

## THIRTY YEARS ON

At the Annual Dinner in 1993 Bill Kelly, the newly-elected Chairman, suggested that, following the success of the Himalayan trip in 1992, the Club should make plans for a similar event to mark the Club's thirtieth year. This was enthusiastically adopted and it was originally hoped that once again a single destination could be agreed on. This did not prove possible and as a result there were three separate trips, to America, Kilimanjaro and Aconcagua. Some members thought this a pity, but at least we had variety and all three achieved their objectives. Once again there was a fund, although without any contribution from the Club, the situation in 1992 being regarded as something of a one-off.

The American trip attracted the largest numbers and managed to combine different plans and aspirations. The central attraction for many was the ascent of Mt. Whitney, the highest summit in the U.S.A. outside Alaska, which most of the group achieved; also, two members achieved a lifelong ambition, to raft down the Grand Canyon. In South America, Aconcagua, the highest summit in the world outside the Himalaya/Karakorum, was conquered by three of the group, while the rest, literally, reached great heights. In Africa, the two-strong party there added their names to the list of Club members who had climbed Kilimanjaro, the highest summit in Africa. Above all, everyone who went on the trips had a tremendous experience to mark the Club's first thirty years.

Richard Kinsman writes in "Epic on Whitney" (Magazine no.14):

*"It's the second week of the G.M.C.'s trip to California. Eight of the group of eleven are attempting Mount Whitney, the highest peak in the U.S. (outside Alaska) at 14,494 ft. The group consists of Greg and myself, who plan to summit via the Northeast Route, a classic rock route of about 1,500 ft, while the rest, consisting of Dave, Christine, Nuala, Reg, Mitch and Jim will walk to the summit via Trail Crest and Mount Muir at 14,015 ft".*

The duo made their way onto Pinnacle Ridge and abseiled down over very loose ground into the valley leading to the northeast wall. Richard moved quickly up towards a small waterfall which would lead them to Iceberg Lake at the base of the wall. He turned and was surprised to see that Greg was way back and looking tired:

*"When Greg got to me he confirmed that he felt terrible and was having second thoughts about the route. It was clear that he was exhausted and on this sort of route both members of the party have to be feeling good. I immediately suggested that we did the Mountaineering Route, which runs up a gully to the right of the main buttress. This route is graded as an easy scramble and would get us to the summit quickly, I thought"*

The gully was carrying a lot of snow so they scrambled up to the right to avoid some of the lower snow, at least, before eventually moving back into the gully. Not having any ice axes or crampons, they decided to rope up, being equipped mainly for a rock route. It was cold in the shade of the gully and Richard hunted in vain for his gloves before concluding he must have dropped them on the abseil earlier:

*"Greg moved with ease up the gully, following the steps kicked by other parties. You had to stick your fingers into the snow to support yourself due to lack of grip underfoot as you kicked into it. Within two pitches my feet were soaking wet and my hands were very cold".*



Richard Kinsman on the ascent of Mt. Whitney  
(Photo: Greg Leasor)



Dave Gray on the summit of Mt. Whitney (Photo: Dave Gray)

At the top of the gully a wall of ice blocked the way to the final scrambling section to the summit. Greg somehow got up it without ice gear but Richard had by this time lost all feeling in his hands and was having difficulty. Fortunately he was able to borrow a pair of gloves from a party that was about to descend the gully. After some sustained scrambling they reached the summit at 16.30 and were back at the camp two hours later.

Later, Christine and Nuala rafted down the Grand Canyon. Christine writes:

*"We trekked from the South Rim of the Canyon down the Kiabab Trail to the Colorado River to join the others. Sounds simple as it was all downhill but four and a half hours of downhill can have quite an effect on the body. It was a well-trodden trail so route-finding wasn't a problem and we were able to concentrate on the sheer size of what we were seeing. We passed a few mule trains ascending the track but having spent two hours horse-riding in another canyon we were not envious of being precariously balanced on a mule, ascending 5,000ft in the heat of the day".*

At the water's edge they met up with the group for the nine-day, 137-mile rafting trip down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon. On the second day they came to Hermit Rapid:

*"Once in the rapid the sensation was fantastic, the adrenalin was flowing and the white water was huge, knocking some of us onto the floor of the boat (our guide shouting for us to 'get off our butts and paddle!') When we realised we'd done it the feeling was tremendous".*

After a memorable trip which included singing round the campfire on moonlit nights:

*"Our last morning on the river! It was a sunny day with small rapids at frequent intervals. We stopped paddling at one point and nobody said anything as the boat just drifted downstream, turning 360 degrees every now and then. It was as though each person was trying to absorb as much of the Canyon as possible",*

In September 1997 Pete Smedley and Mike Borland set off for Africa, landing at Kilimanjaro Airport on a direct flight from Amsterdam:

*"We landed with a bump so bad that the undercarriage was inspected before the aircraft was allowed to take off for Dar-es-Salaam."*

After a few problems with corruption and money-grabbing locals, transport arrived as arranged



Pete on the walk in

to take them to Moshi. They had reasonable accommodation at the Y.M.C.A., with a window facing on to the northern slope of Kilimanjaro. Three days later, having met with their guide, Mr Limo, and concluded all the necessary arrangements:

*"From the Park Post (6,233ft, 1,900m) a well-marked path rises fairly steeply through the rain forest. We experienced the worst forest fires for eight years, raging all over the base of the mountain.*



*At our first camp at 10,000ft (3,048m) the ground smouldered all round the tents - a pretty scary first night".*

They just managed to get above the fires before the routes were closed off by the Park Wardens and headed up to camp on the Shira Plateau at 13,500ft which, the guides said, would be a good place to acclimatise:

*"Hindsight strongly underlines the fact that the guides had wrongly chosen this area as a suitable place to acclimatise. Mike and I only began to experience headaches and erratic breathing at Camp 3 on the Western Breach approach near the Arrow Glacier at 17,500ft (5,334m). It*



Mike at the first camp with the ground smouldering all around the tents



The base of the mountain on fire

*would have been better to spend two nights at the Arrow Glacier with a one-day return to the Lava Tower at 15,000ft (4,572m), after which the final assault on the peak would be made".*

After two nights on the Shira Plateau they moved up to Camp 3 and were told to sleep in the tent until called at midnight:

*"Leaving the tent at that time of night seemed an odd thing to do... through the night the ridge continued to appear unreachable. We were both affected by mountain sickness at about 17,500ft (5,344m), experiencing nausea and*

*lethargy that was so debilitating that you could only scramble a few feet before being exhausted again....once on the ridge we were faced with a view of the most awe-inspiring glacier I have ever seen".*

They reached the summit a few minutes after 9a.m

*"Emotions were mixed, there were tears and a great sense of achievement. The realisation that we were standing on the roof of Africa was indeed very special. It was the highest point either of us had ever been. We spent about twenty minutes on the summit but soon realised that we had to descend by a much longer route, the Mweka, due to the route closures following the disastrous fires".*

Rapid descent soon resolved any altitude problems as they sped down the scree, overtaking a noisy and much more cautious American party. On the way up the mountain this party had not endeared themselves to Mr Smedley:

*"There was an all-American party from the mid-west, led by a guide from their home state who was louder than loud. I'd make headway with my Kenyan porter only to hear the American's unrhythmic drawl assault me from the rear again".*



The view of Kilimanjaro from the Shira Plateau at 13,500ft



The top of the Western Breach approach and nearby glacier(s)



A closer view of the cathedral - like glacier(s), which are not seen from other popular approaches to Kilimanjaro. The local Africans say this is where God lives!





Pete at Arrow Glacier, below the Western Breach



On the roof of Africa (Photos: Pete Smedley)

Later, at camp:



Pete and Mike with their porters

*"The porters brought us the evening meal: you would have been amused to see us wait until their backs were turned before tossing the meat into the bushes. The drawling American and his ever-attentive party were camped just behind us (have I sinned, I wonder?)."*

After descending through the rain forest to Mweka Gate they were met by the landrover party from Moshi. After some haggling about tips, a good clean-up and a trip to Arusha

our intrepid heroes set off by bus to Dar-es-Salaam, en route for Zanzibar, where they relaxed:

*"There were white beaches, azure skies, palm trees, warm turquoise waters and adequate if basic beach huts at \$8(US) per night, with a bar nearby. Heaven!"*

Jim Metcalfe was selected (!) to write the official story of the Aconcagua trip and the following quotes are all from his "Aconcagua '98" account:

*"As soon as I agreed to follow up Roger Hughes' suggested venue for the 1997 30th Anniversary trip I knew somehow or other that I was destined to organise it. 'There's this mountain in South America'*

*said Roger: 'It's the highest in the world outside Asia but it's very easy'. In hindsight there's no such thing as an easy 6,960m (22,840ft) mountain".*



Zanzibar

Alter two years of on and off planning, assisted by the experts from OTT (this stands for "Out There Trekking" and not, as someone thought, "Over The Top"), the final group of nine (Dave Antrobus, Mike Dagley, Mike Gilbert, Neil Harris, Sue Taylor, Roger Hughes, Bill Sutherland, Mary Nash and Jim himself) assembled at Manchester Airport on Friday 30th January 1998 to be greeted by a decidedly quiet Iberia check-in. Industrial action by the Airline's pilots would mean a twenty-four hour delay:

*"After establishing the group's first camp at the airport's Trust House Forte Hotel we eventually left the U.K. on Saturday 31st January and after seven airports arrived in Mendoza, Argentina, mid-afternoon on the Sunday. We were met by OTT's Andy Broom and twins Willie and Damian Benegas. Willie was to prove the very best of guides and, as we were to discover, truly deserved the name of Mr Aconcagua".*

After a night in Mendoza the group set off by coach the following afternoon for Vallecitos, a ski resort in the Andean foothills:

*"The journey was of course not without its dangers, with a suicidal driver intent on burning off other vehicles and driving predominantly on the left hand side of the road, relying heavily on his rosary beads for assistance"*

The next few days were to be spent acclimatising during the ascent of El Plata, a 5,800m peak:

*"While our bags were being loaded onto horses we went into the ski refuge for coffee. Eventually we set off in the mist and rain to our campsite at La Begita, 3,250m (10,670ft). Here some of the group felt the first effects of altitude in the form of minor headaches. That evening, in a cloudless sky, we were able to see the Mir space station and the Southern Cross. At noon the next day we set off (none of your Nepal early starts here!)"*

The intention was to complete two days walk in one to make up for the day lost at Manchester. Jim, particularly, was suffering from the altitude and on arriving at the next campsite at El Salto, 4,200m (13,790ft) could not wait to get into the tent. Later that evening Willie's brother Damian arrived at the campsite with the sad news that Mike Gilbert's father had died:

*"The next morning Mike and Damian left for Mendoza. For those remaining at this campsite the remainder of the day was pretty sombre with everybody quietly making the best of the rest day"*

From now on the group had to carry their own gear to the high camp at La Hollada, 4,800m (15,760ft):

*"We climbed slowly up through the moraines, with Roger, Dave, Mike and I keeping together at the back. If we managed forty paces without stopping we thought we'd done extremely well. Bill Sutherland was well ahead as usual. At about three o'clock we arrived at the camp"*

There was a 7a.m. start the next morning for the ridge above and El Plata beyond it. On reaching the ridge Willie advised the group that the wind was too strong to carry on and some duly turned back. Bill, Mike and Mary, accompanied by Andy and Willie, pressed on and made the summit, returning later in an exhausted state. The next day the group walked down through the mist to Vallecitos.

*"The following day was Sunday 8th February. Back into our coach for a perilous, 45-minute journey in first gear through steeply descending hairpin bends to the main Mendoza-Santiago highway which we then followed towards the Chilean border"*

After a vast steak in Upsallata (film location for Seven Years in Tibet), at the local form of Berni Inn, a Parrillada, they pressed on to an overnight stay at Puente del Inca on the Argentine/Chile border. The next day they set off by landrover for the Aconcagua National Park. On arrival they checked in with the rangers and pressed on to the first camp, mindful of the deteriorating weather. It was six miles to the camp at Confluencia, 3,368m (11,050ft):

*"We set up our tents as it snowed. So much for the Argentine summer! Later that evening it was reassuring to know that as a thunderstorm developed we were camped right underneath the Park Rangers' metal radio mast. As we had our meal of spaghetti bolognese in the mess tent we were joined by a New Zealander who talked about rugby, Coronation Street, and the number of deaths on the mountain during the bad weather of the previous two weeks."*



*Apparently four had died on the Polish glacier and two on the normal route that we would be taking. All a little disconcerting and a bit scary ".*

The next morning they set off for the eighteen-mile walk along the Horcones valley to base camp at Plaza de Mulas, 4,230m (13,860ft), flat apart from the last few miles to the camp. There the death toll was confirmed; apparently the weather had been bad for a number of weeks. Aconcagua was indeed a very serious mountain:

*"As we climbed out of our tents the next morning we were greeted by blue skies and the summit of Aconcagua towering 9,000ft above us. Plaza de Midas itself could now be seen as a village of tents. It wasn't a quiet place, with radios blaring and some rather loud-mouthed Americans. However, it was to be a rest day".*

The next day they set off, after another leisurely start, for Canada Camp at 4,700m (15,400ft). The ascent, zig-zagging through deep snow, was hard going for everyone except Bill S.

"There is no permanent snow and the route can be entirely over scree" said the guidebook.

Four strenuous hours later they reached Canada.

*"After a breakfast of beans, meatballs and mushrooms followed by warmed-up peaches (very tasty) we set off slowly for the next camp at Nido de Condores (the Condor's Nest) at 5,400m (17,700ft). As Willie overtook Roger, Dave, Sue, Mary and I, he told us that Neil was having problems and had decided to return to Plaza de Mulas".*

Eventually, they arrived at Nido, exhausted by the extremely heavy going in deep snow and carrying loads. They heard of another death higher up the route, a Polish climber going for the summit in trainers. After the meal they settled down to a fourteen-hour sleep, waking at 9.30 the next morning:

*"Saturday 14th February was a rest day, the highlight being the arrival of Neil with Sue's Valentine card. You would not get the Royal Mail doing that! After an hour Neil returned to Plaza de Mulas. For the rest of us it was a day of drinking tea and cuppa soups, eating and sleeping. That night was pretty uncomfortable. I woke up at 10a.m. to find that no-one else was awake. I felt very rough and had almost made up my mind to go down. However, Mike persuaded me to carry on. Willie also informed me that Bill and I would not be carrying a tent as that night we would be using the Berlin refuge".*

The ascent to Berlin was fairly short but quite steep, through a series of zig-zags. Bill was well ahead again but the rest decided that they should arrive at Berlin at the same time, thereby helping the slower members of the party. The Berlin refuge had been built by a German group originally but the present construction, a sort of large dog kennel, was only about four weeks old (sturdy as it was, Willie reckoned it would only last about a year):

*"We all piled into this five-star accommodation for tea as Willie had already set up the MSR's (temperamental cooking stoves) to boil water and cook our food. Apparently, the setting up of the kitchen had upset an American guy who thought Willie would burn the refuge down. He'd got so upset that he had actually threatened Willie with an ice axe! As we rested in the refuge an English guy appeared asking if someone could come in to recover from his summit attempt. Apparently an Argentinian had woken up a Brazilian who was asleep near the summit. Apart from Bill, Willie and I the others in our group dispersed to their tents as the Brazilian was helped in. Willie proceeded to look after him, telling us that he was close to*

*death but would survive. After about an hour and a half Willie felt that the Brazilian had recovered sufficiently to descend to Nido”.*

That evening, the eve of the summit attempt, they dined on noodles, with a later snack of delicious, freshly-cooked salmon. The next day they rose at 6a.m. and left at 7.45. Without the usual heavy loads, progress was rapid and they soon reached White Rocks at 6,000m (19,680ft) and rested:

*"Once we set off from here my pace slowed until I could go no further, This was about 50 metres in height below another camp at Independencia at 6,500m (21,320ft). Willie's colleague Calyle was with me. I used his radio to tell Willie I was going down. Willie tried to encourage me to carry on but I'd had enough and in any case if the group waited for me that could delay their summit attempt. So I stopped and watched Dave, Roger and Calyle disappear over a ridge at the beginning of an exposed traverse across the Gran Acarreo scree slope before the notorious Canoleta, a steeper scree slope leading to the summit ridge"*

Jim decided this was the time to enjoy the trip, with no more uphill to worry about:

*"I sat down and took in the view, mile after mile of mountains as far as you could see and all much lower than my vantage point. I thought 'this is what it's all about' and felt exhilarated. My camera recorded the panorama. Had I failed - no. I'd reached over 6,400m (20,992ft). Not bad for 50+! Apart from the exhaustion I was thankfully in one piece and had no other serious effects of altitude. I sat for quite a while before the peace was shattered by a group of Argentinian soldiers making their way upwards. I shouted 'ola' but got no response".*

Jim then descended to Berlin, finding the descent long and worrying about overshooting the camp. Both Dave, Roger and Mike found the same problem when they too, sadly, were forced to retreat from their respective high points a bit later. Meanwhile, up on the mountain, Sue, Mary, Bill, Willie and Calyle continued their ascent. Sue Taylor writes about her summit experience :

*"Once the others had decided to call it a day I was definitely the slowest member of the summit group and as such I was put in the front. Eight tiny steps then stopping for 20 long in-out breaths makes for very slow progress. Sweetened peppermint tea from Willie was much appreciated and definitely helped us on our way. We were aiming to get to the summit before 4p.m, but, much to the annoyance of Willie, we caught up with a group of Argentinian soldiers who were even slower than us but would not let us pass".*

Finally:

*"After eight long, cold, hard exhausting days we were there, on the summit of Aconcagua at 6,960m (22,840ft), the highest point in the world outside the Himalaya/Karakorum. Being so much higher than anything else in the area, the views to the east and south were breathtaking. We spent half an hour hugging each other as well as everyone else in sight and taking loads of photographs. The summit was quite a large plateau, and, had the weather been warmer, a perfect place for a glass of champagne".*

They managed to make radio contact with base:

*"The lack of oxygen was taking its toll. Having exchanged niceties with Harris I proposed to the boy. His answer? If I got back down he'd think about it. Much to his embarrassment,*



Aconcagua, the team at Condor's Nest  
(5,400m, 17,700ft)



Sue, Mary, Willie, Calyle and Bill on the summit of Aconcagua  
6,960m, 22,840ft (Photos: Sue Taylor)



*there were about forty people drinking wine and beer at base, listening to our conversation. The weather closed in quite quickly and, tired but very pleased with ourselves, we started back down.*

*We passed a pile of stones which I hadn't noticed on the way up. They were 'protecting' the body of a Polish guy who hadn't managed to get down again a few days earlier. Willie thought the chap had made the summit, stopped for a quick rest on the way down, and never woke up again. I hope he got to the top. Bill Mary and Calyle pressed on quickly down but, having bad knees and being tired, I was struggling to make fast progress and kept falling over. As Willie didn't want one of his punters falling many thousands of feet off the side of the mountain, I was duly put on a rope before we went any further. We didn't test to see if Willie could take my weight but I was sure he could if the need arose".*

Neil came to meet them on the way down:

*"What did he say? I'm not really sure. His answer to my proposal was so couched in caveats that I threatened to withdraw the offer if he didn't answer in ten seconds. His second attempt was 'Yes'. Back at Berlin camp it was cups of peppermint tea, a snack and a good night's sleep before starting the descent to base camp the next day".*

To return to Jim's account:

*"For us the next day meant a descent to Plaza de Mulas, an evening meal of pizzas (the camp dogs had eaten our steaks!) and Sue & Neil announcing their intention to get married following Sue's proposal on the radio from the summit to Neil at Plaza de Mulas".*

The next day they walked the twenty-six miles to the National Park entrance for an overnight stop at the Puente del Inca Hotel where some of the group indulged in a late-night dip in the local sulphur pool. The following day they returned to Mendoza where:

*"We recovered from the trip, visited local wineries, ate enormous steaks, shopped for gifts and visited the Liverpool Bar where, would you believe, we listened to a live Beatles cover group until four in the morning.*

*The trip was certainly an experience and brought home the reality of attempting a major summit. For me it further strengthened friendships with people who all made the trip something to be remembered".*

As a bonus, some £4,500 was raised for North West Cancer Research.

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