
GEORGE LOWE

1st June 1953: Base Camp

(Plates 6–12)

The following letters were written on Everest to my sister in New Zealand. They have never been published before, nor been seen by others except my family. The letters were written close to the event and show signs of the bias of a New Zealander telling his family what a great job he has done! I hope my companions on Everest will forgive any embarrassment caused by my letters home to the family in New Zealand.

In a day or two the world will know of our success. At present, don't imagine our band of thirteen rolling and rollicking in an ecstasy brought on by victory. If you were at Base Camp now you would see nine climbers and around fifteen Sherpas lying listlessly around the tents with bloodshot and glazed eyes, thin, dirty and bewildered. Ed is now sleeping as he has done for hours and hours; Charles is just smoking and tired; the talk is very desultory and dull; everyone is quite played out. Five of the other lads will be descending from Camp III tomorrow, and they too will come in stiff-legged and flogged after the last two weeks.

Two days ago we were on the South Col urging ourselves to the limit – and now like pricked balloons, all our reserves have gone. Yesterday, we came down to Base Camp. Ed, Charles Evans and I were together on one rope, and it took hours. I have never been so tired, nor had Ed. Now, if you could see us, you would see the most beaten, played out, lustreless team of climbers it is possible to imagine.

I last wrote on 22nd May and since then I have been very high, and the summit has been reached. You will know something of the event from the newspapers, but here, as far as I can recall it, is the day to day happenings from the 22nd.

When the great lift reached the South Col on the 22nd, John Hunt decided to launch the Assault Plan, and accordingly the closed circuit boys went into action. Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans set off that afternoon with all their bedding tied around their closed circuit apparatus with spare soda-lime canisters and spanners poking out – in all some 50lbs. John Hunt went with them on open circuit as support and possible emergency. Two Sherpas also went, Da Namgyal and Balu, to carry a tent and oxygen above the South Col as a possible emergency ration and shelter in the case of a late descent by Tom and Charles. In the event of this tent and oxygen not being used it was to be added to the second assault party backed by Gregory and three special Sherpas.

It was at this stage that I came into the story. The original plan did not include me, but I was very keen to get to the South Col. Because of Ed and



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*)



Tenzing's trip to the South Col with the Sherpa lift, and their consequent tiredness, they decided to wait a day longer than the original plan. Then it was discovered, mostly by my propaganda, that a little more oxygen and food would be advisable.

Accordingly, I was commissioned to escort five Sherpas to South Col along with Gregory and his three special Ridge Camp boys to back up Ed and Tenzing. I spent all the 23rd May frantically trying to fix a leak in the oxygen set I was to use. Finally by cutting and binding one of the rubber feed pipes, I stopped the hiss. Tom, Charles and John climbed to Camp VII on 23rd.

24th May. Tom, Charles and John with their two Sherpas, crept above Camp VII and worked slowly to South Col. We watched them through glasses – in seven hours, they arrived late and very tired. We packed up; Greg and I with our Sherpas left for Camp V, where we spent the night. A cold night – our thermometer read -27°C at 5a.m.

25th May. Tom and Charles were timed to make an attempt on the South Peak, and Summit if possible, using closed circuit. Due to wind and their tired condition from previous day, they stayed on the South Col. Greg and I left for VI using oxygen (2 litres per minute). We made good time, and at VI changed to 4 litres and headed up the Lhotse face for VII. You will remember the climb from V to VII is up the difficult Lhotse face on which nearly 1,000 feet of rope is fixed. Above VI, I began to falter. I began to pant and weaken, although Greg was making a slow pace. I began to worry and think I was failing – but it turned out to be a defect in my oxygen set, which was cutting right out and the mask was stopping even the outside air getting in. The trip to VII, for me, was hell and I collapsed on the snow at VII and took a couple of hours to recover. At VII, I was able to trace the trouble and the set behaved beautifully the next days. Ed and Tenzing came right through to VII from IV that day, and arrived fresh and fit.

Although Everest was blowing a cloud plume on these days, the weather was very settled and the weather reports from Indian radio gave us 'Warm temperatures, winds 15–20 knots and settled weather. Monsoon still only in the Andaman Sea'. Camp VII, 24,000 feet approximately, was calm that night, temperature -28°C .

26th May. We left VII at 8.45a.m. and had wonderful conditions for our climb to South Col. I filmed much of the climb and felt really wonderful. From the top of the Lhotse face glacier, for perhaps 1,000 feet, is a steady crampon climb up crevassed slopes and then swings left to traverse above limestone rock bands and goes diagonally up great snow slopes towards the Col. The South Col is not reached direct. The rock buttress of 'Eperon de Genevois' stops this, and our route connected with the very top of the Eperon, over which we climbed and dropped some 200ft to South Col at 25,850 feet.

About 1p.m. on 26th, we began traversing rock and snow at the top of the Eperon. The South Peak of Everest was in view looking incredibly steep and on the final slope I saw two dots, like flies on a wall, about 200 feet below the cornice of the top. We went mad with excitement as we watched Tom and Charles go steadily up and over the South Summit, 28,720 feet and, we thought, off for the main summit. They were higher than anyone ever before,



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*)



and apparently going at a very fast rate. They had climbed from the South Col that morning and reached the South Summit in five and a half hours. John, too, had set out with Da Namgyal (both on open circuit) ahead of Tom and Charles, to carry Ridge Camp, but the closed circuit party easily overtook him and far outclassed the open circuit at the highest altitudes. Balu, the other Sherpa, had failed to start – in fact, he refused to go above the South Col.

Greg and I were so excited at seeing Tom and Charles that we ran down to the Col camp to shout the news to Ed and Tenzing. Ed came out of the dome tent with a great whoop and then dived back again. Tenzing, we were hurt to find, lost his smile and did not share our enthusiasm. The idea of team effort seemed not to appeal to him, there seemed no doubt that Tenzing had high hopes of being the first to reach the summit.

Ed's disappearance into the dome I thought strange, and pushed my way in to find John lying quite exhausted with Ed plying him with drinks and oxygen. Ed and Tenzing had arrived on the Col before us and saw John returning with Da Namgyal from his ridge carry. They had carried to 27,350 feet and were returning completely done in. John was staggering and crumpling, and staggering on again, when Ed rushed off to help him. Ed assisted him in on his shoulder and slapped an oxygen mask on him for a good half hour (John's oxygen had run out at 27,350 feet and he came down without). Da Namgyal's hands were frostbitten and he was very tired. John certainly earned our admiration – he's got tremendous guts, and this day he pushed himself to the absolute limit – but this was typical of him all through.

There were three tents on the South Col: a Pyramid, a Dome, and a Meade. They respectively housed four, two and two. The Pyramid had previously been used by Sherpas and was in a disgraceful condition. The floor was in shreds and parting at the stitching of the seams. The windward side had a four-inch tear which later caused great inconvenience by admitting drifting snow and cold wind. The rope guys were far too light and in the tremendous and ceaseless buffeting on the Col they were fraying and broken when we arrived. Ed and I went out in the afternoon into a freezing, roaring wind and began to repair the tent. We found a pile of strong Swiss line and began replacing all the guys and placing rocks around the worst tears in the floor to protect it from the plucking of the wind.

During this time, the South Summit became enveloped in cloud and we began to worry about Tom and Charles. We knew, as they knew, that if their closed circuit sets failed in any way, for they had many gadgets, valves, tubes and canisters susceptible to error, they would not come back. Tom was an exceedingly determined thruster, and we felt his enthusiasm could overcome good sense – but Ed remarked, 'Charles is pretty sensible – I think he'll balance Tom'.

About this time, the three Sherpas who had been chosen to carry with Greg to the Ridge Camp arrived on the Col from VII. They had set out with us and gone slowly and badly. This was disturbing as we had placed high hopes on them. They were Ang Temba, Pemba and Ang Nyima. Ang Temba we thought the best, and were amazed to find when he dumped his load of 30lbs outside the tent he keeled over and for ten minutes did not respond to anything.



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.

Pemba was very tired, while Ang Nyima was quite fresh and unaffected by the altitude.

John, by this time, had recovered and was fretting about Tom and Charles. He kept peering up the ridge looking for their return. The afternoon passed, and we all became more and more worried. As we fixed the last ropes, I saw moving dots at the head of the couloir by which they had reached the ridge. I watched until in the shifting mist I was certain, and shouted the news. Our relief was tremendous.

Their descent of the couloir was frightening to watch. Dog tired, they started down one at a time, each anchoring the other and each falling off as they tried to kick downhill. They slid and fell their rope lengths, each just managing to hold the other. As Tom said, 'We yo-yo'd our way down – it was quite fun!'. Ed and I went out to meet them, and I filmed their arrival. They were still wearing and using their closed circuit and apart from their masks which covered nose, mouth and chin, they were covered in icicles. Ice dribbles from the mask outlet had stuck to their windproofs and they were panting and labouring just to move along the flat.

They had not gone far beyond the South Summit – a few yards only – their soda-lime canisters did not leave them with enough time in hand to risk going on. The summit ridge seemed long (Tom judged 2 or 3 hours and Charles thought 4 or more), it was corniced and had a difficult vertical rock step in it. Tom took 18 photographs and they turned to go down. Just below the South Summit they jettisoned two oxygen bottles, having enough left to get to the South Col. These bottles were a vital help in getting Ed and Tenzing to the top two days later.

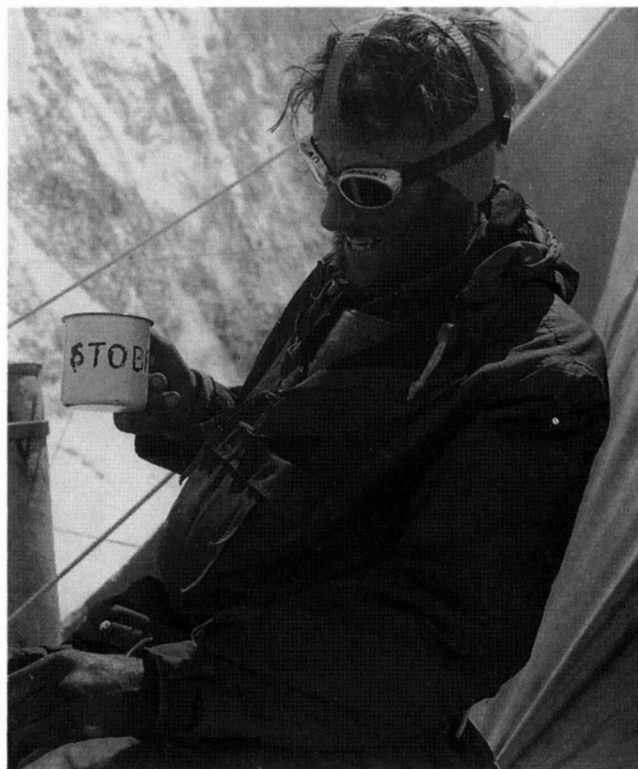
That night, Ed, Tenzing, Greg and I slept in the Pyramid; John, Tom and Charles squashed into the two-man Meade, while Ang Temba, Pemba and Ang Nyima passed the night in the even smaller Dome. That night for everyone was pure misery. The wind slammed over the Col worrying the tents, whining, roaring and snapping incessantly. It became the curse of the Col, sapping our tempers and eating indelibly into our memories. We will never forget the South Col. We all spent there the most miserable days and nights of our lives.

The temperature dropped until we were all cold, even though fully dressed, (we wore our high altitude boots in the sleeping bags to stop them freezing) with full down clothing in our sleeping bags. I have never been so miserable with freezing feet (they were lightly frostbitten – getting better now) cold knees and back which was rammed hard against the windward side of the tent. My pillow was a kitbag full of frozen snow – hard, cold and unsatisfactory. What a night! But it was only the first of four which grew increasingly worse.

At 4.30 a.m. we began to prepare breakfast in the hope of an early start in carrying Ridge Camp. Our appetites were good – we had carried up some 'luxury food' and ate the lot at breakfast. I remember the menu, vita-wheat biscuits with honey; sardines on biscuit; two tins of pineapple between four; slices of salami; more biscuits and honey and lastly a tin of Australian pears. We ate and spread honey with gloves on and you can imagine what a messy business it was.



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)



Our hopes of starting faded when at 8a.m. the wind velocity increased to over 70 or 80 mph and never looked like decreasing. All day, 27th May, it blew and put the chances of climbing on a ridge out of the question.

Supplies on the Col were limited and Charles and Tom had to go down. Ang Temba was so sick that he too was to go down. John, although he felt as leader he should stay to see and support the main assault, decided to go down and leave me to join the ridge carry. With Ang Temba out of the carry, someone had to replace him, and I was fit. So again, although not supposed in the plan to stay on, I was now in the ridge party.

Ang Temba, Tom, Charles and John left in the howling wind. Their climb to the top of the Eperon (200ft) took nearly two hours. Ed and I assisted them – they were dreadfully weak, but once over the Eperon they were out of the worst wind and going downhill. Their journey to VII was an epic and there they were received by Wilfrid Noyce and Mike Ward. On the 28th they limped to Advanced Base, to good food, attention and rest.

For the remainder of 27th May, we sat out the wind and dreaded the coming night. The night was a repetition of the previous one, in the morning we were stiff, bad tempered, ill-fed, with very frayed morale. The wind mercifully eased, and we stiffly prepared to go. Three hours it took to make a few simple preparations. Then an apparently crippling blow fell. Pemba suddenly spewed over the tent floor and began to groan and said he couldn't go. That left one Sherpa, Ang Nyima, and we needed three. That hour the expedition hopes recorded their lowest reading!

After a discussion we agreed to try and lift the two extra Sherpa loads between us. The weights were about 45lbs each, which seemed Herculean when a good load at this altitude was considered to be 15lbs. Greg, Ang Nyima and I got away at 8.45a.m. Ed and Tenzing decided to delay at least an hour to save their strengths and oxygen while we cut steps up the couloir. We were heavily clothed and with the loads we stomped along like robots. We made a very slow steady pace which we managed to hold to without stopping, and began to make height. The wind dropped to a comparative breeze and we slugged up into the couloir and I began cutting steps. Cutting steps at 27,000 feet is an experience – a study in 'go slow'. It took three hours to get to the ridge at 27,200 feet where we saw the wreckage of the Swiss top camp, one tent with not a vestige of cloth on the aluminium bones. Here we dropped our loads and enjoyed the tremendous view. Lhotse and Makalu were wonderful, Kangchenjunga jutted out above the clouds., Below were the Kangshung and Kharta glaciers with wonderful views of brown Tibet beyond.

Oddly enough I enjoyed and remembered the Couloir climb and the view as if it were at sea-level. I had read that that altitude robbed one of these memories. With me it was not so. Here Ed and Tenzing caught up with us. Greg was going exceedingly well, Ang Nyima the same and we urged him on by saying that if he went a bit higher he would have carried and gone higher than any Sherpa in the world. He was very ambitious and carried magnificently. About 150 feet above we reached John's highest point and found the rolled tent, fuel, and R.A.F. oxygen cylinder and these we added to our loads. Ed took the tent, Greg the R.A.F. cylinder and I took fuel and some of Greg's

load. We left there with Ed carrying an estimated 63lbs; Greg and I 50lbs, Ang Nyima and Tenzing with 45lbs. (This of course included the weight of our oxygen sets which, with two bottles up, were about 28lbs.)

From here the ridge is moderately steep – odd broken rock and towers followed by snow ridge. I led and the snow was knee-deep and loose. From then on the upward progress was grim, dead-brained toil. I don't really know how we endured the weight. We pushed up to where we thought a flat spot would be and found it quite untenable. We pushed on again – and again the same thing – and so on. About 2.30p.m. we paused below a snow shoulder and found a tiny ledge where we dumped our loads. Ed and Tenzing began clearing a site which was too small for the tent. Snow flurries were beginning and although very tired we set off within two minutes of arrival, after cheery banter to and from Ed on the chances for the morrow. The height of Camp IX – Ridge Camp – has been estimated at 27,900 feet.

Our return was slow and tough. Greg and Ang Nyima were excessively tired and I recut steps all the way down the couloir. From here Greg was pausing every fifty yards and gasping with exhaustion. I was tired – dreadfully tired – but able to keep moving without pause, and funnily enough with sufficient mentality to appreciate the glorious evening colours over Kangchenjunga and Makalu. I photographed them. Near the tents I unroped and pushed on. Pemba had made a hot drink and I tossed this down, grabbed the movie camera, staggered out, and sitting against a rock filmed the arrival of Greg and Ang Nyima which I hope shows something of the state we were in. We drank hot lemon and tea and crawled into our bags – but not to sleep. The night, the wind and the cold came and we passed another bloody night.

The 29th May finally dawned. On the Col it was windy – it was always windy. The sun hit the top of the tent at about 5a.m. It crept down the walls, releasing the frost of condensed breath in a shower over us, as usual. Greg had decided to go down as he was too weak to be of use to any returning summit party. Ang Nyima and Pemba went down too and left me alone on the Col to receive Ed and Tenzing. At 8a.m. we saw Ed and Tenzing on the way up the final slopes of the South Summit, going slowly but steadily. At 9a.m. they disappeared over the South Summit and somehow then I felt they would reach the top. I boiled soup and lemonade and filled two thermos flasks. I prepared oxygen bottles with all connections and masks ready for instant use and set bedding ready as if to receive casualties. Outside I prepared the spare oxygen frame with two emergency cylinders which I intended to carry up and meet them to assist their descent.

At 1p.m. they appeared again on South Summit and began the descent of the steep loose snow slope. I was wildly excited and leapt into action. I packed the thermos flasks, slung the movie camera in, put on crampons, gloves, vaselined my nose, face and lips against the wind, tied a scarf around my face as extra protection (I was severely wind-burnt and the skin was frost-affected from the previous days and very sore), got into the oxygen carrying frame with two bottles and set off. About 400 yards from camp I began to feel groggy, I was carrying too much, had started too excited and too fast. After the