History



130. John Innerdale, *Matterhorn from Ried*, watercolour, 40 x 30cm, 2007.

HENRY DAY

Annapurna Anniversaries

– and that picture

The twentieth of May 2010 was the 40th anniversary of the ascent of Annapurna I by the British Army Mountaineering Association Expedition; it was also 60 years since the French made the first ascent of the mountain. Or was it? Two books have caused me to look again at our experiences of 1970 and compare them carefully with the details of the first ascent.



131. North face of Annapurna 1. *(Henry Day)*

David Roberts in his book *True Summit* (2000, Constable, p216) wrote:

> *Ever since 1950 there has been a small cadre of skeptics within the mountaineering community who doubted that Herzog and Lachenal reached the summit on June 3. The doubt springs in part from the celebrated summit photo.*

Which caused Reinhold Messner to spring to the defence of Herzog in his



132. Gerry Owens's heels and the summit ridge stretching east. Manaslu is 50km away. *(Henry Day)*

own book *Annapurna: 50 years of Expeditions in the Death Zone* (Mountaineers Books), also published in 2000. Messner says he wrote it because:

> *In 1996 a literary feud directed against Maurice Herzog began in France, which I found unfair. Naturally there were still unanswered questions about the report on the Annapurna ascent published in 1950, but Herzog's summit success remains an indisputable fact… In 1996, when Herzog was almost 80, that nobody was prepared to come to his defence is sad – and it is only because of this that this book was written.*

However, Messner does not address the issue of whether they reached the summit; he just accepts that they did. My photographs have never been published alongside those by Lachenal and they will be compared later in the conclusion to the article to see if they illuminate the matter. Co-incidentally, it was one of my photographs that illustrated the dust cover of the Roberts book and it was John Cleare, who had arranged it, who alerted me to the controversy that had totally passed me by.

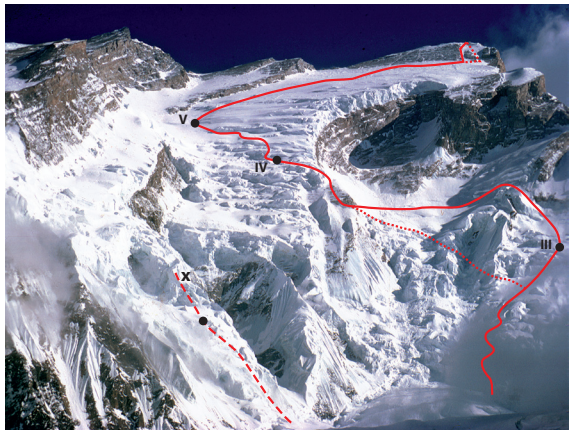
But first let us recall our Army expedition of 40 years ago.

Our team arrived at Pokhara on the King's Flight. The aircraft was a WW2 vintage DC3 Dakota, one of only two planes belonging to the King of Nepal, and we had chartered it. A hooter sounded when the plane was heard to alert a small boy whose job it was to shoo away cattle grazing on the grass airstrip. We had been told there was no motorable road to Pokhara so everything had to be transported by porters or mules or by aircraft. We arrived to find we were sharing a Gurkha compound with Chris Bonington's Annapurna South Face expedition.

133. North Face of Annapurna:
——— AMA Route with camps.

- - - - - - - - AMA attempted new route, X – high point.

••••••• French Route where it cuts the corner below The Sickle. Last section to the summit was to right of AMA line. Dutch Rib is low down, taking the prominent fin to the right of the AMA attempt. *(Henry Day)*



Nick Estcourt and I had overlapped in the Cambridge University Mountaineering Club for two years and I had even tied onto his rope for a few routes, including *Kipling Groove* in a snowstorm on one memorable December climbing meet. At the time, we both lived in Cheshire as did Chris, to whom I had been introduced. Meeting up again in Pokhara, they took us over to meet some of the other glitterati who made up their team, including Don Whillans, Dougal Haston and Martin Boysen.

The South Face team's sea freight and not arrived and we helped extricate them from a morale-sapping delay by lending them enough hill food to get started on the route. After the climb they were able to pay us back in kind, leaving a cache of food where our paths rejoined. We found their rations a welcome change but frugal; I remember eating a complete pack as a snack as we walked along the trail. Don's memorable remark to me later about rye bread in the ration was: 'Pumpernickel, f…ing pumpernickel, just like donkeys' crap.'

A few weeks later a mail runner sped into our base camp at the head of the Miristi Khola on the north side of the mountain with a big smile on his broad Gurkha face. Major Bruce Niven, a Gurkha officer and our expedition commander, had brought with him a few of his soldiers to support us, as well as a delightful manner that smoothed the way through many challenges with the line of supply. What Purna-bahadur handed me I treasure to this day: a letter from Maurice Herzog himself. I had written to let him know we were planning to try another ascent from the north (though not necessarily by the French line) and had studied his account with great care. What he wrote underlined one of a number of lessons we had drawn from his book: *'Buvez de l'eau. Encore et toujours plus.'*

Not drinking enough water had been only one of the mishaps that befell the French summiters, one following on from another in terrible succession. On a small card in my pocket I had listed that they became dehydrated, anoxic, lost, frostbitten and drugged. Our small team had talked through all of this and planned as best we could how to avoid suffering the same.



134. Modiste blanking out Annapurna South. *(Henry Day)*



135. Dhaulagiri 30km away. View to the west past the Fang. *(Henry Day)*

Whether to take supplementary oxygen was one issue. In the same letter Herzog had written:

> *I congratulate you that you succeeded without oxygen on [the ascent of] Tirich Mir, which is at a very similar altitude as Annapurna, but any way it is better to have the apparatus [oxygen bottles] available on the spot either in order to be able to go through a particularly hard area or in order to recuperate in case of exceptional fatigue.*

Only nine months before, three of us had gasped our way to the top of Tirich Mir, at 7784m 'only' a thousand feet lower than Annapurna. Gerry Owens and Richard Summerton had been going more strongly than me that day for the first time on the expedition. Clearly I had to do something to keep up with them this time. Also judgement had suffered. On the way down a nice, even snow slope, at the sort of angle you'd ski down without a thought every winter, I decided on a sitting glissade. Bad decision! The only thing that stopped me accelerating down 3000m to the South Barum glacier was a small ledge we had cut into the slope where we had spent the night at more than 7000m with no tent or bivvi bag. No wonder I had frost bitten toes – another judgement thing. On that ledge, trying to breathe again after being winded by the thudding stop, I resolved to try supplementary oxygen if ever near 8000m again. Gerry, however, did not approve, a purist ahead of his time.

The end of my toe, complete with nail, had lifted off neatly a month or so later when we were waiting somewhere in the Gulf for the RAF to fly us home. Our doctor was most put out that I had not kept it for him to exhibit. Double boots had just become available commercially and mine had inners of leather, which had proved inadequate. Graham Tiso gave me a replacement inner made of felt and this was much warmer. We all had similar boots for Annapurna and no further cold injuries were suffered.

The dehydration problem was directly linked to stoves. The only small gas stoves then available that we knew of used Camping Gaz cartridges

containing butane which would have been frozen solid most of the time. Propane-butane mix only became available some years later. So we were using kerosene stoves with all the palaver of pricking and priming. We became obsessed with keeping the stoves going. As I fell asleep the night before going for the summit on Annapurna, I rehearsed in my mind the exact procedure for the dawn start. Matches in top breast pocket, solid methylated spirits l (1½ sticks) in priming bowl, pricker to the right of it… I can remember it all so perfectly. So we were well up to speed on drinking plenty. Oh yes, and a pee bottle (each) by the knees, halfway down the tent wall.

Our build-up of camps on the north side of the mountain went quite well. We rapidly reached the foot of the Sickle, a huge band of séracs topping a curved rock cliff that covered most of the north face of Annapurna I. Richard and Gerry had an early taste of what it threatened when they were engulfed in the tail-end of a sérac fall one morning as they were brewing up breakfast. The blast was strong enough to blow away a tent full of stores that were never found again. Richard and Gerry were peppered with ice shrapnel and well shaken.

Partly because of this, but also because we wanted to pick a new route for ourselves, we set about probing the left side of the huge face where a series of ribs promised an elegant line that outflanked the worst of the ice avalanche danger below the Sickle. We took turns in pairs to prepare the route – we only had five climbers by then, having lost one to pneumonia on the way in. First Dougie Keelan and I, and then Gerry and Richard fixed ropes up the blue polished ice, but after 10 days of this we gave the route on the north-east buttress best and returned to the French line under the Sickle. It was good to see that one of the ribs was completed a few years later by a Dutch team. However our bodies had continued to acclimatise and the Sickle had not avalanched for those 10 days.

Our Sherpas had now caught up as they were no longer needed to supervise porters over the difficult route from Choya, each section of which had had to be traversed five times by the 32 men we had been able to



136. Manaslu top right, looking east along the Central and East summits of Annapurna I. *(Henry Day)*

recruit. They had also heard of the loss of some friends on Everest and viewed climbing the Sickle with misgiving. However, with great diplomacy, Bruce Niven, who was now running things from base camp, together with Sonam Girmi, our sirdar, were able to persuade them to carry on, to our great relief. The Sherpas took part in the key carry up to Camp IV on 18 May**.** Sonam and Pertemba, together with Dougie Keelan and Andy Anderson, Gerry and I, spent that night there at 7100m. Pemba Norbu and Ila Tashi who had also carried a load up immediately descended as planned. Pertemba was to reach the summit of Everest with Pete Boardman in 1975 by the south-west face and Sonam was to be our sirdar on the South Col route the following spring. Next day six of us laboured up another 400m and sited the tent at 7500m, leaving Gerry and me dug into the open slope with everything we needed.

We were not sure how things were progressing on the south face at this stage. Through our Gurkha signallers, part of Bruce's team, we were able to relay messages to and from their base in Modi Khola and by that means were able to offer the possibility of a traverse of the mountain for their summiters should they wish to give a try. I had sent a message to them, in military terms:

18 May 70. Camp 4 at 7100m. For Bonington from Day. We hope to establish Camp 5 at 7700m tomorrow and send pairs of climbers to the summit on 20, 21 and 22 May. The route will be marked with yellow flags and Camps 4 and 5 will be left in place. Camps consist of (sufficient for 2 men for one night). Nil oxygen. Let me know asp if you are still interested because we will pull out quickly if successful.

137. The iconic photo of Maurice Herzog taken by Louis Lachenal on 3 June, 1950.



Breathing supplementary oxygen led to a great night's sleep, at least for me. Next day, Gerry demonstrated his distain for the apparatus by ignoring the controls. The clumsy masks obscured our vision and until I hauled Gerry to a stop and found he was on four times greater flow rate than me I struggled to keep up with him.

Low winds and perfect weather transpired as forecast, added to which snow conditions mostly made for good, but ankle-breaking cramponning. It took us around an hour and a half to cover a kilometre of ascending traverse to the foot of a broad rock band, split by a snow-filled gully. We kicked steps up progressively steeper snow and ice, eventually escaping left through the top of the rocky band onto a final steeper ice slope, and then up to two mushrooms of a cornice on the ridge that proved to be the summit.

I took a complete round of photographs as well as a few of Gerry, perched as high as he dared on the cornice, which he cut part way through on our side. Peering over the south face, we could see Modiste staring back at us as well as Machapuchare floating below on a sea of puffy white cumulus cloud that obscured any possible view of the other expedition. Dhaulagiri had been visible on our right for the last few days but now we could see Manaslu as well in the opposite direction. Gerry slipped a small Nepalese flag onto his ice axe shaft and pushed it in the snow for a picture. I slipped a Union Jack onto mine and passed it up so he could hold it up like the French had done. It was much later that we spotted it was upside down, a distress signal. This was not intentional, but perhaps appropriate as the tribulations of the French while getting down were much in mind and I was certainly anxious. I took a few more photos of Gerry as we carefully descended, one at a time, the steeper summit ice slope – not without both of us having small falls on the way. Gerry collected a few stones from the sides of the gully to take home as presents. It did not take long to get back to Camp 5 which we reached after about five hours' round trip. It had taken us only three hours to reach the top, compared to Herzog and Lachenal's

eight, which gave some indication of the benefits to us of supplementary oxygen. Meanwhile Dougie and Andy had laboriously returned to Camp V where they insisted on looking after us with brew after brew although they were probably in worse shape than we were, not having the advantage we had had of breathing 'English air' for a night and a day.

In due course we met up again with the South Face team in Pokhara and Gerry and I were soon buttonholed by Dougal and Don who took us off to the other side of the airstrip for a beer. We exchanged experiences, with us telling them all about what we had seen and found. They had topped out on their route in a whiteout and in due course published a grainy still photograph, enlarged from 8mm movie film to show where they had reached. A photo in Messner's book shows the same view of Erhard Loretan on the summit from the ridge. (The full video clip of it is significantly clearer and shows much better what foul weather conditions they had). Don's account appeared in *Mountain* magazine and Dougal's in Chris Bonington's *Annapurna South Face* (1971). It was interesting to read that some of our tracks were visible a week later in spite of the heavy snow we experienced in the intervening week. They had not spotted the yellow RiRi flag we left on top. Strong winds could easily account for both these things.



138. Gerry Owens on the summit of Annapurna I at 11am on 20 May 1970. *(Henry Day)*

At the Alpine Club dinner at the Café Royal in London in December 1970 the guest of honour was Maurice Herzog. Gerry and I presented both him and the AC with a small piece of limestone mounted on a wooden base with a silver label saying where it came from. In return he wrote in my copy of his celebrated book:

> *For Captain H. Day, who gave me the great pleasure to bring me a stone of the Annapurna that I was unable to take myself. With my gratitude. Maurice Herzog.*

Returning to the matter of the summit photographs, Lachenal's diary for 3 June says:

> *A little below [the top] of the north face a rock bench received us, so that we could take the several official photographs we had to take …*

Looking at my photo of Gerry descending the summit slope), the skyline is not dissimilar to that in Lachenal's photo of Herzog minus the mushrooms. Lachenal's rock bench camera position could be where the couloir gave onto the summit ice slope within a few rope-lengths of the crest. Given the way the appearance of terrain can change from day to day as the wind affects snow and ice cover, let alone in the 20 years that had elapsed between the two photographs being taken, the rock exposed at the time of the two ascents as shown in general views of the north face are remarkably



139. Summit icefield in descent. Note flag left on the top. *(Henry Day)*

similar. The configuration of the skyline is too similar for the French photo to have been posed anywhere else except nearly at the summit.

As to whether they actually trod the summit, or at least crested the corniced ridge as we did, I subscribe to the traditional view that if they said they reached the summit, then they did. I salute the French expedition and Louis Lachenal and Maurice Herzog in particular for their great achievement and rejoice that all four of us got down to tell the tale.

Postscript: Statistics compiled by Elizabeth Hawley and given in Messner's book make for sober reading. Annapurna I has been the least ascended of the fourteen 8000m peaks. Fatalities exceeded the number of successful expeditions for many years (38 ascents up to 2000 and 57 deaths) and this grim ratio was the worst of all the eight-thousanders. Five Britons have reached the top so far, of whom Gerry Owens and Dougal Haston were killed in the mountains and Don Whillans died of a heart attack. Alan Hinkes and I are still alive.