

The South West Spur of Mt
Vancouver Expedition

2009

Final Report

Introduction

Having climbed a big new route on the West Face of Mount Alverstone in 2005 Simon Yates and I were keen to return to the remote Wrangell St Elias Range on the Alaskan Yukon Border – an area offering great potential for exploratory, lightweight alpine-style mountaineering. We knew the routine, had seen some good looking objectives and the spring climbing season had offered generally good weather and conditions in 2005. Simon booked some flights to Whitehorse in the Yukon and we were on our way. Then the problems began. At a late stage of planning we discovered that our original route – the compelling West Ridge of Mount Hubbard – had been siege climbed back in the 1970's. We needed another objective. American Wrangell activist Jack Tackle suggested we look at Mount Vancouver. I was soon drawn to the huge SW Spur of 'Good Neighbour Peak' (4850m) – the southern summit of this large complex mountain spanning the Alaskan-Yukon border (See Map). All the information we could gain at the time showed the ridge had not been climbed.

Having agreed by phone as to what technical climbing equipment, stoves etc were required, a simple plan was devised. Paul and Simon would meet at Heathrow airport, travel to Whitehorse in the Yukon, purchase the remaining supplies and make their way into the mountains. To climb the route we need to be dropped off by ski-plane in a glacial basin on the south of the peak, nominally in Alaska. Since our previous visit some misinformed bureaucrat had decided to bring in a raft of regulations concerning bush pilots crossing the border. The Canadian operator we had used previously from Kluane Lake would not land us in the US, as in 2005. Ideally, we needed to fly in from Yakutat - Alaska, but could not change our flights to Whitehorse from the UK without prohibitive cost (in 2005 there was no ski plane service operating out of Yakutat, but the situation has now changed). Our only other option was to cross the land border from the Yukon into Alaska and take the flight in from Haines.

Summary of Events

24/4/09 Paul Schweizer and Simon Yates fly from Edinburgh and Manchester respectively to London, followed by flights to Vancouver and on to the Yukon capital Whitehorse.

25/4/09 A day shopping for food and supplies in Whitehorse.

26/4/09 A taxi transfer from Whitehorse (Yukon) to Skagway (Alaska), where our pilot – Paul Swanstrom – kindly picked us up and flew us across the fjord to Haines.

27/4/09 Paul flew us from Haines in perfect weather and landed in a small glacial basin at the base of Good Neighbor Peaks SW Ridge, where we set up base camp.

28/4/09 A day organising and packing at the base camp.

29/4/09 We were up at 4am and away from the base camp at 6. After crossing the glacier we climbed a couloir to reach the ridge and then the ridge itself, hacking out a tent platform at the end of the day 1000m above base camp.

30/4/09 Another long day climbing the ridge mostly to the left of the crest, before excavating a tent platform on the ridge itself.

1/5/09 A sensational start to the day along a corniced snow ridge led to easier climbing and a mid-afternoon halt to chop out a tent platform below a steep rock tower.

2/5/09 Some difficult mixed climbing and a hidden couloir led through the rock band to gentler slopes above and a shoulder below the summit ice flutings where we chopped out a tent platform for the night.

3/5/09 The snow ridge above camp took longer than expected to climb, to a couloir that led up through the rime towers at the top of the mountain. Difficult climbing up this feature brought us to the summit plateau virtually at the top. We stood on the summit at 4-30pm and descended Good Neighbors East Ridge to a col 300m lower where we camped.

4/5/09 A cold day in the tent on the col in a storm.

5/5/09 The storm had cleared allowing us to continue our descent. We followed the east ridge of the mountain until it finished in a serac band, forcing us to regain height to a col where we made a long series of abseils down the south side to a glacier. We crossed the glacier to a pass and a further two abseils brought us back onto the base camp glacial system. Fourteen hours after beginning our day we finally reached base camp at 10-30pm.

6/5/09 A day resting at the base camp in a storm.

7/5/09 Another storm enforced day resting.

8/5/09 The sky started to clear and we spoke with Paul in Haines about flying out, but the weather turned bad again and we had to remain in base.

9/5/09 A better morning enabled Paul to fly in and take us back to Haines, where we spent the night.

10/5/09 We altered our flights home, arranged a transfer from Skagway to Whitehorse and dried gear in Haines.

11/5/09 An early flight from Haines to Skagway, followed by a road transfer to Whitehorse where we spent the night.

12/5/09 Fly from Whitehorse to Vancouver and then Vancouver to London.

13/5/09 Arrived in London and then flew on to Edinburgh and Manchester.

The Expedition

(text originally by Simon Yates)

We left the UK on Friday 24th April and after a monumental day of travel arrived in Whitehorse in the middle of the night. The following day was spent shopping for food and supplies in the Yukon capital. On Sunday 26th we transferred to Skagway on the Alaskan coastline by taxi and our pilot – Paul Swanstron - kindly flew over from Haines to pick us up, saving us the ferry journey across the fjord. Paul brought news of impending good weather and said he would fly us into the mountains the next morning. We spent the night in Haines and by lunch-time of Monday the 27th of April we were on the glacier (2400m) at the base of our route, basking in spring sunshine from a clear blue sky. We set up our base camp and slept.

The following day was frantic. We examined the ridge line through binoculars as the sun continued to shine. It all looked do-able with the exception of a headwall of rime flutings at the top, which were impossible to fathom at such distance. The forecast

was good for the week adding urgency to our actions. We sorted gear and food, agreed on a rack and finally packed.

At 4am on Wednesday 29th April we woke and began our climb. A thirty minute walk across the glacier led to a broad couloir leading up to the ridge. We roped up to cross the tricky bergshroud and then soloed simultaneously, hoping to reach the ridge before the sun hit the walls above the fall line we were climbing. It was not to be, but we did manage to clear the narrowest section before the rays arrived and sporadic stone-fall began. The widening upper slopes soon turned into a flog, as the heat melted snow underfoot and drew precious water from our skin. We rested on the col at the base of our ridge and marvelled at the panorama to the west – the vast Seward Glacier with Mount St Elias and Mount Logan on either side.

Some gentle trudging up the initial undulating snowy section of ridge soon brought us to mixed ground. We roped up and would stay that way until the summit. Following the line of least resistance - generally to the left of the ridge crest - we made steady progress. By late afternoon we began looking for a tent site, but the terrain offered none. As time passed we started to consider less than perfect options. Luckily we regained the ridge and late that evening hacked out the first, of what would be many knife-edge, snow ridge tent platforms and settled down for the night.

Our second day brought more mixed climbing and long traversing sections on ice to flank a steep buttress on its left side. Again it was hot during the middle of the day and I was amazed to see occasional flocks of small birds over-flying us, twittering their way northwards. Later we re-joined the ridge and excavated another dramatic campsite.

Friday 1st May began with an exciting horizontal section along the corniced ridge. I seconded Paul to what he described as an Alaskan belay – he was sat astride the crest. We continued uneventfully up a snow ridge before stopping mid-afternoon below an imposing rock tower. Getting through this was obviously going to be one of the key sections of the route. It was not something to start on late in the day.

Day four was pivotal. Having already done a long upward traversing section of ridge a retreat in the event of a storm was already looking problematical. We approached the tower with some tension and I traversed leftwards over hard ice to belay below it. Above lay a basin that offered the most promising way line through the tower. Paul led a tricky section of mixed climbing to gain it and then disappeared from sight. I waited nervously until he let out a shriek of delight having discovered a thin ribbon of perfect ice in the back of the feature that led up a narrow gully to the slopes above. I moved quickly up the gully enjoying the quality of the ice, deeply conscious of our need to make rapid progress. Pitch followed pitch, first of ice and then of deepening snow with the rime headwall looming menacingly above. Late in the afternoon we reached a shoulder and dug our final tent platform. The weather was holding, but ominous lenticular cloud caps had formed over Logan and St Elias during the afternoon.

We re-gained the ridge crest in the morning. The exposure was sensational following a cornice fracture line to below steep ice slopes that led up to the rime headwall. The feature itself was bizarre – a mass of strange feathery wind-blown formations, some

massively overhung. However, there appeared to be weaknesses and we headed for the most obvious central one. It began as a couloir of very hard ice, which Paul struggled to lead under the weight of his rucksack. He belayed early and I ditched my sack before continuing above. The couloir soon steepened and entered an almost completely enclosed tube of ice and rime – it was more akin to caving than mountaineering - before opening out into a small basin. Above were two narrow, parallel runnels. I placed an ice-screw and set off. A superb series of moves led up the right-hand feature with a wild pull into the left one. The runnel opened into a broader gully capped by small wall. I placed another screw and then wobbled my way up the now rather hollow sounding rime ice before a final pull brought the summit plateau. The Central and North summits of Mount Vancouver lay directly in front of me. I let out a scream. Five days of climbing had led up to this point (probably 3000m in total) and somehow our route had saved the best until last.

Paul climbed up to join me and we wandered around on the plateau enjoying the moment and the astonishing views for a few minutes, before making our way up onto a knoll of rime just above our finishing point to take our summit photographs. Then pragmatism returned – it was time to begin what we knew would be a long descent.

A few hundred metres of gently angled, but heavily crevassed snow slopes led down the East Ridge to a col, where we called it a day. The wind soon increased buffeting the tent, making cooking a prolonged chore as water was shaken from the pan, extinguishing the hanging stove.

On Monday 4th May we woke to snow and passed the day in our sleeping bags – the mountain hidden in cloud and the wind still blowing hard. Visibility is essential for getting off these big complex peaks and navigating your way back to base camp through vast, complicated glacial terrain. During the second night the storm abated and thankfully allowed us to continue our descent.

The day getting back to our base proved to be a prolonged affair. We hoped to descend the peak by the Centennial Route, but the speed of our approach had not allowed us a reconnaissance outing before starting the climb. As a result we continued down the East Ridge rather than taking a spur off it to the south. The ridge ended abruptly with a hideous band of seracs, forcing us to regain height and begin a long series of abseils down a face on its south side. At the bottom we happily dispensed with the ropes, crossed a glacier and climbed to a pass, where the ropes were required again to make two abseils to another glacier below.

An icefall now lay between us and the base camp. A big crevasse jump was required at one point to make our way through it. The glacier held no further surprises and we arrived back at camp at 10pm having been on the move for a full fourteen hours.

After a long night of sleep we awoke on Wednesday 6th May to storm conditions. We were grateful for the rest – our first since leaving the UK twelve days earlier. I spoke with Paul in Haines and he said to call again once the weather improved. The following two days were spent in base camp recovering while the storm continued.

On Saturday 9th May the cloud began to disperse. I made a couple of satellite telephone calls to Paul, who told me he was on his way. We were still packing when

he arrived. With perfect bad timing a bank of cloud began to drift up the glacier as we loaded the plane. We all got out of the plane and sat on the glacier.

An hour later and the cloud had lifted sufficiently to fly. The plane accelerated slowly down the glacial basin, skipped a shallow crevasse and finally became airborne over the icefall. Paul then made a steep turn back into the cirque. I assumed he was aborting the take-off, but it soon turned out he had other ideas, banking the plane into another tight turn after the skis made brief contact with the snow. With the turn completed the plane began to increase speed and height as we headed once more back over the icefall. Paul had used the manoeuvre to gain altitude to clear a further bank of cloud rising up the glacier below. It was an incredibly committing piece of flying that seemed to mirror our own efforts on the mountain and provided a fitting finale to a very special climb.

After a night out in Haines we spent Sunday 10th May drying gear, altering flights and arranging a taxi back to Whitehorse.

On Monday 11th May Paul kindly flew us back to Skagway, where we transferred to a waiting taxi for the journey back to Whitehorse. After a night in the Yukon capital we started the long series of flights home arriving back in the UK on Wednesday 13th May.

We both felt privileged to spend time in such a fantastic mountain range and were lucky to arrive in, and take advantage of, a prolonged period of good weather. When we returned home Lindsay Griffin discovered that the route we climbed had in fact been done previously by a ten strong Japanese team in 1968, who had approached the ridge from the Seward Glacier to the west. They had sieged the climb using fixed ropes, placing two climbers on the summit after 13 days on the mountain, and three expedition members tragically died during the ascent. We were aware of the Japanese route before leaving the UK, but the only description of it we saw in the 1969 American Alpine Journal did not correspond to the ridge we wanted to climb and therefore we had concluded their route was further to the west. It was not. Therefore our climb was a second ascent and the first in alpine-style, as well as the first starting from the South (US) side of the ridge. The high quality, length, position and commitment of the route led Paul to comment that it was better and more sustained than the Cassin Ridge on Denali -a climb he completed many years ago. Done in alpine-style we feel it warrants an overall alpine grade of ED with climbing up to Scottish grade V ice and VI mixed – 3000m with a 2450m vertical height gain (see photo).

Budget

Expenditure		Income	
International Flights	£2100	MEF	£1050
Food and supplies	£500	The M C of Scotland	£800
Taxis	£400	Personal contributions	£3790
Mountain Flights	£1360		
Accommodation/meals out	£600		
Excess baggage charges	£380		
Insurance	£300		
TOTAL	£5640		£5640

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