## THE CLIMBERS

- **Ang Nyima (1931-1986)**. Ang Nyima was the only Sherpa, with the exception of Tenzing, to carry a load to the top camp. Later he enlisted in the 10th Gurkha Rifles and served in Malaya and Borneo
- **George Band (1929- )**. Band (above) was the youngest member of the expedition. In 1955 he and Joe Brown became the first men to reach the world's third highest peak, Kangchenjunga. He worked in the oil industry and was also president of the Alpine Club and of the British Mountaineering Council
- **Thomas Bourdillon (1924-1956)**. Bourdillon was largely responsible for developing the closed-circuit oxygen used by Evans and himself on their pioneering climb to the South Summit. He was in charge of all oxygen equipment in both 1952 and 1953. He died while attempting a route on the Jagihorn, in the Bernese Oberland
- **Sir Charles Evans (1918-1995)**. A neurosurgeon, Evans was deputy leader, and with Bourdillon, made the first ascent of the South Summit. From 1958-84 he was Principal of Bangor University; he began to suffer from multiple sclerosis shortly after his appointment
- **Alfred Gregory (1913- )**. Gregory went to 27,900ft in support of Hillary and Tenzing; he was also in charge of stills photography. As a professional photographer he has travelled extensively and now lives near Melbourne
- **George Lowe, OBE, CNZM (1924- )**. Lowe helped to establish the top camp. In 1957-58 he made the first crossing of Antarctica with Sir Vivian Fuchs's party, meeting Hillary at the South Pole. He taught at Repton, and later was a headmaster in Chile, returning to the UK in 1973 to become an inspector of schools. He is chairman of the UK branch of the Sir Edmund Hillary Himalayan Trust
- **Nawang Gombu (1936- )**. Tenzing's nephew, and one of the youngest Sherpas, Nawang carried a load twice to the South Col and went on to become the first man to reach the summit twice (in 1963 and 1965). Nawang became field director at the Himalayan Mountainteering Institute on his uncle's retirement
- **Wilfred Noyce (1917-1962)**. The first man to reach the South Col. Noyce taught at Charterhouse for ten years and then retired in order to concentrate on writing. He died on Mount Garmo in Tajikistan
- **Dr Lewis Pugh (1909-1994)**. Pugh's research was largely responsible for solving the "problem of the last thousand feet" on Everest. An Olympic-class skier, Pugh was a physiologist who specialised in the reaction to the body in extreme conditions
- **Thomas Stobart, OBE (1914-1980)**. The cameraman producing the official film, The Conquest of Everest. He was crippled while filming in Ethiopia but continued with his film career and also wrote five books
- **Michael Ward, CBE, MD, FRCS (1925- )**. Medical officer and climbing member. He has continued with mountain exploration in Asia, and with high-altitude medical research. He has also been Master of the Society of Apothecaries of London
- **Michael Westmacott (1925- )**. On the 1953 expedition Westmacott (above) focused on the Khumbu Icefall: pioneering the route and finally descending it with James Morris to get the news home. He was later President of the Alpine Club and the Climbers Club
- **Lt-Col Charles Wylie OBE (1921- )**. Fluent in Nepali, Wylie was the organising secretary and in charge of the Sherpas, leading 15 of them to the South Col. After retirement he worked for the Britain-Nepal Medical Trust, and was Chairman of the Britain-Nepal society.

**THE CLASS OF '53**
What else happened that year

- It wasn't just the conquest of Everest and the Queen's Coronation that led the nation to believe that 1953 was a bumper year. South of the border, the English were cheering after a win against Australia regained them the Ashes
- Further afield, the Korean War officially ended with the agreement that the country would be divided at the 38th parallel - as it was when the Communists first attacked. The US lost 33,327 soldiers with a further 102,000 wounded. The war cost more than $18 billion. An exchange of prisoners meant the British (and US) PoWs were finally allowed to return home
- The Britons Rosalind Franklin and Francis Crick and an American, James Watson, made one of the biggest scientific breakthroughs of the century when they discovered the double-helical structure of DNA
- The Soviet leader, Josef Stalin, died this year, as did Queen Mary and the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, who collapsed after a night out in New York
- General Dwight D. Eisenhower was inaugurated as President of the United States. Also in America, the Rosenbergs were executed for spying
- In the UK sweet rationing finally ended, marking a down trend in the nation's teeth. After much speculation about its name, the Queen launched the new Royal Yacht, Britannia
- The former Prime Minister, Sir Winston Churchill, was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, and Beckett's Waiting for Godot had its premiere in Paris
- There was tragedy, too, of course; 128 lives were lost when a car ferry sank off the Irish coast. At least 280 were killed and thousands left homeless due to severe flooding in eastern England

## FACTS AND FIGURES

- Approximately 175 people have died in the attempt to reach the summit The most likely cause of death on Everest is avalanches (49 deaths), followed by falls (40 deaths).
- Other recorded killers include frostbite, brain and internal haemmorhages, pneumonia, exhaustion, pulmonary oedema, falling rocks, ice and serac, collapsed snow bridge, cold, exposure, drowning, cerebal thrombosis, cerebal oedema and altitude sickness
- Forty-one climbers who reached the summit died on their descent, including the Russian Sergei Arsentiev and his American wife Francys, who made the 999th and 1,000th assents together in 1998. Francys collapsed and Sergei fell while trying to fetch help
- Above 26,000ft is known as the Death Zone - with a third of the oxygen available at sea level, climbers will only survive a limited time without extra oxygen
- 2000 was the safest year to date on Everest, when 145 climbers reached the summit and only two people died. The worst year on record was 1996, when 98 people made the summit but 16 people died Unsurprisingly, Sherpas have suffered the most casualties on the mountain with an estimated 55 deaths. The Japanese have had 13 casualties, and the British 12
- There has been a death on Everest every year since 1969, with the exception of 1977 The most dangerous part of the mountain is Khumbu Icefall. Eighteen people died there up to 1986; however, there has only been one death since
- Altitude makes the removal of dead bodies an almost impossible task. Some 165 corpses remain on the mountain
- Tibetans call Everest Chomolungma, which has many translations, including “big fat hen”. The Nepalese name, given after the peak was recognised as the world’s highest, is Sagarmatha, meaning “brow of the sky”
- Sir George Everest, after whom the mountain is named, is thought to have believed a Tibetan or Nepalese name would have been more apt
- Both Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay’s sons followed in their fathers’ footsteps to reach the summit of Everest; Mallory’s grandson was also successful in his attempt
- The youngest person to reach the summit so far is Temba Tsheri, who was 16
- The oldest person to reach the summit is Tomiyasu Ishikawa, who was 65
- The first woman to reach the summit was Junko Tabei, in 1975
- A record 89 people reached the summit in one day on May 23, 2001. A further 93 climbers also reached the summit that year, the highest annual number to date
- This year a British duo are carrying an ironing board with them to the summit in an attempt to beat the world record for altitude ironing
- Japanese and South Korean clean-up teams find Everest rubbish so fascinating that they exhibit the collected debris upon their return home
- In May 2000 Bob Hoffman’s American environmental expedition brought down 631 oxygen cylinders from the South Col, including their own.
- The group also arranged for a further 12kg of batteries, 168kg of burnable and 35kg of non-biodegradable matter, 832kg of human waste and 750kg of waste food to be disposed of

**TIMELINE: SINCE 1960**

- **1960:** Chinese climbers claim that they have made the first summit from the North
- **1975:** Junko Tabei, from Japan, became the first woman to climb Everest, via the South East Ridge
- **1978:** The first ascent without oxygen was made by the Italian Reinhold Messner and Austrian Peter Habeler, via the South East Ridge
- **1980:** Reinhold Messner went on to make the first solo ascent, this time via the North Col to North Face
- **1990:** The Australian Tim Macartney-Snape became the first man to make the journey from sea level to summit, without oxygen. Starting at the Bay of Bengal he reached the summit via a two-mile swim across the Ganges and the South Col
- **1990:** Yugoslavs Andrej and Marija Stremfelj and the American Cathy Gibson and Russian Aleksei Krasnokutsky became the first married couples to reach the summit on October 7
- **1991:** Leo Dickinson and Chris Dewhirst became the first men to fly in a hot-air balloon over Everest on October 21. The flight, which took off at 6.40am landed less than an hour later at 7.30am
- **1998:** Tom Whittaker, from Wales, who has an artificial leg, became the first single amputee to reach the summit
- **1999:** Babu Chiri Sherpa made the highest possible bivouac by spending a total of 21 hours atop the summit without oxygen
- **2000:** On May 24, Appa Sherpa became the first person to have climbed Everest 11 times. Each climb was made without oxygen
- **2001:** Babu Chiri Sherpa made the assent in 16 hours and 56 minutes, the fastest ever
- **2001:** A record 89 people made the summit in one day. An overall total of 182 reaching the summit also made it a record year
- **2001:** Marco Siffredi, a 22-year-old Frenchman, became the first snowboarder to complete the descent on May 23

## HOW EVEREST GREW 33FT

- **29,002ft: the height of “Peak XV” as calculated in March 1856 by Andrew Waugh, the successor to George Everest as Surveyor-General of India. This figure remained unchallenged for 100 years**
- **29,028ft: the revised height of Everest as calculated by Indian surveyors in the 1950s - less than 0.1 per cent higher than Waugh’s previous figure**
- **29,035ft: the current height of the mountain, as measured by Global Positioning Satellite equipment which was placed on the summit by American climbers and Sherpas on May 5, 1999 - and, geologists believe, it is still growing**

## OTHER ROUTES TAKEN

- North Ridge from North Col (Chinese route), 1960
- West Ridge by Hornbein Couloir (American route), 1963
- South West Face, 1975;
- West Ridge Direct (Yugoslav route), 1979
- North Face by Hornbein Couloir (Japanese route), 1980
- North Face from North Col (Messner route), 1980
- South Pillar (Polish route), 1980
- South West Face Central Pillar (Russian route), 1982
- East Face by Central Pillar, 1983
- North Face by Great Couloir, 1984
- East Face and South East Ridge, 1988

# Everest: 50 years on



On May 29, 1953, at 11.30am Hillary and Tenzing became the first men to climb Everest. ***The Times***, breaking the news, proclaimed: "Their victory is a victory for the human spirit."
Below your can read about the incredible events of 50 years ago, including:

- How James Morris broke the news
- Morris looks back to 1953
- Science of a climb and RSG's role
- The ultimate price: as real today
- The heroes remembered
- Tenzing's descent into disillusion
- Timeline of conquest
- Shipton's controversial sacking

## Conditions bad, base abandoned said code: it really meant success

In *The Times* house journal for 1953, reporter James Morris recalled how he and the newspaper's foreign desk plotted to keep the story from falling into the hands of their rivals

## The Times archive: Everest from the air

## The 'golden calf' that Tenzing pursued claimed him in the end

On May 29, 1953, as Sherpa Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary stood at the summit and gazed about them, the pair found their golden prize. But Tenzing's gaze fell fondly on the slopes and valleys below — the landscape of his life

## 'I was on the right mountain at the right time'

## Hunt's team of heroes have the world at their feet as the nation celebrates

'My mother's voice came in breathless squeaks. "I think they've done it," I said — footsteps pounded up the stairs and the next minute my sister and I were dancing naked, dripping wet and hugging each other.' Sally Nesbitt recalls the joy of her father's triumph

## The last great imperial adventure and the last time we could look down on the rest of the world

## 'One of the most stupendous works in the whole history of science'

Only in 1817-20, when the first surveyors penetrated the mountains to the west of Nepal and began measuring them closely, did the evidence become overwhelming

## Heroic amateurs determined to get to the top

## When wrathful deities made mountains places of fear

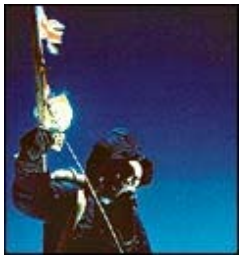
The Tibetan myths about mountains are populated with wrathful deities, ghosts or terrible creatures such as the yeti. They are warnings to stay away. The notion of climbing a mountain was utterly foreign to those nomads grazing their animals on the pastures below

## Did Mallory and Irvine make it to the summit before they died?

On June 8, 1924, the clouds that had been shrouding the upper reaches of Everest magically cleared. From perhaps three-quarters of a mile away, climber Noel Odell saw two men on the mountain's North East Ridge - George Mallory and Sandy Irvine

## Anniversary is catalyst for the RGS to open its archives

The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) is committed to supporting geographical research and learning about the world. This commitment began before Everest was first climbed and is stronger than ever



## Be inspired by the view if you can see it through your tears

For many climbers there is no great revelation but for others the emotion is overwhelming, says Nicholas Roe

## How the sacking of Britiain's top mountaineer sparked a mutiny

In 1952, when preparations were well under way for possibly Britian's last chance at Everest, the members of the Himalayan Committee delivered a coup which looked as if it might just put the entire expedition in jeopardy, says Peter Gillman

## The importance of rigorous military training and diplomatic skills

With internal skirmishes put aside, John Hunt set about what he did best: planning. Hunt's job was difficult. He had to soothe an outraged team and deliver a nation's hopes, says Joanna Hunter

## Purists take on pragmatists in debate over use of oxygen

Of all the key advances that made the ascent of Everest possible none was more important than the use of bottled oxygen. But the philosophy that no supplementary oxygen should come between climber and mountain has its supporters

## Charity devoted to the peaks of the world

The Mount Everest Foundation (MEF), the UK charity for mountain exploration and science,

her summit and can only echo my grandfather's words: 'I am grateful'". **Tashi Tenzing**

- 'You will ask ... "what is the use of climbing Mount Everest?" and my answer must at once be, "it is no use" ... the struggle is the struggle of life itself, upward and forever upward ... What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy and joy is, after all, the end of life ...' **George Mallory, 1922**

was set up in 1953

## The men who carry a country's economy on their backs

Mountaineering in Nepal is the backbone of the country’s economy, an economy carried on the back of Nepal’s thousands of mountain porters

## When fame can mean death

Danu Sherpa: "We’d got them to the top after two weeks of carrying their tents, supplies and then, for the summit attempt, they said, 'Stop there!'"

## Man nor beast? The elusive yeti

Part man, part beast, ranging from the very small to more than 7ft and covered in dirty grey, brown or red hair

## Coming to a Napalese cybercafe near you: 'The Everest Experience'

The trekking industry is to blame for Disneyfication, says Malika Browne

## The risk of paying the ultimate price is just as real today

Clive Tully looks at the perils facing inexperienced climbers with high expectations

## Ancient lands marked by strife and isolation

For generations Nepal was a land as inaccessible as the highest mountain on its border, cutting itself off from the outside world

## Confronting the terror of the death zone

Rebecca Stephens explains why she was prepared to lose two fingers - maybe more - for the sake of success

# Everest



May 14, 2003

## The last great imperial adventure and the last time we could look down on the rest of the world

It was a magical moment but it also marked the end of innocence, says Jan Morris

The 1922 Everest team sitting down to breakfast during the approach march. Their supplies were probably bought at Fortnum & Mason in London's Piccadilly

Most Britons thought it only proper that when Mount Everest, the world's highest mountain, was climbed for the first time in 1953, it was a British expedition that climbed it. As it happened, Everest had never been within the boundaries of the British Empire, standing as it did on the high Himalayan frontier between Nepal and Tibet, but it was well within what was called in those days a British sphere of influence, and had long seemed a sort of quasi-imperial peak.

It had first been identified by a British surveyor, it was given a Briton's name, British expeditions had been going there for half a century, and around its presence there swirled all manner of imperial suggestion, from the skulduggeries of the Great Game to the mythologies of stiff upper lip and gallant amateurism.

Everest was, so to speak, half in fief to the British Raj in India, and as long before as 1905 the most imperial of the Viceroys, George Curzon, had expressed the conviction that it really ought to be first climbed by the British, "the mountaineers and pioneers par excellence of the universe". The first seven expeditions to the mountain, between 1921 and 1938, were almost symbolically British, not just in nationality, but in culture. The very first was

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Conditions bad, base abandoned said code: it really meant success

**The last great imperial adventure and the last time we could look down on the rest of the world**

'One of the most stupendous works in the whole history of science'

When wrathful deities made mountains places of fear

A network of heroic amateurs determined to get to the top

The view from the top

defined by the Dalai Lama, giving instructions to his officials in the Everest region, simply as “a party of sahibs”, and parties of British sahibs they were all to remain. They generally had a military flavour, and their climbers were almost all men of the upper middle classes, with a general bearing, manner and attitude figuratively imperial.

The Empire was already past its prime, debilitated by the First World War, economically faltering and industrially overtaken but it still presented a brave face to the world — and to itself. The values that had created it were not yet discredited, and the imperial styles had not yet degenerated into parody, but were serious expressions of purpose. Dressing for dinner in the jungle was sensible self-discipline. The stiff upper lip was not an affectation but an instrument of example and survival.

So the Everest expeditions between the two world wars displayed, if not the ideology, certainly the aesthetic of the *Pax Britannica*. The climbers were sustained by hundreds of local porters, and nothing could look more imperially evocative than a long, long train of Everest bearers, bent half-double by their loads, led by their dozen sahibs through the wilderness. The British attitude towards these employees, Tibetans, Nepalese, Sherpas, was characteristically at worst patronising, at best paternal. They greatly admired the mountain peoples, and probably the nearest they got to racism, or perhaps just political incorrectness, was sometimes to make fun of them — one particularly flamboyant Sherpa of the inter-war expeditions, habitually slung all around with knives and water bottles and knapsacks, they fondly christened “The Foreign Sportsman”.

They, themselves, like the Empire that bred them, were often more complex than they seemed. A hundred old pictures illustrate their ambiguities. Before they set off for the mountain they look terribly British, in tweed jackets and plus-fours, or shorts and long socks. They suck at pipes. Some have walking sticks, some have pith helmets, and they pose for the camera resolutely manly and unsmiling. By the time they get to Everest, though, they have gone more or less feral. Like so many of the imperial activists they have been liberated — from vicarage or from regimental mess, from mother or poor dear Ethel, or simply from the restrictions and inhibitions of their culture. Now they look like groups of gentlemanly ruffians, dressed in apparent throwaways, old army jerseys, battered trilby hats, raincoats and puttees. Here we see one of them paying a visit to a Buddhist monastery wearing what looks like a speckled dressing-gown. Here somebody else advances towards Mount Everest, on a hot day, stark naked but for a hat and a backpack.

But they were certainly no wimps. Those seven expeditions never got to the top of the mountain but they did climb higher than anyone, anywhere,

had ever climbed before. Even in 1924 Colonel E. F. Norton, wearing a leather motorbike helmet, two sweaters and two gabardine suits, with a woollen muffler “to complete my costume”, reached without oxygen a height of 28,126ft (8,573m) — less than 1,000ft from the summit.

As in the Empire itself, there were many idiosyncratic characters among them, rebels, mystics, visionaries or free-thinkers despite their high bourgeois upbringing. General Charles Bruce, leader of the 1922 expedition, looked the very incarnation of Colonel Blimp, but was in fact a passionate devotee of the Himalayan cultures. Howard Somerville, doctor of the same expedition, decided on the way home from Everest to stay in India as a medical missionary; he spent 40 years there, becoming a pioneer in the treatment of leprosy, besides writing the incidental music to the first of all Everest films. Hugh Boustead (1933) had deserted from the Royal Navy during the First World War; finding he wasn’t seeing enough action, he jumped ship in South Africa, joined the Army and served with such distinction that he was the very first Royal Navy deserter to be pardoned. Frank Smythe (1933, 1936 and 1938) reported seeing UFOs when he was on the mountain. Percy Wyn-Harris (1933 and 1936) later became Governor of The Gambia, and sailed out from Britain to the independence celebrations of that colony single-handed on a five-ton yawl. H. W. Tilman (1935 and 1938) adored cats, became a famous partisan leader in the Second World War and finally vanished somewhere in the South Seas.

And, of course, there was George Leigh Mallory (1921, 1922 and 1924), a schoolmaster of spiritual and literary leanings. He it was who, asked why he wanted to climb Everest, replied “Because it’s there” — the only Everest quotation to go into the language. He was a gracefully powerful climber, a character of charismatic sexual and intellectual charm, and it was perfectly

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## 'One of the most stupendous works in the whole history of science'

A mission to measure the earth's curvature provided the means for estimating its heights, says John Keay

As British rule spread across the plains of northern India, surveyors followed in its wake. Here, Khan Sahib and Afraz Sul Khan are plane tabling from the Tartar La in Kashmir

The 19th century's great age of exploration was inspired in part by a spirit of acquisition that, though usually political or commercial, was sometimes dignified with the cloak of scientific inquiry. Science, as an adjunct to exploration, involved rationalising, classifying, quantifying and representing the natural world. It could be, in other words, another form of control, and was not always distinguishable from cruder methods of exploration and conquest.

Typical of such activity was the measuring and mapping of the Earth's lesser-known regions, those *terrae incognitae* whose blank spaces so intrigued the 19th-century explorer. Along with the polar regions and the inner realms of Africa, Australia and mid-Arabia, the Himalayas were a big challenge. Jesuit missionaries had reached Tibet via Kashmir and the western Himalayas in the early 18th century, and emissaries from the British East India Company in Bengal had done so through Bhutan in the late 18th century. But they took little interest in the mountains themselves; and maps, like that of Jean Baptiste d'Anville of 1733, showed "the snowy range" as a ridge of unknown height.

The first suggestion that the Himalayas might be "among the highest mountains of the old world" came from Major James Rennel, who in the 1770s surveyed up to the mountains in Bengal on behalf of that province's recent British conqueror, Colonel Robert Clive (later Lord Clive of Plassey). At that time, the world's highest mountains were thought to be the Andes, while the highest peak in the "old world" (that is, Eurasia and Africa) was supposed to be Pico de Teide on the island of Tenerife. The

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

The last great imperial adventure and the last time we could look down on the rest of the world

**'One of the most stupendous works in the whole history of science'**

When wrathful deities made mountains places of fear

A network of heroic amateurs determined to get to the top

The view from the top

Did Mallory and Irvine make it to the summit before they died?

height of Pico do Teide was in fact overestimated by several thousand feet (its true height is 12,198ft).

In 1784 Sir William Jones, a Calcutta judge and British India's greatest polymath, went one further than Rennel and declared that the Himalayas were the highest mountains in the world "not excepting the Andes". Jones had corresponded with two explorers who had crossed into Tibet. He deduced that the highest peaks were much more distant than was generally thought, and from the banks of the Ganges he measured the angle of elevation to one in Bhutan (it was Chomolhari), which he calculated to be 244 miles away. The height thus roughly gauged from this calculation convinced him that the Himalayan peaks rose to a height greater than the 20,000ft measured in the Andes.

He could not prove it, however, and his claim was discarded by the scientific establishment. Also discredited, this time correctly, was a suggestion that the Himalayas were a range of active volcanoes (their plumes of windblown snow had been mistaken for smoke).

Only in 1817-20, when the first surveyors penetrated the mountains to the west of Nepal and began measuring them at close quarters, did the evidence become overwhelming. Trekking up to heights of 12,000-16,000ft, Lieutenant William Webb and Captain John Hodgson were among colossal glaciers and eternal snows; and still the main summits towered above them. But now proximity to the peaks meant that the observed angles of elevation were much greater and so much less liable to distortion.

Measurements were taken, and one giant looked to be, according to a scribbled note in Webb's angle book, "so far as our knowledge extends, the highest mountain in the world". Its local name was Nanda Devi and for the next 30 years, while expeditions into the central Himalayas from Tibet and Nepal remained impossible, Nanda Devi reigned supreme as the world's highest mountain (its height is now established at 25,645ft).

Ironically, the techniques required for accurately measuring mountains from a distance had been developed elsewhere in India. In 1802 William Lambton had begun from Madras what has been called "one of the most stupendous works in the whole history of science". Lambton was interested in geodesy, the study of the shape of the Earth. Replicating similar experiments in Europe and South America but to a much higher degree of accuracy, he had embarked on a mission to measure the curvature of the Earth.

This could be done by comparing the distance between two points as ascertained by astronomical observation, with the figure obtained by actual measurement taken along the ground; from the

distance between the two the curvature could be calculated. It sounded simple but the required accuracy was possible only with very elaborate instruments and over enormous distances (his Great Arc from south India to the Himalayas would be about 1,600 miles long).

Such an ambitious geodetic exercise had the added virtue of greatly facilitating the mapping of India. Lambton's measurement along the ground was achieved by a process known as "triangulation". A baseline between two points, usually about seven miles apart, was carefully measured over a period of several weeks using a chain of precisely known length mounted on wooden trestles. Then, from each of the same two points, the angle between this baseline and the sight line to a third point was measured using a theodolite (a tripod-mounted telescope that measures horizontal and vertical degrees). A triangle was thus formed and, if the length of one of its sides (the baseline) plus two of its angles was known, the lengths of its other sides could be calculated. One of these sides could then be used as the baseline for another triangle without the need for ground measurement, further triangles being projected and calculated solely through triangulation between invisible points. As the triangulation progressed, chain measurements along the ground were necessary only to check from time to time the accuracy of the exercise. This "trigonometrical survey" resulted in a scattering of locations, or "trig points", usually in the form of a chain zigzagging across the landscape. As Lambton's

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## A network of heroic amateurs determined to get to the top

The British expeditions of the twenties were tested to the limits of their endurance. Stephen Venables captures the mood of a gentlemanly era

The first teams to tackle Everest were journeying into the unknown. No one had any idea if human beings could sleep or even breathe at extreme altitude

The climbers who tackled Everest in the 1920s were on a quest which quickly turned to obsession. In their attempts to climb the world's highest mountain, they had to solve myriad political, geographical and physiological problems. Of the seven British expeditions to cross the Tibetan plateau before the Second World War, the 1921 Everest Reconnaissance Expedition was the most inspiring. Nominated by the Mount Everest Committee of the Alpine Club and the Royal Geographical Society, the team represented the rump of an imperial world shaken by the carnage of the First World War.

It is easy now to scoff at the apparent amateurism of this ad hoc band cobbled together through the old-boy network, but in 1921 Nepal was forbidden territory and the only approach was a month-long journey though Tibet by foot and pony all the way from Darjeeling. Apart from one distant photograph taken during Francis Younghusband's 1904 mission to Tibet and the account of Captain John Noel's solo journey in 1913, nothing was known of Everest except that its summit was the highest on Earth. And that represented the other great unknown: no one actually knew whether, if a theoretical route to the summit were found, it would be physiologically possible for a human being to follow that route to 29,002ft above sea level (the then calculated height

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

When wrathful deities made mountains places of fear

**A network of heroic amateurs determined to get to the top**

The view from the top

Did Mallory and Irvine make it to the summit before they died?

Anniversary is catalyst for the RGS to open its archives

Be inspired by the view if you can see it through your tears

of Everest).

In 1921 the human altitude record stood at about 24,600ft (7,500m); the highest actual summit attained was Trisul, the 23,385ft peak near Nanda Devi, which Tom Longstaff's team climbed in 1907. But nobody had any idea whether the human body could push itself to nearly 9,000m above sea level or what would actually happen when climbers tried to sleep at extreme altitude.

The 1921 expedition was strictly a reconnaissance, not a full-scale climbing attempt. Nevertheless, George Mallory did lead a party down on to the East Rongbuk Glacier to the site of what would be Camp III or Advance Base. From there, he cut steps up the hanging glacier wall above, leading Guy Bullock, Oliver Wheeler and three porters up to the broad level snow ridge. At last, on the morning of September 23, 1921, they had reached the elusive North Col . . . From Mallory's foreshortened viewpoint the summit looked so close, so attainable. In fact, it was still 6,000ft above him. And, for the first time, he felt the cutting force of the westerly wind blasting across the huge, tilted expanse of the North Face, and realised that with winter approaching and the expedition over-extended, any serious climbing would have to wait until the spring.

The 1922 attempt, led by Brigadier-General Charles Bruce, ended in tragedy. It was while heading back up to the North Col for one final attempt that Mallory witnessed the first disaster on Everest. Everyone knew that the snow slopes leading up the east side of the col were avalanche prone. They also knew that conditions were becoming more unstable with the monsoon approaching. Yet they allowed ambition and enthusiasm to get the upper hand and persuaded themselves that the slope was safe. Mallory, Howard Somervell and Colin Crawford, the expedition's transport officer, were leading a party of 14 porters when a slab broke away with a loud bang, gathering momentum and sweeping the final rope of nine porters over a cliff and into a crevasse. Seven of the men were killed. Somervell, in particular, was stricken by a guilty sense of grief: "Why, oh why, could not one of us Britishers have shared their fate." In 1924 they did.

Like so many of those climbers on the prewar expeditions, the men making up the 1924 expedition were highly civilised, talented individuals. Somervell, a medical missionary who spent much of his life in India, was a fine painter and musician; he had arranged the Tibetan music for Noel's Everest film when it was shown in London. Edward Norton painted some brilliant watercolours during his two Everest expeditions.

Although he was now official leader in 1924, Norton made Mallory "climbing leader". Both men knew that they were top contenders for the summit, yet there existed a high regard between them. Mallory, careless at times, recognised that Norton, the professional soldier, had a firm grip on logistics and was universally liked. Norton in return praised Mallory's "unique" effortless grace as a climber — and no

doubt warmed to the man's literary and intellectual tastes. As a schoolmaster at Charterhouse, Mallory's idealism

had impressed one of his pupils, Robert Graves, who wrote in *Goodbye to All That*: "(He was) so youthful-looking as to be often mistaken for a member of the school. From the first he treated me as an equal, and I used to spend my spare time reading in his room, or going for walks with him in the country. He told me of the existence of modern authors. My father being two generations older than myself and my only link with books, I had never heard of people like Shaw, Samuel Butler, Rupert Brooke . . ."

Literature, art, music, philosophy . . . the civilised things of life, together with their shared passion for high mountain country, must have helped to sustain those pioneers in their isolation, 5,000 miles from home. But in the end their wild dream was going to be realised only through brutish hard labour.

After all the delays and much reworking of plans, two summit attempts were staged far later than planned at the end of May. The first attempt, without oxygen, was made by Somervell and Norton. Setting out this time from a realistically high sixth camp, they had some chance of success.

Rather than head straight up to the Shoulder, they realised that the correct route to the North East Ridge led diagonally rightward. In fact, Norton had decided to avoid the skyline completely and, after climbing through the yellow band, to follow a greyer band of rock horizontally rightward, stayed well below the two obvious steps on the skyline.

Somervell and Norton began their climb to the summit on the morning of June 5, 1924. The scenery around them was overwhelmingly impressive. Looking north along the Nepal-Tibet border they saw the Rongbuk Glacier dizzyingly far below. Even great peaks such as Gya-chung Kang and Changtse were a long way below. Somervell was forced to stop, unable to go any further because of a constriction in his throat. Norton continued alone, his tall figure stooped to hold out a steadying hand on the perversely sloping tiles of Everest’s immense tilted roof. Immediately above him, vertical crags barred access to the North East Ridge. But straight ahead the strata led inexorably into the gash of the Great Couloir and, beckoning just beyond, seeming so tantalisingly close, was the final summit pyramid.

Alone and without bottled oxygen, Norton reached the Great Couloir and attempted to climb the now steeper, snow-covered rocks on the far side. It was precarious and he was acutely aware of the 8,000ft precipice beneath his feet. He also knew that if he were to push on to the summit his chances of returning before dark were almost nil.

We now know that human beings can survive a night in the open on top of Everest. Even without goosedown insulation (only George Finch, the sole scientific voice in the wilderness, had experimented with it, in 1922) and relying only on his many layers of cotton and wool, Norton might have survived a bivouac. But that kind of risk-taking was anathema in 1924, and at 1pm he turned around.

He had reached a point later calculated at 28,126ft, a record for oxygenless climbing that

was to remain unbeaten for 54 years. On one point he was adamant: he felt capable, despite the lack of oxygen, of climbing the remaining 902ft. The decision to turn around was quickly vindicated. Reversing the dicey traverse, he ended up calling to Somervell to throw the rope to him. Weakness was compounded by his failing vision — he had taken off his snow goggles earlier, mistakenly assuming that they were not necessary on the mainly rocky terrain. Somervell also was suffering from his painfully constricted throat. As they climbed back down to Camp VI and continued toward the North Col, Norton drew ahead. At one point, he noticed that Somervell had stopped behind him. Later he explained that he thought Somervell had stopped to do some sketching high on the North Face of Everest, having just helped establish a world altitude record! It speaks volumes for Norton's anti-heroic nonchalance, but also for the delusions of hypoxia. Somervell was actually fighting for his life, coughing up the mucous lining of his larynx. Luckily the blockage was evicted and now, breathing more freely, Somervell hurried to join his companion. Darkness fell as they staggered toward the North Col shouting for help. Someone offered to bring up oxygen and Norton shouted, "We don't want the damn oxygen; we want drink!" Exhausted and snowblind, Norton now heard Mallory outline plans for the second attempt.

Desperate to finish the job once and for all, Mallory had decided to boost his chances with oxygen. Aware of his shortcomings in handling machinery, he had decided to take with him the youngest member of the team; 22-year-old Sandy Irvine. Still an undergraduate at Oxford, Irvine had a pitifully meager climbing record but he had abundant enthusiasm and had proved brilliant at coaxing the temperamental oxygen sets into working.

He had been invited to join the 1924 team at the suggestion of the older, more experienced Noel Odell, a geologist.

Odell must have been surprised and disappointed not to be chosen for the summit attempt himself, but any bitterness was subsumed in a heroic display of support over the next few days. Climbing up and down the North Ridge with apparently effortless ease, geologising as he went, he showed an aptitude for altitude that has rarely been matched. And it was he who witnessed the final, mist-wreathed moments of tragic drama. On the afternoon of June 7 he arrived at Camp V to meet Sherpa Lhakpa descending from Camp VI, where he and three of his colleagues had just installed Mallory and Irvine for their summit attempt. He showed Odell two notes from Mallory — one for Odell and one to be taken on down to Captain Noel, who was stationed on a rocky perch above Advance Base with his cine camera trained on the upper slopes of the North Face.

That now-famous note, Mallory's last message to the outside world, read as follows: "Dear Noel, We'll

probably start early tomorrow (8th) in order to have clear weather. It won't be too early to start looking for us either crossing the rock band or going up skyline at 8.00 pm. Yours ever, G. Mallory."

Taken from *Everest: Summit of Achievement* by Stephen Venables. Foreword by Sir Edmund Hillary, published by Bloomsbury courtesy of the Royal Geographical Society, priced £35.

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## Be inspired by the view at the top if you can see it through your tears

For many climbers there is no great revelation but for others the emotion is overwhelming, says Nicholas Roe

Rising majestically above the clouds is Mount Everest. Awestruck climbers say the vista underlines for them the vastness of the Earth and the insignificance of people

When Sir Chris Bonington clambered on to the summit of Everest in 1985 at the age of 50 he performed a small act that helps the rest of us glimpse what it feels like to stand on the roof of the world. He cried.

“I was very tired, I was pushing it,” the climber recalls. “I couldn’t help thinking of the number of mates who had lost their lives on Everest. I’m quite an emotional soul anyway, and with all those thoughts, and being absolutely knackered, and being glad, glad I was there . . . I collapsed and burst into tears.”

No wonder, really. Apart from the incredible achievement, any climber standing on that summit, gazing across Nepal and Tibet in crystal, thin air, is as close to a classic centre of religious and spiritual inspiration as it is possible to be without actually dying — think of Jesus on the Mount, Moses fetching the Commandments; Coleridge deifying mountains as “that visible God Almighty”.

When humans seek inspiration they invariably head uphill. Who could not be moved on top of Everest? Yet, if you ask what summiting is like — what it does for those who reach the top — the replies are often inadequate.

In a new book, *Everest — Reflections From the Top*, 120 summiteers present the peak as a distinctly mixed bag: sometimes a cliché — “It is a

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Anniversary is catalyst for the RGS to open its archives

**Be inspired by the view if you can see it through your tears**

How the sacking of Britiain's top mountaineer sparked a mutiny

The importance of rigorous military training and diplomatic skills

Purists take on pragmatists in debate over use of oxygen

Bourdillon gets within 300 feet but has to turn back; the way is clear for Hillary and Tenzing

symbol, a dream and that dream came true for me" (Russian climber, Alexei Bolotov); often a conquest — "Little, insecure, non-athletic geek was standing on top of the world" (American, Michael Brown); occasionally a mystery — "When I am on the summit, sometimes I worry I am stepping on my god" (Nepalese, Chhuldim Dorje).

Clearly, it is not easy to fathom the impact of Everest, even if you have been there. The rest of us should bear in mind the curious state climbers are in when they finally take the last step.

The South African climber Cathy O'Dowd the only woman to have summited Everest from both Nepal and Tibet, speaks of overwhelming physical relief. "You would have been moving steadily for ten hours or longer and there is a release of tension, an end to that drive to push that has kept you taking step after step upwards," she says. There is elation, too — "the very thought of being the highest person on the planet". But even as that thought arrives, confusion hurries in over the horizon: fear.

As O'Dowd explains: "A disproportionate number of climbers die on the way down from the summit. If you have been thinking all the time that the summit is the end, you turn away from it to go home and stumble down the mountain and your mind may be 1,000 miles away."

Throw in the need to keep warm, to wipe steam from the oxygen mask, and to photograph your sponsors' flags before fleeing after as little as 15 minutes on the Earth's roof, and summiting becomes less a moment of triumphant ecstasy, more a matter of fighting for momentary clarity. Sir Edmund Hillary, describing how he placed those first footprints on the summit, addresses the final triumph in John Hunt's classic book *The Ascent of Everest* in a phrase loaded down with effort and not much else: "A few more whacks of the ice-axe in the firm snow and we stood on top."

In short, the odds are stacked against revelation. And yet, somehow, it can happen.

Doug Scott, in 1975 the first Briton to summit Everest by the South West Face, speaks of fewer stray thoughts "coming in" during the struggle to the top: "There is all this space between thoughts in your head. That is why you feel incredibly at peace with yourself, because in that space you expect to be more aware of everything — which is what happens. But it doesn't happen at the summit, that is on the way to that point of peace. The peace and contentment is a good reference point as to how one can be."

The vastness of the Earth, viewed from the top, struck both Scott and O'Dowd forcibly. "There's a sense of the absolute magnificence of the wild places of the Earth, and the insignificance of people," O'Dowd explains. "We take ourselves too

seriously. We don't get the big picture. My strongest feelings were of excitement and a kind of awe at the beauty of it all."

Scott accessed hidden parts of his mind: "It's the third man syndrome: imagining there is someone else walking beside you, a comforting presence telling you what to do next, and it can be as strong as a voice in your chest."

Eighteen years after Sir Chris Bonington summited Everest, he can still describe in detail the "sense of distance and space, the brown rolling hills rather than mountains, the occasional white top" that formed the view into Tibet.

O'Dowd says the experience changed her life, partly in her perception of humankind within its vast context, but also in terms of having made it against the tallest odds: "I realised that I had seriously underestimated myself and what I could do. I took that home with me."

Intriguingly, Scott feels that an aspect of Everest's impact can be experienced by us all on lower slopes where there is less risk, and, therefore, more clarity — "you get it in the Lake District sometimes," he says. And we should try to achieve that awareness, according to Dr Michael Money, a psychologist at Liverpool John Moores University, who says: "It's not surprising that people are motivated to seek environments where logjams are not so great, which match our biological inheritance more closely."

From that perspective, mountain tops do not just give us a simpler vision of the world, they remind us where we came from. It really is an inspiring view — if you can see it through the tears.

*Everest — Reflections From The Top* is published by Rider, priced £8.99.

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## The importance of rigorous military training and diplomatic skills

John Hunt's job was difficult. He had to soothe an outraged team and deliver a nation's hopes, says Joanna Hunter

John Hunt, looking exhausted, at South Col after descending from the South East Ridge

With internal skirmishes put aside, John Hunt set about what he did best: planning."With his clear thinking and experience as a planner," Charles Wylie observed, "John very soon produced a masterly plan, agreed and understood by all concerned. In the event, on the mountain the plan was followed in virtually every detail." Despite Edmund Hillary's prejudices, there is no doubt that Hunt's rigorous military training proved invaluable in the initial stages of the expedition.

"John had a very clear idea of what was needed at the outset," said Wylie. "First, a comprehensive plan for the whole expedition from start to finish, embracing all concerned: planners, suppliers, climbers, porters, technical experts (eg, high-altitude physiologists), oxygen technocrats, the Foreign Office, the media and many others." All this was in stark contrast to Eric Shipton's plans scribbled on the back of an envelope.

Hunt believed that those who were going to take part in the expedition should be involved in the planning of it. "They would have a very personal interest in the preparations, since they would later be taking part in the venture," he wrote in his memoir, *The Ascent of Everest*, and so his first task was to select the climbing party.

Hunt was heavily involved in Allied manoeuvres in Germany when he was appointed expedition leader on September 11, 1952. Even so, by November 1 all team members had been officially invited to take part, and, by November 5, he had drawn up a memorandum, Basis for Planning, with appendixes A: The Ascent (Build-up and Assault), B: The Preparatory Period, and C: The Expedition Timetable.

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

How the sacking of Britiain's top mountaineer sparked a mutiny

**The importance of rigorous military training and diplomatic skills**

Purists take on pragmatists in debate over use of oxygen

Bourdillon gets within 300 feet but has to turn back; the way is clear for Hillary and Tenzing

Hunt's team of heroes have the world at their feet as the nation celebrates

'I was on the right mountain at the right time'

Even at this early stage, Hunt took in everything from oxygen requirements to potential weather conditions, the size of the climbing party (six for the assault, four for support, a physiologist and a photographer) the number of camps, and the number of sherpas at each camp.

“It may seem absurd to have drawn plans up in London against the distant moment when a final attempt could be made on the top of Everest,” Hunt wrote. “Yet only by making some such plan and entering into considerable detail, only by making certain assumptions based on an unfavourable combination of circumstances, could we work back to the size of the party, the quantities of food, equipment, and in particular, oxygen required to achieve success.”

Hunt was renowned for his personal charm and diplomacy; he was also an excellent delegator. Wylie was put in charge of overall co-ordination; Anthony Rawlinson, assisted by Wilfred Noyce, took charge of mountaineering equipment; Emlyn Jones and Ralph Jones, were responsible for clothing; Michael Westmacott looked after structural equipment and tents; George Band was set to work on wireless equipment, food (the least popular assignment of all) and weather forecasts; Tom Bourdillon continued his work on oxygen equipment; Edmund Hillary took on sleeping bags and cooking equipment; Alfred Gregory took on travel arrangements and photographic materials. Even the Hunt family found much of their Christmas taken up with packing at warehouses in Wapping. “We spent hours putting on clothes tapes and writing the names of the men on their mugs,” remembers Hunt’s daughter, Sally. “I remember piles of ice-axes and crampons, huge gloves and socks that were so big we later used them as Christmas stockings. People sent in huge numbers of bobble hats, you couldn't move for them, and my sister and I added to the pile by knitting Dad a hat.” Evans, Noyce and Ralph Jones were also enlisted to help with the packing so that some of the party would know where to find things when they got to India.

Earlier that December, Hunt, Wylie, Gregory and Pugh headed for Switzerland to test their equipment against the blizzards of the Bernese Oberland. In mid-January the team tried out their oxygen at Helyg in North Wales; they then went to Farnborough to use the Royal Aircraft Establishment’s decompression chamber. Hunt visited the returning Swiss team to see if there was anything he could glean from their failure. Nothing, in short, was left to chance.

Hunt’s training had arguably started a long time before. Born in Simla, India, on June 22, 1910, his father, Cecil, also a keen mountaineer, met John’s mother, Ethel, when he joined the 34th Sikh Pioneers, the regiment formed by her father.

Cecil Hunt was killed in 1914 when John was only four, leaving his mother to raise him and his brother

on her own. Hunt was sent to Marlborough, where by his own account he excelled at very little except French and German. This was thanks largely to the regular excursions to Switzerland that he made with his mother from 1920 onwards. It was here, at the age of 15, that Hunt completed his first climb, Piz Palü. It was an experience that was to intoxicate him for the rest of his life.

“I soon became wedded to the notion that mountains were there to be climbed,” Hunt wrote in his biography, *Life Is Meeting*, “precisely because they made demands on my willpower and fitness, and because the effort was so rewarding. I began to realise that there were intriguing challenges beyond that snowline, and up those beetling rock buttresses, which would require skills and entail risks. For me, the satistfaction of these discoveries was the greater for the fact that I was an indifferent performer at competitive games, to which so much importance was attached at my school.”

On finishing school, Hunt was accepted at Sandhurst. Here he won the King’s Gold Medal for best results in military and practical subjects and also the Anson Memorial Sword, which is given to the best cadet of the year overall.

Hunt received a commission into the 60th Foot The King’s Royal Rifle Corps (now part of Royal Greenjackets Regiment) and a year later, in 1931, he was posted to India. Here he was able to spend a great deal of his time exploring the Himalayas. Even at this stage, he showed a passion for exploring and a tenacity that would, no doubt, have bemused his contemporaries.

Hunt recalled spending his leave in Lebong in an article for the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers) in 1997: “I pushed myself, for the sheer joy of being in the mountain area, to the point of exhaustion. Indeed, I recall having resorted to crawling on all fours along the final stretch of the bridle track up the hillside, on returning to Lebong at the end of one of these marathon walks.”

Doubtless it was these qualities that led to his selection for the 1936 Everest expedition. Selection proved a short-lived triumph, however, when doctors advised that his heart condition meant that he should be careful climbing stairs, let alone Everest.

While in India, Hunt served for 18 months as a plainclothes officer in district intelligence branch. With them he helped gather information on underground independence movements and was also influential in proposing activities aimed at undermining terrorist recruitment among school pupils. For this he was awarded the Indian Police Medal.

Hunt described himself as shy with women, a condition that earned him the nickname “the aloof blond” from the girls at his club. Nevertheless, he married Joy Mowbray-Green, a Wimbledon tennis player and a keen mountaineer, in 1936. When their daughter Sally, the first of four, was born shortly afterwards Hunt climbed Tiger Hill to celebrate.

On his return from Everest, Hunt wrote *The Ascent of Everest*, which took him only 30 days but was translated into more than 20 languages and became the most popular mountaineering book of all time. He was also to write *Our Everest Adventure* as well as his autobiography. Hunt chose to leave the Armed Forces in 1956. He then indulged his great and enduring interest in young people, becoming secretary of the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme until 1966, and chairman of the National Recreation Centre in Snowdonia of the Central Council of Physical Recreation. He was also president of the Royal Geographical Society from 1977-1980. He took part in courses aimed at developing young people's climbing, camping and orienteering skills.

Naturally, Hunt also indulged his love of mountains, becoming president of the Alpine Club from 1956-58. He went on to lead a party to the Caucasus in 1958, where it climbed two peaks of more than 17,000ft.

Hunt was knighted in 1953, and created a life peer in 1966. He was appointed chairman of the Parole Board for England and Wales in 1967, and from 1968 to 1974 held the presidency of the Council for Volunteers Overseas. The Government also sent him to investigate policing in Northern Ireland, and to Biafra, where he advised on postwar aid requirements. From 1974-77 he was a member of the Royal Commission on the Press. In 1979 he was appointed a Knight of the Garter. Despite his public service, he was not afraid to express his beliefs: Hunt joined the SDP, and spoke on environmental subjects for the Liberal Democrats in the Lords.

His greatest ambition, however, was to inspire others. As he wrote in *Our Everest Adventure*: "I hope that the moral which may be read into this story of the long drawn-out struggle to reach one of the ends of the Earth will have its effect in shaping the characters and steering the actions of our young people, both now and for generations to come."

John Hunt died on November 8, 1998.

# Everest



May 14, 2003

## Purists take on pragmatists in debate over use of oxygen

An early version of the oxygen cylinder, some of which weighed 47lb

Of all the key advances that made the ascent of Everest possible none was more important and more vital to success than the use of bottled oxygen.

John Hunt wrote: “But for oxygen, we should certainly not have got to the top.”

Its use has always been a bone of contention. Reinhold Messner, the first man to conquer Everest solo without oxygen in 1980, refused to climb with anybody using it. “In reaching for the oxygen cylinder, a climber degrades Everest,” he wrote in his book, *Everest: Expedition to the Ultimate*. “A climber who doesn’t rely on his own strength and skills, but on apparatus and drugs, deceives himself.”

The 1922 expedition was divided over the use of oxygen. Some thought it indispensable, with physiologists, researching it for the RAF, urging the use of oxygen masks.

For the 1953 British expedition, it was agreed that no prima donna purists would be tolerated and everyone had to learn to use oxygen. The expedition took eight closed-circuit systems and 12 open-circuit sets, where oxygen flows constantly at a rate chosen by the climber. These had lighter and smaller cylinders and were used most.

George Band recalls being put in a decompression chamber and fitted with an oxygen mask while the air was pumped out to simulate conditions at 30,000ft. The mask was taken off and he instantly slipped into unconsciousness.

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

The importance of rigorous military training and diplomatic skills

**Purists take on pragmatists in debate over use of oxygen**

Bourdillon gets within 300 feet but has to turn back; the way is clear for Hillary and Tenzing

Hunt's team of heroes have the world at their feet as the nation celebrates

'I was on the right mountain at the right time'

The 'golden calf' that Tenzing pursued claimed him in the end

The first summit bid was made from the South Col by Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans, using closed-circuit apparatus. Their main objective was the South Summit but, if they had enough oxygen, they would press on to the peak.

However, there were problems with the apparatus — a frustration compounded for Bourdillon because he had helped to design it. The following day, Hillary and Tenzing, succeeded using open-circuit oxygen equipment.

Modern cylinders are now made from lightweight carbon-fibre, wrapped round an aluminium tube, and can withstand oxygen at very high pressure. A single modern light cylinder can produce more than 12 hours of oxygen. The latest equipment can even sense a climber's inhalation before releasing a dose. Less oxygen should be used and so the cylinders last longer.

Even today, though, the philosophy that no supplementary oxygen should come between climber and mountain has its supporters.

In the 1970s the strongest advocates were Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler, who arrived at Base Camp in March 1978. Habeler became ill with food poisoning and reconsidered oxygen but Messner believed that climbing as high as possible without oxygen was more important than reaching the summit. Messner testified into his tape-recorder that "breathing becomes such a serious business that we scarcely have the strength to go on".

However, on the afternoon of May 8, 1978, they achieved what was thought to be impossible — the first Everest ascent without oxygen. "In my state of spiritual abstraction, I no longer belong to myself and to my eyesight," wrote Messner. "I am nothing more than a single gasping lung floating over the mists and summit."

Andrew Morgan

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## 'I was on the right mountain at the right time'

Sir Edmund Hillary claims to be an ordinary man. Rebecca Stephens disagrees

If Everest is the one mountain every layman knows, so Sir Edmund Hillary is the one mountaineer. He is a living icon, with his face on New Zealand's $5 note and a new exhibition focused solely on him and his life's work.

On my first encounter with the great man, as an Everest groupie hovering outside the Royal Geographical Society, I felt compelled to push aside the crowds and shake his hand — very uncharacteristic. But then we are talking about a man who was the first to stand on the highest point on Earth.

Now in his autumnal years — he will be 84 in July — Hillary appears a contented sort of fellow, still travelling across continents, to Windsor once a year to attend the Knights of the Garter ceremony, and to Nepal, where he continues his lifetime's work helping the Sherpa people.

Undoubtedly, Hillary will always be defined by his accomplishments half a century ago. But what was it about the young Hillary that made him the winner of such a coveted prize? Was it, as he once said, simply that he was on the right mountain at the right time? I don't think so. Photographs of him then reveal him as a man of immense physical presence: that long, handsome face and rangy body, towering head and shoulders over Tenzing Norgay.

"I tended to create challenges for myself — didn't wait around for recommendations from other people. Mountains just seemed to fit my frame of mind," he says.

It was George Lowe, Hillary's lifelong friend and compatriot climber on the 1953 expedition, who set the two of them on their path to Everest. But it was Hillary who wrote to Eric Shipton suggesting that a couple of climbers from their New Zealand team might make a valuable contribution to the expedition planning to reconnoitre the south side of Everest in 1951. It was Hillary who got to go, and Hillary who was a key player in pioneering a route through the Khumbu Icefall.

It was while sharing a rope with Tenzing that he took a tumble down a crevasse and was immensely impressed by the man's lightning belay

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Hunt's team of heroes have the world at their feet as the nation celebrates

**'I was on the right mountain at the right time'**

The 'golden calf' that Tenzing pursued claimed him in the end

The men who carry a country's economy on their backs

Charity devoted to the peaks of the world

When fame can mean death

and eagerness to keep going hard and fast. So he set about proving to Hunt how fit a partnership they would be for the summit.

But for Hillary, as for any climber, the significance of whether it was he or his partner who was the first to place his boot on the summit was lost. “It is so unimportant that we never think of it,” he wrote to his fiancée Louise Rose. Until, that is, others kicked up a fuss. “Nepal (and India) have gone completely mad over Tenzing’s success and he has become almost a God,” he wrote. “Unfortunately, the Communists have been trying to get Tenzing to say that he got to the top first and then dragged me up. Actually, I did all the leading for the last couple of hours and did in actual fact reach the summit a rope length ahead of Tenzing.”

In the event, the two of them agreed to compromise. “We reached the summit almost together,” they told the world.

But if there was some confusion over the nationality of Tenzing (both India and Nepal wanted him as their own) there was none over that of Hillary. In the postwar years he, like most citizens of New Zealand, was still a British subject. But did he have any sense of climbing Everest for Britain? “Never, I just wanted to climb the mountain,” he said, a sentiment common to many a mountaineer. “Hunt was probably one of the few who wanted success for the Coronation.”

But on the expedition’s triumphant return to England, Hillary was in for a surprise. “A taxi-driver pulled up and said, ‘Thank you for climbing Everest!’ ” he recalls. “I didn’t expect that.”

It would be difficult to imagine how any of them might have anticipated the response: crowds, lining the streets for the Coronation, crying, “Everest has been climbed, for the Queen!”; and the headlines, “All this, and Everest too!” For the team there was a whirlwind of receptions, and for Hillary a knighthood.

Everest had an impact on everything he did. The achievement catapulted him into a world of further expeditions, books, lectures, a somewhat specialised job as an adviser on camping equipment and a posting as New Zealand High Commissioner in India.

Nevertheless, he regards his subsequent work with the Sherpas as the most important part of his life. “I’ve built up a very warm relationship with the Sherpas and spent a lot of time in their homes, with their families. One day I was with a group and asked them if there was anything I could do for them. They told me they’d like a school in Khumjung.”

From this one request sprang his Himalayan Trust, which has established 27 schools, two hospitals

and 12 clinics in 40 years. If Hillary is something of an icon around the world, he is something close to a saviour to the Sherpas.

In an otherwise blessed life, the story of his family is the one tragedy. In 1975 his first wife, Louise, and younger daughter, Belinda, were killed in a plane crash in Kathmandu; in 1989 he married June Mulgrew.

With festivities here, in Nepal, New Zealand and around the world, could Hillary possibly have imagined the interest that would be generated 50 years on? “I thought mountaineers might be interested,” he says. “I didn’t feel the public and the media would be interested.”

Yet he seems to take it in his ample Antipodean stride. When I spoke to him he had just attended in Auckland the opening of the exhibition dedicated to his life. “It was very good,” he says, matter-of-factly. “People seem to like it.”

He’s also got used to seeing his face on a $5 note but he does not like being called an icon.

“I know that I am really a very ordinary person,” he says. “I think I’ve taken advantage of opportunities, many of which I’ve thought up myself, but so have many people.” As if to verify his ordinariness, Hillary lives in the same house that he built and moved into as a newlywed in 1953. He tells me how, while out on a walk recently, a Maori passed him by. “He said, ‘Good morning, Ed’, and treated me with respect and warmth, as one of the gang. I rather liked that.”

*Rebecca Stephens was the first British woman to reach the summit of Everest*

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## Hunt's team of heroes have the world at their feet as the nation celebrates

Sally Nesbitt recalls the joy of her father's triumph

Click to enlarge

The phone rang shrill in the quiet of our house on the Radnorshire/Shropshire border. It was 11pm; my sister Sue and I should have been in bed long since, but it was the night before the Coronation and we had been allowed to stay up and help with the final preparations for the village revue that my mother was putting on. We stopped splashing each other in our huge bath and sat still, listening. The steam swirled eerily in the flickering light of the oil lamp.

My mother's voice came in breathless squeaks. "I think they've done it," I said — footsteps pounded up the stairs and the next minute my sister and I were dancing naked, dripping wet and hugging each other.

Something amazing had happened, and the word had swept round the globe. Everest, the highest mountain in the world, had been climbed. The moment remains clear and vivid, encapsulated in time. My mother, Joy, phoned all our friends who, in turn, phoned more friends, and suddenly our house was full of people opening bottles. The party went on till the early hours.

We woke the next morning to find journalists and photographers in our garden. The press had arrived. Our world had changed, and my father, John Hunt, had become a celebrity. It was several weeks before the Everest team returned to cheering crowds. My mother flew to meet them in Kathmandu, and we plotted their journey home, which was marked by tumultuous welcomes whenever they touched down.

It is difficult now for people to understand the excitement that the event generated. The team were all heroes, hailed wherever they went; every village fête had a Hunt, a Hillary and a Tenzing in their fancy-dress parades, and two tiger cubs at Edinburgh Zoo were named Hunt and Hillary. Invitations and letters poured in from around the world, keeping our long-suffering postman very busy.

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Bourdillon gets within 300 feet but has to turn back; the way is clear for Hillary and Tenzing

**Hunt's team of heroes have the world at their feet as the nation celebrates**

'I was on the right mountain at the right time'

The 'golden calf' that Tenzing pursued claimed him in the end

The men who carry a country's economy on their backs

Charity devoted to the peaks of the world

My father sat in an annexe in our garden writing his book, *The Ascent of Everest*, which was translated into more than 20 languages, and answering the mail. Then came the putting together of the film of the same name and its premiere. They were exciting times for us.

Climbing and mountains had always featured large in our lives. My father was often off on some expedition, so it was no real surprise when he was invited to lead the 1953 Everest expedition. We were all thrilled, of course; it had been his lifelong ambition to climb Everest.

But it nearly didn't happen. He had an opportunity as a young man to join the 1936 expedition but was terribly disappointed when he was thwarted by a supposed heart murmur (which turned out to be incorrect). So this time, when he developed severe sinus problems, it looked as if history was going to repeat itself, for sinus would have presented real problems at altitude.

Gloom and despair descended. Various remedies and cures were tried and failed, then my mother was told of a so-called Magic Box, apparently a form of faith healing. Supposedly, a drop of blood was put into this "box" which then somehow "broadcast" a cure. My parents were definitely not into radical, alternative medicine and this sounded more like mumbo-jumbo, but desperate times called for desperate measures, so the blood was sent off and, to everyone's astonishment and relief, the remedy worked.

My father was granted a sabbatical by the Army and preparations began in earnest. The house filled up with equipment, and there were frequent trips to take it to Tilbury docks, where we were allowed to paint the names of the team on tin mugs. There were farewells at the airport, my sister and I posing sheepishly for photographers, and then they were gone. I have been asked so often if I had been worried, but the truth is I wasn't. Perhaps I was too young to worry and, after all, climbing was what my parents did. I'm sure that my mother was concerned, although she never showed it, except once, just before the news broke — she hadn't heard from my father for some time, and the monsoon was due, which would have made things difficult and dangerous.

Fifty years on this has become history. My father and Tenzing Norgay have now gone, as have many of those who took part in the expedition, their names settling gently into the pages of the past. With half a century of incredible technical advances in sport, and the need to find more extreme forms of adventure and endeavour, perhaps the triumph of that time seems diminished.

Everest is still magnificent, despite the piles of rubbish discarded by queues of would-be "summiters", who pay a fortune to scale the ladders that hang from the steep slopes and ridges of that

once unconquered mountain.

I am not a mountaineer but I feel privileged to have been part of what was a golden moment in history, and my heart still skips a beat when I look at those now-faded headlines . . . HER CROWNING GLORY . . . EVEREST IS CLIMBED.

# Everest: 50 years on

May 14, 2003

How the sacking of Britiain's top mountaineer sparked a mutiny

In 1952, when preparations were well under way, the members of the Himalayan Committee delivered a coup which looked as if it might just put the entire expedition in jeopardy, says Peter Gillman

Eric Shipton with Sherpas at a glacier lake on the main Rongbuk Glacier. He held the record for taking part in the most Everest expeditions

For years Everest had been a British preserve. However, when Tibet was closed by the Chinese Communists in 1950 and the British could no longer rely on the support of the Dalai Lama, the rush to the summit took on a new urgency. Not only did the Nepalese Government grant the 1952 permit to the Swiss, but the French and Germans were waiting in the wings for 1954 and 1955. To the British, 1953 wasn't just Coronation year, it was also, quite possibly, their last chance at Everest.

But the mountain slopes weren't the only scene of feverish competition: there was another, equally dramatic battle going on at home. In the autumn of 1952, when preparations were well under way, the members of the Himalayan Committee, drawn from the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club, delivered a coup which looked as if it might just put the entire expedition in jeopardy. The original leader, Eric Shipton, was deposed, to be replaced by John Hunt, a serving Army officer of far less Himalayan experience.

Shipton's sacking provoked strong emotions and there was a near-mutiny among the prospective British members of the team, while in New Zealand Ed Hillary came close

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Be inspired by the view if you can see it through your tears

**How the sacking of Britiain's top mountaineer sparked a mutiny**

The importance of rigorous military training and diplomatic skills

Purists take on pragmatists in debate over use of oxygen

Bourdillon gets within 300 feet but has to turn back; the way is clear for Hillary and Tenzing

Hunt's team of heroes have the world at their feet as the nation celebrates

Guide
Health
Online Specials
Play
Promotions
Public Agenda
Style Guide
Subscription
Supplements
Talking Point
Television and Radio
The Register
Times e-mail
Times 2
Times Services
Weekend

SPECIAL REPORTS

Investor's Centre
Outsourcing
Special

to withdrawing. It was to take all Hunt's diplomatic skills to win the dissenters back.

Eric Shipton is one of the most colourful characters in the Everest story. With twinkling eyes and a gnomic face, he was an adventurer and explorer, driven by new challenges and the lure of the unknown. He took part in all four British Everest expeditions of the 1930s, which attempted the mountain from the North via Tibet, and was leader of the 1935 team. When Tibet was closed he was prominent in the search for an approach through Nepal, and in 1951 led the reconnaissance group which pushed a way through Khumbu Icefall, the mile-long river of ice which offers the key to the summit from the south. He attracted intense personal loyalty from fellow climbers, who relished his informal, romantic approach and his preference for light-weight groups rather than military-style mountain sieges.

Shipton had long coveted Everest, and in 1938 came within 2,000ft of the summit before being turned back by heavy snow. After the hiatus caused by the war, he was one of the first to push for attempts to be resumed. He had identified a potential route via the Khumbu Icefall and the Western Cwm, even though earlier climbers had dismissed it as impassable. But Shipton persevered, and in autumn 1951 led a six-man team to the top of the icefall, where their way was barred by a crevasse. The climbers retreated, confident that they had prepared the way for a full-scale attempt in 1952 — only to discover that they hadn't been awarded the permit.

The postponement in fact gave the British vital breathing space, and Shipton led an expedition to Cho Oyu, near Everest, to test equipment and conduct physiological trials. To immense British relief, the Swiss failed. Shipton was thus fully confident that he would lead the 1953 expedition.

The Himalyan Committee, however, had numerous objections, fuelled by reports they had received from the Cho Oyu trip. His attachment to light-weight expeditions did not necessarily suit him for the large-scale logistic venture that a first ascent appeared to require. His leadership tended to be too democratic,

often shaped by his colleagues' preferences rather than an overall strategy. He was notoriously disorganised, even forgetting his rucksack when he set off on the 1951 reconnaissance. Crucially, he was prone to self-doubt, and seemed to lack the unrelenting drive vital for success. The committee believed that it had found a suitable alternative in John Hunt, who had several key attributes. He was known as a strategist with a gift for planning and as a respected and decisive leader. Although his mountaineering experience could not match Shipton's, he had climbed in the Himalayas.

It was through its next actions that the committee attracted the greatest opprobrium: having decided that Shipton should be deposed, it appeared unwilling to do so. On July 28 it endorsed Shipton as leader. Six weeks later, it prepared to deliver the *coup de grâce*. Although Shipton attended the meeting, he was excluded when the leadership issue was discussed. The members lined up to cite their criticisms: the expedition "needed a more forceful and dynamic personality"; Shipton spent too much time "writing, lecturing etc"; and "as the expedition was of national importance", a leader "of drive and enthusiasm" should be appointed.

Even now the committee hesitated. It suggested that Shipton and Hunt should act as co-leaders, with Hunt taking charge on the mountain. Shipton recognised this shabby compromise for what it was, and resigned from the expedition.

Shipton was outraged by the "subterfuge and clandestine lobbying", making his feelings clear in a letter to the committee: "There is no precedent in the field of mountaineering and exploratory expeditions for a man with such long and intimate acquaintance with every aspect of a particular enterprise taking a position subordinate to one who, whatever his qualities of character and leadership, has no personal experience of the project." He accused the members of having "little appreciation of the powerful personal and psychological stresses" that could result from a twin leadership.

One of those most dismayed at the turn of events was Tom Bourdillon, a government scientist who had been with Shipton on the 1951 reconnaissance. Bourdillon died in the Alps in 1956 but his wife Jennifer still recalls his strength of feeling. "Tom was shocked,"

she says. Bourdillon, Jennifer insists, bore no ill-will towards Hunt. But his mountaineering record in no way matched Shipton's and there was a whiff of the old boys' club about his appointment, as he was a personal friend of the committee secretary, Basil Goodfellow.

News of these machinations soon reached Hillary. "I had a great warmth for him and an admiration," Hillary says of Shipton. "I had never heard of John Hunt and I was very disappointed to hear that Eric had been replaced by him . . . I did think of pulling out." Within days, Bourdillon protested formally. "We were all upset," confirms Alf Gregory, climber/photographer. But the committee was not to be swayed and Bourdillon withdrew. Shipton asked Bourdillon to reconsider and Hunt asked to meet him; Bourdillon then gave Hunt his support.

Hunt won universal praise for his leadership, and Shipton was at Heathrow to greet them although the rejection had shaken him profoundly and he went through a series of crises. He divorced and at one time struggled to find work. Hillary says that "quite possibly" the mountain would have been climbed with Shipton as leader: "We had a good group of climbers, working together with Eric we would have done quite well." Gregory is less certain: "I had a sort of inner realisation that he may not have been the right leader for that climb."

# Everest



May 14, 2003

## The 'golden calf' that Tenzing pursued claimed him in the end

Jonathan Gornall traces the Sherpa icon's descent into disillusion and depression

Tenzing Norgay on the summit of the peak, Chukhung. He did not find the view from the top of Everest as enchanting as he had imagined

The moment Tenzing Norgay set foot on the summit of Everest, he stopped being a man and became a symbol and a brand name. At 39, after a life of hardship and poverty, this simple son of a Tibetan yak herder had achieved the goal that had eluded generations of wealthy, advantaged Europeans.

As a child, he had heard the talk that the Europeans were bent on climbing the sacred mountain because they believed a golden calf awaited them on the summit. At about 11.30am on May 29, 1953, as he and Sir Edmund Hillary stood there and gazed about them, the pair found their golden prize.

But as Hillary's eyes took in the vista of tall peaks, Tenzing's gaze instead fell fondly on the slopes and valleys below — the landscape of his life. Yes, he would make money — more money than a Sherpa could ever dream about — but the more he saw of the wide world the more he realised, and the more he resented, that his reward would never equal that of Hillary's.

His disappointment, his sense of anticlimax, was best summed up in the remark he made to one of his sons, who later asked his permission to follow in his footsteps. "You can't see the entire world from the top of Everest," he cautioned Jambling in 1983. "The view from there only reminds you how big the world is and how much more there is to see and learn."

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

'I was on the right mountain at the right time'

**The 'golden calf' that Tenzing pursued claimed him in the end**

The men who carry a country's economy on their backs

Charity devoted to the peaks of the world

When fame can mean death

Coming to a Napalese cybercafe near you: 'The Everest Experience'

Tenzing was born in 1914 in a poor village nestling in a remote Tibetan valley only a day's march from Everest and close to the border with modern Nepal. Despite becoming the man who would give the world Sherpa vans, Sherpa boots and a hundred other products whose makers sought identification with the "noble spirit of the plucky hillmen", he was not even a Sherpa. His family had moved to Khumbu, where Tibetans were looked down upon, and where the once sniffy locals now revere and claim him as their own: "Tenzing Sherpa".

"His was the most astonishing life," says Ed Douglas, a climber himself and author of a new biography of Tenzing. "He was the first humbly-born Asian to become globally famous, and this is a man who has literally come from nowhere. Yet he is now an icon for achievement: reaching the summit of Everest is the most obvious metaphor there is.

"On balance, I think he should be regarded as a great man. For him, even getting to the foot of the mountain was an achievement. In the Twenties you'd have thought it would be some effete Englishman from Cambridge who'd have got to the top of Everest first."

And yet, as Tenzing discovered, the view from the top wasn't quite as enchanting as he had imagined. Sherpas had been the mainstay of Himalayan forays since the Twenties. On the whole, they were treated well, but there was only a harsh living to be made from climbing until Tenzing broke the mould. Lhakpa Chgedi, who carried loads for the 1924 Mallory expedition, ended his days as a doorman for a Calcutta department store. Others, crippled by frostbite, descended even further, often into alcoholism.

Tenzing was only a child when Bentley Beetham, on Everest with a British expedition in 1924, said of the Sherpas — the men upon whom they relied utterly: "It has been said that these men could easily reach the top if they themselves really wished to. I do not believe it for one moment . . . they lack the right mentality."

The child who grew up to prove him wrong had been entered into a monastery as a trainee monk, destined to become a lama. But after being struck by a tutor he ran back home. One consequence of his flight was that he never learnt to read or write. He became obsessed by the idea of education, and, thanks only to climbing Everest, put all six of his children through school. As he said to Jamling in 1983: "I climbed Everest so that you wouldn't have to."

There was little glory for the Sherpas but large helpings of death. One calamity seems to have charged the imagination of 19-year-old Tenzing. The Germans in the Thirties became obsessed with Nanga Parbat in the Indus valley, at 26,656ft (8,125m) the ninth highest mountain in the world. In 1934 an expedition got to within 900ft of the top before a storm blew in. Six Sherpas and four of the Germans died. Tenzing arrived in Darjeeling shortly after the tragedy, and the sense of pride in the community fired his ambition to climb. By the time the Swiss so nearly beat the British to the summit

in 1952, Tenzing had become the sirdar of choice. It was while climbing with the Swiss, who, unlike the diffident British, treated him as a climbing equal, he realised he had a chance of making the summit. “He was the first Sherpa to figure out that if he climbed Everest he would make a lot of money,” says Douglas, author of *Tenzing: Hero of Everest*.

But Tenzing’s golden calf proved to be tarnished. Despite the adulation, he felt a sense of anticlimax, Douglas says. “The more he travelled the bigger he realised the world was, and instead of being satisfied with what he’d done and accepting there was always going to be somebody with more than him, it gnawed away at him that the western climbers had done better, particularly Hillary.”

Tenzing lived into his seventies. His young third wife took to spending more and more time away. He suspected she was having affairs and, lonely and disillusioned, he turned increasingly to alcohol to take the edge off his depression. Visitors to his home in Darjeeling were often surprised to see that a picture of him with Raymond Lambert, his Swiss friend from the 1952 expedition, took pride of place, rather than his Everest photo.

Tenzing had climbed with the English in 1953 because it was the surest way to achieve his ambition, but in his heart he wished he had stood on top of the world with Lambert.

He died in 1986, apparently of a brain haemorrhage. When Hillary came to pay his respects to the great Sherpa he remarked: “I looked for the last time on the still, waxy face of my friend who had shared that great moment some 33 years before. He seemed so much smaller than the strong, vigorous person I had known.”

*Tenzing: Hero of Everest*, National Geographic, £18.99.

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## Charity devoted to the peaks of the world

The Mount Everest Foundation (MEF), the UK charity for mountain exploration and science, was set up in 1953 by the Alpine Club and Royal Geographical Society. The MEF is the only major national mountaineering charity in the world.

Initially financed from the surplus funds and subsequent royalties of the 1953 expedition, the MEF was founded to encourage climbers in their understanding and exploration of the world's mountain regions.

Since its inception, the foundation has dispensed £750,000 in grants. Most go to small expeditions organised by adventurous young people. Often the grants are just enough to pay for an air fare, but the support of the MEF is valued in the climbing community and expeditions with MEF support can usually find sponsorship elsewhere. MEF grants keep British teams at the forefront of exploration and endeavour.

Present policy is to maintain this. Some 30 or 40 expeditions are supported each year. The MEF's screening committee tries to support small expeditions to unexplored areas, which is important because to date only half the peaks at 7,000m (nearly 23,000ft) or more have been climbed.

The MEF has supported expeditions to the Earth's highest peaks including first ascents and new routes on Everest, Kangchenjunga and Annapurna. Many expeditions are devoted to scientific and exploration work. Notable among these were the RGS Mulu (Sarawak) Expedition, the RGS International Karakoram Project and high-altitude physiological studies on Kongur.

The foundation, which encourages the protection of mountains, their people, culture, fauna and flora, requires teams to follow strict environmental policies.

The MEF relies on donations, and it is hoped that the 50th anniversary celebrations will generate enough income for it to continue its valuable work. (http://www.mef.org.uk/).



# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## The men who carry a country's economy on their backs

The treatment of Sherpas is poor, says Doug McKinlay

Heavy load of the Sherpa

In the five decades since Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay ascended Everest, Nepal has evolved from being an isolated mountain kingdom to one of the world's premier mountaineering and trekking destinations. It is an activity that is the backbone of the country's economy, an economy carried on the back of Nepal's thousands of mountain porters.

The porter labour force isn't new. For centuries it has been the principal means of moving goods around the high alpine reaches of the Himalayas. What is new, however, is the modern economy in which they now work. After Hillary reached the summit of Everest, the trekking industry exploded. It was to be both boom and bust for porters.

Since trekking became such a lucrative industry, Nepal's porters have been treated, as Sir Edmund remarked, "like tins of beans" — once used, they are tossed on the rubbish tip. However, the issue of how porters are treated is complex. It is a valuable industry that provides jobs in one of the world's poorest countries on the one hand, while at the same time it has them working under conditions described by a Pakistani tour operator as tantamount to slavery.

Myth has played a big role in their lives. For years Western trekkers were fed the notion that porters were almost superhuman, that they carried massive loads in harsh conditions, dressed in minimal clothing because that was the way they liked it. Nothing was further from the truth.

The reality is that most porters are lowland farmers trying to earn extra income to feed their families. Very few understand the difficulties of working at high elevations. And, until five years ago, both Western and Nepalese trekking outfits treated them like beasts of burden. The greatest danger porters and trekkers alike encounter is the affects of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS) compounded by freezing temperatures. AMS occurs when trekkers gain

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

The 'golden calf' that Tenzing pursued claimed him in the end

**The men who carry a country's economy on their backs**

Charity devoted to the peaks of the world

When fame can mean death

Coming to a Napalese cybercafe near you: 'The Everest Experience'

Man nor beast? The elusive yeti

altitude too quickly and don't drink enough water. The symptoms can be as minimal as a bad headache and nausea, or as severe as a pulmonary oedema, a dangerous accumulation of water in the lungs.

In 1997 a young mountain porter employed by a Western trekking company fell sick and was dismissed while still at high altitude. After being paid off and sent down on his own, he died at the side of the trail.

Out of this the International Porters Protection Agency (IPPA) was formed. Although not an easy task, its goal is to try to prevent such incidents from occurring again.

IPPA's founder, Jim Duff, believes that it is up to Western trekking companies to lead by example but, at the same time, care must be taken.

"If we handle the situation the wrong way everybody will be out of work," he says. "A good example is Nepal's carpet industry. Not long ago it was a thriving trade but the Western media got its hands on it and labelled it a hotbed of child labour. Within a very short time the industry all but crashed. What didn't make the news though was that many of those factories were providing work as well as education, food and often places to live. Kathmandu's number of street kids increased by 300 per cent. We don't want that to happen to the porters."

"There is a benign indifference to the needs of the lower-caste porters, not just from Sherpas but also from many in the travel business," he adds. "Western trekking companies, by and large, now have policies that include proper treatment of porters. Nepalese trekking companies have no interest other than making money."

Pal Tashi Tamang is 38 and has been a porter for the past 18 years. He says conditions have improved but not in every company. He is employed by the London-based World Expeditions and says he gets fair treatment. But he has harsh words about a former employer.

"It was very difficult," he says. "They didn't provide us with any proper clothing, not even boots. We were never fed. We either carried our own food as well as the clients', or had to pay for it in teahouses along the way. We never had a place to stay at night, so we often had to sleep in caves or huddle together. And if any of us got sick, we were just left to our own devices."

The Welsh mountaineer David Durkan has been guiding treks and climbs in the Himalayas for the past 32 years. He says one of the problems is that everything is too easy. Tourists turn up for a few weeks but never really get involved with the porters who struggle with their gear; a situation that further removes porters from the process of the hike, leaving them open to abuse.

"What trekking companies promise is the instant Everest — go up, throw up and come down. And none of it is possible without the lowly porter," he says. "I can lie in a sleeping-bag designed for -

40°C and my fingernails won't even crack, while the guy outside, the guy who packed that sleeping bag up the mountain for me, freezes to death."

But it is not just Nepalese trekking companies which come under fire for mistreating their staff. Western backpackers have also been blamed.

"They are the ones who take the most liberties with porters," says the trekking guide Rinzin Sherpa. "They often share one porter and overload him. The porter won't say no because he needs the money and gets paid by weight. And when the porters have worn themselves out, they are paid off and left to fend for themselves."

Although overall conditions for porters working for companies have improved greatly, it is not the same with independent porters. Estimates vary but there are approximately 100,000 employed directly by companies and double that who are freelances. This unseen 200,000 are, according to Durkan, the real engine behind Nepal's trekking industry. "It is on the back of those 200,000 that Nepal's tourist industry rides," he says. "These are the guys carrying the infrastructure of tourism — the food, the beer, the toilet paper."

"IPPG has no authority to take action against anyone. All they can do is advise," says Rinzin Sherpa. "Not even the Government can take action. You cannot improve the life of the independent porters. They are hired by small business people who are operating at the margins."

Nepal's economy is also at a crossroads. In the last two years tourism has dropped 70 per cent. The killing of members of the Royal Family followed by September 11, and a continued uprising by Maoist rebels has made Westerners wary of visiting Nepal. As tourism dries up, so improving working conditions will take a back seat only adding to the stress under which porters work.

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## Fame also means death and humilation

For many Sherpas providing services for climbing and trekking is a necessity in an area where there are few job opportunities (Pic: Royal Geographical Society)

Danu Sherpa is a bitter man. “We’d got them to the top after two weeks of carrying their tents, supplies and then, for the summit attempt, the extra bottles of water and oxygen, and they said, ‘Stop there! You mustn’t come any further’. We were only a few metres from the summit but they wouldn’t let us go with them. They like to say they did it alone. They don’t want us in the summit photo!” He is describing a German expedition he took up Everest in 1999. A slight man in his early forties, he looks much older. He sits surrounded by his climbing photos in his house in the Sol Khumbu area of Nepal. He is one of 100 elite Sherpas hired by the expeditions. A Sherpa gets about £2,000 for each expedition and an extra £1,000 if he gets it to the top. “They promised us a bonus as compensation for not going to the top,” Danu continues. “When we got to Base Camp we found that they’d taken a helicopter back to Kathmandu. When we got there we found they’d flown home. We never got the money.”

The success of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay transformed the lives of the Sherpas but, as Danu Sherpa suggests, the Everest experience has also brought problems. He takes me to visit his namesake, another Danu Sherpa. He has been to the top of the mountain three times and will join one of this year’s memorial expeditions. “The British, Canadian and American groups are OK,” he says. “It is the Koreans and Russians who push us.

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Charity devoted to the peaks of the world

**When fame can mean death**

Coming to a Napalese cybercafe near you: 'The Everest Experience'

Man nor beast? The elusive yeti

The risk of paying the ultimate price is just as real today

Ancient lands marked by strife and isolation

Even if there has been an avalanche, they say, ‘We’ve paid you. You’ve got to go on’. The worst bit is the bodies. After the expedition, we are paid to go back up and collect the rubbish and the bodies of the foreign climbers. But there is not the money or time to collect Sherpa bodies. I dont like it.”

Forty-seven Sherpas have been killed, while more than 100 climbers have lost their lives. The difference is that the latter willingly take the risk while, for many Sherpas, it is a job opportunity in an environment where there are few others.

Sue Lloyd Roberts

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## The risk of paying the ultimate price is just as real today

Clive Tully looks at the perils facing inexperienced climbers with high expectations

Dougal Haston nears the top of the Hillary Step on the day he and Doug Scott reached the summit in 1975. Haston died two years later while skiing alone in the Swiss Alps

Remembering the date of the historic first ascent of Everest has always been easy for Doug Scott, the first Briton to reach the summit. He was 12 when Hillary and Tenzing stood on the roof of the world — May 29 happens to be his birthday. His 62nd birthday this year will be a little different, too. Scott will be taking one of the starring roles in the Royal Gala Celebration of the Everest jubilee in the presence of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh at the Odeon in Leicester Square.

Scott, appointed a CBE in 1994, is not just an institution in British mountaineering. Having made some of the most difficult climbs over a long career, he has beaten the odds. Many of his climbing partners did not, including Dougal Haston, with whom he made the first British ascent of Everest “the hard way” in September 1975. The fact that they came down from the summit at all was a surprise. Having topped out late in the day, there was no time to get back to camp before night fell. Haston and Scott dug themselves into a snowhole at 28,700ft (8,747m), just below the South Summit. Their overnight bivouac without oxygen remains the highest on record, and the climb up Everest’s formidable South West Face is still seen as an all-time feat of high-altitude mountaineering.

These days, climbers using supplementary oxygen have the benefit of lightweight Russian cylinders.

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Man nor beast? The elusive yeti

**The risk of paying the ultimate price is just as real today**

Ancient lands marked by strife and isolation

Why climbers can't keep away despite the terror of the death zone

Exhibitions

Join in the celebrations

Book offer

They are half the weight of the British aluminium tanks used by the 1975 expedition. Weight wasn't the only problem. There was an anxious moment when Haston's system iced up and Scott used his Swiss Army knife to undo a jubilee clip and prise out the lump of ice. He considers that enough subsequent ascents have been made of Everest and the other peaks over 26,000ft without oxygen that it is no longer a consideration for serious mountaineers. "When I went to Kangchenjunga, which is only 800ft lower than Everest, it was marvellous to be up there without the weight of the bottles. I realised that the contents simply weren't worth the extra effort required to carry them," he says.

Other aids cannot be avoided. The Khumbu Icefall is a vast cascade of ice which guards the approaches to the Western Cwm and South Col. It is the most dangerous part of the South Col route, where blocks of ice the size of houses tumble down without warning. Larger crevasses are bridged by aluminium ladders, sometimes using two or three bolted end to end, with fixed rope handrails. Scott's 1975 expedition used 60 six-foot aluminium ladder sections and more than 1,000 feet of rope to make a safe route through the icefall. In 1975 a Chinese assault on the northern side of Everest led to an aluminium ladder being placed on the Second Step at 28,250ft, taking some but not all of the problems out of a steep and crumbly 100ft rock face. While no one today would dream of making a rock pitch easier, the ladder was climbed by subsequent expeditions because it might as well be used. It survived for more than 20 years before storms swept it away.

Fixed ropes are safety lines used to connect one camp with another higher up the mountain, as aids to scaling steeper slopes when climbing, and to guide weary climbers as they descend. A single expedition aims to get its fixed ropes in at the start of the climb to enable people to move up and down the mountain more easily. Whereexpeditions share the same route, there may be an attempt to share the responsibilities of fixing ropes or ladders, although it is easy to wait for another team to do all the work. It is more likely that if serviceable ropes are in place, an expedition will improve security by using its ropes to fill in gaps. But depending on someone else's fixed rope could endanger your life.

Even on guided trips, where there is extensive use of fixed lines, it is possible for people to get disorientated and lost if there is not a continuous rope guiding them all the way back to their camp. "Basically, if they haven't served an apprenticeship on the mountains,when things go wrong, they're far more exposed to paying the ultimate price," says Scott.

As he sees it, people trying to climb Everest as tourists pay their money and absolve themselves of personal responsibility, expecting others to bail them out when things go wrong. "But at extreme altitude it's simply not possible," says Scott. "Before they pay up, clients should be made aware that there's very little that can be done for anyone if they hit problems high up in the death zone. Basically, that's summit day — anywhere above the South Col at 26,000ft."

He also considers the gimmicky notion of claiming records to be dangerous and pointless, along with more spurious claims for climbing solo, or for speed ascents. “Many have claimed solo ascents, but, in reality, other expeditions have been around them, so they haven’t had to break trail for themselves, and they were using their fixed ropes. It’s hardly the same as when Messner first soloed Everest in 1980, with only his pregnant girlfriend waiting below.”

Looking back, Scott regards his ascent of Everest as a milestone. It proved that if you have enough experienced climbers, which they did (six had been to the South West Face before), you are well led (an excellent job by Chris Bonington), you have reasonable weather, and you have enough backup, you can do anything. But the climb also marked a turning point in the approach to big Himalayan peaks.

“Climbing is about facing up to uncertainty,” he says. “Repeating someone else’s ascent would be a waste of time. When we went back to the Himalayas to do other mountains, we went back to climb in a more lightweight, Alpine style. That was the case on Kangchenjunga — just four people, lightweight, without oxygen. And that for me was far more satisfying than climbing Everest with the full Monty.”

*Doug Scott is the founder and operations director of Community Action Nepal, a charitable trust; http://www.canepal.org.uk/.*

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## Ancient lands marked by strife and isolation

Funeral pyre of a member of the Nepalese Royal Family, murdered two years ago

For generations Nepal was a land as inaccessible as the highest and most famous mountain on its border. The ancient kingdom cut itself off from the outside world in an attempt to protect its culture and independence from powerful neighbours — the British, and, later, an independent India in the south and the Chinese in the north. Indeed, exploration of Everest was severely restricted by the long ban on foreign travel in Nepal, and the country began to open up only after the first successful assault on the mountrain had been completed.

For centuries Nepal was ruled by various Hindu dynasties. It was not until the 18th century that powerful rulers were able to consolidate their hold, establishing their capital in Kathmandu. From 1775 until 1951 Nepalese politics was characterised by confrontations between the Royal Family, the Shah dynasty, and several noble families, the most important of which was the Rana family.

For two centuries the British conquest of India had presented Nepal with its greatest external challenge. The rulers came to various accommodations, among which was the recruitment of the Nepalese for the highly valued Gurkha units in the British Indian Army. In 1950 the sovereignty of the crown was restored and the revolutionary forces of the Nepali Congress Party predominated in the administration.

Democracy proved hard to introduce, however. A Constitution was finally introduced in 1959, and the Nepali Congress Party won an overwhelming victory and formed a government. It soon fell out with King Mahrenda, who dismissed it in 1960, imprisoned most of its leaders and dissolved the Constitution in 1962. A new Constitution concentrated all real power in his hands. He died in 1972, succeeded by his Eton-educated son Birendra.

The new King formed a strategic alliance by marrying a prominent member of the Rana family. Throughout the 1970s he tried to speed up economic development while maintaining his father's "non-party" political system. In 1982 he proposed direct popular elections for the National

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

The risk of paying the ultimate price is just as real today

**Ancient lands marked by strife and isolation**

Why climbers can't keep away despite the terror of the death zone

Exhibitions

Join in the celebrations

Book offer

Assembly and also allowed limited freedom to some outlawed parties, including the Nepali National Congress. Unrest rumbled, however, and underground communist parties began to win support.

In the 1980s tensions rose, the Government periodically cracked down hard on agitators, the press and demonstrators. In 1990 the King announced a general amnesty and published a new Constitution allowing political parties while making him a constitutional monarch. Throughout the 1990s a series of unstable governments tried to fight Maoist agitation in the countryside while speeding internal development.

The most cataclysmic event, however, was the massacre on June 1, 2001, when the drunken Crown Prince Dipendra turned a machinegun on his father, mother, brother and other senior royalty before killing himself. Only the King's brother Gyandendra, out of the country at the time, survived. He was proclaimed King.

Nepal has scarcely recovered. The Maoist rebellion gathered pace. Thousands of Nepalese have been massacred by the Government and Nepal now faces a cloudy future.

The other ancient land that guards the approaches to Everest is Tibet. Its history has also been marked by isolation and strife but since the Chinese invasion and occupation in 1950 it has ceased to be a separate country and is now a province of China.

Before the 1950s, Tibet, covering the "roof of the world" plateau north of the Himalayas, was an ancient, poor, isolated land dominated by a Buddhist religious hierarchy that owed its loyalty and legitimacy to the Dalai Lama. The Chinese attempted to modernise the country and build new infrastructure, but their presence was deeply resented and in 1959 a general uprising broke out in Lhasa. The Dalai Lama fled to India. The revolt was forcibly suppressed, and since then China has attempted to remodel Tibetan society, undermine the power of the monasteries and flood the province with immigrants.

Tibet, like all China, was shaken by the Cultural Revolution and periodic repression. But in recent years Beijing has attempted a more relaxed policy and tried to win local loyalties. Special restrictions on travel still apply, however, and China is extremely sensitive to outside criticism, foreign aknowledgement of the Dalai Lama or questioning of its policies in Tibet.

Michael Binyon

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## Why climbers can't keep away despite the terror of the death zone

Rebecca Stephens explains why see was prepared to lose two fingers - maybe more - for the sake of success

A climber whose hands have been affected by frostbite, which starts off with blistering

For all the fun and gimmicks that surround Everest now, climbing her remains a dangerous occupation. We should not be surprised by deaths on Everest. For every six or seven climbers who have stood on the summit, one has died. That is 175 people over the years. Yet one such incident — that involving a British photographer, Bruce Herrod — touched me in a way that felt uncomfortably close to home.

Bruce was climbing in the spring of 1996. I was in London and, late one Saturday morning, picked up the telephone and called his girlfriend. “Bruce has just summited,” she said.

“Fantastic news,” I responded. Until I heard what she had to say next. Bruce had called her in the last few minutes from the top of Everest via satellite. This meant he was actually on or close to the summit at the exact moment we were speaking, alone, he had said — and in the Himalayas it was almost dusk. If he was forced to bivouac at 28,000ft — maybe 29,000ft — his chance of survival was slim.

In the next few days the news seeped back to me: Bruce was assumed dead. I cannot say that I knew Bruce’s girlfriend well — he only a little better — but, perhaps because of that phone call made at such a poignant moment, my sympathy was almost entirely with her, and my feelings for Bruce, frankly, were of anger. How dare he? What of his promise to turn back if his progress was slow? What the hell was he doing on the summit so late in the day? I raged for days, until a friend, another Everester, cut me short, telling me: “But Rebecca, you would have done exactly the same.”

That is the problem with mountaineering. You are totally immersed in it one moment and then

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Ancient lands marked by strife and isolation

**Why climbers can't keep away despite the terror of the death zone**

Exhibitions

Join in the celebrations

Book offer

Win a 14-day trek to base camp

Posters, prints and great opportunities

Membership

removed the next. When you are in the big mountains death surrounds you and, brutal though it sounds, is almost the norm. When I made my climb in 1993 five people died while we were on Everest, another 13 on McKinley. Then you step back into daily life and the whole thing seems a nonsense.

Was my friend right? Would I have pushed as hard to make it to the summit? I don't doubt that we are prepared to take greater risks the closer we get to our goal. One morning at Base Camp, for instance, I woke up to discover an ugly blistering of the little finger on my left hand. Frostbite. I found myself asking, would I be prepared to lose a finger for Everest? Or two? And the answer, casting an eye up at the mountain — in a different world, there in the Himalayas — was yes. While here in London I think that is mad.

On the South Col, too, my judgment was coloured by the proximity of the summit — just half a day's climb away, tantalisingly close. The weather was not great but, with the Sherpas Ang Passang and Kami Tchering, I went for it anyway and was lucky that a forecast storm held off just long enough for us to return safely.

It might have been very different. The weather might have deteriorated. The Britons Doug Scott, Dougal Haston and Stephen Venables — all strong, experienced — bivouacked within a stone's throw of the summit and survived, but many more have died in similar circumstances.

In time, my opinion of Bruce's actions softened. Risk and its relationship with danger and fear is perplexing, particularly when the aim is so unnecessary. If mountains are so dangerous, why go there? Because — talking only for myself — it is invigorating, because the landscape inspires, because there is nowhere I feel more alive. You know if you mess up you are in trouble. It sharpens the senses — an antidote to our suburban lives.

I have been very, very frightened in the mountains. I keep going back for more only because I forget the bad bits, and the memories of the good bits are so intense. On Everest there were times when my heart was in my mouth. I didn't much like teetering over gaping crevasses on wobbly aluminium ladders in the Khumbu Icefall, or sitting out a storm on the South Col with the wind, screaming, buckling the poles of our tent. It was the violence of it all that got to me. But, oddly, on the summit day — the most dangerous leg of the journey — I was not scared. I found myself calculating risks but I never truly believed that I would be one of the unlucky ones. I have been petrified climbing a rock face in Gloucestershire — palms dripping, legs juddering out of control, despite the security of a bombproof rope and anchor. Rationally, I know it is safe but, emotionally, hanging a couple of hundred feet above a void, I need some convincing.

As I set off from Everest's South Col on summit day, the rational part of my brain understood that the danger of extreme altitude lay ahead, but my instinctive brain was not alerted because, on the normal route, the upper reaches of Everest look so innocuous, like a Snowdonian hill. On our descent from the summit, still a long way from our high camp, there was half an hour or so when cloud engulfed us, visibility deteriorated virtually to zero, and, on a narrow ridge, we dared not move. For the first time I believed that our luck might finally have run out. Yet, with nowhere to fly, and no reason to fight, I felt no fear — only an overwhelming acceptance and calm.

# Everest: 50 years on



May 14, 2003

## Conditions bad, base abandoned said code: it really meant success

In The Times house journal for 1953, the reporter James Morris recalled his assignment on Mount Everest and how he and the newspaper's foreign desk plotted to keep the story from falling into the hands of their rivals

An aerial view of Mount Everest showing the various routes climbed, including the 1953 route, seen above Nuptse

Chomolungma is the local name for Everest, and it is characteristic that there are at least five different translations, all by scholars of repute. Everest, for all its grandeur, is a pernickety mountain, a place of waspish annoyances and difficulties. For the newspaperman the most awkward thing about it is its situation. It lies bang on the border between Nepal and Tibet, the one country just emerging from that peculiarly romantic political state known as "forbidden", the other in Communist hands and barred to Western visitors. The mountain is thus ridiculously remote and inaccessible. The sinews of a foreign news service are the international cables and telephones, for without them the hottest news is liable to cool; but from Everest to the nearest cable office or telephone it is about 180 difficult and roadless miles.

Wireless transmitters are not encouraged in Nepal, so the most obvious way of getting news away from the mountain is ruled out from the start. When

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

A victory for the human spirit

**Conditions bad, base abandoned said code: it really meant success**

The last great imperial adventure and the last time we could look down on the rest of the world

'One of the most stupendous works in the whole history of science'

When wrathful deities made mountains places of fear

A network of heroic amateurs determined to get to the top

the problem of communications with the British 1953 expedition was discussed in London early this year, ingenious amateurs suggested that carrier pigeons might be used; or beacon fires; or that dispatches might be floated in watertight containers down the river that flows from the region of the mountain into India. One enthusiast wondered if use might not be made of those strange powers of telepathy for which Tibetan sages are allegedly noted.

But the only really practicable way of sending messages from Everest to the cable office at Kathmandu was by runner.

Runners recruited from the Sherpas, the tough people who live in the area, had been employed by all previous expeditions. This time competition was going to be ruthless and unremitting, and it was foreseen that runners would be intercepted and bribed to disgorge their news, that dispatches would be milched, and hearsay information cagily collated.

The most careful plans were therefore laid in the old *Times*'s offices at Printing House Square (abbreviated to PHS) to ensure that *The Times* had the fullest and speediest news service from the mountain. We alone had the copyright of Colonel Hunt's own dispatches, but there was nothing to prevent any enterprising rival from sending a correspondent to the foot of the mountain to pick up what he could.

It was decided in February that I should join the expedition as Special Correspondent, to see that our news got away swiftly and safely, and to supplement Hunt's messages with dispatches of my own. ("I wish," said the Foreign Editor when they gave me this welcome assignment, "I wish Morris didn't look quite so pleased!") From the mountain our messages were to go by runner to Arthur Hutchinson, Delhi Correspondent of *The Times*, who would be stationed at Kathmandu to shepherd them through the cable office and interpret them where necessary. Hutchinson had dealt with the dispatches sent by the Swiss expeditions to Everest last year, and he probably knew more about news communications with the mountain than anyone else. In case the Kathmandu route proved unsatisfactory, an Indian employed by Hutchinson was to be at a town on the Indian frontier, 150 miles or so south of Everest, prepared to transmit any dispatches sent his way.

I left London for Delhi by air halfway through March, and on March 25 I flew into Kathmandu. This extraordinary place, all palaces and pinnacles, wide green spaces and cluttered bazaars, princes and drooling children, lies in a wide, secluded plain surrounded by high hills. The aircraft from India weaves its way through a narrow mountain gorge, the peaks towering above it on either side, until suddenly in the green below there appears the fabled capital, for all the world like something in a lost world or a forgotten country of legend.

Hutchinson was waiting for me (in bed with a fever) in the city's one "hotel". This was a nobleman's palace, converted for familiar economic reasons into a cross between an army transit camp, a provincial museum, and a seaside boarding house. At every conceivable doorway throughout the building was laid a fibre mat inscribed with the ironic word "Welcome".

The walls of every room were hung horribly with life-size portraits of the nobleman's relatives (one of them apparently in the uniform of the Nepalese Navy, and looking quite extraordinarily like Admiral Beatty). Here and there could be found a stuffed crocodile, or a petrified ibis, and in the hall two small tigers were locked in eternal conflict. Sometimes the place would echo with the roars of a rather mangy lion (a live one) that happened to live in a private zoo across the road. Now and again, too, the entire building would reverberate with Hutchinson's exasperated bellow: "Bearer!" The Everest news campaign had already opened. The main body of the expedition had left for the fortnight's trek to Kathmandu, closely followed by Ralph Izzard of the *Daily Mail*. Colin Reid of *The Daily Telegraph* (an old colleague of mine from Egypt days) was living on boiled chicken — the safest dish in the "hotel"— and several Indian newspapermen were in Kathmandu. A Reuter correspondent was expected any day.

I was to travel to Everest with Major Jimmy Roberts, a Gurkha officer who was taking oxygen supplies to the expedition. We set about recruiting our ragged, barefoot, petulant porters and assembling their loads in the garden of the British Embassy.

On March 27, as we were engaged in this job, we were astounded to get a message from Hunt dispatched only two days before from Namche Bazar, a village about 30 miles from Mount Everest. It takes anything up to 12 days for a runner to travel from Namche to Kathmandu; Hunt's message could only mean that somewhere out there, in primitive country first visited by Europeans three years before, there existed a wireless transmitter. The message had reached Kathmandu through the Indian Embassy; but the embassy staff were decidedly reticent about its origins, and the strange transmitter was very much in my mind throughout the long trek from Kathmandu. It was a difficult walk through mountainous country, enlivened by occasional plank bridges swinging dizzily over torrents, by groves of gorgeous rhododendrons, by quaint local music and quainter local food. Once I found an enormous and very damp frog sitting in my sleeping-bag, and for days my porters thought it funny to shout at me: "Sahib! Sahib! One frog in your bed!" Once (on Easter Day) I had an attack of stomach trouble so acute that every hundred yards or so I had to lie flat on my back and wish Everest to perdition.

Several times beetles five or more inches long swooped around our heads. More than once I wondered if it really was all right to drink the grey and syrupy liquid that passed for water.

Twice I sent short dispatches back, addressed to

the British Embassy in Kathmandu. The first I entrusted to a group of Hunt's porters whom we met on their way back to the capital. The second was taken by a rather dotty-looking young man I recruited in the bazaar-village of Those (a village exquisitely set beside a clear fresh river and between lovely wooded hills): he shambled off in the general direction of Kathmandu, and I heard later that he delivered the message crumpled but intact, and collected his fee from Hutchinson.

I gave one old boy, with an immense white beard, a copy of the airmail edition of *The Times*. He regarded it with such veneration that when I came back the same way, more than three months later, he still had it protruding prominently from the neck of his shirt.

A fortnight of walking brought us to Namcheyes. This is the headquarters village of the Sherpas, and as full of gossip as a suburban shopping centre or a cavalry mess. I had not been there ten minutes before I discovered the truth about the wireless transmitter. Namche is only a few miles from the frontier with Communist Tibet, and the Indian Government (which enjoys a privileged position in Nepal) has established a police post there to keep an eye on movement over the border: hence the radio link with Kathmandu.

The Indians manning the post seemed friendly enough, and indeed transmitted a short message for me. (In London a kindly sub-editor headed the piece with the phrase "By runner to Kathmandu"; and our rivals were astonished to find that in Nepal there were men who could run 150 miles in three days.) But I did not feel altogether happy about them. There was no guarantee that any news they sent for me would be kept private, and I resolved that unless other correspondents used the transmitter for news I would not use it except for the final message of success or failure; and even then I would disguise the news in some way.

Next day we reached Thyangboche, where some of the climbers, including Tenzing, were encamped. They had finished their preliminary training, and were going up to Everest the next day. I sent a message home that night with the mail runner, who was going back to Kathmandu with the expedition's letters, and set about recruiting some Sherpas to look after me during my stay on the mountain.

They are an odd people in appearance, the Sherpas. They are short and stocky, like Toby jugs, and they wear coarse, dark woollen cloaks, high fur-lined hats, and embroidered Tibetan boots. (I had a tiny pair made for my small son, and for weeks my wife has been trying to rid them of their violent smell of yak.) Their wives are shy and pretty in youth, loud-mouthed and importunate in middle-age, and appalling in their dotage. I was an unwilling admirer of the Sherpas, for I did not like their heartiness but deeply respected their good cheer, their honesty and their resolution.

I became, however, greatly attached to my cook-sirdar, a friendly character named Sonam, and later stayed with him at his house lower in the valley. He specialised in a delicious dinner dish which it was his fancy to call "Snowman Pie". It consisted of

chopped-up yak meat decoratively embedded in mashed potato and garnished with a vegetable called a "Thyangboche onion" — excellent, if indigestible. He also had an uncanny knack of whistling up boiled potatoes, sizzling from the fire and covered in butter. Sonam, like every Sherpa I met, was an incorrigible tippler, and did his best to corrupt me by producing at odd moments through the day a hideous old bottle full of *rakhsi*, a drink closely akin to methylated spirits made from fermented rice (it was not at all bad).

With this good friend, and with a little company of Sherpas to carry my goods, I set off with Charles Evans and Alfred Gregory for the mountain. Thyangboche is at about 13,500ft, and soon we were above the 15,000ft mark. At this height the unacclimatised visitor is likely to feel breathless and unduly tired, and it was something of a strain moving up the Khumbu Glacier that leads to the foot of the mountain.

The glacier valley is all boulders and moraine, interspersed with snowfields and great pinnacles of ice; but it is saved by its surroundings — for it is overlooked by one of the most magnificent groups of mountains in the world, peak upon peak in a splendid profusion. The site of the expedition's base camp was a moraine hillock in the middle of the glacier, just below the boot of the icefall, a mass of crumbling ice which led on to the mountain proper. It was a bleak and unfriendly place, with temperatures at that time sometimes very much below freezing point.

Here I settled down for a stay of some weeks during the preliminary operations on Everest, moving sometimes higher on the mountain, but always returning to base to organise my runners. I had a double sleeping-bag; a high-altitude tent; a radio receiver for hearing BBC weather broadcasts (the BBC also broadcast the news of the birth of my second son); two walkie-talkie sets for communication with other camps on the mountain; my camera; my typewriter; some books; and three desperately heavy sacks containing Nepalese money —— all in ancient coin, for the Sherpas were inclined to turn up their noses at paper money. All this rather cluttered up my quarters, but I managed to make myself reasonably comfortable; and, indeed, although I lost about a stone in weight, I soon began to feel notably fit.

My first experience of mountaineering proper came with the climb up the icefall into the Western Cwm, the great snow valley cut in the flank of Everest, which was the highway to the summit. It would be idle to pretend that I found it easy; but the other men on the rope were some of the world's finest

and friendliest climbers, and somehow they pulled me over the gaping crevasses, heaved me up the iceblocks, pushed me over the precarious makeshift bridges, and dragged me through the wilderness of crumbled snow and ice. The climate was appalling. Sometimes it was parchingly dry, and blazing hot; sometimes cold, damp and dreary with snowfalls. There was a great deal to be said for the pleasure of arriving at a staging camp on Everest — just a couple of tents huddled in the snow but still a place of tea-mugs, sleeping-bags and good company.

At 20,000ft and above the altitude is likely to tell quite severely on the novice climber. I found my brain a little blunted, and my natural enthusiasm dampened. I wrote less than I ought to have written, and took fewer photographs. (Tom Stobart, the expedition's cinecameraman, who is a climber of experience, found at one time that taking any pictures at all was a most intolerable bore and mental burden.) I sent regular dispatches home during the long weeks before the assault. I built up a small corps of elite runners, all of them swift and trustworthy. To ensure maximum speed, I offered them pay on what I think is called a sliding scale. They had a basic fee of about £10. If they did the journey in eight days, they got £5 extra; if they did it in seven days, they got £10 extra; and if, miracle of miracles, they did it in six days, they earned a bonus of £20. It was astonishing how they responded to these incentives (and I think also to the comradeship and sense of purpose which we shared with them). Time after time the journey, always before supposed to take ten days at the very least, was done in six days; and two magnificent runners did it in five. Some of them regularly brought me presents of eggs; one had a deep contempt for the local *rakhsi* and used to pop over to Those now and again (a mere 60 miles or so) to bring me back a special brew prepared only there.

The fight to wrest the story from us was now at its height, though no other correspondent came on to the mountain. In Kathmandu one of the great news agencies, and one of the London national papers, each had powerful receiving sets with which they hoped to intercept wireless messages from Namche and cable messages going out of Kathmandu via the radio link with India. A Reuter correspondent had stationed himself at the Thyangboche monastery (he turned up at base camp one afternoon and I gave him tea) and an Indian working for *The Daily Telegraph* was at Namche. To make sure that the final news of success went over the Namche radio safely — I could scarcely afford to ignore that means of communication altogether — I devised a new code. We already had several adequate codes which made messages look gibberish, but I was afraid the Indians would not accept dispatches unless they thought they understood them. I therefore, with a certain nasty cunning, composed a new cipher in which coded messages looked as if they were not coded at all. Thus the code phrase for "Everest climbed" was "Snow conditions bad": the phrase meaning "Hillary" was "Advanced base abandoned", and that for Tenzing "Awaiting improvement".

The main assault on the mountain, by Hillary and

Tenzing, was made on May 29. For a week or two before then there was a rising tide of excitement, and my runners left for Kathmandu almost daily (very expensive). I stayed at Base Camp as long as I could. It was easier to write dispatches there; I could organise the runners; and as no other European was there I was able to be of some service to the expedition — each day the climbers would radio their needs to me, and I would see that the necessary stores went up by Sherpa.

However, on the day of the attempt I felt I should go up higher, so I climbed up the icefall again to Camp III, and the next morning went on to Camp IV, at the head of the Western Cwm.

There most of the climbers were waiting, in a state of high expectancy, for news from the higher places; and a kind of feverish hush settled on the camp when we first spotted the figures of Hillary and Tenzing on the ridge high above us. Hunt, himself seriously weakened by his exploits on the final ridge a few days before, sat on a packing-case tense as a violin string. The rest of us looked through binoculars, or laid the odds, or sipped lemonade rather listlessly, or thumbed our way through the old newspapers that littered the main tent of the camp. It was, for me anyway, a decidedly pre-dentist feeling.

But, I shall never, as long as I live, forget the transformation that overcame the camp when the summit party appeared and gave us the news of their victory. It was a moment so thrilling, so vibrant, that the hot tears sprang to the eyes of most of us. The day was so dazzlingly bright — the snow so white, the sky so blue; and the air was so heavily charged with excitement; and the news, however much we expected it, was still somehow such a wonderful surprise; and it felt to all of us that we were very close to the making of history; and away in England, as we knew, an entire nation, in celebration for the Coronation, was waiting eager-hearted for the word of triumph. It was a moment of great beauty: a joy for ever, as the poet wisely said.

It was May 31. I was nearly 22,000ft up on the inaccessible slopes of Everest, but it occurred to me in a moment of wild optimism that *The Times* could conceivably print the news of Everest's conquest on the very day of Queen Elizabeth's Coronation, June 2. I had climbed up the Cwm that morning from Camp III, and I was tired; but I felt I must get down to Base Camp again that evening and get the news off by runner first thing in the morning. Michael Westmacott, a great-hearted friend, instantly volunteered to come with me down the mountain. I got Ed Hillary's story from him as he sat in the big tent eating an omelette (he has since become godfather to my son) and we set off down the Cwm in the late afternoon.

The thaw had set in, the sun that day had been blazing, and the snow surface of the Cwm was crumbling. We kept falling in up to our thighs, and the process of extraction was tiring and unpleasant. The Cwm is overshadowed by a vast and impenetrable mountain rampart, and before long the sun had disappeared and the snow valley was cast into gloom. It was twilight when we reached

Camp III and drank a little lemonade. Below us the mass of the icefall looked singularly uninviting.

The route had been entirely obliterated by snow and the thaw, and only occasionally did we glimpse, often on some unattainable eminence, the little route flags which used to guide our way through this wilderness. We stumbled and slithered our way through the iceblocks. The dark was coming on and I was fairly exhausted, often losing my footing on the crumbly ice, getting entangled with the rope, or tottering on the brinks of crevasses. Mike prodded his way through a maze of icecliffs with infinite skill, but our progress was slow and perilous. Once we reached a steep snow-slope, and glissaded down it on our feet; I stubbed my toe on an iceblock at the bottom and spent a moment or two cursing creation in general and the foreign department of *The Times* in particular; I had to hobble home with half a toenail, and eventually had the whole thing removed in Calcutta. At the foot of the icefall the little glacier rivulets had swollen in the thaw into swift torrents; we balanced our way along their edges, sometimes jumping across to surer footing on the other side, sometimes slipping in so that the water oozed into our socks and over the tops of our boots.

It was long after dark when we reached Base Camp, to be greeted by my loyal Sherpas. I rumbled into my sleeping-bag and typed out a code message to tell the world that the mountain had been climbed by Hillary and Tenzing. It ran: "Snow conditions bad stop advanced base abandoned may twentynine stop awaiting improvement." This little dispatch I checked and rechecked before sealing it and handing it to a runner; his instructions were to leave at first light the following morning and deliver it to the radio station at Namche for transmission (with luck) to Kathmandu. Another runner was to leave for Kathmandu direct carrying a duplicate message and a longer account of the victory.

THOUSANDS SPEND NIGHT ON CORONATION ROUTE

PLACES TAKEN UP 24 HOURS IN ADVANCE

EVEREST CONQUERED

SUMMIT REACHED BY TEAM FROM BRITISH EXPEDITION

I slept fitfully. It was my last night under the

shadow of Everest, and in the early hours of the morning I slipped out of my tent in the moonlight to look once again at the staggering panorama of mountains round about.

They shone palely, like ghosts. Next morning I packed my possessions, assembled my Sherpas, shook hands with Michael Westmacott and set off down the glacier. I skirted Namche by devious mountain paths, because I did not particularly want to meet the Indians again (they might ask difficult questions about my code message) and I camped that evening in a village in the beautiful valley of the Dudh Kosi river. It was June 1, and as I went to sleep I prayed vaguely (for I was spent) that my dispatch was indeed winging its way to Kathmandu and PHS.

I slept like a log, and awoke next morning to learn that miraculously my prayer had been answered.

Only in my craziest dreams had I supposed that the news from Everest could break quite so timely in London. On the very eve of her Coronation, the radio told me, the Queen had been told of Everest's conquest. *The Times* had printed the news in that morning's edition, the vast crowds waiting in London's rain had been told in the dark watches of the night, the world was rejoicing with us, and it had been my privilege to add to the nation's pride on the proudest day of the century. Everest was climbed (forgive the dramatics) and England knew it.

I leapt out of my tent in my tattered old shirt and holed socks, bearded and filthy, and shouted to my Sherpas, peering owlishly from the upper windows of a neighbouring house. "Chomolungma finished!" I shouted. "Everest done with!! All OK!"

"OK, Sahib," the Sherpas shouted back. "Breakfast now?"

*This appeared in The Times house journal in 1953. Jan Morris's book on the ascent, Coronation Everest,* has been republished by Faber, *priced £8.99.*

# Everest



May 14, 2003

## When wrathful deities made mountains places of fear

Tibet's relationship with its land has been transformed, says Ed Douglas

The dzongpen of Kharta and his wife in front of a ceremonial tent. Dzongpen were administrators appointed by Lhasa to collect taxes

George Mallory's famously flippant rejoinder to why he wanted to climb Everest — "because it's there" — is countered by the Dalai Lama. He said: "I imagine that for most Tibetans 'Because it is there' is a very good reason for not making the attempt. Hillary and Tenzing's triumph was an instance of the human ability to overcome nature, to dominate the world.

"The traditional Tibetan attitude to mountains is quite different. They are treated with respect as the abodes of presiding deities. Tibetans would rather salute their mountains, offering juniper incense smoke in their direction than try to conquer their mountains."

The Tibetan myths about mountains are populated with wrathful deities, ghosts or terrible creatures such as the yeti. They are warnings to stay away. The notion of climbing a mountain was utterly foreign to those nomads grazing their animals on the pastures below. Why expose yourself to unnecessary risks when life is already full of them? They didn't have a word for the apex of a mountain; the summit Mallory was trying to reach didn't exist for them.

For the nomads in the Kama Valley and the monks at Rongbuk monastery, the motivation for those attempting Everest was obscure. Nawang Gombu, the first man to climb the mountain twice, was a novitiate monk at Rongbuk in the late 1940s before

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

'One of the most stupendous works in the whole history of science'

**When wrathful deities made mountains places of fear**

A network of heroic amateurs determined to get to the top

The view from the top

Did Mallory and Irvine make it to the summit before they died?

Anniversary is catalyst for the RGS to open its archives

he ran away to follow his uncle, Tenzing Norgay, into the expedition game. Trulshik Rinpoche was 14 when the last prewar expedition arrived at Rongbuk in 1938. Gombu asked the monks what the English were looking for. They told him that there must be a golden cow there and they wanted to take it home. In a way, they were correct. Several climbers have become millionaires from lecturing and writing about their experiences.

Trulshik Rinpoche became head lama at Rongbuk after the death in 1940 of its founding monk, Dzatrul Rinpoche. In 1921 Dzatrul had been on retreat and did not wish to see the climbers who arrived with their passport from the 13th Dalai Lama. The following year, during the first full attempt on the mountain, Dzatrul received the leader, Brigadier-General Charles Bruce. “When the 13th Dalai Lama gave the first permission to climb Chomolungma, he said that they could come as long as they didn’t bring guns and kill any of the animals. Before Buddhism, there was an animist tradition in Tibet that is preserved in its remote valleys. An illustration of this is the legend that surrounds Everest itself, the mountain Tibetans call Chomolungma.

The goddess said to inhabit the slopes of Chomolungma is Miyolangsangma. She is one of five sisters who are associated with mountains, often above sacred lakes, along the Nepal/Tibet frontier. The head of these five sisters is Tashi Tseringma, whose home is Gauri-shankar, a peak to the west that is sacred to Hindus as well, especially in Kathmandu. The “Five Sisters of Long Life”, as they are known, are only minor deities; the peak Khumbila, for example, is more important to the Sherpas of Khumba as the home of their patron deity Khumbu’i Yulha, literally the “Home God of the Khumbu”. This mountain holds the collective soul of the Sherpas, a repository for their sense of identity.

According to legend, Miyolangsangma was one of a group of wrathful Bon deities, the *srungma,* who was subdued by the evangelising zeal of Guru Rinpoche to act as a servant of Buddhism. Miyolangsangma’s character became that of a generous benefactor. Sherpas on Everest go out of their way to keep on her good side; offensive smells, such as roasting meat or burning garbage, rubbish and morally questionable behaviour, can provoke her wrath. Before every expedition they will hold a *puja*, building a *lhap-so*, which is a kind of altar, and stringing up lines of prayer flags to bring good luck.

In the past her role as the deity of Chomolungma was purely symbolic: a wealth-giver. There are legends of how the people around Everest suffered because they failed to pay her due attention. Now, Everest is a workplace offering employment to the Sherpas and income to the tourist businesses. From being a symbol of wealth, Chomolungma has become the real source of that wealth, replacing the trade and agriculture that sustained the Sherpas before the Chinese invaded Tibet and curtailed activity across the border.

Religion in this part of the Himalayas has grown organically, blending the old and the new, mixing

the practices of competing traditions and faiths as the wheel of history turns. The tourist dollar, like the barley crop or the yak herds, is just one more resource for which Sherpas are grateful, and it is Miyolangsangma herself who has given them this. Chomolungma is often translated as “Mother Goddess of the Earth”, which isn’t correct; it is more a translation of what we expect from the world’s highest mountain. But however Chomolungma is translated, the important issue is not what it means but the thing to which it refers because within that difference we see just how fundamental the divide is between Western attitudes to Everest and the role of Chomolungma in the lives of those Tibetans and Sherpas who live on the slopes.

# Everest



May 14, 2003

## Did Mallory and Irvine make it to the summit before they died?

With the news that a second "English body" has been spotted on the north face, Peter Gillman assesses the evidence


At around 12.50pm on June 8, 1924, the clouds that had been shrouding the upper reaches of Everest magically cleared. From perhaps three-quarters of a mile away, the climber Noel Odell saw two men silhouetted against a snow-crest beneath a rock step on the mountain's North East Ridge. As he watched, the first climber emerged on to the top of the step, and the second followed him there. Then, as Odell related, "the whole fascinating vision vanished, enveloped in cloud once more".

The two men were George Mallory and Sandy Irvine, who had left their precarious camp among the shattered rocks of Everest's North Face that morning. Odell, some 2,000ft below, had seen nothing of them until the clouds parted to allow that tantalising glimpse of the two men "going strongly for the top".

Mallory and Irvine were never seen again. It fell to Odell to search their last camp, finding it just as they had left it two days before. Poignantly, he spread out two sleeping bags to make the sign of a cross, indicating to the watchers below that there was no sign of life.

But could the pair have succeeded in reaching the summit? Since 1924, a succession of clues has emerged, culminating in the discovery of Mallory's body on the North Face by American climbers in 1999. It is possible to construct a scenario whereby Mallory and Irvine did make it to the top before dying, although much turns on where they were when Odell last saw them.

Fresh information from Everest suggests that there could be further revelations to come. A Chinese climber claims to have spotted a second English body on the North Face. His assertion, only now revealed, was made to two people who found

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

The view from the top

**Did Mallory and Irvine make it to the summit before they died?**

Anniversary is catalyst for the RGS to open its archives

Be inspired by the view if you can see it through your tears

How the sacking of Britiain's top mountaineer sparked a mutiny

The importance of rigorous military training and diplomatic skills

Mallory's body, the US expedition leader, Eric Simonson, and the team's German historian, Jochen Hemmleb. "If what he says is true," says Hemmleb, "it can only be Irvine."

Mallory and Irvine left their camp at 23,000ft (7,010m) on the North Col at 9am on June 6. They pitched their last camp at 26,800ft on June 7 and sent back their three Sherpas with two notes, one about the oxygen they intended to carry, the other describing possible routes to the summit. Taking the most optimistic scenario — based on evidence and a degree of surmise — Mallory and Irvine left their tent at sunrise, about 5am. The pair were dressed for the rigours ahead, wearing seven to eight layers of clothing, mostly silk and wool. They were carrying three oxygen cylinders each, enough for 12-18 hours' climbing. At 27,800ft they discarded a spent cylinder, which was retrieved in 1999.

Ahead of them were the great landmarks of the North East Ridge: two intimidating rock buttresses named the First and Second Step, and beyond that a further crag, the Third Step. They overcame the First Step without difficulty but the Second Step was a more challenging proposition, requiring all Mallory's technical ability to climb, and his qualities as a leader to help Irvine to follow, roped by Mallory from above. They then pressed on to the Third Step which they climbed with apparent ease.

Mallory and Irvine were now just 500 vertical feet below the summit, with maybe one oxygen cylinder left each. Gaining strength from seeing their goal nearing, they climbed a snow slope, negotiated some brittle, down-sloping rocks, and reached the summit that afternoon. Irvine, who was carrying at least one camera, photographed Mallory on the summit, then posed himself.

With nightfall due at around 7pm, it was urgent to begin their descent. Although drained of energy, they descended all three steps, with Mallory shepherding Irvine down. Somewhere en route their oxygen ran out. Then, a short distance below the First Step, one of them slipped on the treacherous, snow-covered slabs, dragging the other with him. At some point, the rope between them broke and Mallory slithered down to the rock basin where his body was found 75 years later.

Nobody can say for sure when Mallory and Irvine left their tent, although 5am, sunrise, is a reasonable guess. It is certain that they climbed to the crest of the ridge where the oxygen bottle was found. But the debate revolves around two issues: where were they when Odell saw them? Could they have climbed the Second Step? Odell changed his mind several times. But his description best fits the Third Step, meaning that Mallory and Irvine had made rapid progress that morning, putting them tantalisingly close to the summit. That entails two further assumptions. First, that they had been able to scale the Second Step, which would have been at the limit of their abilities. Secondly, that they had taken three oxygen cylinders each, when it is more likely — based on notes found on Mallory's body — that they had two each. And although Odell had a clear view of the final stretch to the summit when the clouds cleared later, he never saw the men.

The more likely scenario is that Mallory and Irvine were delayed setting off because they had trouble with their oxygen sets. They climbed the First Step but turned back at the Second Step, which Mallory judged was beyond Irvine's capabilities. They were also out of time to make it to the summit and back before nightfall. It was a Chinese climber who spurred on the search for Mallory after he spotted the body of an "English dead" in 1975. Years later in Beijing, Hemmleb and Simonson met another Chinese climber, Xu Jing, who is the source of the latest disclosure. He told of seeing a body at around 27,200ft on the North Face during the first Chinese ascent of Everest in 1960.

Since no other climbers had visited that part of the face since 1924, the body could only be Irvine's. This fits in with the assumption that both climbers fell together until the rope broke. While Irvine lodged in the gully, Mallory fell a further 200ft.

It is also possible that they were descending the gully when Mallory slipped. Irvine tried to hold him but the rope broke. The revelation about Irvine opens up the possibility that a pictorial record of the climb could yet emerge if the camera he was said to be carrying is found.

Xu also said that Irvine appeared to be wearing a sleeping bag. Mallory and Irvine had left their sleeping bags at Camp VI. But Mallory also mentioned a bivouac bag and it is just possible that they could have carried this with them. If so, it conjures up the poignant scenario of Irvine surviving the accident and snuggling into the bag for warmth until dying of shock, injuries or cold. However, none of these theories fits in with the discovery of Irvine's ice-axe near the crest of the North East Ridge in 1933.

Plans are now being laid to search for the body. Simonson wants to return next spring, while a climber in the 1999 search party is on a North Face expedition this month.

Everest's greatest riddle may yet be solved.

# Everest from the air



The first aeroplane flight over Mount Everest took place on April 3, 1933. *The Times* had exclusive rights to the story, and provided the expedition with cameras, one of which remains in *The Times* archive

## The Houston Mount Everest Flight Expedition, 1933

BY NICK MAYS

"We were now for a few moments in the very plume itself, and as we swung round fragments of ice rattled violently into the cockpit"

Slideshow: Everest from the air

## A magnificent spectacle; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

"With my head out over the top of the cockpit, I was conscious of a buzzing in my ears, and then was seized with violent pains in the stomach"

## Everest surmounted; leading article, April 4, 1933

For the first time in history the loftiest point of the earth's surface has been surmounted by man

## Conquest of Everest by air; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

The flight over Everest to-day was carried out with no more fuss than an ordinary Service flight at home and was completed in exactly three hours

## From the top of Everest; letter to The Times, April 4, 1933

The Houston Mount Everest Flight Expedition desires to send you this letter which has actually been flown over Mount Everest

## The expedition cameras

BY NICK MAYS

The cameras needed to be kept warm at high altitudes to avoid their lenses misting over and their controls freezing

## EVEREST: 50 YEARS ON

On May 29, 1953, at 11.30am Edmund Hillary and Norgay Tenzing became the first men to climb Everest. The Times proclaimed it "a victory for the human spirit". Read our 50th anniversary tribute

Good University Guide
Health
Online Specials
Play
Promotions
Public Agenda
Style Guide
Subscription
Supplements
Talking Point
Television and Radio
The Register
Times e-mail
Times 2
Times Services
Weekend

**SPECIAL REPORTS**

Investor's Centre
Outsourcing Special

# Everest from the air



## Slideshow: Everest from the air

Click on the image above to view the Slide Show

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

The Houston Mount Everest Flight Expedition, 1933

A magnificent spectacle; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

Everest surmounted; leading article, April 4, 1933

Conquest of Everest by air; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

Public Agenda
Style Guide
Subscription
Supplements
Talking Point
Television and Radio
The Register
Times e-mail
Times 2
Times Services
Weekend

**SPECIAL REPORTS**

Investor's Centre
Outsourcing Special

# Everest from the air



March 20, 2001

## Everest surmounted; leading article, April 4, 1933

FOR THE first time in history the loftiest point of the earth's surface has been surmounted by man. Yesterday the two specially equipped machines of the Houston Everest expedition carried their pilots, together with observers and cameras, over the great peak, which has long resisted every human assault upon it. Leaving the base camp at Purnea they accomplished the journey of 160 miles, rose to a height of nearly seven miles, traversed the massif along its highest pitch, and returned safely to their starting point. This is success at the first attempt, success lifted to the point of triumph and simplicity at which it almost recoils upon the undertaking. There is hardly a hitch to give the scale of the exploit, to give home-keeping imaginations the help that some may need to measure what has been accomplished in this journey, prudently and daringly planned, over the whole belt of untamed peak and snow that culminates at 29,000 feet in Mount Everest. It is perhaps the peculiar penalty of air conquests that they should seem to make so light of the resistance of the conquered. To-day's message is proud to compare the flight with "an ordinary Service flight at home." But those who recall what has been published in these pages already will more easily find the perspective of a magnificent achievement. It has proved again that luck and preparation are nearly synonymous terms for the air pioneer. He must, in words that AIR COMMODORE FELLOWES has quoted, do his "thinking on the ground". But when all the serpentine length of preparation through many months is remembered, the boldness of the first conception of the flight, the faith and generosity of the backers, the skill of the designers, the sympathy of Governments, the detail of meteorological preparation - when all this is allowed for, there is still the venture itself to be confronted that turns the dream into the reality at last. When every tribute has been paid to the wise care lavished upon organization, the last and warmest praise of all must be for the pilots, LORD CLYDESDALE and FLIGHT LIEUTENANT MCINTYRE, whose cool and skilful control of all the complexities of high altitude flying yesterday converted a well-studied hypothesis into a glorious fact.

LORD CLYDESDALE'S story on the opposite page shows how the expedition was enabled to seize its moment among the shifting moods of the mountain. Not for nothing has Indian legend surrounded it

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

A magnificent spectacle; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

**Everest surmounted; leading article, April 4, 1933**

Conquest of Everest by air; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

From the top of Everest; letter to The Times, April 4, 1933

The expedition cameras

with a sinister demonology. Not for nothing - apart from every other manifestations of storm, mist, and haze - do travellers and climbers remember the mane of snow streaming from its summit as one of the most familiar characteristics of the peak. A steady hurricane of over 100 miles an hour is among its more faithful attendants.

Yesterday, it is pleasant to record, it was an Indian observer who set the enterprise in motion by reporting from the behaviour of the balloons that the wind, though hardly slumbering, had relaxed its vigilance and fallen to fifty-seven miles an hour at mountain height. There was still a dust haze, and there were inevitably the risks and rigours of a temperature of the order of 70 degrees below zero. But after days of waiting and reconnaissance it was the first flying change since the expedition had made ready at Purnea, and AIR COMMODORE FELLOWES, whose leadership throughout has been a source of confidence for the whole team, probably had little difficulty in taking his decision. It was then the turn of the two pilots, of COLONEL BLACKER with his cameras, and of MR BONNETT, the cinema operator. It was the pilots' task to navigate their machines in company to the summit - under the special difficulties which this morning's message describes - and, then to manoeuvre them in such a way as to give the cameras the best possible use of the precious minutes during the climax of the flight. While so engaged they would have to watch not only the usual instruments and controls of the cockpit, but also the elaborate series of specialised attachments necessitated by the great height and in particular the vital supplies of oxygen and heat. It is small wonder that among this galaxy of gadgets they had spent days in training themselves to meet this or that contingency in the air by making the appropriate action as nearly as possible instinctive and unconscious. Fortunately the Houston-Westland and Westland-Wallace machines with their Bristol Pegasus engines were again models of constancy in performance, but it says everything for the quality of the navigation that the pilots were able to provide for a fifteen minutes' cruise at the summit, and much for the risks they braved that their margin over the peak was no more than 100 feet. The photographers, when their turn came, had to make sure that no fraction of the crowning opportunity given them by the pilots was wasted. This in its way was a responsibility equally calling for steadiness of nerve and quickness of judgement among the encumbrances of necessarily limited space and command, of special clothing and of the breathing apparatus, while at the speed of the machine and in the temperature of the atmosphere it would be impossible to leave shelter for more than a second or two at a time. The minor mishap that set the survey cameras out of action for part of the time, and the more serious chance that put the cinema's operator's life in peril for a moment or two, and partially interfered with the cinematographic record, illustrate vividly enough the risks and uncertainties of photography six or seven miles above sea level.

The practical results of the flight will be chronicled pictorially. One of its objects has still to be attained. The low visibility over part of the journey and the failure of the survey cameras may require the

second flight, which has always been in view. Every geographer and every mountaineer certainly will wish to hear that an almost unmapped and unmappable area has been given a page of its own in the world's atlas. The still photography has evidently secured that close-up portraiture of Everest itself, which was to be one of the prizes of success. It should be possible to sample this part of the record in these pages within two or three weeks. Since the panorama was clear near the summit, the infra-red process may also have played its part. If it has, the recent picture of the Isle of Wight from the air is a promise - though, wonderful as it was, it may be hardly half a promise - of the kind of spectacle that may be expected. But not even the camera will tell the whole of what the airmen, first of their kind in this, have seen, nor can they perhaps ever hope to communicate it. It is almost like exploring the rainbow to have travelled high above the range of physical life direct to that immense, remote, tethered cloud that the traveller sees, say, from Darjeeling; to have proved its solidity of ice, snow, and rock; to have looked down its many-shaded slopes and folds, its glaciers and its desperate precipices; to have seen from above the iridescence of its gigantic ice-barriers; and to have gazed, as it were, over the "flaming walls of the world."

# Everest from the air



March 26, 2001

## A magnificent spectacle; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

*The Times,* April 4, 1933

A MAGNIFICENT SPECTACLE

COLONEL BLACKER'S STORY

THE SNOW PLUME OF EVEREST



From Our Aeronautical Correspondent

PURNEA, APRIL 3

The tale of the great flight over Everest, soberly given in Lord Clydesdale's message, is told in greater detail by Colonel Blacker, who was in the same machine as Lord Clydesdale and whose story is given below.

The scenery was magnificent almost beyond description, and all who took part in the flight were impressed by the enormous size of the mountains and by the extraordinary visibility, which permitted the whole range to be seen to the western horizon. As Colonel Blacker said on his return, the only limit to the view along the mountains was due to the curvature of the earth's surface. The stupendous scale of the scenery and the clear air upset estimates of size and distance. Mr Bonnett confessed that he could not tell how far or near things were.

The flight proceeded without incident until the great massif of Chamlang was approached. Climbing over its huge edge both machines received the full force of the down draught caused by the wind striking the steep side of Everest, being shot upwards over the summit and recovering in a steady downward sweep some 12 miles beyond. Caught in this, something like 2,000ft. of height was lost in a very few seconds. The machines at this time were quite close to the mountain side, and the pilots were ready to turn away if necessary. But they found that they were getting across the down current, and, estimating that they had just enough height to get safely over, they continued and crept over the ridge, with little room to spare. This was the last serious air disturbance they encountered on the way up.

### OVER THE SUMMIT

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

The Houston Mount Everest Flight Expedition, 1933

**A magnificent spectacle; article from The Times, April 4, 1933**

Everest surmounted; leading article, April 4, 1933

Conquest of Everest by air; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

From the top of Everest; letter to The Times, April 4, 1933

The expedition cameras

Good University Guide
Health
Online Specials
Play
Promotions
Public Agenda
Style Guide
Subscription
Supplements
Talking Point
Television and Radio
The Register
Times e-mail
Times 2
Times Services
Weekend

SPECIAL REPORTS

Investor's Centre
Outsourcing Special

Over the summit a strong wind was blowing, though less than earlier in the morning, when violent gusts could be seen, driving a snow plume high into the air off the crest. The machines made two complete circuits of the summit, occasionally banking steeply to give the photographers good chances to take oblique views. After 15 minutes both turned away. It was at this point that Flight Lieutenant McIntyre missed Mr Bonnett, who had previously been standing head and shoulders above the cockpit using his camera. Mr Bonnett says he was feeling very ill until the machine had descended to 25,000ft, by which time he was fast recovering.

So surprising was the sight over the mountain tops that neither pilot is prepared after this short flight to define precisely the nature of the country, or express an opinion as to the gaps or inaccuracies in existing maps. If the survey cameras between them can produce a complete mosaic of the country flown over the details will be available. This is thought unlikely, and if permission can be obtained from Nepal, a second flight will certainly be made.

Colonel Blacker tells the following story of the flight:-

“Immediately we left the ground I began my routine duties. At the start of all high altitude flights a number of vital checks must be made, and to avoid omitting any I had made a list amounting to 46 separate jobs. The whole flight might be ruined, for instance, by failing to remove the caps of camera lenses, which in this dusty climate must be left on till the last moment. All checks passed off without incident except that for a moment the dynamo refused, as electricians say, to build up. I had to take off the cover of the accumulator, cut out, and undo the screws with my thumbnail and press the contacts together. Thereupon the dynamo behaved perfectly. Both of us were kept very warm throughout the flight.”

## HAZE TO 19,000FT

“By the time these lists were finished we had been flying some 10 minutes, and for the next half-hour I had nothing to do but sit conning over my duties. This part of the journey was the more humdrum because the plains and foothills below were practically invisible on account of thick dust haze which had unluckily risen from the plains to an abnormally high level. We were not clear of it until above 19,000ft., which circumstance made it difficult for the pilot to find the southern ground control whence the photographic survey should start. The haze generally ceases at 5,000ft. or 6,000ft., and in the present case its continuing above that height was most annoying. Nevertheless, I was able to see an infinite tangle of the brown mountains of Nepal seamed with black forests and had occasional glimpses of the swift Arun river in its gradually steepening valley as now and then I opened the hatchway in the floor and looked straight down through thousands of feet of purple space.

## NAKED MAJESTY OF EVEREST

“Then suddenly our craft sprang clear of haze, and we found a wonderful view of Kanchenjunga in all its gleaming whiteness on our right. I soon opened the cockpit roof, put my head out into the slipstream, and there, over the pulsating socker arms of the Pegasus, showing level with us, was the naked majesty of Everest. I was not able to remain long watching the wonderful sights, as the machine roaring upwards unfolded countless peaks to right and left and in front, all in their amazing white mantles, scored and seared with black precipices.

“Somewhat to my dismay Everest bore that immense snow plume which means a mighty wind tearing across the summit, lifting clouds of powdered snow and driving it with blizzard force eastward. Soon we came closer to the big mountains, and my time became fully occupied handling three cameras. Now and then we checked the drift, and saw the automatic survey camera was working, looking vertically down through the hatchway to the amazing mountainscape, bare of trees and seamed with immense glaciers and interspersed with heaps of scree and shale. Up went the machine into a sky of indescribable blue till we came on a level with the great peak itself. Then, to my astonishment, at a great distance northwards across the vast bare snowless plateau a group of snowclad peaks lifted itself. I hesitate to conjecture the range of this view, but by some trick of vision the summits seemed even higher than that of Mount Everest. This astonishing picture of Everest, its plume now gradually lessening, its tremendous southern cliffs flanked by the immaculate whiteness of Makalu, was a sight which must remain in the mind all the years of one’s life.”

## OVER CHAMLANG

“Then again in an interval of exposing plates I opened the hatchway to find to my surprise our aeroplane barely surmounting a summit of a stupendous peak. We had appeared to approach it with plenty of height to spare, then the altimeter began to register loss of height. In a few seconds we had lost nearly 2,000ft. The peak beneath us was no doubt Chamlang. The aeroplane settled steadily down until it seemed that we should never clear this obstacle in our way to Everest. Below loomed an almost unaccountable medley of peaks, ranges and spurs interspersed with broad, grimy glaciers, littered with scree and shale, with here and there the characteristic yellowy-red rock of the mountain showing through. The alarm was short-lived, for our fine engine took us through the great downdraught over the peak, and again we climbed.

“Slowly, and yet quickly to one who wanted to make use of every moment, the aeroplane came to the very summit of Everest, crossing it, so it seemed to me with a few hundred feet to spare while I laboured incessantly panting for breath to expose plates and film, each lift of the heavy camera being a real exertion. I looked at the oxygen flowmeter and found it at maximum, so bethought myself of the little cork plugs I had made for the air apertures of the mask, and after a certain amount of fumbling with cold fingers stuffed them in.

“By now I had the cockpit roof fully open and put

my head and shoulders out into the slipstream which had become strangely reft of its normal force. So I could take photographs much helped by the cork plugs, without which the oxygen tends to be blown from the mask and the flow stopped before it can reach the lips. Trout may be drowned the same way by pulling him upstream against the lie of the gills.

## CIRCLING THE SUMMIT

“At last and before I expected it we were over the summit; then a hectic period began. The pilot circled skilfully over the summit while I crammed plate-holders into the camera, clicking the shutter as fast as I could train the camera. The snow plume had finished, but we swung round into wisps of thin cloud, and flakes of thin ice rattled into the cockpit.

“We made another circuit while I feverishly handled the big camera. The sojourn there could not be long protracted because the oxygen needle in my cockpit moved towards the empty end of the scale and we had no definite idea of the length of the return journey in existing wind conditions. So we turned back, and in a short time saw this wonderful view with the countless serried peaks surmounted by Everest and Makalu almost grotesquely outlined by the aluminium-coloured fabric of our rudder.

“The 160 miles home passed surprisingly quickly, the journey somewhat marred by the discovery that the second film in the cinema camera had become frozen despite the warm jacket, and was so brittle I could not reload; also by the fact that my oxygen mask, plugged as it was with cork stoppers, was a solid mass of ice. Steadily we came down, the engine well on to prevent freezing. I managed with a struggle to change the magazine of the survey camera and adjust it to the drift now coming from the opposite side of the aeroplane.

“Soon that gleaming semicircle of peaks faded from our sight as the straight line of purple dust haze rose to overwhelm it. Our minds were numbed by that stark vision of beauty. Days must pass before we can appreciate what we have seen in those few sublime crowded minutes looking down on the world’s last penetralis. Overriding the winds, man’s art has torn the veil from another of Nature’s secrets. The uttermost peak is no longer inviolate.”

## MR BONNETT’S STORY

### A MISHAP WITH OXYGEN SUPPLY

Mr. Bonnett made the following statement:-

“It was a long climb up out of the mist, and I could do nothing apart from routine duties for more than an hour. As we got level with the top of the mist peaks began to creep up in a semicircle before us. They seemed so big I could not judge properly their size or distance. My first shot was Kanchenjunga, a long way away, but a perfectly clear view. Before we knew where we were we came over the whole mass of peaks. I expected to see Everest standing well clear of everything else, but that was not so. It could be identified by size and shape but it was hemmed in by great mountains.

"When we struck the big downdraught I believe we were near Lotsi, and we only just made it. The air was so clear it was difficult to judge distances. As soon as I got a clear view of Everest, after passing Chamlang, I stood up head and shoulders above the cockpit and took photographs forward between the wings. We made two circuits well clear of the summit.

“I think it must have been while I was bending down during the second circuit that I probably trod on the flexible tube bringing oxygen to my mask. Soon after resuming work, with my head out over the top of the cockpit, I was conscious of a buzzing in my ears, and then was seized with violent pains in the stomach. I became so weak I could not carry on. One of the clockwork keys of the cinema camera had been broken off, and I had to wind it with a screwdriver.

“Even winding up with an ordinary key was a task. I had to sit down inside, and when I had sat a while I noticed a break in the tube. The spiral armour had pulled out a near connection and the tube inside had broken, and evidently no oxygen was reaching the mask. I tied a handkerchief round the fracture, and as we were coming down fast I soon began to recover."

# Everest from the air



March 26, 2001

## The Houston Mount Everest Flight Expedition, 1933

BY NICK MAYS

> Thus almost, and indeed before I expected it, we swooped over the summit and a savage period of toil began. The pilot swung the machine skilfully again towards the westward into the huge wind force sweeping downwards over the crest; so great was its strength that, as the machine battled with it and struggled to climb upwards against the downfall, we seemed scarcely to make headway in spite of our 120 mile an hour air speed. I crammed plate-holder after plate-holder into the camera, releasing the shutter as fast as I could, to line it up with one wonderful scene after another. We were now for a few moments in the very plume itself, and as we swung round fragments of ice rattled violently into the cockpit.

With these words, Colonel Stewart Blacker described the first aeroplane flight over Mount Everest, on April 3, 1933.

Blacker was an officer in the Indian Army who had flown with the Royal Flying Corps in France during the First World War. He had drawn up the plan for this great expedition two years earlier, submitting it to the Royal Geographical Society in March 1932. The aims were mainly scientific: to demonstrate that flight over the highest point on the planet was possible, to make a photographic survey of the area using both oblique and vertical angle photographs, and to gain knowledge of the meteorological and flying conditions around high mountains.

The expedition was also intended to promote the idea of aerial mapping of the earth's surface, a project in which Blacker had a personal interest. His ancestor, Colonel Valentine Blacker, had been the first Surveyor-General of India in the 1820s, and had initiated the trigonometrical mapping survey of the continent which had culminated in the discovery of Mount Everest.

As 1932 progressed, negotiations took place with the Indian and Nepalese governments over the flight path, and with various companies for the

Good University Guide
Health
Online Specials
Play
Promotions
Public Agenda
Style Guide
Subscription
Supplements
Talking Point
Television and Radio
The Register
Times e-mail
Times 2
Times Services
Weekend

**SPECIAL REPORTS**

Investor's Centre
Outsourcing Special

supply of equipment. The Westland Aircraft Company loaned the aircraft, the Bristol Aeroplane Company the engines and the Williamson Manufacturing Company Limited the cameras. The aeroplanes and equipment were shipped to India by the P&O Steam Navigation Company. Much of the equipment had to be modified and lubricants developed so that it could withstand the extremes of environment between the plains of India and flying at up to 33,000 feet.

Two types of camera were used for the expedition. Williamson's Automatic Eagle III cameras were selected for the vertical survey work. They were mounted in the floor of the fuselage and were operated by the pilot from control switches on his instrument panel. P-14 cameras were used to take the oblique photographs. They were handheld and operated by the observer.

Conscious of the need for publicity, the expedition's organisers opened negotiations with the Gaumont-British Film Corporation to make a film. *The Times* was also approached. Under the terms of the agreement concluded on March 16, 1933, the newspaper acquired exclusive rights as the channel for all information relating to the expedition, the rights encompassing the dissemination both of news and photographs. *The Times* dispatched E. Colston Shepherd, its aeronautical correspondent, to act as special correspondent to the expedition.

Sponsorship for the expedition was sought from many sources, both official and private. The primary sponsor was Lady Houston, widow of the shipping magnate, Sir Robert Houston. In 1931 she had underwritten the Royal Aero Club's organisation of the Schneider Trophy race. It was from the British winning entry that the Supermarine Spitfire aircraft and the Rolls-Royce Merlin engine were subsequently developed for use by the Royal Air Force in the Second World War.

The expedition left for India in February 1933, arriving the following month. The aeroplanes were assembled in Karachi and flown across the country to a landing ground owned by the Indian Army Department at Purnea in Bihar, north of Calcutta. Here at the expedition's base, the crews began an extensive training programme. At its conclusion Squadron Leader Lord Clydesdale and Flight Lieutenant David McIntyre were selected as the pilots, with Blacker and Mr R. S. Bonnett from Gaumont as observers.

On the evening of April 2, the weather was pronounced suitable for an attempt the following day. The planes were prepared for departure at dawn, and took off at 8.25. The plan was for them to approach Mount Everest at a height of 33,000ft, descending to 31,000ft as they neared the summit, thus allowing a 2,000ft safety margin. However, as the planes approached the mountain it became clear that they were not high enough and that their course was too far to the east, causing them to arrive on the leeward side. At almost the same moment they were caught by a powerful down-draught caused by the deflection of the wind over the summit, and forced to descend faster than they could climb. Clydesdale's machine lost 2,000ft in a matter of seconds and the summit towered over

them. At the last moment, the plane caught an up-current which lifted it over the summit with a clearance of 500ft. It was now 10.05am.

McIntyre's aircraft was in a worse position. It was blown off its course for Everest and straight towards Makalu, one of the nearby peaks. Like Clydesdale, McIntyre caught an up-current in time and cleared the summit. He was then able to circle around and make a second attempt on Everest, this time successful. At this point, however, Bonnett trod on the tube connecting the oxygen supply to his mask, disconnecting it, and fell unconscious. McIntyre had to descend to allow him to regain consciousness.

Clydesdale spent 15 minutes around the summit of Mount Everest before his fuel ran low, forcing him to join McIntyre at lower altitude and return to base. The two planes landed at Purnea at 11.25am. The flight had been a great success despite these narrow escapes, and reports were hastily dispatched to *The Times,* which reported the story at length the following day, April 4. A letter from Lord Clydesdale to the Editor of *The Times*, which had flown over the summit with him, was also published. The same day, the expedition made a second flight into the Himalayas, this time flying over Kangchenjunga.

One of the two vertical survey cameras, it transpired, had not functioned properly during the original flight. The team wanted to return to take more pictures but was refused by the expedition's committee in London. Then Air Commodore Fellowes, the expedition leader, fell ill with a fever. While he lay stricken, the other expedition members secretly prepared for a second flight under the guise of further training.

By April 18 they were ready and Fellowes sufficiently recovered to give his permission. They set off the following day and, learning from previous experience, gained higher altitude before approaching the summit, which both planes cleared easily. Breaking the news to the world, *The Times* said in its leading article on April 20:

> The second flight to Everest, which took place yesterday, may well be described by historians of great achievement as a piece of magnificent insubordination. Made in uninsured aeroplanes and without authority from home it was carried through with the greatest success and has yielded results of the highest scientific value.

When the expedition returned to Britain, *The Times* hosted a luncheon at Grosvenor House on June 1. The Duke of York [later King George VI] presented the expedition members with silver commemorative medals, commissioned by *The Times* and designed by Percy Metcalfe, designer of the Great Seal of England then in use. Lady Houston also received one, despite being unable to attend.

# Everest from the air



March 26, 2001

## The expedition cameras

BY NICK MAYS

One clause in the agreement made between *The Times* and the Everest expedition committee on March 16, 1933, was that *The Times* purchase for the expedition two new Williamson P14 hand-held aircraft cameras. These were used to take oblique photographs of Mount Everest and the surrounding Himalayas.

The Williamson cameras were chosen for the expedition on a number of grounds. Good quality photographs taken using a plate camera could be enlarged to a far greater extent than corresponding photographs taken on film. The cameras also needed to be kept warm at high altitudes to avoid their lenses misting over and their controls freezing. The Williamson P14 was heated by electrical resistances. The camera's focal plane shutters had fabric blinds which tended to stiffen when chilled by frost, but a single internal resistance in each camera, coupled with a fabric insulation jacket, was sufficient to keep the lenses warm and the shutter blinds flexible. The body of the cameras was made of aluminium and highly finished with a durable Kryslac enamel. They each weighed 12lb (about 5.5kg).

The contract also specified that the cameras were to remain the property of *The Times*, and were to be returned to the newspaper at the conclusion of the expedition. *The Times*'s financial accounts relating to the expedition, which are held in the archive, show that one of the cameras was later sold. The other was retained and remains in the archive. The original glass plates used in the camera are still held by *The Times*'s picture library.

Good University Guide
Health
Online Specials
Play
Promotions
Public Agenda
Style Guide
Subscription
Supplements
Talking Point
Television and Radio
The Register
Times e-mail
Times 2
Times Services
Weekend

**SPECIAL REPORTS**

Investor's Centre
Outsourcing Special

# Everest from the air



March 26, 2001

## From the top of Everest; letter to The Times, April 4, 1933

From *The Times*, April 4, 1933

FROM THE TOP OF EVEREST

A LETTER TO "THE TIMES"

THE EXPEDITION'S THANKS

TO THE EDITOR OF THE TIMES

Sir, - The Houston Mount Everest Flight Expedition desires to send you this letter which has actually been flown over Mount Everest.

The Expedition wishes to acknowledge the encouragement it has received from *The Times* and the help your journal has given in making clear to the public the objects of this flight and the ways in which the knowledge and experience of the aircraft industry, aviation experts, meteorological authorities, and photographic specialists have been applied to the performance of this difficult task.

This letter, which brings you greetings and thanks from the whole Expedition, is about to be placed in the Houston-Westland aeroplane, of which Squadron Leader Lord Clydesdale is the pilot and which is now ready on the aerodrome to begin its joint flight with the Westland-Wallace, piloted by Flight-Lieutenant D. F. McIntyre, to the summit of Mount Everest.

Yours, &c.,

P.F.M. FELLOWES, Air Commodore. Purnea, April 3.

Good University Guide
Health
Online Specials
Play
Promotions
Public Agenda
Style Guide
Subscription
Supplements
Talking Point
Television and Radio
The Register
Times e-mail
Times 2
Times Services
Weekend

**SPECIAL REPORTS**

Investor's Centre
Outsourcing Special

# Everest from the air



March 26, 2001

## Conquest of Everest by air; article from The Times, April 4, 1933

*The Times,* April 4, 1933

LORD CLYDESDALE'S REPORT

TWO AEROPLANES 100 FEET OVER SUMMIT

CLOSE-RANGE PHOTOGRAPHS

PILOTS' TRIBUTE TO ENGINES AND AIRCRAFT

Mount Everest was conquered yesterday when the two machines of the Houston Expedition flew over the summit, and cleared it by 100 feet. The flight was completed in exactly three hours.

The flight is described below in the official report of Lord Clydesdale, the chief pilot, by Colonel Blacker, who was in the same machine as Lord Clydesdale, and in a message from our Aeronautical Correspondent, who is with the Expedition.

### FULL STORY OF FLIGHT

15 MINUTES ROUND THE CREST



From Our Aeronautical Correspondent

PURNEA (BIHAR), April 3

The summit of Mount Everest was flown over to-day by both the Houston-Westland and Westland-Wallace aeroplanes (Bristol Pegasus, SIII. Engines). The following is the official report drawn up for *The Times* by Squadron Leader Lord Clydesdale, chief pilot of the Houston Everest Expedition:-"This morning (April 3) the Indian meteorological officer at Purnea, Mr S. N. Gupta, whose information and advice have been of very great value to the Expedition, reported from balloon observations that the wind, which previously had been unsuitable, had dropped to a velocity of 57 m.p.h. at 33,000ft., which altitude we had decided would be the most suitable working height for photographic survey.

"Our two machines took off at 8.25 from Lalbalu aerodrome (near Purnea) in still air, the Houston-Westland crewed by Colonel L. V. S. Blacker and myself and the Westland-Wallace piloted by Flight Lieutenant D. F. McIntyre, with Mr. S. R. Bonnett, who is aerial photographer of the Gaumont-British

ALSO IN THIS SECTION

Everest surmounted; leading article, April 4, 1933

**Conquest of Everest by air; article from The Times, April 4, 1933**

From the top of Everest; letter to The Times, April 4, 1933

The expedition cameras

Good University Guide
Health
Online Specials
Play
Promotions
Public Agenda
Style Guide
Subscription
Supplements
Talking Point
Television and Radio
The Register
Times e-mail
Times 2
Times Services
Weekend

SPECIAL REPORTS
Investor's Centre
Outsourcing Special

Film Corporation, as observer. Our direct route to the summit meant flying on a track of 342 deg. This necessitated changing the compass course at intervals more to the west on account of the increase of wind velocity with height according to our weather report. We had relied on overcoming to some extent the difficulty of accurate compass navigation caused by this frequent change of wind speed by the good landmarks near and along our track.

## HEAVY DUST HAZE

"A heavy dust haze, rising to a considerable height, almost completely obscured the ground from Forbesganj to the higher mountain ranges. This made aerial survey work impossible. We climbed slowly at low engine revolutions to a height of 10,000ft. By this height the crews of both machines had tested their respective electrical heating sets, and McIntyre and I signalled to each other that everything was satisfactory.

"After 30 minutes' flying we passed over Forbesganj, our forward emergency landing ground, 40 miles from Purnea, and at a height of 19,000ft. Everest first became visible above the haze. We flew lower than our intended working height in order to make every endeavour to pass over Komaltar, close to which is the ground control from which we were to begin our survey. It proved impossible to identify any landmarks at all until approximately within 20 miles of the summit.

"At 9 o'clock we passed over Chamlang at an altitude of 31,000ft. On approaching Lhotse, the southern peak of the Everest group, the ground rises at a steep gradient, and both machines experienced a steady down current due to deflection of the west wind over the mountain, causing a loss of altitude of 1,500ft., despite all our efforts to climb.

## OVER THE SUMMIT

"Both aeroplanes flew over the summit of Everest at 10.05, clearing it by 100ft. The wind velocity was noticeably high near the summit, but no bumps were felt by either aircraft. Fifteen minutes were spent flying in the neighbourhood of the summit, and on account of the smooth flying conditions the taking of close-range photographs was rendered possible.

"The visibility of distant high peaks was very good. The great Himalaya range could be seen extending to great distances and provided a magnificent spectacle.

"The return journey was carried out at a slightly lower altitude, so as to secure better conditions for oblique photography.

"Both machines landed at Lalbalu at 11.25. Both pilots pay the highest tributes to the splendid performance of the engines and aircraft."

The flight over Everest to-day was carried out with no more fuss than an ordinary Service flight at home and was completed in exactly three hours.

The only mishap was a fracture to Mr. Bonnett's oxygen pipe over the mountain top, unnoticed until the cinematographer became faint with violent pains in the stomach. He had to sit down in the cockpit, and eventually noticed the fracture. He tied a handerkchief round the broken part, and soon recovered sufficiently to continue his photographic work.

Apart from this and a blister from a glove heating on one of Flight Lieutenant McIntyre's hands, the crews were entirely comfortable.

The result of the flight is probably not very satisfactory as to air survey, because both cameras failed to operate over part of the flight, but still the cameras have produced magnificent photographs of the crest of Everest and the surrounding peaks, including one fine close-up of the whole mountain peak, showing the main southern slopes, the final ridge where Mallory and Irvine lost their lives, and the great peak itself.

The product of the cinema cameras has not yet been ascertained.

## THREE MILES OF HAZE

It was a still morning, with the sun climbing late above the haze. Air Commodore P. F. M. Fellowes, leader of the Expedition, went up into the haze in a Puss Moth for reconnaissance at 5.30 and climbed to 17,000ft. over the Nepal frontier, but failed to clear the haze. Nevertheless, wind strengths were reported reasonably good, and hopes that the haze would subside led to the decision to make the attempt. A balloon sent up at dawn had been watched to 16,000ft., where it indicated a wind speed of 22 miles.

The aeroplanes were brought out at 7 o'clock and were fitted with the cameras. The engines were started at 8 o'clock at the first attempt, and, after running up, the machines left the ground at 8.25. They made a quarter circuit of the aerodrome, then headed north flying in formation, Lord Clydesdale leading. They climbed steeply, and in a few minutes were lost to sight in the haze.

Thereafter no word was heard of them for three hours, during which period they climbed through three miles of haze, travelled the double journey of 160 miles, and reached a maximum height of about 30,000ft., right over the crest of Everest itself.

## A LETTER TO THE KING

On landing after the flight Mr. Bonnett was examined by Captain R. A. Bennett, the doctor attached to the Expedition, who found him still shaken but suffering no serious harm. He also examined the others. There was no sign of strain in the pilots, though Flight Lieutenant McIntyre's mask had come unfastened for a short period over the summit and had been replaced with some difficulty. He found Colonel Blacker pale and tired, but not suffering from exhaustion.

A number of letters were carried over the top in Flight Lieutenant McIntyre's machine. Bearing a special cancelling stamp, they are being sent on by

Air Mail. They include letters to his Majesty the King, the Prince of Wales, Lady Houston, and the Editor of *The Times*.