

Harold William Tilman (1898–1978)

a tribute

Peter Lloyd and Colin Putt

On 1 November 1977 the Cutter 'En Avant', a converted seagoing tug, skipper Simon Richardson, in which Tilman was sailing as a member of a crew of 6, left Rio de Janeiro for Port Stanley en route to Smith Island in the South Shetlands. They never reached the Falkland Islands and there has been no news of them since that day; it seems unlikely now that we shall ever know how they perished.

The loss of his young companions was tragic, but for Bill Tilman this was perhaps a fitting end to a life of action and adventure. He had fought in both world wars, winning front line decorations in each. In the twenties he carved a farm and coffee plantation out of the bush in Kenya. The thirties were the heyday of his African and Asian journeys which continued in the first 5 years after the war. Finally there was the remarkable period of his seafaring ventures in Polar waters starting in 1954 and continuing right up to the end. Had this final expedition reached its objective he would have spent his 80th birthday in the Antarctic. It is a unique record.

Tilman won the MC in 1917 at the age of 19, bar to the MC later that year, both on the Western front where he was twice wounded; in the Second World War he served in France, Iraq and in the N African campaign before being parachuted into Albania and N Italy to serve with the partisans, for which he was awarded the DSO and made a Freeman of the city of Belluno. He received the Founders Medal of the RGS in 1952 for his exploratory work among the mountains of E Africa and Central Asia, the Blue Water Medal of the Cruising Club of America after his 1955/6 voyage to Patagonia. He was made CBE in 1973, an honorary member of AC (which he had joined in 1934) in 1976 and Hon.LL.D. St. Andrews University.

For a notoriously taciturn man he was an astonishingly prolific writer and his climbs and travels are well documented with one book about Africa, 6 about Himalayan and other Central Asian journeys and 7 about his sea voyages. There is therefore no need for me to catalogue his climbing career in detail; all I will attempt is to indicate the pattern of his life and to say something of him as a man.

The origins of his interest in climbing are not very clear, they were probably the outcome of visits to the British Hills. Certainly he was already keen to climb when he went to Kenya and it was there, partly through the agency of Wyn Harris, that he first met Eric Shipton with whom he was to do so much. For Tilman, still very much a beginner, their (first) traverse of the twin peaks of Mount Kenya, well described in Shipton's autobiography and characterized as the hardest climb he had ever done, must have been quite an experience. Two years later he was the survivor of an accident on Dow Crag in which one of his companions was killed and the other very seriously injured. Tilman, himself seriously hurt, dragged himself down to the village to give the alarm.

He had now sold his Kenya farm and fairly soon after this his father's death left him financially independent. Later still the income from his books also contributed to his resources. From now on, apart from the interruption of the war years, travel was his life.

There followed the golden years of Himalayan exploration and climbing, all save one in company with Eric Shipton: the forcing of the route up the Rishi Ganga into the Nanda Devi Sanctuary, the post-monsoon Everest reconnaissance of 1935,



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(Photo: AC Collection)

the ascent of Nanda Devi, the Shaksgam Expedition and leadership of the 1938 attempt on Everest. Apart from the further failure on Everest it would be hard to imagine 5 more productive years.

After the war there were, for a start, 2 visits to Shipton in Kashgar, the second involving a journey right across Asia from Shanghai to Chitral, the last before the Chinese Communist revolution made such things impossible. Soon after that came the exciting prospect of the opening up of Nepal to Western travellers. Now the most accessible of all Himalayan territories it had, till then, been rigorously closed. Tilman was not the man to miss this chance and the years 1949 and 1950 saw visits to the Langtang, Ganesh and Jugal Himal, to Annapurna, and finally to the area we so much wanted to explore, Sola Khumbu, the country of the Sherpas and the gateway to Everest's southern approach.

In this return to Everest there was an element of sadness, first because he was now in his fifties and it marked the end of his time in the big mountains; second because he reported too gloomily on the prospects of access to the South Col up the Khumbu ice-fall. But he was right to draw back, for this was perhaps the beginning of the more organized and mechanized climbing of a later generation. Nor was he so far wrong about the hazards of the ice-fall which has already claimed 10 lives. His era was over.

None could have thought that he would rebound from this check to enjoy another quarter century of adventurous travel in a style of his own invention. It is not for me to write of these later exploits but I must, in conclusion, say something of him as a man and as a mountaineer.

On the way through Sikkim in 1938 we were entertained at a formal dinner by the Maharaja at Gangtok. Bill made a short speech the keynote of which was a quotation from Thoreau to the effect that the simple life was the gateway to higher things. In retrospect this seems even more significant than it did then, for simplicity was the characteristic of all his journeys. He crossed Africa on a bicycle. The equipment for his Himalayan travels was of the simplest. Most of his sea voyages were done in a boat 50 to 60 years old. He preferred to dispense with such devices as wireless sets, crampons, oxygen.

Recollections of expeditions tend to centre on camp life, transport and provisioning problems and food. In this field Bill certainly had a style of his own. He got a reputation for austerity but in the main this resulted from the quest for mobility and economy, for apart from Everest his climbing journeys were privately financed. He would rather dine off eggs and potatoes bought at the last village than off a hamper of delicacies brought out from England. But it was not entirely a question of self denial, for he relished the tinned farmhouse cheeses which he always brought out and latterly took great delight on an off day in baking a loaf or cake in an improvised oven.

As a companion Bill was of course taciturn, but this came I think from the habit of solitude rather than from shyness, certainly there was no constraint in his silences. In this respect he was of course a complete contrast to Eric Shipton, the most gregarious and talkative of men. But he was in no sense inarticulate for he had both a richly sardonic humour and a gift for puncturing a pretentious argument with devastating common sense. Nor was he a real solitary, for he was always ready to pass the time with a game of chess or picquet. In his dealings with ordinary people there was a quality of real kindness and gentleness.

As a climber he was competent rather than spectacular and the qualities I associate with him are determination, endurance and dependability. But most remarkable of all was his natural authority. This came out most clearly on the Nanda Devi Expedition of 1936. We started off as a group of 8 climbers including some more experienced and others more technically skilled and without formal leadership. As we approached the serious business of tackling the mountain and the need for a recognized leader became evident, Bill was so obviously the man for the job that the question resolved itself with perfect ease.

He was indeed a great man.

PETER LLOYD

When H. W. Tilman bought the pilot cutter 'Mischief' in 1954, it was not to retire from mountaineering but to use the sea for access to remote and unvisited mountains in high latitudes. Over the next 22 years 'Mischief' and her successors, 'Sea Breeze' and 'Baroque' saw regular service in distant waters, and their owner developed a whole new technique and tradition of amphibious mountaineering.

His seafaring methods were very like those which he had already brought to mountaineering. He eschewed complications, new-fangled gadgets and publicity, and achieved great results with well tried tools reduced to their barest essentials. His 3 ships were built at the turn of the century, his navigational equipment was essentially the same as that used by James Cook, and he held that the only worthwhile innovations made in small ships in the last hundred years were the Diesel engine and Terylene rope. This Spartan equipment was used with the same intelligence, cool judgement and simple but masterly skill that had made Tilman's mountaineering exploits famous. He became a very good navigator, his

seamanship was more like that of a merchant sailing ship's master than a modern racing yachtsman's. None of his ships were built as yachts and he never drove them hard, the object was to arrive, not to win a race, and his ships and crews were carefully nursed through severe conditions without strain or fuss.

The full record is to be found in Tilman's seven seafaring books; humorous, learned, devastatingly honest, and packed with information. Although 'Mischief' was bought to take him to the Straits of Magellan, Tilman soon discovered the advantages of Greenland and its neighbours for summer voyages and made annual expeditions in that direction, interspersed with long voyages to the Southern Ocean. Here he visited Patagonia, the Crozets, Kerguelen, Heard Island and the South Shetlands, and was again bound for the South Shetlands on the last, uncompleted voyage. The mountaineering highlights of his seafaring career were the crossing of the Patagonian ice cap, the crossing of Bylot Island, and the ascent of Big Ben on Heard Island, where although Tilman was not in the summit party, he contributed more than any of them to the success of the expedition.

Not all of his voyages were successful or enjoyable. There were the sad losses of his two faithful cutters, 'Mischief' and 'Sea Breeze', but just as bad or worse were those occasions when individual crew members or whole crews, unable to match Tilman's endurance of discomfort or danger, decided to desert or mutiny. He was a shy taciturn man and made little attempt to talk them out of such ungrateful conduct; he simply delivered them to the port of their choice and set about preparing for his next voyage.

Most of his crews were made of sterner stuff, they were rewarded with good fellowship and humour, the chance to learn seamanship and mountaineering from a great teacher, and the wonderful experience of seeing at first hand what may be done in rough waters and heavy ice in a little, old, unstrengthened ship. These they will always remember with awe and delight.

Some few of us managed to return for more than one voyage with Tilman, and the best seaman of all these was Simon Richardson, in whose cutter 'En Avant' Tilman, Richardson and their crew disappeared after leaving Rio de Janeiro for Port Stanley in November 1977. We may never know what happened to them, but it must have been a fitting end for Tilman, at sea and in the best of good company.

COLIN PUTT