
JOHN HUNT

Letters from Everest

(Plates 2-12)

These extracts from letters to my wife during the 1953 Everest expedition were written in the context of her own climbing experience, both in the Himalaya and in the Alps. During the three years which ended in May 1940 when I returned from India to rejoin my Regiment, Joy and I were stationed in Bengal, where I was serving with the Indian Police. Darjeeling was only an overnight rail journey: to Siliguri in the Bengal-Nagpur express, and thence in the little cog-driven mountain train which climbs up the steep hillsides to Ghoom, and over a ridge to Darjeeling. We took every opportunity, even during long weekends, to travel that way, and onwards into Sikkim. In those years we walked great distances over the length and breadth of that little mountain kingdom. With C R Cooke and a few of our special Sherpa friends we undertook two lightweight expeditions, to the Zemu and the Talung glaciers beneath Kangchenjunga, in the course of which Joy, with limited climbing experience, had reached 20,000ft. During the period immediately following the War, with the advantage of my posting to Allied Forces, Central Europe, at Fontainebleau, we climbed for a further three years in France and Switzerland.

So I was writing to a seasoned mountaineer and, more importantly, to someone who had travelled through the valleys and villages of the Eastern Himalaya, where we had met with Sikkimese, Lepchas, Tibetans and Sherpas. I was aware of the memories I would stir, without the need to dwell on them: the sights, the smells, the sounds, the voices and the music; the toil of plodding up and down steep mountain tracks.

And beyond all this, I remembered her amazement when first viewing one of the Himalayan giants – Kangchenjunga.

Namche Bazar 25.3.53

... The walk has been quite heavenly, specially since we came down from the final high ridge to the Dudh Kosi, which drains from the Everest massif, and turned North. This is a tremendous gorge, reminiscent of the Teesta¹ – very rugged indeed. We have followed the path up it for 3 days, getting progressively higher – here it is 12,000 feet. It has stayed fine, except for some rain two days ago and yesterday it was cloudy. But for the final walk up here the day has been glorious. We had a fine view of Everest and some fantastic nearer views of peaks the size of Siniolchum,² all flaked and jagged – quite unthinkably difficult. Flowers have been wonderful – the rhodies above 7,000 feet are deep or pale pink, and all the magnolias have been at their best – great, heavy white blossoms. Several mauve primulas and other flowering bushes. We have



2. Everest 1953
John Hunt putting on crampons. (*Alfred Gregory*)

continued the practice of starting off at 6 a.m. and stopping for breakfast about 8–8.30, usually by a stream. This has given us a chance to get cleaned up and have a dip. On one of these occasions we nearly lost Charles Evans. Ed [Hillary] and Chas³ and I had gone to bathe in the Likhu Khola, a biggish river – Chas plunged in and was at once swept under. He hit a rock, reappeared and then went under again! However he was luckily unhurt and had not taken a mouthful, so managed to get in to the bank before we went to his rescue; it was a nasty moment!

In this Sherpa country the people are very friendly indeed and greet us as we pass their houses. The latter are strongly built stone buildings, with good timber work – very like Swiss chalets – but you will remember them at Lachen.⁴ Potatoes and barley are growing at present in their small, stony and walled-in terraces. On arrival here today we found the wife of one of our Sherpas⁵ on the path with a teapot of Tibetan tea – the pot decorated with coloured paper in our honour! We had to drink some tho' it was not very nice. Naturally there has been much interest in our arrival and great welcomes for the Sherpas who live here. Crowds of kids are swarming round the camp, some of them playing with kites. The village headman has been to see me, and also some Indians who are manning a frontier check point – they have a wireless which may be useful in emergency. This camp is on a col just above the village, with views both ways to high and fierce-looking peaks.

Thyangboche 29 March 1953

This is written just before we leave on the first period of acclimatization; Chas Evans' party has already gone, as they are trying out Tom B's Closed Circuit Oxygen⁶ as well as the O.C. [Open Circuit] This has been an invaluable 3 days, partly restful, partly pretty busy, with instruction in wireless, oxygen, cookers (I have asked Ed to tell Reggie⁷ how pleased he is with the latter), sorting out of loads, issuing of kit (everyone is both impressed and delighted with everything – the NZ pair have asked me to send you their special thanks), making up of accounts, articles for Times etc. etc. This is a simply heavenly spot – I won't repeat what has gone to the Times as you'll see it there. Yesterday we were entertained by the Lamas at the monastery. The head Lama, a very portly and impressive old man in fine red robes, looked after us. We entered the sanctuary – you will remember the Gangtok one – where I laid a scarf on the Lama's chair and on that of the Abbot of Rongbuk (+ some money!); then I presented the expedition flag. After that we sat in an upper room and had a meal, the old Abbot was very interesting about Yetis, leaving no doubt whatever in my mind about their existence.

This a.m. prayers were offered for the expedition most of the morning. 6 of us did a training scramble up to 16,000 feet, and tried out our little wireless sets with great success. We had stupendous views all round, and got our first sight of the South Col.

Training camp (circa 17,500ft) 3 Apr 1953

... Here we are 'acclimatizing' and having a thoroughly wonderful, if fairly strenuous time. George [Lowe], Greg [Alfred Gregory], Tenzing and I have

come two days' journey from Thyangboche, and are camped beside a glacier (we have named it Nuptse glacier) which springs from the foot of that great mountain wall. So far we have climbed an easy rock peak using oxygen, starting from 18,000ft and going up to 19,700. The times have averaged 50 minutes, which is a good proof of the value of the oxygen at present stage. Then yesterday we crossed our glacier and set up a light camp for just the 4 of us, at nearly 19,000ft, beneath a very attractive snow and rock peak (we have called it Chukhung peak, after the top village in the valley below). This morning we climbed it by its very steep North face, which I led. It involved a lot of step-cutting and we are all rather pleased to have done our first peak, and without undue effort. We then came down its South side back to this main camp.

Tomorrow we plan to return by crossing a col into the valley which comes down from the Khumbu glacier; this will take us 3 days and depends a little on the weather, its snowing at present.

Base camp 8 Apr 1953

... It's been a very busy 3 days, so much to arrange and think of for the future.

We are all astonishingly well and all have reached much the same standard after the first week of training – I've actually gained 5lbs!! The best sign is the fact that everyone seems pretty happy – Tom Bourdillon came up to me last evening, after we'd had supper by a camp fire, and said what a success he thought it all was.

The next big job ahead is the icefall reconnaissance, which Ed Hillary is taking on. I am moving up after his party, to see the results and take decisions on the spot. Charles [Wylie] and Greg and Tom B are clearing up here on return from their acclimatization period and will meet Jimmy Roberts⁸ with the 2nd oxygen consignment. So all is fairly well in hand.

We are feeding well; yesterday had the first Ready Mix scones, which were pronounced to be excellent by all. At lunch today George Band brought me a stew made in 5 mins in one of your Pressure Cookers – and sends you his thanks!

Camp beside Imja Glacier beneath Nuptse 12 Apr 1953

This is the 3rd night spent at this camp, on the 3rd acclimatization period. We (Noyce, Ward, Bourdillon and self) are mainly trying out the Closed Circuit oxygen, and this has come through its trials quite well. We are in quite wonderful country, under the very shadow of this fantastic mountain, and across the way from the Nuptse-Lhotse ridge. Yesterday, Tom and I climbed a very nice rock peak of 19,500 feet, and this was today repeated by Mike Ward and Wilf [Noyce]. Tom and I spent today training Sherpas on steep ice and snow. My little caravan had a most interesting outing among seracs beneath a great ice ridge of 20–21,000 feet which divides us from the valley known as the Hongu away to the East. We got to rather over 21,000 feet before turning back. Ed Hillary's party has gone up to reconnoitre and prepare the Icefall, and tomorrow my party is starting on its way to join them – three days' journey. Meanwhile, Chas Evans has been training a select few of our Sherpas



3. Entrance to the Western Cwm. Wilfrid Noyce crosses the bridge over the big crevasse. (*Alfred Gregory*)



5. The Lhotse Face Sherpas, standing: Ang Tsering, Ang Norbu, Kancha, Angtharkay, Ang Dawa II; squatting: Annullu, Phu Dorji, Pasang. With Wilfrid Noyce. (*Alfred Gregory*)



Left
4. Nawang Gombu crossing the big crevasse. (*Alfred Gregory*)

Facing page, below
6. Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans at the South Col. (*Alfred Gregory*)



in using oxygen. I gather from a scribbled note that this has been a great success. Weather has turned nasty on us, and we came up here through 3-4 inches of new snow. Yesterday was fairly nasty too, but today has been glorious again.

13/4 [13 April 1953]

We've come down to the valley (Chukhung) from our training camp, and are now half way up on the other side – in a lovely grassy alp. Tomorrow we hope to cross over to the Khumbu valley on our way to the icefall – and Everest. There is a chance of climbing a peak on the way.

When we get there, it will be the end of one important phase, and the beginning of Everest proper. I think we shall all be very ready in every sense to get on with the real thing at last.

14/4 [14 April 1953]

I'm giving this to Tom Bourdillon, who leaves me tomorrow morning to return to Thyangboche. I've come down beside the Khumbu glacier, and an easy two days' march from the foot of the icefall, after crossing our pass from the Imja valley this morning. For some reason I was going awfully badly, having had a somewhat breathless night, and had to decide to let the others climb a 20,000 feet peak from the pass. I came straight over and have rested up ever since. This was rather tantalizing, as you can imagine, but there could be no doubt I wasn't up to it. Mike has run me over with his stethoscope and given various drugs – he suspects pleurisy but thinks he's checked it. Anyway, I'm feeling much better already!

Tomorrow we go up the glacier and cross it to the foot of Pumori, where there is a frozen lake; this is to be the place where we will rest up for a few days before going up to Base Camp.

Base Camp Khumbu Glacier 21 Apr 1953

I am scribbling this to you in bed before setting out for 2 days' work in the icefall glacier. James Morris, the Times man, is sending a runner back to Kathmandu and it's a chance to get letters off. This confounded pen won't write when it's cold. You'll have a terrible time trying to read it. We are very nearly all assembled at Base Camp, beneath the icefall and ready for the job. It's been snowing overnight which is a nuisance as we have hundreds of coolies coming up today and tomorrow and there'll be the trouble with snow blindness. We intend to start the loads moving up on 24th, and there's still a good deal to do to make the icefall easily passable for the Sherpas. We shall know the worst by tomorrow about snags high up at the entrance to the Cwm, where there was a huge crevasse last year. So far we've bridged two or three smaller ones lower down, and have a certain amount of beams to put across others.

I am staying tonight at Camp II, half way up, after helping Wilf today, then tomorrow up to Camp III site with Ed Hillary, George Lowe and George Band. Finally, down tomorrow night to launch the Build-up period. The idea is to come right off the mountain half way through – early May – for a rest,

while a reconnaissance is made of the Lhotse Face – I shall probably take part in this, so as to make the plan for the assault.

Base Camp Khumbu Glacier 23 Apr 1953

... Well, tomorrow we start the big task of lifting stores into the Cwm. I was up there yesterday, after spending a night at Camp II (half way up) and with Ed and George Band was very much relieved to find only one impassable gap before we could really say we were into the Cwm proper. Tomorrow I am going up there again with Chas Evans and Tenzing.

We have moved the necessary sections of the ladders up to Camp II today, so as to take them on with us tomorrow. Most annoyingly it is snowing hard again and all our hard work on the track will have to be repeated. It's certainly a very serious problem, this icefall, and I only wish I could feel happier about its safety.

Khumbu Glacier 28 Apr 1953

... I came down yesterday from Camp III which is now firmly established at the head of the icefall. Two days ago, Tenzing, Chas Evans, Ed Hillary and self went right up the Cwm, following a reconnaissance the previous evening, and reached the Swiss Camp IV at 22,000ft, where we are going to establish Advanced Base. It was rather a thrill to blaze the trail thus far, and to know that we were, indeed, through. There had been some doubt about getting up the icefall itself, which is exceedingly complicated and difficult – then the big question mark about entering the Cwm, where the Swiss had such trouble last year with monster crevasses – and now, unless there are big changes in the ice which produce fresh problems, we seem to be up to schedule and able to stick to the long-determined programme. The process of ferrying the loads up is well under way. I left Greg and Wilf at Camp III, in charge of moving stores up to Camp IV; others are looking after the ferry service from Base to Camp III, a two day journey. Chas Wylie and George Band are just due back from Camp III, having moved up yesterday afternoon with two Sherpa trains to Camp II. And so it is intended to continue until 2nd May, when we are to have a break of 3 days.

During this break, Chas Evans with Tom B, Chas Wylie and Mike Ward are to carry out a reconnaissance of the Lhotse Face getting as high as they can, the first pair using Tom's Closed Circuit Oxygen, the second pair the Open Circuit. As a result of this reconnaissance I shall decide on what plan to adopt, and we shall be busy between 6th and 10th May preparing for that plan. Time seems to slip away and doubtless before very long we shall be put to the real test.

Camp IV (22,000 feet)⁹ 1st May 1953

Chas Evans, Tom Bourdillon and I have arrived up here at the beginning of a reconnaissance of the Lhotse Face. I am spending tomorrow with them and we are going as high as we can, then they are going up to establish our future Camp VI, at about 24,500 feet. It all rather depends on the weather, for hardly had we got in than it started snowing and it's doing so really heavily – all the



Facing page

7. The first assault. Returning from the first ascent of the South Summit, Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon creep back to camp across the South Col. (Alfred Gregory)

Above

8. Evans and Bourdillon (L) exhausted after their summit attempt. (Alfred Gregory)



track below us must have filled in by now; most disheartening, this regular and heavy new snow.

This recce is a very important affair, for it will show us how to stage the assault. Chas Wylie and Mike Ward are coming up tomorrow using Open Circuit oxygen, while Tom and Chas E are to use Tom's Closed Circuit. We used the latter coming up today, with success, cutting an hour off the time taken last time from III to IV despite the fact we were carrying a good 50lbs. We will eventually make our attempts on the top from here, for it is close enough to the Lhotse Face and quite a comfortable spot.

Base Camp Khumbu Glacier 4 May 1953

... What is there in what we are doing which stirs people so? Letters and telegrams go on coming in full of such fine sentiments.

Chas E, Tom B and I, with the Bourdillon oxygen apparatus [Closed Circuit], went some little way up the Lhotse Face (to 23,500 feet or so), prior to the proper Reconnaissance, and yesterday I had a long day, first going up to Camp V with the Recce party and giving them final instructions and then escorting 3 sick Sherpas down to Camp II en route for Base. It was rather interesting that, whereas I'd used oxygen the day before, I went up to 23,000 again without it, but just as easily as with – in fact, it was altogether a more pleasant experience! I am now worried about the Recce party, as the weather has turned foul just as they are wrestling with the Face. It isn't going to be at all easy, I fear – but then this is no surprise.

Base Camp Khumbu Glacier 7 May 1953

... [This letter will] catch James Morris's runner, with his report on the plan, which resulted from my conference this morning.

Chas Evans' Reconnaissance of the Lhotse Face and the oxygen tests have enabled me to decide on using *both* Closed and Open Circuit equipment, in a double assault on the summit. After lots of thought I've decided on the 'line up' for the assault as follows:

- | | |
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| 1. To prepare the Lhotse Face and establish Camp VI
(11-15 May) | Lowe
Band
Westmacott
plus 4 Sherpas |
| 2. To carry to the South Col | Noyce
Wylie
plus 12 Sherpas |
| 3. First Assault Party (Closed-Circuit) | Evans
Bourdillon |
| 4. 2nd Assault Party (Open Circuit) | Hillary
Tenzing |
| 5. Support Party (to establish Camp VIII on SE Ridge
at 27,500 or 28,000ft) | Hunt
Gregory
plus 4 Sherpas |
| 6. Reserve | Ward |

It was tempting to go for the top myself, but I'm sure I've chosen the best men for the job and that my position enables me to control the business and make decisions on the spot. We are now in the final stages of getting stores into the Cwm and, if weather suits, may go straight ahead after the 15th. Equally, we may come down and wait for the weather. At the moment it's pretty ghastly and as you know, so very much depends on this. Ed and I go up to the Cwm again on 9th, to release George Lowe and his team for the Lhotse Face.

Camp III 16 May 1953

... I have come down from Camp VI¹⁰ to arrange the final move to Advanced Base, before we make our bid for the top. The weather has suddenly relented in these last few days and, tho' it has slowed us down, we are now very nearly ready – I've fixed the 20th for the first carry to the South Col (Wilf's) which will be followed by the Assaults if the weather holds – I pray earnestly that it may for the next 10 days at least. At the moment Wilf Noyce and George Lowe are at, or moving up to, Camp VII at 24,000ft,¹⁰ in order to prepare the last bit of the route towards the South Col; Ed Hillary went up there yesterday and set up their tent. Tomorrow stores for Camp VII will be carried up before the assault. All are in fine fettle if a little tensed up – I find the suspense trying too and feel we ought to be 'at it' already in this perfect weather – but there is no speeding up the machine and we must be patient now.

Advanced Base Western Cwm 20th May 1953

... Everything is really in the balance till we see how Wilf fares tomorrow morning. He has the difficult job of preparing a certain critical passage across the Lhotse Face, and taking a string of Sherpas to the South Col. If he succeeds in this, then we shall be half way *set* for the assault in the next few days. The party preparing the route up the Face has unaccountably failed to finish its job – our wireless communications have broken down and we can only watch events from here. They spent all yesterday in Camp; today – as 2 days ago – they started out, only to return. It is tantalizing and desperately disappointing. But we live on, in hopes of success tomorrow – the weather today is glorious and seems fairly set, but how long can it last? You may well imagine just how anxious it all is, for me. All being well, we shall see fairly soon, I hope, but cannot wait indefinitely like this without spirits dropping a bit.

Advanced Base Western Cwm 22nd May 1953

... the first Assault party is just off. Yesterday we watched Wilf Noyce, with Sherpa Annullu, climb to the South Col from Camp VII – a thrilling sight and a very fine effort, for it meant we had conquered the Lhotse Face at long last – after nearly a fortnight's anxiety and struggle. Today Ed Hillary and Tenzing, whom I'd sent up yesterday to 'boost' the morale of the Sherpas, are leading 14 Sherpas to the Col. Chas Wylie is also with them. They are well up in the gully beside the Eperon des Genevois and seem to be going well. Wilf and Annullu have just returned here after their fine and historic effort and their reports are encouraging – little wind and good snow conditions.

Chas E, Tom B and I are going up to Camp V tonight. This means we



9. The South Summit in cloud, seen from the Geneva Spur. (*Alfred Gregory*)

Plates 2–12 formed part of an exhibition of photographs by Alfred Gregory at the Royal Geographical Society in May 1993 to mark the 40th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest. Many of them are reproduced in his book *Alfred Gregory's Everest* published by Constable in 1993.

should be on the Col on the 24th and T and C [Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans] will try for the top, from the Col, on the next day.

Ed and Tenzing are at the moment on their way to the Col – they are to come down and follow us up as soon as possible – 24 or 48 hours interval.

Adv Base 29th May 1953

This scrap of a letter will go by hand of James Morris, of the Times, who will probably be off to UK with the final news in a day or two. I got down from the South Col with the first Assault Party yesterday – more or less whole – but I fear we are really casualties after our effort on the 26th. You will know the story so I won't go over it all. It was funny to look westwards from 27,500 feet on the SE Ridge (my limit) to Kangch [Kangchenjunga] – all our old friends of 1937 – just the reverse view I'd had from Nepal Peak.¹¹

At this moment we are anxiously waiting for news of Ed Hillary's bid for the top – they are at it now, and I've sent Wilf Noyce with 3 Sherpas up to the Col to help get them down. Wilf was splendid in helping us, for we reached Camp VII in a state of very near exhaustion – in fact I only came down here because we feared Tom Bourdillon might not get down alive.

Some terribly difficult decisions had to be made, but somehow they have sort and all turned out alright. I'm felt very sure of the rightness of each one, as of the final outcome, all along, as though guided along a predestined track. A curious sensation of confidence answering to faith had that big imponderable, the weather, has been with us just enough to see us through.

Base Camp 1.6.53

... I don't remember when I last sent you a letter; was it before I went up to the South Col? That was the start of the assault and from then until the evening of the 30th, when we knew the outcome of Hillary's and Tenzing's attempt, there has really been no respite at all – some terribly difficult

decisions had to be made, but somehow they have each and all turned out aright. I've felt very sure of the rightness of each one, as of the final outcome, all along, as though guided along a pre-destined track, a curious sensation of confidence answering to Faith. And that big imponderable, the weather, has been with us just enough to see us through.

It started on 21st, when I had sent up Ed and Tenzing to intervene in the vital carry to the South Col. Wilf, one of those leading the Sherpas, had made a wonderful change in the stalemate on the Lhotse Face, by going up to the South Col with one Sherpa; but it was by no means sure that the rest would go on up next day (22nd). There were 14 of them up at Camp VII, and on those loads the assault depended. Only Ed and Tenzing could tip the balance, and I sent them up from Adv Base, knowing well the risk of prejudicing their effort in the second assault. But first things first, and it worked. On that day (22nd) we watched no less than 17 little dots emerge from the serac in front of Camp VII and continue steadily, if slowly, up the face and across the traverse. All but one went on without hesitation into the couloir leading to the Col – and that defaulter's load was taken by someone else. With the essential backing thus ensured, I decided that the first assault party should start, the weather had been good for a week, and we must tempt Providence no longer. So off we went – on oxygen – to Camp V that night, Chas E, Tom B, myself and Sherpas Da Namgyal and Balu.

Soon after our arrival, down came Ed, Tenzing, both dreadfully tired, and a few of the stoutest of the Sherpas; the rest stayed up at Camp VII. Among these was Dawa Thondup,¹² well in his 40s, whose medical fitness had been in doubt up to the last minute and addicted to strong drink – a remarkable performance this.

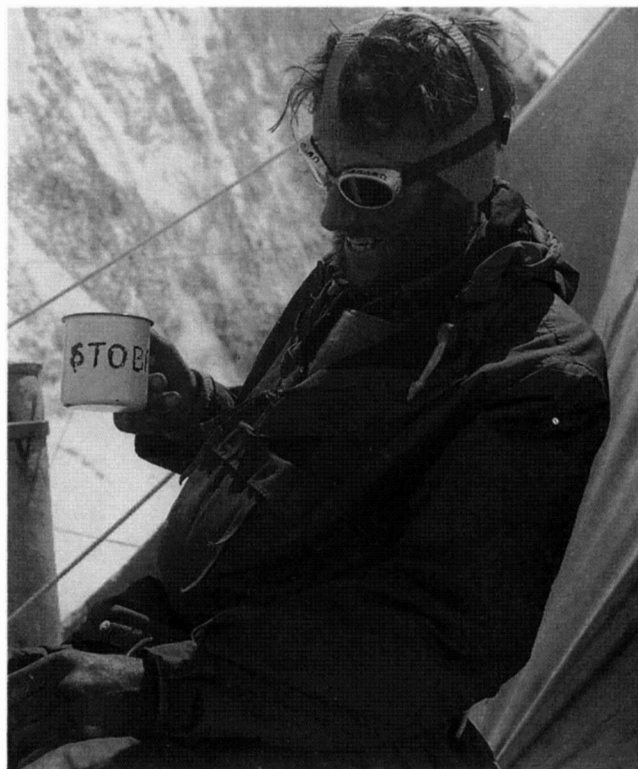
Next day we went up to VII and on 24th evening reached the South Col. It was blowing as only it can on that dread and desolate spot and we will none of us forget the terrible struggle – lasting over an hour, to erect our Pyramid tent. We were so exhausted at the end, when we had put up this tent and the Meade, that it was already out of the question to go for the Summit on the next day, as planned. One day's delay thus resulted, spent at 26,000 feet on the South Col of Everest in fine weather. I even managed to walk – very slowly – to both edges of this curious, stony plateau, and photograph the views both ways. To the east, over the left shoulder of Makalu, was Kangch and its Satellites – I could make out the twins, Nepal Peak and Tent Peak, just as I'd seen Everest and her neighbour from that group in 1937.

We had a good night on oxygen on 25th and got away early on 26th though Tom and Chas had some delay with freezing up of the Closed Circuit valve system. I was with Da Namgyal, our mission [being] to place stores for the Ridge Camp as high as possible – the camp to be finally established by the second support party accompanying Ed's assault party. We were pretty heavily laden, for the other porter, Balu, who should have been in my party, had utterly failed to turn out of his tent.

Well, we made our way (both on oxygen) up to the crest of the SE Ridge by a very steep couloir, following T and C – I can't describe to you the agonies of it – my oxygen wasn't functioning properly and it seemed a struggle for dear



10. The summit assault. Hillary and Tenzing on the way up to the highest camp at 27,900ft. (Alfred Gregory)



Right
11. Edmund Hillary relaxing after his return from the summit. (Alfred Gregory)

Following page
12. Hillary and Tenzing after their successful first ascent of Everest. (Alfred Gregory)



life to make each 5–6 paces upward – a terrible nightmare. We stopped for some time at the skeleton of the Swiss tent, used by Lambert and Tenzing in May 1952, then managed by a great effort – laboured step by step, fighting for breath, to get up another 150–200 feet, with the weather closing in (snow, wind and mist). Da Namgyal was now at the end of his tether and I had to urge him on to a convenient-looking ledge, where we could dump the kit¹³ – a Meade tent, assault rations, kerosine, oxygen (we left our own bottles for use as sleeping oxygen). We actually tried to scrape a platform for the tent, but in our feeble state it was useless and in any case I wanted it placed higher – at the top of a shoulder on the Ridge¹⁴ – by the second party. Through the mists I could still see T and C above us, just getting to the crest of the shoulder. We started down probably 11.30 a.m. terribly slow and wobbly now without oxygen. I had left my second bottle by the Swiss tent and for a time tried to use it on the way down to the couloir – but owing to the defect (in my mask) I found this worse and decided to carry it down to be used by the 2nd party. We secured each other, rope length by rope length, in the couloir – Da Namgyal had one slip, then at last we were on easier ground, and the strength seemed to leave one like water. I could see the 2nd Assault Party winding up the Lhotse Face and already two figures at the Col. As we descended they came towards us – Ed and Tenzing. I collapsed hopelessly into tears and found I'd no more strength to walk in. Ed was splendid in propping me and eventually bringing oxygen, which just did the trick. He kept me on it for some time after, in the little 'Blister' tent.

Later George and Greg arrived, *jubilant*, they'd seen T and C on the South Pk! For some time we thought they might well have made the summit (they were seen at 1.15 p.m.) – the Sherpas with the second party thought the South PK *was* the top. But when they at last came down, at about 4.30 p.m. we learnt that they had NOT, quite rightly following their briefing and not having enough oxygen for the double journey; they reported the connecting ridge as formidable.

Followed a grim night of strong gale, T, C and I crammed in the Meade and without oxygen, to assist Ed and Tenzing with their support party to get off. We were in pretty poor shape next day, Tom specially so.

It was blowing a gale anyway and Ed had not started. A 24 hour delay was decided on, luckily we were sufficiently provisioned in food, fuel and oxygen to last this out. We sat through the morning in fair misery in the Pyramid, failing to get the stove to light – outside, all hell was let loose and I began to feel toward the S. Col as the Swiss had – it had an atmosphere of death. About midday it was time for Tom and Chas to go down, taking with them yet another 'failure' from our elite Ridge team – the renowned Ang Temba. They left; 5 minutes later Chas was back. Tom was in a very bad way – perhaps dying – on that villainous slope up to the ridge – on his knees and unable to make it. Another Sahib¹⁵ must join this party to get him down to VII and below alive. Here was a quandary. I had decided my post was here, to take decisions on the send-off of the 2nd Assault and to support Ed on return. I turned to Greg and George, it must be one of them. Then, in their chagrin, I saw my mistake. I was finished, they were fresh. That Ridge Camp must be

pushed higher and they were already – as I had been – one man short. I must go down. But it was a bitter decision to take. Packed up with help of the others, in haste, while Tom was being given oxygen and physical help to the top of the Eperon [Geneva Spur]. Ed carried my pack and I said farewell to him and George on the top, before joining the other three.

We stumbled and stopped and straggled our way down the endless slopes of the Lhotse Face to VII – Tom improving with his oxygen, I getting more tired. Reached there to find it occupied, to our joy and relief, by Wilf and Mike [Ward] who had anticipated our need. It was as well. Ang Temba fell head first into the crevasse above the camp, and Wilf was able to extricate him. Wilf too, at my bidding, stayed to feed and care for us (Tom, Temba and self) that night, while Mike escorted Chas [Evans] down to IV. We three were helplessly weary, and I had already decided to send Wilf up with 3 fresh Sherpas, to reinforce Ed's party. Chas [Wylie] would be able to send the Sherpas up here to VII.

Next day we plodded on down, reached IV – a veritable haven – about 1 p.m., having passed Chas [Wylie] bringing up the three Sherpas to join Wilf. It was a glorious day and we felt pretty sure the second assault was on.

On 29th, all day, no news. I'd fixed that Wilf should place sleeping bags on the Eperon, arranged so as to indicate 'Summit', 'South Pk', 'Failure'. But we saw nothing despite anxious searching with glasses until dark. We saw Wilf go up with his party and two of them return to Camp VII. We saw three descend from the Col; later, these materialized into Greg and two of the Ridge Sherpas – dead weary but triumphant. Despite yet another 'failure' – Pemba (leaving them, like me, with only *one* useful carrier), Greg, George and Ang Nyima had carried the camp 300 feet higher than my dump (to 28,000 feet) – on the shoulder, thus giving Ed and Tenzing a magnificent send-off to the top.

On 30th came relief to our prolonged tension. First we saw 5 figures crossing the Lhotse Face, down from the Col. This meant that all were *safe* (Ed, Tenzing, Wilf, George and one Sherpa). Then, in early afternoon, three people approached Adv Base – we'd seen them emerge from VII shortly after the 5 had arrived there – I started up to meet them, followed by Mike Westmacott, the strain was at last to be ended one way or another. I realized it was Ed himself, with Tenzing and George Lowe, they made no sign, evidently they'd *not* made it, after all. Then, suddenly, they started gesturing with their axes towards Everest's Summit above us. I couldn't make the mental switch for a second or two, then emotion and joy and wild excitement overwhelmed me utterly and I must have seemed possessed for some time. Weeping foolishly, I embraced Ed and Tenzing in turn.

Shouting to the others, asking questions. Everyone crowded round, everyone was equally mad, the Sherpa team were grasping these two splendid, lucky people by the hand, grinning broadly. Such a scene as I've imagined, but never believed could come true – Everest was climbed yesterday by Ed and Tenzing, at 11.30 a.m. We'd made it, exactly according to plan. We had crowned the efforts of all our illustrious predecessors. We had stood at the apex of this pyramid of hard-won experience and endeavour. What a tale to tell the waiting world!

NOTES

- 1 The gorge of the Teesta river in Sikkim.
- 2 Siniolchum, 22,600ft, in Sikkim, described by Douglas Freshfield as 'the most beautiful snow mountain I have ever seen, perhaps the most beautiful in the world', (AJ20, 170, 1900).
- 3 'Chas' (for Charles Evans and Charles Wylie). My abbreviation, not their nicknames.
- 4 Lachen, a village in Sikkim, which we passed through on our way to the Zemu glacier.
- 5 She was the wife of Dawa Tenzing, one of our leading Sherpas (who became famous as sirdar on the first ascent of Kangchenjunga in 1955).
- 6 Tom Bourdillon and his father helped develop the closed-circuit oxygen system, which reduced the wastage rate and provided a richer supply but was heavier and, being more complicated than the open-circuit system, more liable to breakdown.
- 7 Reggie Cooke, Indian Posts and Telegraphs, who partnered my wife and myself on expeditions to the Zemu glacier (1937) and Pandim (1940).
- 8 Lt Col J O M Roberts, 2nd Gurkha Rifles, took part in an ill-fated attempt on Masherbrum in the Karakoram in 1938 with Jimmy Waller, Royal Artillery, one of my companions on Saltoro Kangri in 1935. Jimmy Roberts had a distinguished climbing career and was Deputy Leader to Bonington on the 1972 Everest South West Face expedition.
- 9 Camp IV (Advanced Base) was, in fact, at 21,200ft.
- 10 Camp VI was a temporary camp at c. 23,000ft. During the Assault, we went straight from Camp V at 22,000ft to Camp VII at 24,000ft.
- 11 Nepal Peak, 23,400ft. I made the second ascent of the SW summit, 23,300ft, in November 1937.
- 12 Dawa Thondup, my oldest Sherpa companion, played a great part on Saltoro Kangri in 1935 with Jimmy Waller and myself. He was with his wife and myself on expeditions and treks in Sikkim in 1937, 1938, 1939 and 1940.
- 13 In 1976 Captain Henry Day RE, a member of the Joint British Army/Royal Nepalese Army expedition, brought back my oxygen cylinder from a point which he computed to be between 27,400 and 27,500ft. I am confident that Da Namgyal and I placed the dump (with the oxygen cylinder) between 150 and 200 vertical feet above the height of the Swiss tent, which I believe to have been at about 27,300ft. (The Swiss, in their book *Avant-premières à l'Everest*, gave the location of their tent as 8400m: almost certainly an over estimate.) In my diary, and in letters to my wife and to James Morris, written between 27 and 30 May, I wrote of 27,500ft as the height. I still believe this to be about right.
- 14 This was where Hillary and Tenzing, supported by Lowe, Gregory and Ang Nyima, pitched the top tent on 28th May 1953 at about 27,900ft.
- 15 The appellation 'Sahib' was, indeed, an echo of the British rule in India (the 'Raj') which had ended in 1947! It did *not* reflect our relations with the Sherpa team in 1953.