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THE ASCENT OF MOUNT EVEREST

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Her Majesty the Queen, Patron of the Society, His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh, Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Kent, Honorary President of the Society, and Her Royal Highness the Duchess of Gloucester, were graciously pleased to be present at a meeting held at the Royal Festival Hall, London, on the afternoon of 2 November 1953. This meeting, as well as one on September 14 at the Royal Festival Hall and another on October 19 at the Central Hall, Westminster, was attended by Fellows and members of the Royal Geographical Society, members of the Alpine Club and many distinguished guests.

The paper that follows is based on the illustrated lectures delivered on these occasions by Brigadier Sir John Hunt, Sir Edmund Hillary and other members of the British Mount Everest Expedition 1953, under the auspices of the Joint Himalayan Committee of the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club.

IN DESCRIBING the ascent of Everest, I must first of all recall that this is a story which has been going on for nearly thirty-three years; there have been no less than eleven major expeditions to Everest since 1921, eight of them, including this year's expedition, sent out by the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club, acting jointly as the Himalayan (formerly Mount Everest) Committee. Not all of these were serious attempts to climb the mountain, for the problems encountered were so numerous and difficult and the chances so limited by the weather, that three whole seasons were spent during these thirty odd years in preparing the way for an attempt planned to take place the following year. This happened in 1921, 1935 and again in 1951 after the war.

To put our own expedition in its right perspective, therefore, it must be realized that a great deal had already been done to pave the way. Not only had our predecessors brought to light most of the problems and found the answers to many of them, but they had also actually climbed to a very great height on different flanks of the mountain—about 28,000 feet was attained by Norton and Somervell as early as 1924, and again in 1933 by Smythe, Wyn Harris and Wager, on the northern side; the Swiss guide Lambert and the Sherpa leader Tenzing reached approximately the same height on the southern side in 1952. It was our task and opportunity to complete an



Her Majesty The Queen with Brigadier Sir John Hunt, looking at equipment before the film "The Conquest of Everest"

adventure—I might almost say a mission—which had already been lived and told almost to its end by many gallant men before us.

Organizing a big expedition is a formidable business. We started to get ready in September 1952, about five months before we were due to leave this country for Nepal, and in many ways this was far too late; we were working against time throughout the preparatory period. We tried out the most critical items of clothing, equipment and food on a high pass in Switzerland in mid-winter and made trials of the oxygen equipment on our own hills in North Wales.

One of the lessons of the past was the need to become thoroughly accustomed to a high altitude before attempting any of the bigger Himalayan peaks and the only way to ensure this was to go out to the Himalaya some time before the period when we planned to climb Everest, and to carry out a programme of acclimatization training among the lower mountains. The period when the weather seemed most likely to give us a chance on Everest was after mid-May, when the winter gales and the extreme cold should have abated, and the arrival of the monsoon some time after June 1. There was no certainty that we should be lucky enough to have a fine weather gap, but we aimed to be absolutely ready from May 15 onwards. To do so, and at the same time have a period of preliminary training, meant leaving for India and Nepal in the middle of February.

On February 12 the main party left Tilbury by sea while a small advance party set off a few days later by air to pave the way. We were a party of thirteen: Charles Evans, Tom Bourdillon, Michael Westmacott, George Band, Wilfred Noyce, Charles Wylie, Edmund Hillary, George Lowe, Alfred Gregory and myself. Dr. Michael Ward came as expedition doctor, Dr. Griffith Pugh was the physiologist¹ and Tom Stobart was the cameraman. All but two of the team had been to the Himalaya before.

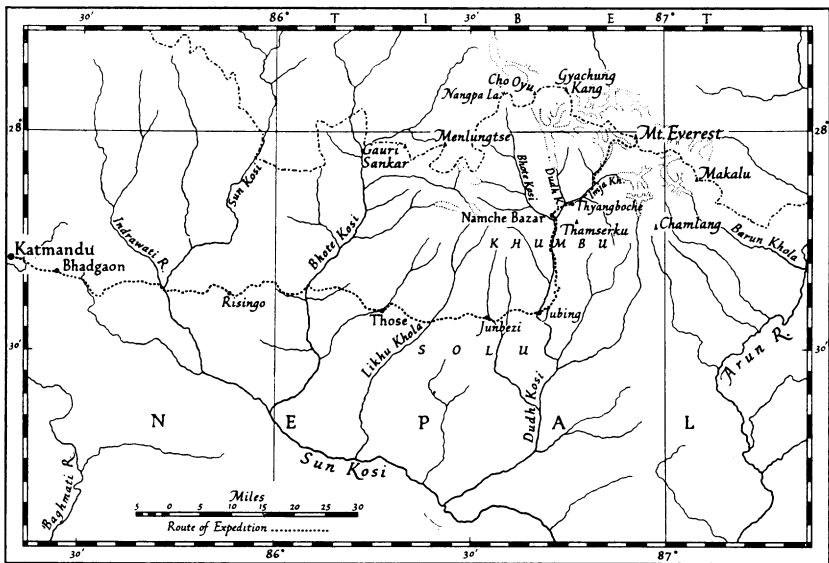
The expedition assembled at the British Embassy at Katmandu the capital town of Nepal. It was from here that we were to travel on foot to the mountain, a journey which would take us seventeen days. We had with us no less than 7½ tons of baggage made up into man-loads each weighing about 60 lb. This meant a small army of carriers, or coolies—about 350 of them. So numerous were we at the moment of leaving Katmandu, that I decided we must travel in two convoys at a day's interval.

During our stay at Katmandu those other full members of the expedition, the Sherpas, arrived under their great leader Tenzing. We had arranged for twenty of these splendid little men to do the most arduous carrying on the higher part of the climb, and here most of them were, smiling and gaily coloured in their odd assortment of clothing from the various expeditions they had served on, ready for this biggest expedition of all. Tenzing himself made up the climbing party to a total of eleven. Only a few months earlier he had come back from his second expedition to Everest in a year with the Swiss, and it was uncertain whether he was fit enough to go again. But from the moment we met there was no further doubt about this—he was obviously going to go high.

¹ His attachment was made possible through a generous grant from the Council of the Royal Society.

We were to march eastwards from Katmandu for about 150 miles, moving roughly parallel with the main range of the Himalaya. This had the disadvantage that we would be going athwart the grain of the land, crossing ridges and climbing thousands of feet in and out of deep valleys. But this was more than made up for by the variety and excitement of the scenery and by the fact that such a march was in itself an excellent way of getting fit for the job.

We had a wonderful journey through the beautiful land of Nepal. During the early part of the march the hills were gentle, broad and richly cultivated, just what we needed in our then unfit condition to run us in gradually for higher and steeper ground. The weather was perfect and it was still cool among those lower hills; some of the early flowers were out—almond blossom



The route from Katmandu to Mount Everest

in the cultivated areas, rhododendrons, magnolias in the higher forests and primulas along the paths. Breasting the ridges we had tantalizing views of the high mountains on our left, towards the north. We went down and down the flanks of the ridges to the foaming torrents, crossing them sometimes by log bridges close to the turbulent surface of the water; sometimes by a high swinging suspension bridge of chains and planks. The marches were short, owing to the slow progress of our laden coolies, and we had time to bathe as we waited for our cook Thondup to prepare breakfast. As the days passed, the country became first alpine, then more truly Himalayan in appearance; the hillsides were steeper and rocky, covered in places by virgin forest; we began to catch glimpses of the snow mountains, now challenging in their nearness. We had turned northwards up the deep glen of the Dudh Kosi, making directly towards our goal; and just before we reached our first base camp we sighted Everest itself.

On March 26 we arrived at the monastery of Thyangboche. Situated at over 12,000 feet on a high ridge, it must be one of the most beautiful places in the world. Here we set up a base camp for the next three weeks, while we trained among the surrounding peaks. The camp was on a grassy alp in constant view of the Everest group. We paid off the coolies who had carried our loads and got our kit ready for the next task—acclimatization. For three days we discussed plans and attended lessons in the use of our equipment, and then set out in several parties for the training period. We climbed six peaks of about 20,000 feet, got to know the country and one another, and became accustomed to our equipment, especially the oxygen.

It was now about mid-April and we had to move up the Khumbu valley to reach the foot of Everest, where we planned to set up a second base camp high up on the Khumbu glacier. The various parties moved there independently in the third week of April, moving up beside the Khumbu glacier which takes its source from Everest and dominated by Everest's close neighbours. The new base camp was situated at just under 18,000 feet in the centre of the glacier surrounded by fantastic ice pinnacles, above which stood the great peaks—Lingtren, Pumori, Nuptse and others. One party under Hillary had arrived there before the others to explore the lower part of the mountain.

Into the West Cwm

The first problem in getting up Everest from the Nepalese side is to climb the great Icefall, which descends steeply over a height of 2000 feet. It presents a serious obstacle from the technical climbing point of view and it is also a constant source of danger, for the ice is always shifting downwards in sudden unpredictable surface changes. Great chasms open up, masses of ice are poised at one moment and the next come crashing down, obliterating everything in their track of destruction, and it is a maze through which it is difficult to trace a practicable way. The Icefall leads into a long narrow high-level valley running down from the final walls of Everest and enclosed both by our mountain and two others which complete the trinity of the Everest group—Lhotse (27,890 feet) at the head of this valley, and Nuptse (25,680 feet) on the side opposite Everest. The valley itself is known as the Western Cwm. The average height of its floor is 21,000 feet and it slopes gradually downwards towards the sudden drop of the Icefall.

Before we could make an attempt on the summit we had to shift the great bulk of our stores higher up the mountain and closer to its final keep; we planned to establish an advance base camp high up in this Western Cwm at over 21,000 feet. First a way must be found up the labyrinth of the Icefall and farther along the Cwm to the site chosen for the advance base. Then over 3 tons of stores must be carried (in smaller loads of about 40 lb now, owing to the greater height and the difficulties of the climbing), staging at various camps yet to be set up, by teams of Sherpas led by members of the climbing party.

We had now increased the Sherpa team to thirty-four by recruiting and equipping local men from Khumbu and the work of stockpiling in the Western Cwm started according to plan on April 24—it will be remembered that it was to be finished by May 15. We worked on two levels; one party

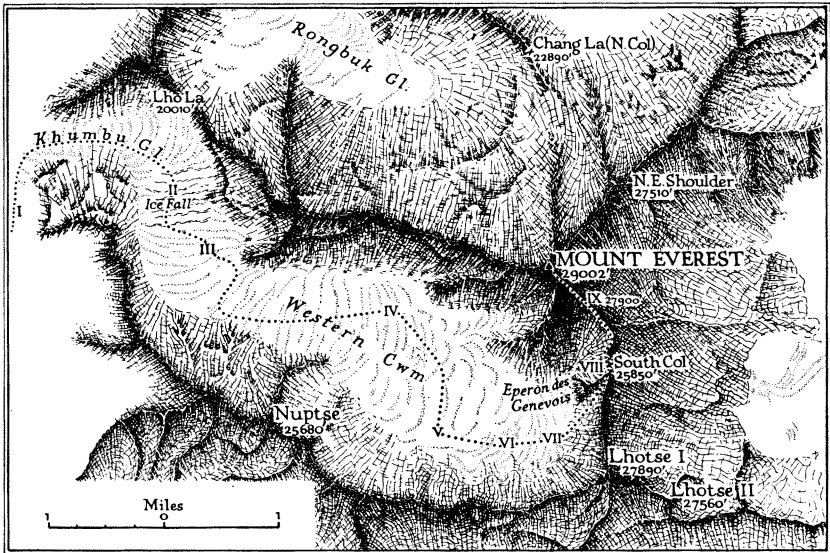
*Everest from the south beyond
the Lhotse-Nuptse wall*

Photo: Indian Air Force





from Base Camp, the other from Camp III at the top of the Icefall at over 20,000 feet. The work became a regular system of ferries, working almost to a time schedule. The low-level teams would leave Base Camp about midday and reach Camp II about half-way up the Icefall two or three hours later. There they stayed for the night and, starting early, would reach Camp III at the entrance to the Cwm by 9 or 10 o'clock. They dumped their loads at Camp III and descended directly to base in the early afternoon, ready for the same programme next day. The high-level parties would take over the burdens dumped by the Icefall Sherpas, carry them up to the site for the future advance base—at first only a dump for these stores and later labelled Camp IV—and return down the Cwm to Camp III in the course of a long, hard day. The climbing in the Icefall was always strenuous and difficult;



The Western Cwm

there were bridges to cross, ladders to climb, vertical ice walls to ascend in steps carved in the ice, with the aid of a hand line or rope ladder. There was always the danger of falls of ice at a moment when a carrying party was underneath some tottering ice cliff. Falls were constantly occurring and it was mainly chance (perhaps indeed a miracle) that we were spared any accident throughout the many weeks that we moved up and down the Icefall. The weather was bad. For five weeks it snowed during a part of every day, covering the laboriously prepared track with deep new snow, making each journey a fresh problem in track making and route finding and it was all the more depressing in that we were so intent on being ready from mid-May onwards. Our numbers were reduced too by sickness; many suffered from sore throats and hacking coughs, and there were numerous cases of tummy troubles.

But the work, though slowed down, went steadily ahead, and everyone took

View down the North face of Everest, taken by Hillary from the summit, showing the North Col, North Peak, Rongbuk Glacier (left), East Rongbuk Glacier (right) and Rongbuk Valley

a cheerful, full and effective part in this process of getting ourselves ready for the assault. The stores at Base Camp dwindled; at Camp III they piled up only to be whittled down as they were shifted daily farther up the Cwm to Camp IV.

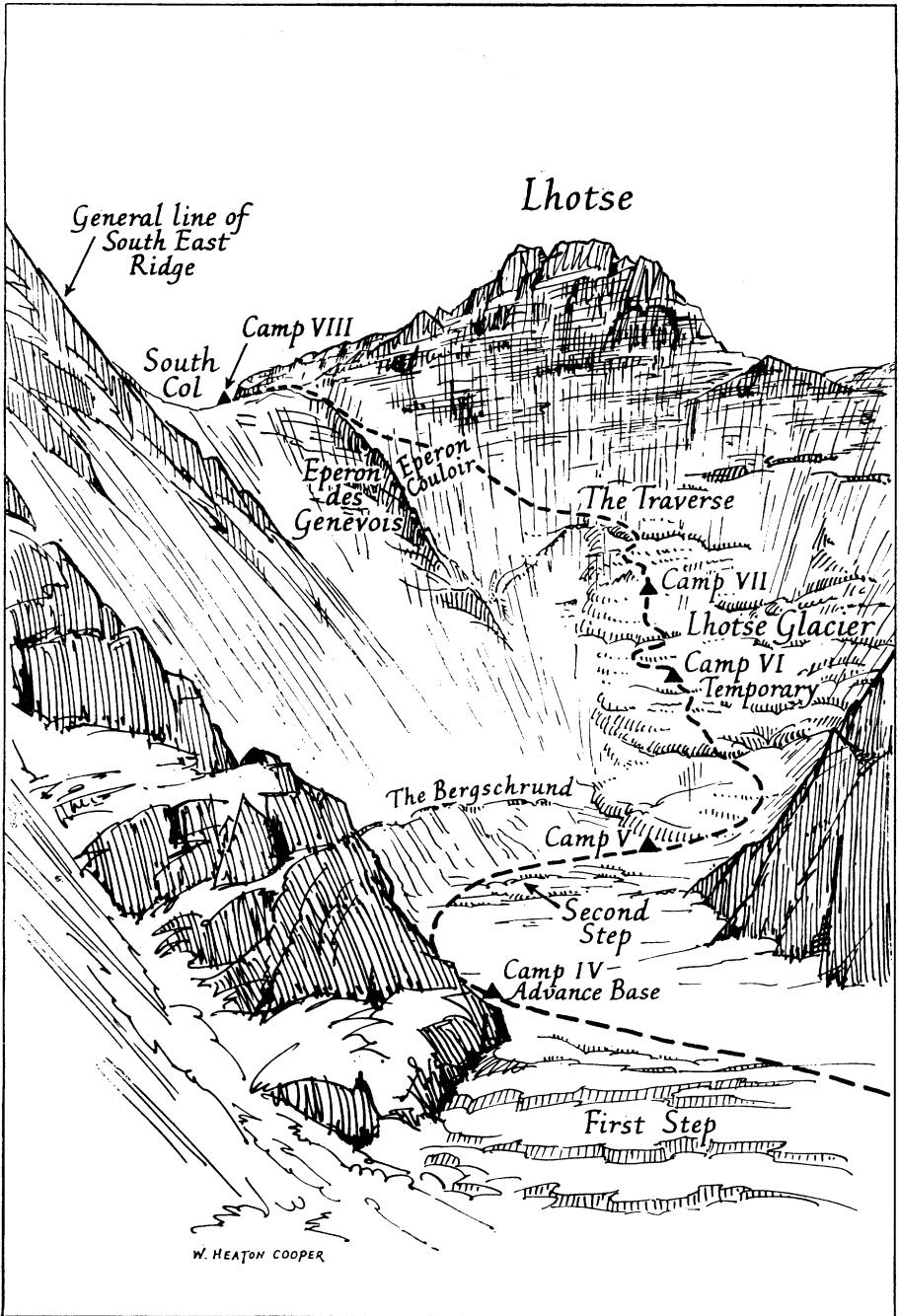
Up the Lhotse Face

During all this time, of course, we were spying out the land ahead. Reconnaissances had preceded the making of the route through the Icefall: likewise we had sent a party up the Western Cwm at the beginning of the build-up period in order to prepare a way to and look for a site for Advance Base. Now, about half-way through the three weeks' period of stockpiling, the most important reconnaissance of all was carried out: the way out of the Western Cwm. This, the Lhotse Face, is the crux of the whole climb. It is 4000 feet high, it is uniformly steep and it is technically difficult—a glaciated slope with vertical cliffs or steps of ice separated by snow-covered shelves—and the problem of climbing it is made infinitely more severe by the altitude, for it rises from 22,000 feet at the head of the Cwm to nearly 26,000 feet on the South Col. First we sent a small party to find a way and also to experiment with our oxygen equipment for the first time at really high altitude, for hitherto we had been able to try it out only below 20,000 feet during the training period. As a result of this reconnaissance, which was carried through in appalling weather conditions by Evans, Bourdillon, Ward and Wylie, another party was sent up to prepare a route through the main difficulties—Lowe, Band and Westmacott with a special party of Sherpas. Band and Westmacott fell sick at the beginning of this important mission and Lowe had to carry on with the Sherpas alone. He set up a tent on a ledge where the Swiss had camped the previous autumn at about 23,000 feet and for ten gruelling days he, assisted during various stages by a magnificent Sherpa Ang Nyima, and by Noyce and Ward, remained on the Lhotse Face, operating between 23,000 and nearly 25,000 feet, without the aid of oxygen; cutting steps in the steep ice, fixing ropes to assist parties on the most precipitous ground, stamping a trail through the deep snow on the terraces. For the first five days his work, like that of the toilers lower down, was hampered by heavy snowfall; and at times the Lhotse Face team were waist deep in fresh snow. Yet by May 20, they had forced a route nearly two-thirds of the way up the Face, and over the main difficulties. It was a performance which will go down in the annals of mountaineering history.

While this was going on, others of us were carrying the stores ever higher, from Camp IV to the very foot of the Lhotse Face; from there the special items required for the assault plan were lifted up the Lhotse Face in the track prepared by Lowe's party, first to the temporary Camp VI then, as he progressed, to a Camp VII at 24,000 feet. Thus we infiltrated up the mountain.

We had made a rough guess at an assault plan in London, but it was only after the reconnaissance of the Lhotse Face that a definite scheme could be made, based on actual experience of the ground, the weather conditions and the performance of our equipment. On May 6 I was able to make the final decisions, which were as follows:—

We would be prepared to make, if necessary, three attempts on the summit



Reproduced from "The Ascent of Everest" by John Hunt (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1953)

Route up the Lhotse Face to the South Col

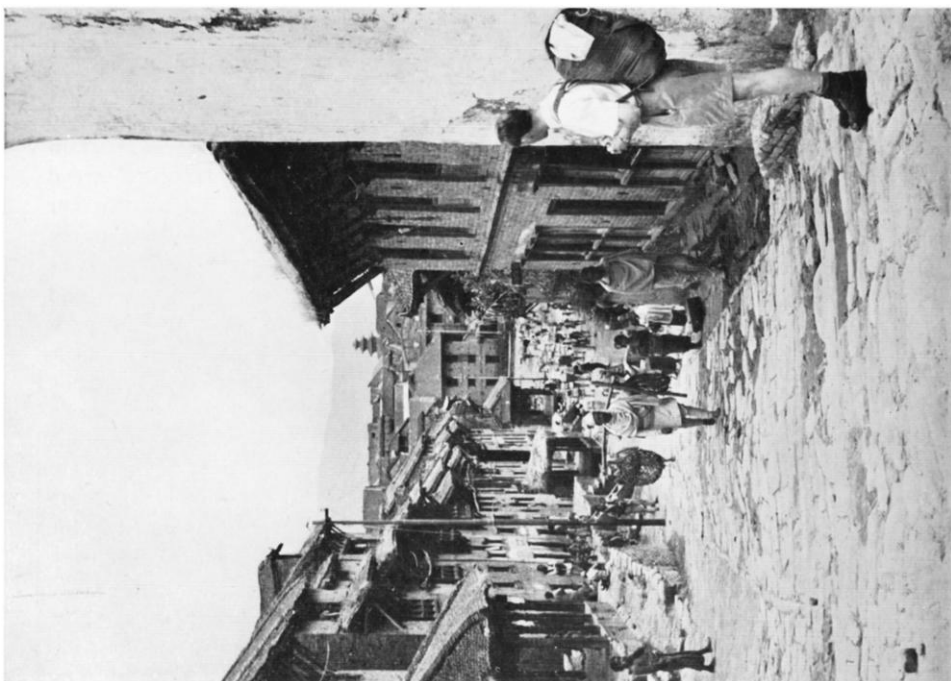
—this much was feasible in terms of men and material. Two of these would be made in quick succession, the one supporting the other, on consecutive days if the weather allowed. Each assault party should consist of two men to attempt the summit, and others to accompany them, in support so to speak, and carrying stores to establish the highest camp of all, the final camp from which the attempt would be made. The first assault was to be made using an experimental type of oxygen equipment—the closed circuit type—which we hoped would enable us to save time, effort and (not least) the burden of additional oxygen cylinders, by climbing directly to the summit from the South Col without the use of a further camp. The second assault, using the more fully proven open circuit equipment, would be made if necessary from this top camp. Bourdillon and Evans were to make the first attempt on ‘closed circuit,’ supported by myself and two of our élite band of Sherpas, Da Namgyal and Ang Tenzing. We had, during the acclimatization period, trained seven of the best men in the use of oxygen. The second attempt was to be made by Hillary and Tenzing, supported by Gregory and three other Sherpas of the select team—Ang Tema, Pemba and Ang Nyima. Ang Nyima had already established a reputation by his fine work with Lowe on the Lhotse Face.

But before these first two attempts could be made over 700 lb of stores—oxygen, tents, food, fuel, cookers, climbing gear—must be lifted from the head of the Western Cwm up the Lhotse Face to the South Col. Fourteen more Sherpas, chosen specially as a result of their showing during the build-up period, and led by Noyce and Wylie, were to undertake this vital preliminary mission.

It was now May 21. Two days before I had sent off Noyce with the first party of eight men to Camp V at the foot of the Face and the day following (May 20) he had reached Camp VII, half way to the Col. Wylie’s party had started off for Camp V on this same day and was due to go up to VII in Noyce’s tracks—twenty-four hours behind him. It was an anxious and critical day in the history of the expedition, for everything depended on whether Noyce’s party would in fact get up to the Col; they would be doing so largely over ground which we had not yet explored, let alone prepared, for Lowe’s magnificent effort had at last petered out on the 20th below 25,000 feet and he had come down for a badly needed rest. We were watching from Camp IV a certain point on that immense backcloth of dazzling whiteness—a pinnacle or sérac of ice which concealed the tents of Camp VII. Would they come out? At about 10 o’clock two figures emerged alone, two tiny dots barely visible to the naked eye. Apparently, Noyce had decided to adopt the alternative plan which we had discussed, of taking his leading Sherpa—Annullu—and making the track upwards while leaving the rest of his men in the camp that day. This was disappointing, for it meant a serious overcrowding in the few tents of Camp VII that night when Wylie’s party would also have arrived, and the lurking uncertainty remained as to why the others had not accompanied him? Were they sick or too tired, and if so would they go on even the following day? We waited and watched throughout that day, our anxieties banished by wonder and admiration, as Noyce and Annullu climbed steadily up those steep slopes to the top of the glaciated incline and turned across



In the Dudh Kosi



The Expedition passing through Badgaon, with Noyce (right)



Bridging a crevasse in the Icefall



Ice pinnacle on the Khumbu glacier



Wylie and Sherpas on the Lhoise Face



Evans (left) and Bourdillon on return from the first assault when they reached the South Summit (28,720 feet)



towards the South Col itself. Soon after 2 p.m. we caught a last glimpse of him, a speck of blue against some rocks, and then he disappeared beyond the crest of the Col. It was a triumphant moment. For twelve days now we had been doing battle with this, the greatest obstacle of all on our way to the top—and now it was overcome. As we watched Noyce on his epoch-making climb, we also saw Wylie and his nine men arrive at Camp VII. The watchers at Advance Base settled into their tents for the night, excited by the drama of that day but carrying their anxieties to bed with them—for the big question still remained, would the complete party of fourteen men with their leaders follow Noyce's lead and go up to the Col next day?

And on May 22 we again stared at the Lhotse Face. Despite the possibly grave consequences to the assault plan I had sent Tenzing and Hillary up to Camp VII the day before to give encouragement to the Sherpas in their vital mission and support, if it were needed, to Wylie and Noyce, and we watched in amazement as a whole string of seventeen little dots spread out across that great white expanse, creeping gradually—with painful slowness but moving none the less—in Noyce's footsteps of the day before. As the day wore on, it became obvious that they were going to make it and at long last I was able to put an end to the anxiety and suspense by deciding that the assault should start.

The first assault: Evans and Bourdillon

The weather, having done its best to deter us for five weeks, had suddenly turned fine on May 14, just the day before we had planned to be ready to seize any opportunity we might be given. It had succeeded in delaying our readiness for a week, but miraculously—I can give no other explanation—the elements continued to smile upon our struggle. Bourdillon, Evans, Da Namgyal, Ang Tenzing and myself went up to Camp V on the evening of May 22, meeting there on arrival some of the most stalwart of the men who had made this possible by carrying loads to the distant Col that day. Among them were Hillary and Tenzing, who, having left Camp IV only the day before, had climbed to the South Col and were now on their way back to Advance Base from 21,200 to 26,000 feet and back in thirty hours—not only this, but they must now get ready to follow us in the second assault. These facts speak eloquently of the guts and stamina of these two men.

Using oxygen though we now were, we found it a long, hard climb to the South Col. We spent a restless and anxious night at Camp VII, with the great west wind sweeping across the Face of Lhotse in tremendous gusts which buffeted the tents and seemed intent on uprooting us bodily, tents and all, down the mountainside. We struggled on upwards next day (May 24) heavily burdened and slowed down by the tiresome breakable crust formed on the snow surface by the wind; no traces remained of the large party which had climbed these slopes only two days before. At about 4 p.m. we at last climbed out of the couloir and stood on the top of the Geneva Spur gazing down at the South Col of Everest, a dismal enough scene. We were also looking for the first time at the final keep of the fortress of Everest, the last 3000 feet of the mountain. This was an awe-inspiring but scarcely encouraging sight. A tall slender snow peak, the South Summit (28,720 feet), rose

directly above our heads, incredibly close yet somehow depressingly far above; leading to it was the ridge by which we must climb, running down to the south-east, its angle gentle in places but surprisingly steep in others. To reach it was not going to be easy, for we must climb by one of several steep snowfilled gullies in the South Face, which rises above the Col for over 1000 feet. The peak was clear, but a great plume of snow dust was as though appended to it—a banner of cloud which is an almost permanent feature of the mountain.

To reach the surface of the Col you have to descend a slope of some 200 feet, so down we went, with the uncomfortable feeling of going into a trap, for this slope, gentle and innocent as it was, must again be climbed to get back to our comrades and safety, at 26,000 feet and very weary, after making our attempt on the summit. It was a dreary, dread scene. There were the tattered remnants of the Swiss tents set up there last autumn, the bare skeletons of them, all but a few shreds of canvas stripped from them by the westerly wind. Around were scattered remains of equipment, a bleached climbing rope, oxygen frames, odd tins of food. A more comforting sight was the mound of stores carefully weighted down with boulders, which had been carried up for the assault. We dragged out two tents, and set to work to put them up. For the next hour and more we were engaged in a struggle which none of us will ever forget. We were trying to put up just one of those two small tents, fighting with the wind, an invisible enemy which pulled the canvas from our hands and made our task all but impossible. Weak as we were after our climb, deprived now of oxygen, we were hopelessly inadequate for the job. We tripped over the ropes, fell over stones, got in each other's way. In the end the tent was up somehow, just before we became completely exhausted and the sun went down. We scrambled in and, amid a confusion of gear, settled down, utterly weary, for the night.

It had been blowing hard during the night; but the morning of May 25 was not only brilliantly clear, the infamous north-west wind, which had so nearly prevented us from getting into our tents, had died away to a stiff breeze: conditions were as favourable for an assault on the summit as they ever can be on Everest. But we quickly decided that we must wait for another day before essaying it. It will be remembered that Evans and Bourdillon were to make their attempt directly from the Col and for this an early start was essential. We had been far too tired the night before to get ready—and getting ready at 26,000 feet is a slow and exhausting business. There remained much to be done, particularly in preparing our oxygen equipment. Moreover, one of the two Sherpas who were to help me in getting a part of the stores for the highest Camp (IX) up on the south-east ridge was in a bad state of exhaustion and we still hoped he might recover with rest. Despite the drawbacks—a possible turn of the wind or weather against us; using up food and fuel not allowed for in the plan; the risk of our own physical deterioration—we stayed through that day on the Col, resting and getting ready for the morrow. On the 26th after some delay and much anxiety over the functioning of the oxygen equipment, both parties set out—Evans and Bourdillon as summit party and Da Namgyal and I as support party. Ang Tenzing was still sick and we two were fairly heavily laden with a tent, fuel,

food, in addition to our own oxygen sets and personal equipment—about 45 lb each. The two ‘summiters,’ with their more powerful oxygen soon pulled ahead of Da Namgyal and myself, as we followed very slowly in their tracks up the snow gully we had chosen to lead us to the south-east ridge. Near the top, the angle of the snow steepened uncomfortably and we had to move away on to a slope of rock and snow on the right. A little higher the slope eased suddenly and we found ourselves beside another pathetic relic of the Swiss Expedition: the frame of a small tent just below the ridge, where Tenzing and Lambert had spent a terrible night without sleeping bags almost exactly a year before, during their splendid effort to reach the top. Here we lay to rest and recover from the ordeal of that climb up the gully, fighting and gasping for air for a while; in my case, though I did not realize it at the time, there was a blockage of ice in the tube of my oxygen set which must have added very considerably to the pain and grief of that day’s climb. We were both pretty tired by now but decided to struggle on up the ridge as long as we could. Being short of one of our carrying team I had realized that we should probably not be able to lift the stores for the top camp as high as I had planned—I had always intended to place it much higher than any camp established on Everest before and hoped that this might be at 28,000 feet. Now, without Ang Tenzing, it seemed that the best we could do would be to dump the stores and leave the second assault party with their three Sherpas under Gregory, to carry them still higher. Before leaving, I looked round at the view—on the world, in fact, for we were now climbing on its roof. There was Lhotse, for all its 27,800 odd feet not very much higher than we. Away on the western horizon rose another Himalayan giant Kangchenjunga, third highest in the world, only 800 feet lower than Everest itself. We must have climbed on for another half hour or perhaps a bit more (it seemed an eternity) until we found a niche in the crest of the ridge where the loads could safely be placed. Here we built a cairn—the height we now reckon to have been 27,350 feet—and leaving our oxygen bottles for Hillary and Tenzing we started down towards the Swiss camp. Even going downhill now seemed a very great effort; every step had to be carefully considered for we were moving on steep ground and a slip would have been serious. We moved one at a time down the couloir, each safeguarding the other with the rope passed over his ice-axe; as we went down, I was relieved to see figures spread out across the great slopes of the Lhotse Face on their way up to the Col. This was of course the second assault party, who had started forty-eight hours after us because of the exhausting feat of Tenzing and Hillary in accompanying the Sherpas to the South Col only a few days before. Here they were, fitting perfectly into the timing of our own attempt. We were both well-nigh at the end of our tether when we reached the level ice surface of the South Col, and without the wonderful help of Hillary and Tenzing, who had got up ahead of the rest of their party, I doubt whether I should have had the strength to crawl back to the tents.

Meanwhile Evans and Bourdillon were climbing strongly and steadily up the south-east ridge—I had last seen them in a break in the clouds—some 300 feet above us, while we rested near the Swiss tent. But those of us who were now gathering on the Col below could not know this, for the weather

was by no means good; it was once again blowing hard and the whole of the upper part of the mountain was obscured by cloud.

It might have been half an hour after Da Namgyal and I had got back—I was resting, I remember, in a tent and chatting with Tenzing—when George Lowe shoved his head in through the narrow entrance. He was wildly excited—jubilant. “They’re up!” he shouted, “By God they’re up!” Everyone was overcome with excitement. The Sherpas, believing the slender snow cone of the South Peak to be the summit itself, were even more thrilled than we ourselves. They thought Evans and Bourdillon had climbed the mountain. I remember Ang Nyima, one of the trio forming Gregory’s support party for the second attempt saying to me in slang Hindi “*Everest khatm ho gya, Sahib,*” which in equally slang English might be translated “Everest has had it.”

But we knew that we must await their return for definite news, for from that South Peak there remained a long stretch of ridge which had never before been seen close at hand; we had many times wondered what Everest held in reserve on this final part of its defences. It was an anxious wait, with the lurking question ever in mind: Could they come back safely? We could see nothing through the mists swirling around the mountain, tortured by the rising wind.

Then about 3.30 there was a fleeting break at the lower end of it and there, framed in this gap were two little dots at the head of the gully, some 1300 feet above us. I heaved an immense sigh of relief. At least they were safe. They moved slowly and were obviously very tired, but at last they were back among us, telling us of their wonderful first ascent of the South Peak of Everest—28,720 feet. That they did not continue along the final ridge to the highest point was exactly in accordance with my briefing, for I had been most anxious that they should not take risks with their experimental oxygen equipment. It must have been a tantalizing situation to be up there at 1 p.m. that day, so near to the fulfilment of a life’s dream and yet knowing that they had neither the time nor the oxygen to reach the summit along the formidable alpine ridge they now saw stretching before them. To continue would not have been in the interests of the expedition, and in returning safely they not only made a fine mountaineering decision, but gave us all enormous confidence in final triumph.

The second assault: Hillary and Tenzing (Hillary’s narrative)

“By May 22 we had made the first great carry to the South Col and fourteen 30-lb. loads of vital food, equipment and oxygen were awaiting our use. As we descended to Camp IV after making this lift, we met Bourdillon, Evans and Hunt setting out up the Lhotse Face to make the first assault on the summit. During the next two days we rested and watched their tiny figures on the Lhotse Face climbing steadily to Camp VII and then on to the South Col.

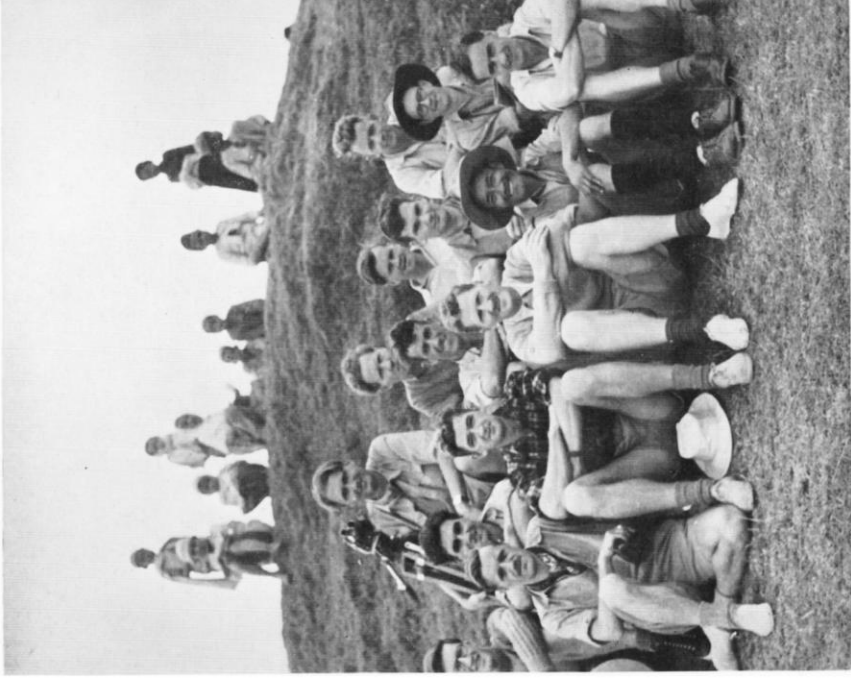
“It was now time for us to move. On May 25 Tenzing and I supported by Lowe and Gregory moved up to Camp VII. The following day we climbed the steep glacier above the camp and then began to cross the great traverse towards the South Col. From here we got our first glimpse of Evans and

Lowe climbing from the South Summit (28,720 feet) towards Camp IX (28,900 feet) in support of the second assault





Hillary and Tenzing preparing for the second assault



The Expedition: left to right, back: T. Stobart, Griffith Pugh, W. Noyce, C. Evans; middle: G. Band, M. Ward, E. Hillary, T. Bourdillon, M. Westmacott; front: A Gregory, G. Lowe, J. Hunt (leader), Tenzing, C. Wylie

Bourdillon on the south-east ridge, obviously moving strongly. Just before we reached the South Col, through a gap in the clouds we saw two tiny specks moving on the South Summit. It was a tremendous moment for us.

"We reached the South Col in time to assist Hunt and Da Namgyal back to their tents after their strenuous efforts in carrying food and equipment to 27,350 feet. Much later in the afternoon, two tired figures descended out of the clouds on the ridge and came slowly down the slope towards the Col. They were Evans and Bourdillon. They told us how they had reached the South Summit, the problems they had been faced with and the difficulties they had had with their oxygen sets. They also reported that the ridge leading to the top appeared to be of considerable difficulty.

"We went to bed that night elated over the success of our companions but not particularly happy about our prospects for the summit. The next day the South Col wind at its worst was blowing and no move upwards was possible. We assisted Bourdillon, Evans, Hunt and Da Namgyal to the top of the Geneva Spur and saw them start off on their long and weary descent to the relative comforts of the lower camps. All night it blew fiercely and although we were ready to leave very early, no start was possible before 8.45 a.m. The high-altitude Sherpas chosen to carry our camp high up the south-east ridge had all fallen ill except Ang Nyma, so there was nothing for it but to carry everything ourselves. Lowe, Gregory and Ang Nyma cut a stairway up the firm, steep snow of the couloir. Tenzing and I followed in these tracks and were able to conserve our strength and make faster time. We caught them up on the south-east ridge near the remnants of the Swiss tent of the previous spring. Despite our large loads we were all going very well. The ridge above, although steep, was generously supplied with foot and hand holds and although we moved slowly up it, we were able to climb steadily and rhythmically, taking every care.

"At 27,350 feet we came to the dump left by Hunt several days previously and reluctantly tied this extra equipment on to our heavy loads. Ang Nyma had just over 40 lb. but the rest of us were carrying between 50 and 63 lb. Moving very slowly now, we hauled ourselves up the ridge, all of us breathing oxygen at the rate of 4 litres a minute. A possible camp site would appear deceptively above us, only to vanish as we reached it. We were all very tired, and indeed a little desperate, when we finally reached a snowy ledge, which although uneven was sufficiently roomy to pitch a tent.

"While Lowe, Gregory and Ang Nyma descended to the South Col, Tenzing and I made a very rough platform, tied our tent down as best we could and crawled in for the night. After a somewhat uncomfortable night, I looked out of the tent very early and was greatly encouraged to see every sign of a fine day. We quickly organized ourselves and at 6.30 a.m. set off up the mountain. The first 500 feet was covered very slowly but steadily. We were going well, and were able to overcome without difficulty any problems we met. But then we reached the great 400-foot face running up to the South Summit, and this was a different proposition. Not only was it very steep but I felt the snow was in a dangerous condition. Laboriously beating a track up it, sometimes to our knees and often deeper, we were always conscious of the tremendous drop to the Kangshung Glacier, 11,000 feet below.

Half-way up the slope I asked Tenzing his opinion and he replied that he was rather unhappy about it and thought it very dangerous. When I asked him whether he thought we should go on, he gave his familiar reply: 'Just as you wish.' I felt we had a fair chance so decided to persevere. It was a tremendous relief however when, 100 feet from the South Summit, the snow became firm and we were able to kick and chip steps up the last steep slopes on to the South Summit itself.

"We sat down and had a drink from our water bottle. We had been using oxygen at the rate of 3 litres a minute and I estimated that this would give us another four and a half hours on our remaining bottle. The ridge ahead looked both difficult and dangerous, heavily corniced on the right, dropping off to enormous rock bluffs on the left. The only possibility was to keep along the steep snow slope running between them. I cut a line of steps down to the saddle between the South Summit and the ridge and was overjoyed to find that the snow, far from being soft and powdery, was firm and hard and that a couple of good blows with the ice-axe would make a step big enough for even our outsize high-altitude boots. We moved slowly and very carefully. I cut 40 feet of steps, then forced my ice-axe into the snow and belayed Tenzing as he moved up to me. Then he in his turn thrust his ice-axe in and protected me as I cut another 40 feet of steps. Moving one at a time and fully conscious that our margin of safety must inevitably be reduced at this great altitude, we forged slowly ahead.

"After an hour's going the South Summit was dropping away beneath us, but I suddenly noticed that Tenzing, who had been going very well, was starting to drag. When he approached me I saw he was panting and in some distress. I examined his oxygen set and, finding that the exhaust outlet from his mask was blocked with ice, was able to give him immediate relief. We moved on again and soon reached the worst problem on the ridge—a great rock bluff which looked far too difficult to tackle directly with our limited strength. There was one possibility: attached to the right-hand side of the rock bluff was a cornice and the ice had peeled away leaving a gap running the full length of the bluff and just large enough to take the human frame. With Tenzing belaying me I moved into the crack and cramponing on the ice behind and using every handhold on the rock in front I wriggled and jammed my way up and pulled myself panting on to the little ledge at the top. I signalled to Tenzing and heaved on the rope until he in his turn struggled up and collapsed exhausted on our little ledge. I really felt now a fierce determination that we would succeed in reaching the summit.

"The ridge stretched on in a never-ending succession of corniced bumps and as I continued cutting the trail round the back of them I wondered just how long we would have to go on. We were starting to tire. I had been cutting steps continuously for almost two hours and wondered rather dully, whether we would have enough strength left to get through. I cut around the back of another hump and saw that the ridge ahead dropped away and that we could see far into Tibet. I looked up and there above us was a rounded snow cone. A few whacks of the ice-axe, a few cautious steps and Tenzing and I were on top. The time was 11.30 a.m.

We stayed fifteen minutes, removing our masks and so conserving oxygen.

After an hour we were back on the South Summit; moving gingerly down the great snow slope, we were able to shrug off the sense of fear that had been with us all day. At 2 p.m. we were at Camp IX, where we brewed some lemonade before setting off on the long trek down to the ridge. We were both very tired, but not too tired to make the last effort of cutting steps down the couloir where yesterday's tracks had already been blotted out. On the Col we were greeted by Lowe and Noyce; the latter had come up that day in support with Passang Phutar, both making their second trip to the Col." (*End of Hillary's narrative.*)

We waited at Advance Base in vain for news all through May 29. Gregory had come down with the two remaining Sherpas of his support team and had raised our hopes by telling us that he had seen Hillary and Tenzing at 9 o'clock that morning, just as he had watched Evans and Bourdillon on the 26th, approaching the South Peak and going well. This, the early hour that he had seen them, and the glorious weather, apparently with little wind even higher up, had given us great confidence that they might have made it. But by evening we were in the dark about the outcome. I had asked Noyce, who with three Sherpas had gone up a second time after Evans, Bourdillon and I had come down, either to reinforce or rescue the second assault party, to lay out sleeping bags on a certain snow slope just below the Col visible to us below—"T" would mean success: two bags laid parallel would mean they had reached the South Peak; only one would mean failure. But as evening approached, mists drifted across the Lhotse Face, and we stared in vain at the blanket of vapour behind which Noyce and Passang Phutar had, in fact, placed the signal.

Next morning part of our anxiety was removed when we counted five specks high on the Face coming down. They were all there and all were moving independently—they were safe and well. Soon after 2 p.m. they appeared again, much closer this time, only a few hundred yards up the glacier above our Camp. Most of us, unable to bear the suspense, went up to greet them and hear their news. As they came towards us the returning summit party made no sign, just plodded on dejectedly, obviously very tired. My heart sank—this must be failure; I tried to focus my thoughts on that third effort which we had kept in reserve. Then, when they were quite close, George Lowe, who was leading the little group, started gesticulating, making unmistakable jabs with his ice-axe towards the top of Everest, frowning down above us.