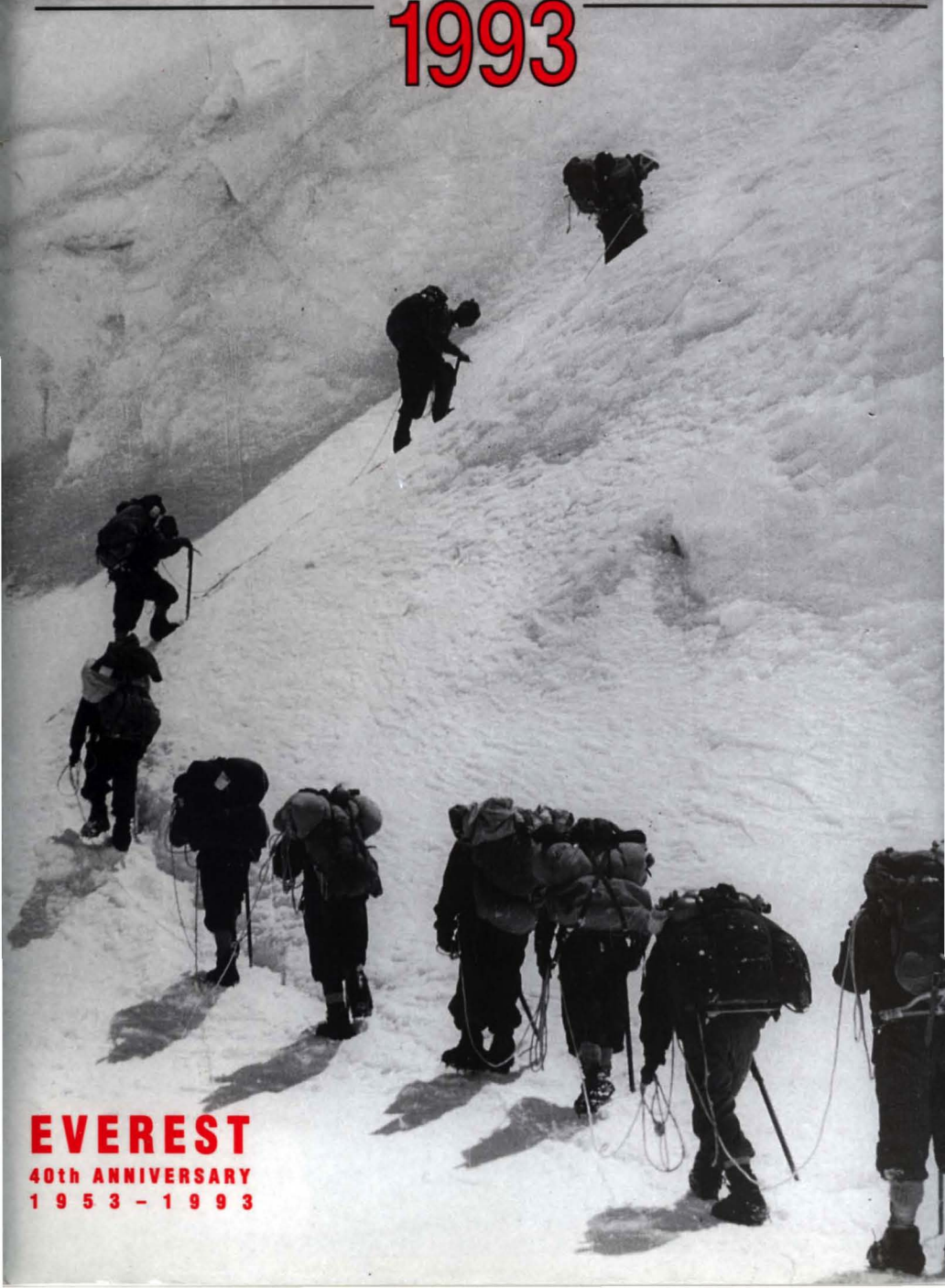


THE ALPINE JOURNAL 1993



EVEREST

40th ANNIVERSARY

1953 - 1993

THE ALPINE JOURNAL 1993

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Everest 1953: the triumphant return

From left:

George Lowe, Goerge Band, Alfred Gregory, Edmund Hillary, Griffith Pugh (hidden), John Hunt, Tenzing Norgay, Michael Ward, Charles Wylie, Wilfrid Noyce, Tom Stobart (hidden), Michael Westmacott, James Morris. Photograph © by Times Newspapers Ltd

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Jacket photographs: front, Everest 1953: Charles Wylie leads Sherpas up the Lhotse Face (Alfred Gregory); back, the Summit Ridge of Everest from the South Summit (Edmund Hillary)

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CHARLES WYLIE

Tenzing Norgay 1914-1986 and the Sherpa Team

(Plates: front cover, 4, 5, 10, 12, 26)

Forty years ago there were no jumars, no front-pointed crampons and no modern ice tools. 'Alpine-style' climbing, with very few Sherpas or none at all, had not reached the highest mountains of the Himalaya. Light expeditions – the most enjoyable form of mountaineering, many would agree – were arguably not suited to achieving success on 8000m peaks. The experience of Everest expeditions before 1953 had shown that success depended on adequate support high up in the final phases of the climb. This meant a large, well equipped expedition, capable of sustained assault. This, in turn, meant relying heavily on Sherpas.

John Hunt's task was to succeed where seven assault expeditions had failed. He could not afford to ignore the evidence that a large party had more chance of success than a small one. His plan catered for a team of 35 Sherpas to carry 12 tons of stores to the Advanced Base and nearly one third of a ton to the South Col. This allowed for effective support really high up, initially for two attempts on the summit. This was indeed a large party but, put in perspective, nothing like so big as other expeditions which were to follow.

The Sherpa team, some from Darjeeling and some from Khumbu, carried out their part in this plan magnificently. Their contribution to the success of the expedition was absolutely crucial, and it was right and proper that a Sherpa should have been included in the summit attempts. Specifically, one Sherpa reached the summit, another carried to the highest camp at 27,900ft, another to John Hunt's dump at 27,500ft*, and 19 to the South Col at 26,000ft, seven of them twice. This was a greater quantity of stores than had ever been carried to such heights before. It meant that the summit assault pairs and their support parties could climb in the knowledge that adequate shelter, food and oxygen, should they be needed, were not far below. It also meant that Hillary and Tenzing had everything they needed for their final night before the summit – a tent, warm clothing, a cooker, food and enough oxygen for the night (special sleeping sets had been provided for this particular night) and to get them to the top and back. While this was the result of careful preparation, planning and of the efforts of the whole expedition, final success could not have been achieved without the sterling performance of our Sherpa team.

Forty years on, what has happened to these splendid men? Tenzing, as we all know, achieved world renown and became an international personality. He

*See page 21, note 13.



Tenzing Norgay, 1953

A drawing by Lt Col Gordon Borrowman of the 4th Gurkha Rifles



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*)



received the George Medal (the highest civilian award for courage after the George Cross) personally from HM the Queen at Buckingham Palace. All of the Sherpa team received the Queen's Coronation Medal and the Himalayan Club gave their Tiger Badge to those who by their performance on the expedition qualified for this coveted award. Some joined Tenzing as instructors at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling which was set up in 1954 by Sri Jawaharlal Nehru, Prime Minister of India, to (in his words) 'produce more Tenzings'. All were in demand as porters and some as sirdars on the spate of expeditions which followed. And many, sadly, are dead; the local expectation of life is not high.

It has not been easy to trace everyone. Indeed, after 40 years, it would be almost impossible to find out about all 35 of the Sherpa team. I have therefore confined myself to the 10 Sherpas whose names are most likely to be familiar to readers of this journal.

Tenzing Norgay

By 1953, Tenzing had climbed Nanda Devi East with the French in 1951 and had taken part in five Everest expeditions (three British expeditions, 1935, 1936 and 1938, and the two Swiss expeditions of 1952). He had climbed to over 28,000ft and had far more experience of Everest than any other Sherpa. Moreover, as a person and as a sirdar he was held in considerable respect by the Sherpas themselves. All of us in 1953 were impressed not only by his engaging personality, but also by his energy, good sense and his authority over the Sherpa team.

After the expedition we were equally impressed by the way he reacted to his new role as an international hero. Publicly compared to Buddha in Kathmandu, hosted by Nehru in Delhi, received by the Queen at Buckingham Palace and honoured wherever he went, he retained his inherent modesty and steadfastly refused to let his head be turned.

His life, however, was to be radically changed. A large house was bought for him in Darjeeling with funds raised by public subscription, organised by an Indian newspaper. He was appointed the first field director of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI) and, largely through his achievement on Everest, mountaineering gained recognition in India. He received invitations from all over the world and was a frequent visitor to Europe, particularly to Switzerland and Britain where his many friends were delighted to welcome him to their homes and to maintain the happy relationship forged through challenges shared on high mountains. Such friendships are enduring, and have continued since Tenzing's death, with his family.

In 1964 his wife Ang Hlamu, mother of his two elder daughters, died, and Tenzing married Daku, a highly intelligent Sherpani, much younger than he was, who like him had left Khumbu for Darjeeling. She was a considerable help to him in running his large house and establishment. She bore him three sons and a daughter. Sadly, she died in 1992.

After 22 years as Field Director, Tenzing retired from the HMI in 1976, although he maintained his connection as the Institute's Adviser. He continued his trips overseas, however, and was employed by tour promoters, for instance as a guest lecturer on a cruise tour to the Antarctic and as a tour leader to Lhasa.

In 1987 John Hunt wrote: 'Although Tenzing was an immediate friend to everyone, I like to think that his special affections and loyalty were reserved for his companions in 1953. He joined some of our periodic reunions . . . and, on each occasion, it was as though the years had rolled back to those unforgettable weeks we spent together on Everest in 1953.'

Tenzing died in 1986, aged 72. He was described as 'A great leader and ambassador of the Sherpas, who brought recognition and fame to his people'. The procession behind the bier at his funeral was over a kilometre long. To the end he maintained his sense of values, modesty, integrity, and devotion and loyalty to his family, his people, his friends, his homeland, his dogs, and to the mountains.

Dawa Tenzing

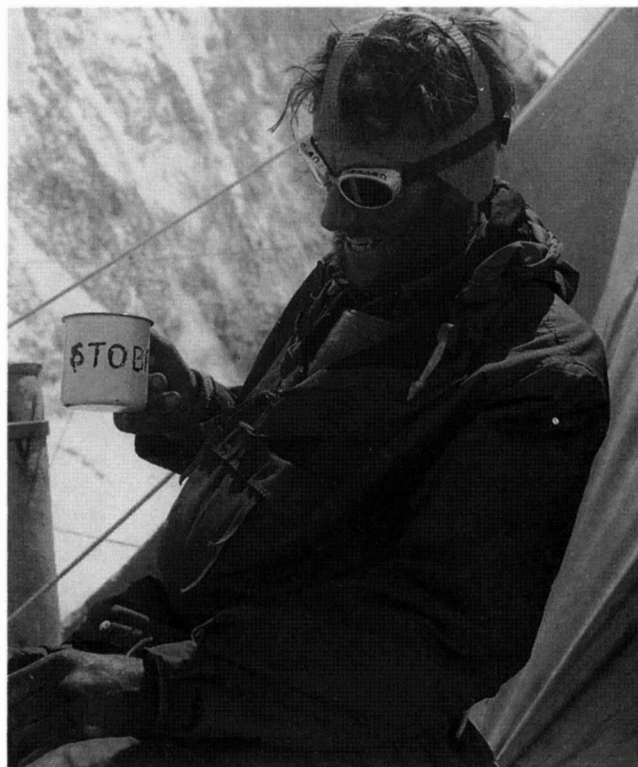
Dawa Tenzing was the deputy sirdar of the 1953 Sherpa team. He was in many ways a contrast to Tenzing Norgay, to whom he was unrelated. A strong, tall, patriarchal figure from Khumjung village in Khumbu, he was still pigtailed and had a distinct 'presence', together with a good sense of humour. A veteran of many expeditions, including several with Eric Shipton and Charles Evans, he played a significant part on Everest in 1953, carrying loads twice to the South Col and taking charge of the Sherpa team while Tenzing was on the summit assault. He was a very devout man, a quality which commands great respect among Sherpas, and the performance of the whole team was, I believe, influenced by his example, leadership and reliability.

In spite of advancing years, he continued as an active expedition member. In 1954 he was on Makalu with Edmund Hillary and in 1955 he was sirdar to Charles Evans's expedition which made the first ascent of Kangchenjunga, carrying to nearly 27,000ft. The following year he took over from Passang Dawa Lama as sirdar on the Swiss expedition which made the second ascent of Everest and the first of Lhotse. He took part in three further expeditions: Emlyn Jones's attempt on Ama Dablam, James Roberts's first ascent of Annapurna II, and as sirdar to Dorothea Gravina's ladies Jagdula expedition which climbed Kanjiroba Himal, before returning to Everest with the Americans in 1963, when he carried loads twice to the South Col. On all these expeditions he made an outstanding contribution. A great record of a great mountaineer.

Dawa was much loved by British mountaineers. On visits to Britain he was an impressive sight, complete with pigtailed and Tibetan dress. At home in Khumbu, however, he suffered a double tragedy when his son Mingma was killed on an expedition, and his wife, on hearing the news, committed suicide. Dawa moved to Thyangboche, living close to the monastery, supported by a pension initiated by Tony Streater and contributed by British climbers.



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)



When, to mark the 25th anniversary of the ascent of Everest, the team members trekked from Darjeeling to Khumbu, they unexpectedly met Dawa Tenzing on the track coming the other way. It was a joyous and emotional reunion with much embracing and back thumping. That alone was worth the two-week walk from Darjeeling, but we were to see him again over the three-day Mani Rimdu festival at Thyangboche, where he enjoyed the position of honour at the side of the High Lama.

We were saddened to hear of his death a few years later. He was one of that small élite band who have made the name of Sherpa known and respected throughout the world.

Annulu

Annulu was Dawa Tenzing's younger brother, and an equally fine Sherpa. An instantly likeable person with a ready smile, his smart turnout contrasted with his elder brother's more rugged appearance. In 1953 it was he who, with Wilfrid Noyce, first reached the South Col and paved the way for the large party of porters which made the vital lift to the Col the next day, to set up the high base from which the assaults were made. Later Annulu carried again to the South Col.

Annulu took part in the successful expedition of 1955 to Kangchenjunga and, in 1956, to Everest with the Swiss, carrying again to the South Col. With his brother, he was on Ama Dablam and Annapurna II before joining Hillary's Makalu expedition of 1961, when he carried a load to Camp 7 at 27,000ft and almost reached the summit. He was then involved in an accident with a number of other Sherpas, helping to rescue them in spite of having broken a rib and being in great pain himself. The following year he was with the Germans on Pumori, and in 1963 again on Everest, this time with the Americans, keeping the Icefall open for eight weeks.

Sadly he was killed in an accident on the relatively easy crossing of the Ambu Lapcha. He was one of the most popular of Sherpas. He was married three times and left seven children.

Ang Nyima

Young, strong and capable, Ang Nyima had been on both the Swiss Everest expeditions of 1952. A chain smoker, he had to be given a special ration of cigarettes in 1953. In spite of this, he carried to Camp 9 at nearly 28,000ft, the only Sherpa, apart from Tenzing, to do so. After Everest he played a leading role in Jimmy Roberts's expeditions to Machapuchare and Annapurna II where he reached the summit (26,041ft). On Machapuchare he proved himself thoroughly safe, unprotected on extremely steep ice, when he had to negotiate the difficult 'Nick' crossing of the N ridge, solo.

Later he was recruited into my regiment, the 10th Gurkha Rifles, and served in Malaya and Borneo, reaching the rank of sergeant. On retirement he returned to his home in Darjeeling, where he died some years later shortly after the death of his son.

Nawang Gombu

Nawang Gombu, Tenzing's nephew, was in 1953 a chubby lad of 17 whose youthful appearance belied his capability. He proved to be an excellent member of the Sherpa team, carrying twice to the South Col. When the HMI was founded he was chosen as one of the original batch of instructors, and when Tenzing retired Nawang Gombu took his place as field director, a post he still holds.

The HMI encourages its instructors to extend their experience, and Nawang Gombu was able to take part in a number of expeditions over the next decade, including those to Saser Kangri, when he reached the summit of Sakang, 24,796ft, and to Nanda Devi, where he had to turn back only 650ft from the summit. He was also a member of expeditions to Garhwal and Kanak, and an observer with Dorothea Gravina's women's party to Cho Oyu.

His triumph came in 1963 when he reached the summit of Everest with Jim Whitaker on the US expedition. Two years later he repeated this success with the Indians, becoming the first man to climb Everest twice. Like his uncle, he became an internationally known mountaineer, and visited many countries, climbing, among other peaks, Mount McKinley and Mont Blanc.

Phu Dorji

Phu Dorji was one of the strongest young Sherpas of our 1953 team. Pigtailed and cheerful, he personified all that was best of the local, Khumbu, Sherpas, carrying his load with apparent ease to the South Col. He was to take part in three further Everest expeditions. With the Americans he carried twice to the South Col, and with the Indian expedition of 1965 he led the support team of Sherpas which carried to the highest camp, estimated at 27,930ft, from which the first party, Nawang Gombu and A S Cheema, reached the summit. While the second and third pairs went to the top, Phu Dorji, resting at Base Camp, received a radio call to tell him that he could be on the fourth summit party provided he could get to the South Col in two days. This he succeeded in doing, and also in reaching the last camp at nearly 28,000ft next day. From here, with Rawat and Ahluwalia, he climbed to the summit on 29 May, 12 years to the day after Hillary and Tenzing. From Base Camp to the summit in four days was a remarkable achievement.

Phu Dorji returned for the fourth and last time to Everest with the Japanese expedition of 1969-70, this time as sirdar. Sadly he was killed in an accident in the Icefall. So ended the life of an outstanding Sherpa, whose record on Everest has, I feel, been insufficiently recognised.

Da Namgyal

Da Namgyal, a somewhat shy and retiring Sherpa, was in 1953 one of only three Sherpas to go beyond the South Col, climbing with John Hunt to 27,500ft with a full load of stores for the high camp. During this vital carry, he was frostbitten in one finger (happily without lasting effect), the only casualty of the expedition.



26. Tenzing in 1969, with his daughters Nima and Pem Pem.
(John Hunt) (p56)

Unfortunately, little seems to have been recorded about Da Namgyal after 1953. He became an instructor at the HMI where John and Joy Hunt, Alfred Gregory and I had a happy reunion with him in 1973. He died six years later. His son Passang Namgyal is now an instructor at the HMI in his father's place.

Nawang Topke (also spelt Topgay)

Topke was, like Gombu, Tenzing's nephew. Although he looked hardly more than a boy in 1953, he was 22, five years older than his cousin. Like him, he carried loads twice to the South Col. The year before, on the Swiss post-monsoon expedition, he had climbed to 27,000ft.

When the HMI was formed, Topke became an instructor and was able to take advantage of the opportunities for further climbing offered there. After expeditions to Ganesh Himal and Kamet he and Gombu made the first ascent of Sakang, 24,796ft, in the Karakoram. He later reached the summit of Nilgiri Himal in Nepal. This was a winter ascent and his feet were frostbitten.

Wanting a change, Topke left the HMI and at first taught rock climbing to high school students in Kerala. Then when the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering was set up in Uttar Pradesh, he became an instructor there. Again there were opportunities for joining expeditions. On Mrigthuni, he reached the summit; expeditions to Shivling, Banderpunch, Kedar Dome, and Dhar-masura followed. He retired in 1987 and returned to his home in Darjeeling. One of his sons is an instructor at the HMI and another is in the army.

Ang Temba

Ang Temba joined the 1953 expedition as an experienced porter. Aged 33, stocky and strong, he had already taken part in five expeditions, including the Swiss post-monsoon Everest attempt of 1952, when he had carried three times to the South Col, on one occasion going even higher. In 1953 he again carried to the South Col and would have gone higher had he not fallen ill.

When the HMI was set up, Ang Temba became an instructor and, in addition to his duties there, took part in a number of expeditions including those to Makalu with the Americans and to Kamet, where he reached the summit, 25,550ft. In 1960 he was again on Everest with the first Indian expedition. He went twice to the South Col and was selected for the second summit attempt which, unfortunately for him, was not made because of bad weather. He retired in 1973.

Dawa Thondup

Dawa Thondup was an old friend. He had been with me on Nilkantha and I knew he had the heart of a lion. He was a young porter on Everest in 1933 and one of the heroic Sherpas who came down from the Silver Saddle on Nanga Parbat in the storm which spelt tragedy to Willi Merkl's 1934 expedition. He

was one of two Sherpas who accompanied John Hunt's Peak 36 (later Saltoro Kangri) expedition to the Karakoram in 1935, as well as joining him on two expeditions and several treks in the Sikkim Himalaya. He had later done well with the Swiss on Everest in 1952.

In 1953, John Hunt had specially asked for Dawa to be included in the Sherpa team. At the age of 48, he was by far the oldest member of the 1953 expedition, and the doctor who checked his health before he was selected said he should not go beyond 20,000ft. However, once on the mountain, he soon showed he had no intention of abiding by the doctor's ruling and could carry his load every bit as easily as younger and stronger Sherpas. At his own request, I included him in the party for the first lift of stores to the South Col, but not without some trepidation and only after close consultation with Tenzing. In the event, not only did Dawa Thondup carry to the South Col without any ill effects, but he proved himself an obvious choice for a subsequent lift there. This feat, which he again achieved with apparent ease, must be one of the more remarkable high-altitude performances for one of his age.

John and Joy Hunt, Alfred Gregory and I had the pleasure of his company again when, aged 68, Dawa accompanied us on a trek from Khumbu to Darjeeling for the International Mountaineers Meet of 1973 at the HMI. He was a delightful companion.

These then were some of that happy band which played so significant a part in the success of the 1953 Everest expedition. Their 'co-operation in the essential teamwork of the whole party was beyond praise' (John Hunt's words). This and 'the happy relationship between the Sherpas and the climbing team' (again I quote John Hunt) were, for me, as rewarding as the expedition's achievement in reaching the summit. It was an honour and a privilege to be put in charge of such a splendid group as the 1953 Sherpa team.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Colonel Dutt and Nawang Gombu of the HMI, Harish Kapadia and his wife Geeta, Trevor Braham, Elizabeth Hawley, Col Alan Jenkins, Lt Col J O M Roberts, and John Sims for their help in preparing this article.