
ANDRÉ ROCH

Some Words on Everest 1952

*An Address given at the Alpine Club Annual Dinner
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Mr President, My Lord, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am proud and happy to be invited by the Alpine Club, it is a great honour. I will try to talk about our adventure on Everest in 1952.

The first time I met Tenzing, he was one of our porters in 1947 on the attempt on Kedarnath peak in Tehri Garhwal. Trevor Braham, who is here tonight, was our Liaison Officer. Wangdi Norbu, our sirdar, had an accident and fell 300m, taking Alfred Sutter with him. He slid over the bergschrund and landed in deep snow. Sutter fell on him with his crampons. Poor Wangdi was badly wounded. Two days later we dragged him down the mountain and saved his life. As Tenzing was the best and most intelligent of our porters, I promoted him to sirdar to replace Wangdi, and I was glad to pay him more money. Of course it was not my money!

In 1952, thanks to the foundation of Karl Weber, a wealthy man from Zurich, the Swiss got permission from Nepal to try Everest from the south. It was the first time that anyone other than the British could attempt Everest. At the end of April, trying to find the way to Everest Base Camp, Tenzing, Dittert and myself were exploring up a glacier. The sky was overcast. We had no map, only a sketch and Tilman's photos from 1950. We could only see the bottom of the mountains and were comparing their outline with a photo from Tilman's book. Three days later we returned with the whole caravan. Zimmermann the botanist and Lombard the geologist, who were looking at the ground, announced that there were tracks of yeti all over the moraine. We laughed and said it was only Lambert in his bare feet. (Lambert had lost all his toes on the Aiguille du Diable in 1938.) We had not seen these tracks two days earlier as we were looking up at the mountains. This was the same place where Shipton took the best existing photo of yeti tracks the year before, 1951.

The first obstacle on Everest was the Icefall. Dittert, Aubert, Chevalley, Lambert and Tenzing tried to find a way. They came down the same day beaten and very tired. The next day, Flory, Asper, Hofstetter and myself decided to try again. We made camp in the middle of the Icefall. It was a unique experience because the glacier was constantly moving. We could see some ice towers falling on others like bowling balls. It was not reassuring. The next day we came to the last crevasse. It blocked our passage across the whole width of the glacier. Jean-Jacques Asper tried to pendulum across and take a footing on the other side. It did not work. Then he abseiled down and climbed up the other side in an ice chimney. We installed a rope bridge anchored on

pieces of wood, which we had brought with us, buried in the snow. The whole caravan went over the rope bridge.

At the foot of the South Col, we tried to go up the Lhotse glacier, but were driven to the left towards a buttress where there was more snow covering the ice slope. The first team, Lambert, Tenzing, Flory, Aubert and some Sherpas tried to climb to the South Col. Unable to do it in a day, they slept in two tents on the snow slope. The next day they reached the plateau of the South Col. Only Tenzing was strong enough to go back to recuperate one of the tents from below.

They had the mission to put a tent as high as possible on the South Ridge and to try for the summit. They pitched a tent at about 8400m. Flory and Aubert returned to the South Col. Lambert and Tenzing decided to stay the night and make a summit attempt the next day. They had not taken sleeping-bags nor stove. They spent the night sitting and melting snow with a candle. The next day Lambert and Tenzing crawled up to the foot of the last steep slope under the South Summit – maybe up to 8600m. That was a good effort but a poor exhibition. Flory and Aubert helped them back down to the South Col.

The next team, Dittert, Chevalley, Asper, Hofstetter and myself, with two Sherpas, went up to the South Col passing the first team coming down. Dittert was very slow, already out of shape. At the South Col the weather was stormy. We were glad to stay in the sleeping-bags coughing and breathing hard. The next day the weather was better. But Dittert, leader of the climbers, gave me the order to go down. For me it was a terrible disappointment to touch Everest and not be allowed to try for the summit. But I knew really that even if I tried, I could not succeed because we had stayed too long too high. We were out of shape.

Hofstetter and myself put on boots and crampons and climbed up the shoulder to reach the top of the slope to go down the buttress. Then Hofstetter said 'It is too late – we have to go back to the South Col'. I was furious. I was desperate and mad at Hofstetter. I wanted to attack him with my ice axe. There was such a rage in me. Why was I so furious? Psychologically I had prepared myself to abandon Everest. And now we were going back again. I was astonished that I could be so angry at 8000 metres. I thought 'I have to quiet down'. I put down my sack and sat on it. After a while we went back to the South Col . . . I had not killed him!

The next day the weather was clear, no wind, great sun. We sat in front of the tent. We could even sunbathe. We put on our boots and crampons without gloves. It would have been the ideal day to go up. But Dittert was worried about the monsoon and afraid of the mountain. He said: 'We don't try, we don't want any accident. We will go down.'

Dittert told me: 'Leave your rucksack, the Sherpa will take it.' How stupid I was to obey. When we were over the bump, going down the buttress, I yelled to Dittert who was higher: 'I can take my rucksack.' The answer came back: 'Shut up!' Something was wrong. He had taken out of my sack the photo and movie cameras and the exposed films and left the sack behind in the tent with

my down jacket. Half-way down the buttress, Dittert was so tired that he decided to bivouac on the scree. Bivouac without down jacket, without sleeping-bag, without my rucksack . . . ! I kept going down with Hofstetter. There was enough stupidity. We arrived down in the dark. The Sherpas saw us coming and brought us tea. We had sleeping-bags in the camp.

Later nobody could understand why I had been so furious. They thought it was just the altitude.

Back down in the valley in Namche Bazar, we were invited by the village chief for a cup of tea. We had lost all our spoons. But there they all were in the chief's house! We left them in his care.

From there the main expedition went directly down south to Jaynagar in India with our equipment. Wyss-Dunant, Dittert and myself walked back to Kathmandu. Why did they choose me to go with them? I was so mad at Dittert that I did not talk to him any more. He asked me, for instance: 'How do you like your eggs?' I answered 'Don't ask me, you know that I don't talk to you'.

Wyss-Dunant had the notion that I was too old at 46 to try for the summit, and Asper at 23 was too young. I did not know it at the time, and learned this only afterwards from the books.

After the monsoon, a second Swiss expedition went to Everest. Weber asked me to lead it. I did not dare to leave my work on avalanches for the state, but I think I should have done it. Chavalley was the leader. Cold and wind beat them above the South Col. Norman Dyhrenfurth was filming. He completed my film from the spring. Ernst Reiss, a very good climber from Davos, took part in this second adventure. On his return home, I went to the station to welcome him. He brought my rucksack back from the South Col. The down jacket had been adopted by some Sherpa. Reiss returned to Nepal in 1956 and made the first ascent of Lhotse.

It had been a wonderful adventure for every one of us. In spite of very good preparation, we behaved like children on the mountain. But it seems that I was the only one to make trouble. A year later the British team succeeded as grown-ups – and deserved the success. We are glad of this and congratulate the British team and the Alpine Club wholeheartedly for their great accomplishment.

And now, Mr President, My Lord, Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to propose a toast to the health of the Alpine Club.