the head of the Balmaceda Glacier on the 27th and on the 30th were picked up by the Chilean Navy from Ultima Esperanza 400km from their starting point.

The Chileans, who had incidentally each lost an average of 10kgs in weight by the end of this arduous 98 days' journey, are the first to admit that they owe at least part of their success to the previous teams that paved the way, especially the greatly respected '93 Spanish-Argentinian expedition, which brought back considerable information and suggestions for future traverse parties. The Chileans feel their own performance could be improved by a party completing the traverse with no pre-placed food and equipment dumps but believe that the descent into the Falla with the huge total load required for an onward journey would prove a logistical nightmare.