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Because We Were There

A question regularly put to me since 1953 is 'How were you selected for the expedition'? or, from a fellow-climber when his or her companion has been more than usually inept, 'How did *you* get on that expedition?' John Hunt has given his version of events, with typical discretion, in *The Book*. What follows is a worm's eye view. But don't expect startling revelations. There are no skeletons, no dirty linen, as far as I know.

It began for me with a splendid day traversing the Matterhorn, Zmutt-Hörnli, with Dick Viney, returning to the valley in the late afternoon. It was the fine season of 1952, when the foreign currency allowance was £25; by dint of sleeping always in huts (scarcely any of my contemporaries had tents, sleeping-bags or cars in those days) I managed three weeks in Switzerland and brought home £4. Based on huts, we were taking full advantage of the good weather, did a number of classic routes and saved ourselves hundreds of pounds in guides' fees. As we made for our doss at Stafelalp Dick said 'We've had a marvellous day's climbing, Mike. Nothing like it in the Himalayas – all slog, slog, slog – but wouldn't you give anything to go to Everest next year?'

He was right, but I don't think it had occurred to me before to do anything about it. It was worth a letter when I got home, although I did not think there was much chance. No acknowledgement but, some weeks later, I heard on the PyG grapevine that there was a short list; what names were on it I did not know. Then there was an exciting letter calling me for interview at the RGS. I told my employers I had urgent private business in London on Tuesday and took the day off.

The prospect of being interviewed by an unknown Colonel Hunt, a full colonel no less, was a bit daunting for an ex-lieutenant RE. I need not have worried. This was no brass-hatted inquisitor probing for weak points, but someone who wanted to get to know me. We talked mostly about the climbs I had done and the people I had done them with. I wanted to be selected solely on the basis of my climbing record. Perhaps quixotically, I did not tell him that I spoke some Urdu, which was to come in useful later, because I felt this would hardly be fair to other aspirants, friends of mine, who had not had the luck to serve in India. When with John Hunt, one bends over backwards to be fair. I left the interview with the thought that, if I were to be turned down, I would be happier to accept refusal from John than from most people.

Again a period of waiting; again the grapevine, this time more specific. There were still two places to be filled and I was still in the running. Then there was another letter and next morning the names of the party in *The Times*.

We were all very lucky just to be around at that time, with approximately the right qualifications. Thirty years of expeditions had built up the necessary

know-how. Clothing was improving, with the use of synthetics. Oxygen equipment benefited from wartime developments. Griffith Pugh's work on the physiology of high altitude crowned his predecessors' achievements. John was an ideal leader. And, on a more personal note, there was far less competition than there would have been a few years later. Not too many people had managed to get in four good alpine seasons since the war. George Band and I, with no Himalayan experience, were particularly lucky and may well have owed our selection to the good weather in the Alps in 1952.

I suppose that all of us, ever since, have been trying in one way or another to live up to our membership of that unique and very happy expedition.