

AN AMBITION ACHIEVED

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This year an American expedition has climbed Mount Everest, the cost of which was given in the papers as being nearly £200,000. It was not of course just a climbing expedition as it had a lot of scientific functions to carry out, so that a lot of the money has been spent on specialised equipment and instruments.

But let us think of the climbing part of this invasion of Sola Khumbu, for such it is; a great number of people have set out to "do" Everest while the opportunity still exists and the money to do so presents no problem. I know some of the party and they share my feelings, but it is becoming more and more difficult financially to organise Himalayan expeditions with all the new taxes that are being levied by the Nepalese—even food brought into the country is taxed unless it is taken out again. How thankful I feel that I have been able to go out there before commercialism reached the land of the Sherpas.

I do not forget, however, that had we not been the first to climb Everest, I for one would never have been able to afford to go to the Himalaya. This was the greatest thing that has happened for British mountaineers, for the Everest foundation has sponsored many expeditions throughout the world. In particular it has assisted the average person, who otherwise could not possibly afford it, to go out and experience for himself the joys of wandering in the unknown. For my part it started in 1954 when a colleague returned from West Africa and out of the blue suggested that we went there. We went in 1955 and again in 1957.

At first, one's thoughts are "If only I could go just once". In 1958 the urge was there again as it looked as though there were going to be no more major expeditions from this country and Dhaulagiri was still unclimbed. Joe Walmsley, Don Whillans and myself decided we should have a crack at it. We applied for permission but could not get it until 1961 because the Austrians and Swiss had first priority. In 1960 Dhaulagiri fell to the Swiss, a high powered national expedition who even had a plane at their disposal to save the long approach march, perhaps the most enjoyable and relaxing part of any expedition. At this stage I unfortunately had to withdraw from the party for financial and business reasons.

John Hunt was now our patron, and on hearing this news he suggested that there was still Jannu and also Nuptse, the west peak of Everest. Lionel Terray had written to John to request that we leave Jannu for them in 1962, but we had in fact already selected Nuptse as our objective even though some of the tigers thought that it was no more than a horizontal ridge off Everest.

Christmas, 1960, found us at the Old Dungeon Ghyll. I was a little under the influence of alcohol, and Sid Cross was saying in his wistful way, "It's a pity you're not going with them". I said I thought it was a bit late to rejoin the party at this stage when all the work had been done. Mr. Luckman, an old habitu  of the O.D.G. interjected that he had heard that I was going. I was too far gone to think properly, but how I wished I was going with them.

During the appeal for people to buy postcards to support the expedition Joe, who had been elected leader and who had done a fantastic amount of work towards the organisation of it, showed a slide of Nuptse. This was too much. A week later Joe said, "Well, are you coming or not?" I went.

We left on February 4th 1961, one by sea, five by car and three by air. The car journey had to be done too quickly for comfort but was an experience in itself. The two works-trained mechanics knew how to strip the engine down but it was left to the enthusiastic amateurs to keep the cars running.

After five weeks of sitting, during which time the only exercise taken was that of pushing the accelerator down to the floorboards, we arrived in Khatmandu. We were met by the wireless operator who was treated very informally by us but was a most amiable fellow really. Later we found out that he was the Ambassador.

To walk again along the road towards Everest was a great joy even though the car party were very unfit and ill during the first ten days. Those views we had seen before were still there; why we should have thought they might have changed I do not know. Once more we were back; this really would be for the last time, and we should have to take our opportunities while they were there. For my part, I had given up everything to come; the others were luckier and were on full or half pay.

After seventeen days, the last few of them spent under the influence of Chang, we tottered into Thyangboche. Joe and Chris Bonington went to make a reconnaissance of the Great South Ridge suggested to us by John Hunt as being a possible line, although no one had really thought the south face to be climbable. Even Hillary's party on Ama Dablam and Makalu did not reckon much of our chances, and although the 1953 Everest party had climbed a 19,000 foot peak at the end of our ridge they had not really looked at the face with any idea of finding a route. A bad start to the South Ridge, a rock buttress of unknown height at 24,000 feet, together with the fact that it joined the summit ridge a mile from the summit, all of which was over 25,000 feet, decided us to try a direct route up a ridge leading into the face in line with the summit. It was much steeper, but the main difficulties would be low down at below 21,000 feet.

A few trips up the local hill behind Thyangboche and we began to feel much fitter. At last we had news from the reconnaissance party and we moved up to Base Camp. I was lucky here as I felt reasonably fit, and after Joe and Les Brown had made a sortie up towards the saddle on our ridge, Chris and I were given the job of continuing the route up the mountain. We had seven days of perfect climbing with many heated arguments; our principle was that if you thought something, you said it.

We slowly cut our way up the mountain step by step; at times we could only do two hundred feet in a day, so steep and difficult was the route. Fixed ropes were essential on such ground to assist the load carrying; in all we used six thousand feet of fixed rope and the last few hundred feet of that was bought locally and did not really measure up to British standards, but it was better than nothing.

In the Himalaya it is not possible to wait for perfect conditions as they do not always come. We had just spent our first ten days on the mountain in conditions without equal; perhaps we had been spoiled, for when the weather changed there was a marked lack of activity on the mountain. It was bitterly frustrating and many hard words were in the air about "the lazy so-and-sos not pulling their weight".

After those first seven days on the ridge I volunteered to go down and help with the load carrying, and spent one day at base before starting on the ferry service. A lot of gear had to be taken up the mountain; we would carry up to Camp One with our personal equipment and from there ferry up to Camp Two (once we did three lifts in one day, but never again). The following day we would move up to Camp Two and so on up to Camp Four which had now been reached but not established due to the bad weather. After a week we were on our way up to Camp Four to stay, having made contact with the others the day before. Alas, my companion was ill and had to return to Camp Three, but I decided it was safe enough to go on alone. There was a temporary camp site between Camps Three and Four because it had proved impossible to reach the one and return to the other in one day. I found a tent rolled up in the snow and had started to pitch it when Simon Clarke and Chris returned from a short trip above; the next day we established Camp Four properly, and Chris went down to sort out more stores.

The weather had worsened now, but every day we did something knowing that all our tracks would be filled in before we returned. Such was life, but at least while we were doing something our morale kept high.

Slowly we moved up to Camp Five and then to Camp Six. Tashi was with me there and we climbed together for the next ten days. Tashi must be one of the greatest living sherpas; he had been climbing

with expeditions since before the war and his experience and knowledge of mountains was immense and of great value to us. His willingness to work hard, and in fact to do more than his share, endeared him to us all. He was very proud of the fact that he had just had his fiftieth birthday.

From Camp Six we moved up towards Camp Seven, and on the second day got through the rock band and up to a possible camp site; I was a little worried about this as we should have left it to our rock specialists and I feared that they might have been a bit put out by our rapid advance. During these three days we had expected reinforcements from below, but they did not come. I feared the worst, that the clouds we could see down below might be bringing bad weather, but up here it was fine. What was going on? We decided not to wait any longer but to continue next day the long traverse into the couloir which was just to the left of the summit.

As we descended, the sun came out and we saw movement all over the mountain. It was as though spring had arrived and all the animals were popping out of their holes now that winter had gone. On arrival back at Camp Four we found Chris, Les, Jim Swallow and Ang Pemba there. They told us that two of the team had gone back to Khatmandu, a surprise indeed. They also broke the news to us that the monsoon was nigh and that Joe had suggested an all out attempt on the summit, with a bivouac if necessary—but it had to be done from Camp Seven direct. This would mean going up by the couloir to the right of the summit; this was certainly a more direct line, but we could not see the exit. We had a long discussion on this topic and eventually agreed to proceed as originally planned, but letting Chris and Les stay at Camp Seven while we carried up their gear, joining them there the next day. It was late when they returned from their traverse across the left hand couloir, so I suggested that they should eat with us that night. They had done very well in getting a long way across the traverse, especially as they had come straight up from Camp Three and were not properly acclimatised. As they looked tired I suggested that Tashi and I should go through to Camp Eight and they could bring our tent and food later in the day. We set off early in the morning, only to get a little anxious when we saw no signs of them by 2.00 p.m. They had apparently been held up by having to leave a tent behind when Jim and Pemba had arrived somewhat unexpectedly without a tent to sleep in.

We stopped some way up the couloir at 3.30 and hunted high and low for a camp site. Tashi spotted a rock ledge which I dismissed as being too small, but this was where we camped. Chris came slowly up towards us, urging Les step by step until they were alongside us. I have never seen anyone looking quite so done in as Les that evening; with a sweep of his weary hand across his forehead he sent his snow

goggles down the couloir, so first making sure that Tashi had a spare pair I gave Les mine. How they got back to Camp Seven I do not know, but next day Les was going like a bomb again. Such is the resilience of the Himalayan mountaineer.

It took us an hour and half to pitch the tent on that tiny ledge and by the time it was up the language was fairly ripe, but at last we could retire for the night. It was our plan to make a route up the couloir and then return for the others before going for the top.

For us it was to be our greatest day. All the work which had been put into the expedition not only by ourselves but by our friends and well-wishers was to bear fruit. For me it was to be the conclusion of my wildest dreams. I had very much wanted to climb a big mountain and had failed on two previous trips to reach the main objective. How great the moment was when Tashi and I stood on the summit together we hardly had time to realise, for it was already 5.00 p.m. and we had been on the go for eleven hours and needed to make tracks for home, though not before staying long enough to savour the magnificence of our position and to drink in what must be one of the most fantastic panoramas in the Himalaya. My only wish was to be able to be transported across to the South Col and to try to go higher, for we felt no oxygen lack whatsoever after coming up over two thousand feet that day. But perhaps my greatest pleasure was in having Tashi with me, for it is such men as he who have made climbing in the Himalaya so enjoyable, and without these men we would lose not only good carriers but also very dear friends.

At last my burning ambition to climb a big mountain had borne fruit and the stirring force within me could now rest for a little. Perhaps it will rise again and drive me to the high hills once more, but at present it is well satisfied and is content to roam the nearer hills.

