

The 40th anniversary of: The "New Zealand Patagonian Expedition 1969 (commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Tararua Tramping Club)"

Members contemplating the excellent 90th anniversary celebrations planned for July 2009 may be surprised to know that the first (fringe?) event has already occurred! In 1969 we raised an expedition to Patagonia that coincided with the club's 50th anniversary. The expedition was supported by the TTC, so it became a 50th anniversary event. Now 40 years on five of the original expedition members were meeting up in Chile to revisit the area.

The original expedition had been blessed by good weather and as a result the members managed to achieve the second ascent of San Valentin (highest peak in Patagonia) and first ascents of 12 other unclimbed peaks. In contrast the follow-up expedition in 1971, which included a number of the members of the 1969 expedition, was pinned down by continued bad weather and they were not able to achieve their goals.

On 14th January 2009 we met in Chile Chico on the shores of Lago General Carrera, Chile. Alan Bibby and Rob Gunn had flown down from Canada where they now live, accompanied by Mark Lott, Alan's movie making assistant. Alan had made a 50 minute film of the original expedition, weighed down with a huge Millar tripod and a clockwork movie camera that gave a maximum clip length of 30 seconds. Now he was able to use a pint sized digital camera with a tiny tripod and was making a second movie on the theme of "The return to Patagonia". Paddy Gresham and Dave Launder had flown in from NZ.

We were joined by some other tramping supporters including Peter and Vivienne Radcliffe and son Edward and Dave Bamford who was in Chile advising government on developing their national parks. I was accompanied by Jacky and daughter Brittany. We were fresh from our adventures on the Torres del Paine Circuit and the Fitzroy area further south.

Of the other original members, our Chilean comrade Claudio Lucero had evaded our efforts to contact him but he eventually made it to drinks at the NZ ambassador's residence in Santiago with Robert, Paddy and Dave. John Nankervis had some urgent business with some powder snow in Japan and my brother Ray was undergoing a series of three operations on a badly damaged leg that had plagued him for the last 35 years.

Soon after assembling in Chile Chico we were bundled into two mini vans and set off on the spectacular drive around the southern shore of Lago General Carrera. We were headed for the Terra Luna lodge in Puerto Guadal from where we would be transported to our old base camp. Neither the road nor the lodge had existed forty

years ago. I had been concerned that Jacky and Brittany would find our area a bit tame after the mighty mountains and glaciers of southern Patagonia, but even as we drove around the lake (second largest in South America after Lago Titicaca) they were exclaiming over the rugged scenery.



Next generation. Edward and Brittany above Lago General Carrera. Mist shrouded lower peaks and ice cap in the background

Our dinner and accommodations were excellent and the evening passed in a flurry of logistical planning. Next morning the “originals” took their places in the lodge jet boat piloted by Philippe Reuter, the lodge owner. We heard that his father was a champion rally driver and we could believe this as we roared across the lake and up the swollen Rio Leones, which was in high flood. He skillfully shot up the terrifying rapids guided by flimsy bamboo wands placed in drilled boulders during winter when the river is low.

Definitely a contrast to our sedate progress up the valley 40 years ago with our 2 tonnes of equipment carried on creaking ox carts. I didn't remember the river being this ferocious and wondered how we had managed to cross it on horses all those years ago.

Eventually we arrived at the point beyond which even Philippe was not prepared to take the jet boat, so we walked the last hour to glacial Lago Leones. Philippe keeps a small Zodiac inflatable there. Alan, Mark and I and Rodrigo, the Terra Luna guide, were soon heading towards the base camp site through a light chop. It was great to see the well known glacial terrace hove in to view, and we soon ascended the steep track to a tarpaulin shelter erected by Terra Luna. It was as idyllic as I remembered, with little streams tinkling through the undergrowth and great views

of the three Leones glaciers.

The Zodiac returned to the bottom of the lake to ferry the rest of the party but did not re-appear that day. We were somewhat puzzled as the weather seemed reasonable. The Zodiac finally arrived about midday the next day with the next boatload who told stories of huge waves at the bottom of the lake that had prevented them from launching the boat. They had spent the night under a smoky biv rock or in tents pitched in puddles. By late afternoon we were all ensconced at base camp but Rodrigo claimed that the last trip, bringing the Radcliffes up the lake, was the hairiest he had ever undertaken.



The originals. Dave Launder, Paddy Gresham, Robert Gunn, Gordon Vickers, and Alan Bibby relax at base camp

Next day we set out for our camp 1 or "Heim's Camp" as we called it after the Swiss geologist Arnold Heim who had explored the approaches to the ice cap in the 1940s. He had written the book which had inspired our original expedition. In 1969 we had cut a track up to Heim's camp, but on this day we followed a new track the Terra Luna staff had cut up to the snow line.

This route brought us out higher up the Leon glacier. We spent some time locating Heim's camp further down the glacier, but eventually we were having lunch in the shelter of the rock walls we had erected all those years ago to protect our tents from the Patagonian wind.

We realized that global warming had caused the glacier retreat from Heim's camp

which meant it was no longer a logical staging post. In 1969 we had stepped straight on to the surface of the glacier from the camp and started skinning up towards the col leading to the ice cap. Now the glacier was many metres below the camp.



Peter Radcliffe by the edge of the shrunken Leones glacier. The other two branches can be seen beyond. Heim's camp is out of sight on the left

The main divide and our col by which we accessed the ice cap remained mysteriously shrouded in Patagonian mists but the Leon glaciers were spread out below us. Jacky and Brittany were adamant that the experience was at least equal to our more southerly adventures.

Back at base camp we explored the site of our original base camp shelter, which was a little further up the hill from the Terra Luna shelter. It had been situated against a huge rock that had acted as a backing to our fireplace. The area around the fire had been dug out to provide room for eight seats around the fireplace and shelves to hold odds and ends had been constructed.

We found rusting four gallon (18 litre) food tins buried under the scrub. These had each contained 8 man days food and when empty some had been used to make the shelves in the shelter. We had left them there for use by any that may have followed us. I hasten to add that most of the 80 four gallon food tins were transported back down the lake where they were eagerly accepted by the subsistence "campesinos" living in the valley at the time.

Next day was fine and calm so with our previous boating experiences in mind we all elected to go back down the lake. Alan, Dave, Paddy and Robert planned to stay in

the area and explore the alpine areas above "Laguna Cachorro", a glacial lake above the outlet of Lago Leones. The day was warm and the dreaded "tabanos" or horse flies were out in force. We had not been troubled by these blow fly sized monsters at base camp as the weather had been cool, but under this attack the rest of the party were keen to set off down the valley in the waiting mini van.

This was a somewhat sad journey as the collapse of markets for wool, hides and meat had led to the departure, some years previously, of the colorful campesinos. They were no more to be seen riding their hardy Chilean horses in their black ponchos and berets to muster their sheep, and their split log and plaster houses were abandoned. Some of the very infertile valley sides and floor were planted in *Pinus radiata*, a poor replacement for the extensive lenga (beech) forests burnt off by the campesinos.

On the good side, the removal of sheep from the burnt out valley sides had allowed the lenga forests to start regenerating, and it is possible that in another 40 years the valley could be returned to its pristine condition. We were told that two of the farms whose previously owners, the Poblete brothers who had been so helpful to the expedition, had been purchased by an Australian. He visits only for about one month a year, and intends to allow the farms to return to their natural state.

Soon Jacky, Brittany and I were deposited by the Leon bridge on the Carretera Austral where we unsuccessfully tried to hitch a ride and were eventually picked up the next day by the once daily bus and continued on our way to more adventures in Peru and Bolivia.

Gordon Vickers

Leader

New Zealand Patagonian Expedition 1969

1969 participants

Gordon Vickers, Claudio Lucero, John Nankervis, Ray Vickers, Alan Bibby, Rob Gunn, Paddy Gresham, Dave Launder

2009 participants

Alan Bibby, Rob Gunn, Mark Lott, Paddy Gresham, Dave Launder, Peter and Vivienne Radcliffe and son Edward, Dave Bamford, Gordon Vickers, Jacky Challis and daughter Brittany





Category
Expedition Overseas Patagonia