

ON TOP OF THE WORLD

THE INDIAN EVEREST SAGA

(1854-2006)

Contributions by Everest Leaders

M.S. KOHLI

Foreword by

Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh

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DR. MANMOHAN SINGH
Prime Minister of India

FOREWORD

Mount Everest is closely associated with the advent, development and growth of Indian mountaineering. In 1953, the maiden ascent of Everest by Tenzing Norgay, alongwith Edmund Hillary, electrified the entire nation. It is to the credit of our visionaries—Jawaharlal Nehru and Dr. B.C. Roy—who, realizing the potential of this historic achievement by an Indian, took the momentous decision to set up the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling in 1954 with Tenzing as the Director of Field Training. These welcome developments played a significant role in the life of our nation.

In 1965, India became the fourth nation in the world to climb Everest when the record-breaking Indian expedition, superbly led by Captain M.S. Kohli, set up the world record by putting nine climbers on the summit. This catapulted India as a major mountaineering nation in the world. In Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's words, "The record of Commander Kohli's expedition will find special mention in history. It was a masterpiece of planning, organisation, teamwork, individual effort and leadership".

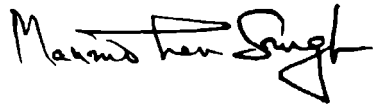
By the end of the climbing season of 2006, one hundred and

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seven Indians, including 12 women, have reached the highest point on the earth. It is a matter of pride for us that one of the first two persons to reach the summit is an Indian; the first man to climb Everest twice is an Indian; the first woman to climb Everest twice is also an Indian and the three climbers, who hold a world record of spending three nights just at about 28,000 feet, are also Indians.

These gallant climbs by Indians prove that there is nothing beyond the reach of our people. Today the climb of Everest has become symbolic of reaching the highest peaks of achievement in different spheres of life and the best way to promote the spirit of adventure. I am happy that Captain Kohli has now embarked on a historic mission to set up 500 'Adventure and Leadership Parks' in India. These character-building endeavours for the youth will also go a long way in improving the quality of life in the nation.

I hope this book will inspire and motivate our youth to march forward and take India to its zenith.



MANMOHAN SINGH
Prime Minister of India

PREFACE

I have vivid memories of the post-war phase of the epic of Everest which began in Nepal in 1950 when the Himalayan kingdom opened doors to foreign mountaineers for the first time, as also the pioneering Indian attempts to reach the highest peak in the world. On March 23, 1952, when I came to know that the Swiss Everest team was in Delhi on way to Base Camp, I had rushed to the Swiss Hotel in Civil Lines to meet them. As Students' Union President, I wanted them to visit our college. On reaching the hotel, I observed that no one spoke English. I could not converse with them at all. I returned to the college without making any headway. Tenzing was away in Kathmandu. It was this historic expedition in which Tenzing and Raymond Lambert blazed the trail to the South-East Ridge of Everest, missing the summit by 650 feet. This meeting had one positive outcome—it generated in me a desire to climb Everest one day.

The following year we were all thrilled to know that Tenzing and Hillary had reached the top of Everest. On their return to Delhi, there was a civic reception in honour of the team. Many of us had gate-crashed to get a glimpse of the heroes.

In 1960, India took up the challenge of Everest. The expedition led by Brigadier Gyan Singh, missed the summit by 730 feet. I was in the second summit party and was caught in the heavy snowfall on arrival of monsoon. On return to Delhi, we received a very heartening message from the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, "The spirit and lure of the Himalayas is spreading now all over India among our young people, and that is a sign and

symbol of the new life and the new spirit that is coursing through India's veins."

In 1962, India attempted Everest for the second time. Major John Dias was the leader and I was selected his deputy. Sonam Gyatso, Hari Dang and I made a bid for the summit but missed it by 350 feet due to strong blizzard. We spent three nights at our last camp at 28,000 feet, two nights without oxygen. I remember, Indian newspapers had announced that we were probably dead.

The Americans had booked Everest for 1963 and 1964. So our booking was now for 1965. In 1963, six climbers reached the top. We were delighted that one of them was an Indian—Nawang Gombu. On their return to Delhi, Prime Minister Nehru, who was not really feeling too well, invited the team to Teen Murti. The American ambassador, John Galbraith, was also there. Sunil Dutt and Nargis also joined us. They were returning from Ladakh after entertaining the troops.

In 1965, I was selected to lead the third Indian Everest expedition. Another eminent climber, Major N. Kumar, was my deputy. This time we were better equipped, more determined, and of course, more experienced. The team was wonderful and nine of us were able to reach the top.

In 1984, we decided to send a mixed (men and women) expedition to Mount Everest. The expedition was led by Col. D.K. Khullar. Those days the President of Indian Mountaineering Foundation, Harish Sarin, was away in Kathmandu as India's ambassador. In his absence, as Vice President of the IMF, I looked after the administration of this important expedition. Five climbers, including Bachendri Pal, reached the summit.

Directly or indirectly, I was associated with most of the subsequent Indian expeditions to Everest. All these expeditions to Everest were responsible for spreading the spirit of adventure to every nook and corner of India and deserve to be chronicled.

The book in Part One covers the discovery of Everest and the important role played by the Indians in foreign expeditions. Part Two covers the first Indian success and Part Three covers

subsequent Indian Everest expeditions till the end of the climbing season of 2006. It is hoped that the book will inspire the young generation to scale the highest peaks of achievement in their chosen fields.

I am most grateful to the Hon'ble Prime Minister, Dr. Manmohan Singh, for writing the Foreword to this book.

I am grateful to Sir Edmund Hillary, leaders of various Indian Everest expeditions and other members for sending me their articles for inclusion in this volume.

I am grateful to Yogendra Bali and R.S. Somi for going through the manuscript and offering useful suggestions.

M.S. KOHLI

PART I

**DISCOVERY AND
FOREIGN EXPEDITIONS**



DISCOVERY OF EVEREST

1852

H.P.S. Ahluwalia

Few people are aware of how the world's highest and most famous mountain got its name. It was during 1849 to 1855 that the Himalayan peaks in Nepal were first surveyed by the British Surveyor General of India. No one imagined that one of the peaks surveyed was the tallest in the world. Mount Everest was not prominently visible as it was hidden by a lower peak which lay in front of it. At that time Kangchenjunga was considered the highest mountain in the world. Since most of the peaks observed by the surveyors did not have any local names, Roman numerals were allotted to them. Mount Everest and Gauri Shankar were given the numerals XV and XX respectively.

The methods of computing the heights of mountain peaks were not sufficiently advanced in the mid-19th century. As a matter of fact, altitudes were not calculated with any degree of accuracy till much later. The question of atmospheric refraction was being investigated by scientists and that played an important part in the calculation of altitudes. When the results of the calculation were finally announced at the end of 1855, it became known that Peak XV was 29,002 feet above sea level.

The peak is situated on the Nepal-Tibet border at latitude 27°59'16" and longitude 86°55'40". The mountain range at this highest point is formed of sedimentary calcareous and metamorphosed sandstone. The final pyramid composed of dark schist is very compact and dips northwards at 30 degree. The group is estimated to belong to the Triassic or Jurassic period (200 to 240 million years ago). It has a conspicuous, broad, light-brown band of rock known as the Yellow Band, which extends along the base of the pyramid. Stone pieces brought back from the summit of Mount Everest were analysed and the results have proved beyond doubt that it was once under the ocean. Studies of the Himalayas also reveal that they are still rising due to continuing pressure exerted by the hard crust of the earth from the north and the south. It is for this reason that the Himalayas have grown approximately 2000 m during the last 20,000 years. It is observed, as per latest figures, that the average growth is 1 mm a year.

After having found the highest mountain in the world, a search began for an appropriate name, and the matter was debated for nearly ten years. During this period, the Surveyor General considered all the local names which could possibly be used. Many names were suggested but they were all rejected. Col. Andrew Waugh, the then British Surveyor General of India (in consultation with his deputy Col. Henry Thuillier and Radhanath SIKDhar, Chief Computer), decided to name the peak after his predecessor, Sir George Everest, who had contributed a lot to the Geodetic Survey of India. He was the dominant figure of the Great Trigonometrical Survey and believed in great accuracy. The name was accepted by the Royal Geographical Society of Britain. Col. Andrew Waugh wrote to Col. Henry Thuillier, Dy. Surveyor General in March 1856, as follows:

"I was taught by my respected chief and predecessor, Sir (Col.) George Everest, to assign to every geographical object its true local or national appellation... But here is a mountain, most probably the highest in the world, without any local name that we can discover, whose native appellation, if it has any, will not very likely be ascertained before we are allowed to penetrate into Nepal, and to approach close to this stupendous snowy mass."

"In the meantime, the privilege, as well as the duty, devolves on me to assign to this lofty pinnacle... a name whereby it may be known among geographers, and become a household word. In testimony of my affectionate respect for a revered chief, in conformity with what I believe to be the wish of all the members of the scientific department over which I had the honour to preside, and to perpetuate the memory of that illustrious master of accurate geographical research... I have determined to name this noble peak... Mount Everest."

The appellation Mount was chosen by Waugh for a single definite peak and not a massif. Everest was changed to Mount Everest a year later. However, the naming of the highest mountain did not go unchallenged. Brian Hodgson, formerly a political officer in Nepal and an able linguist and scientist, claimed that "newly found" peak was none other than Devadhunga or Bhairathan, names well known in the ancient literature of Nepal. Waugh spent considerable time investigating these claims and wrote to the Asiatic Society that "the names appear to pertain to some peaks near Kuti Ghat, but as the position of that Ghat is uncertain... there is no point of departure for our investigations. The evidence only shows that there is a peak called Bairoa or Deodhanga considered to be to east of Kathmandu, but there are many peaks. We have nothing to which to have a verification."

Another controversy arose over the name of Gauri Shankar. The German brothers, Adolf Herman and Robert Schlagintweit, conducted scientific investigation in Tibet, Sikkim and Central Asia, where Adolf was later murdered in Kashgar. During their stay between 1855 and 1857, they made observations from Sikkim and announced that Everest was called Gauri Shankar in Nepal, and Chingopanari in Tibet. This caused a great sensation. The Royal Geographical Society in London supported them and disagreed with the Survey of India. Thus the name Gauri Shankar came to be adopted in maps as the highest mountain in the world till as late as 1900. Later, their sketches and observations were closely scrutinized by the Survey of India and it was discovered that the observation stations of the German brothers hid Mount Everest from their view. From Phalut they had seen Makalu and

from Kaulia they had seen Gauri Shankar. Mount Everest appeared very small from their observation post as compared to these two mountains and remained unnoticed.

The legend of Gauri Shankar and the name persisted for about half a century. It was only in 1903 that Capt. Wood entered Nepal and made observations from two stations and established that Mount Everest and Gauri Shankar were two different peaks, 36 miles apart. The explorations carried out between 1906 and 1908 in Tibet by Sir Sven Hedin and the subsequent publication of his work brought out many interesting facts. He wrote:

"I do not wish to rob the English surveyors of their discovery in 1852, but I feel compelled to bring to light the true facts of the forgotten part. In 1921 Mount Everest expedition under Col. Howard-Bury found that the Tibetans have the name Tchomo Lungma for Mount Everest, and the official instructions from Lhasa to the local district Tibetans informed the latter that the English expedition wished to visit their mountain Tchomo Lungma. Now, this correct Tibetan name, Tchomo Lungma, appears as Tchoumou Lancma on maps which were prepared from native information by French Jesuits in Peking in 1717, and these maps were printed by D'Anville in Paris in 1733. If the resemblance between the new name Tchomo Lungma and the old Tchoumou Lancma is held to be merely an accidental similarity in sound, I must then draw attention to the agreement in the geographical position of the name between the latest English maps and the old French maps. On modern maps the latitude of Mount Everest is $27^{\circ} 20'$, the modern longitude east of Ferro, $104^{\circ} 55'$ and D'Anville's longitude was $103^{\circ} 50'$. This is surprisingly accurate when one remembers that the Peking calculations were made at the beginning of the 18th century."

Commenting on his observations, Sir Sidney Burrard of the British Surveyor General of India wrote:

"The evidence produced by Sven Hedin to prove the identity of D'Anville's range of mountains Tchoumou Lancma with the Mount Everest of modern geography is certainly very interesting; his investigation has earned our gratitude. But as in some ways,

his outlook is different from my own, I am venturing with all respect to analyse his conclusions. The two main conclusions which Sven Hedin reached in his book are:

1. The highest peak in the world, which the English claim to have discovered in 1852, was shown on French maps 119 years previously.
2. The real Tibetan name of Mount Everest, namely Tchomo Lungma, which the English did not succeed in finding until the 20th century, was known to the Jesuits in Peking 190 years before."

These conclusions should be impartially considered; the highest peak of the earth is beyond the reach of nationalism. In his review of Sir Sven Hedin's book, Sir Sydney Burrard wrote:

"The interest that now attaches to Mount Everest is due only to its great height. The Lamas and Jesuit Fathers discovered that the whole of this region was mountainous, and that it abounded in ranges and peaks, but their maps show that they were unaware that any mountain of exceptional height was standing here. In fact they knew no more about Mount Everest than the Tibetans themselves knew. Nothing was known about Mount Everest, until it was observed by a theodolite from the plains of India in 1849. Until that observation was made, the world was ignorant that their highest mountain was standing here."

The question then arises: who discovered Mount Everest? A popular story which, unfortunately, has gained ground and appears in many books on Everest is that the Chief Computer, Radhanath Sikdhar, rushed into the room of the Surveyor General's office breathlessly exclaiming, "Sir, I have discovered the highest mountain in the world." Burrard in his book has effectively contradicted this version and proved that the above words could not have been uttered then.

While working on this book, I visited the Survey of India office in Dehradun and for several days went through all the available files and records of Everest, through the kind courtesy of the then Deputy Surveyor General. I am fully convinced from the facts available that the Chief Computer, Radhanath Sikdhar, was at that

time in the Calcutta office of the Survey of India. He was posted in 1819 and continued there and had no hand in the computation of the height of Everest. Radhanath Sikdhar, a very able computer, worked under Sir George Everest and was highly praised by him. He joined the Survey of India on a salary of Rs. 30 a month and rose to be the Chief Computer, which was a great achievement.

In 1950, immediately after the Independence of India, a great controversy started and at one stage, pressure was brought on the then Prime Minister by Bengal that Mount Everest should be renamed Mount Sikdhar as it was stated then that Sikdhar's contribution to the discovery of the highest mountain was much more than that of Sir George Everest. This question also came up for discussion in the Indian Parliament but did not yield any fruitful results. Firstly, Sikdhar had no hand in the computation of the readings of Everest, and moreover, a computer is not the real discoverer. According to the records available with the Survey of India: "Mr. Hennessey was engaged on all the computations for determining the positions and heights of the principal peaks of the Himalayan range including Mount Everest. He saw Mount Everest when he was engaged on the north-east longitudinal series. Mr. Armstrong is one of the gentlemen by whom Mount Everest was observed."

During my visits to the Survey of India, Dehradun, I did visit the various branches where the calculations were conducted and made my notes perhaps on the same table on which the computation readings were made over a hundred years ago.

Five Tibetan names for Mount Everest were familiar in the regions of Everest. They were found to be: Chomo Kankar (mentioned by Col. Waddell and Sarat Chandra Das, 1904), Chholungbu (mentioned by Surveyor Natha Singh, 1907), Chomo Lungmo (mentioned by Gen. Bruce, 1909), Chomo Uri (mentioned by Col. Howard-Bury, 1921), and Chomo Lungma (also mentioned by Col. Howard-Bury, 1921). Chomo is a Tibetan word corresponding to the Sanskrit word *Gauri* which means Goddess. Everest is known as Chomolungma by the Tibetans and Sagar-matha by the Nepalese today. The official name used by the Tibetan authorities in Lhasa for Mount Everest was Teha-mo-

Lungma. Sir George Bell, the British representative at Lhasa, who received the first passport in the form of permission for the first Mount Everest expedition wrote:

"When the Dalai Lama gave me the permission for Mount Everest expedition to take place, a week or two after I had reached Lhasa, he handed me a paper on which was written in Tibetan, 'To the west of the five treasuries of Great Snow (in the jurisdiction of 'White Glass Fort' near 'Rocky Valley inner monastery') is the Southern District where birds are kept (Lho-Cha-ma-lung) [Lho-south]'. Later on, in Lhasa, one of the Dalai Lama's secretaries who was in attendance on my party, a man of exceptional knowledge and intelligence, told me that Cha-ma-lung is short for Cha-Dzi-ma-lung-pa, which means 'the district where birds are kept'. He told me that in the time of the early Tibetan kings, 650 to 800 A.D., a large number of birds were fed in this district at the expense of the king. Now, *lung* in Cha-ma-lung means a district that has a valley or valleys in it, and it often means just a valley. It cannot be applied to a mountain summit, nor would a bird sanctuary be on the top of a mountain. In fact Cha-ma-lung, which is a common contraction from Cha-Dzi-ma-lung-pa cannot be the name of a mountain. Nor did the Dalai Lama or his Secretary use the name in that sense. I never heard Chomolung or Chomo-Lungma. People would be very likely to change Cha-mo, into Cho-mo, for the latter occurs in mountain names such as Cho-molha-ri or Chomo Kangkar. *Cho* means Lord amongst gods. The maps on the previous page of Mount Everest were prepared by Sir Sidney Burrard. One was copied from a Lama's survey and the other from a modern map. In comparison, the Lama's map has many errors; the position of the sacred peak of Kailash was in error by 85 miles in latitude. Sir Sydney Burrard observed that such an error can sufficiently displace Mount Everest from the crest of the Himalayas to the plains of India. He also observed that the Lama's map followed the rivers and laid down their courses; the modern map shows the same rivers. The maps do agree closely in shape which is determined by the sources of rivers. It can safely be assumed that it was the combined effort of the two and the credit should go to the Survey of India."

Sir George Everest

Born on 4 July 1790 in Greenwich, England, he was the second son, and his father was a solicitor to both Greenwich and Chelsea Hospitals. George Everest had a brilliant academic career and it was in 1806 that he came to India in the service of East India Company. He later joined Bengal artillery. Few years later, he went to Java to make the survey of the island for the Governor, Sir Stamford Raffles. He returned to India in 1818 and began his work in the Survey of India. After working in India for a few years, he left for England for a brief period to supervise the design and purchase of new instruments. On returning to India he was employed in Calcutta, organizing workshops for field units. In 1830 he became the British Surveyor General of India and conducted the grand Trigonometrical Survey. In 1832, he came to Mussoorie bringing a Great Arc from the Central Himalayas and bought a house which became his summer headquarters for the succeeding ten years.

Although his main interest lay in the Great Arc, he was responsible for the surveys of Madras and Bombay. In 1834, he selected Dehradun and Agra as the base line to start his detailed work on the Great Arc. The same year he went to the hills of Kedar Kanta and Chour. He made observations of the snow peaks and made sketches of these profiles. He continued his work even during the winter and hot summers in India. Due to the strenuous work and the long journeys he had to undertake, his health started to deteriorate. Once, in the month of February he was confined to bed with inflammation in the hip joint which crippled him. He wrote: "To the astonishment of my medical attendants... after the application of some hundreds of leeches, fomentations administered night and day for several days in succession, a due abstraction of blood from cupping and a course of gruel did



Sir George Everest

I begin to recover the use of the limb, and by the end of February was again able to walk about”.

George Everest became a fellow of the Royal Society which paid rich tributes to him remembering the “journeys through vast and magnificent forest where, more to be dreaded than tiger or hyena, lurked the deadly typhus which prostrated him and his whole following... For months he was so weak that he had to be supported by two men while taking his observations at the great theodolite, and could not reach out his hand to the screw of the vertical circle without assistance... The chief was so indefatigable that his contemporaries spoke of him as Neverest.” Sir George Everest was promoted to the rank of Lt. Colonel in 1838 and his salary rose from Rs. 1700 to Rs. 2000.

Everest once refused to cross into Gwalior without due ceremony. He wrote angry letters to the Resident who refused to interfere. He then broke all rules and wrote directly to the Darbar for which he was severely reprimanded by the Supreme Government. In 1843, he handed over the charge of Surveyor General of India to Waugh who had joined him to work on the Great Arc in 1836. He returned to England in 1844 where he started the Second Great Arc work which was published in 1847.

Immediately after returning to England, he married Emma, daughter of Thomas Wing. They had six children but unfortunately none of the Everest descendants survived. Everest was offered knighthood on his retirement but he refused. He was again offered the knighthood in 1861 which he accepted perhaps on persuasion by his friends. Among his other publications were ‘On Instruments and Observations for Longitude for Travellers on Land,’ published in 1859. He died in 1866.



FIRST ON TOP

1953

Sir Edmund Hillary

Night on South Col. The wind screeches across the ridge and sets the canvas crackling like a rifle range; an awful noise. I'm braced between Tenzing and the tent wall; no room to stretch out. Whenever my head falls back against the roof, it is as if I'd run my brain into a pneumatic drill.

I keep looking at my watch, wondering if it has stopped. The hour hand finally creeps round to 4, and I strike a match. The thermometer on the tent wall reads -13 degrees. It's pitch dark.

In the sleep, Tenzing mutters something about breakfast, and I retreat callously to my bag. Pretty soon, the primus has warmed a few degrees—just enough to make it seem safe to sit up and eat.

Scruffy, cramped, somewhat depressed, we gulp down cups of sugary hot water flavoured with lemon crystals, munch some biscuits and argue about which one of us has spent the worst night.

Snow Blown Inside Tent

Greg claims honour, contending that sleeping between Lowe and Tenzing is like being caught in the jaws of a vice. But Lowe scores heavily when he points to a small heap of snow on his sleeping bag, blown through a pinhole in his side of the tent. Scraping it off, he grins and says,

“Well, at least you’re having a good holiday. I hope you’re feeling better for it.”

Nobody bothers to answer. We sprawl about for five hours, waiting for the wind to die down. It doesn’t.

At 9 I bundle up and stumble over to John Hunt’s tent, which he is sharing with Bourdillon and Evans. John agrees we must postpone the attempt. He decides too, that everyone but Greg, Lowe, Tenzing, Ang Nyima, Pemba and I should go down; no point in depleting the slim reserves of food we’ve hauled up here.

An hour or so later, they are packed and ready. Hunt, with his blue eyes frostier than ever, grips my arm. Above the howling wind he says:

“Most important thing—is for you chaps—to come back safely. Remember that. But get up if you can.”

We watch them slog across the Col, up the ridge, and down the slopes toward the traverse: four tired figures dwindling against the monstrous icy face of Lhotse. Then we turn back to our own chores.

I spend the afternoon sorting oxygen bottles, strapping them to their frames, and preparing our sleeping sets. All day we have used no masks. We can breathe well enough, but we work very slowly.

Altitude Sickness Fells One Sherpa

Night comes on, with the wind still intent on blowing us off the Col. We cat-nap through the long hours, not as uncomfortable as before, since there’s now more room. Tenzing and I have the appropriate Meade tent for ourselves: Greg and Lowe share the pyramid.

By 8 a.m. the wind has eased off; but when I go to fetch Pemba I find him at the door of his tent, retching his heart out. Obviously he won't be going anywhere today. Which leaves us only Ang Nyima to help us. Blast old Pemba, I think to myself, and with no remorse; South Col is too high for pity.

We repack our loads and shove off. Lowe, Gregory, and Ang Nyima leave first, at 8:30, with about 45 pounds apiece; they will cut steps for us, so that we can save energy and oxygen. We follow at 10, carrying our sleeping bags, air mattresses, food and extra clothing on top of our breathing sets.

At the foot of the big couloir, we climb up the staircase Lowe has chipped only to duck, as a tolling barrage of ice chunks splatters down at us from 300 feet above. We have to pull aside until the fellows up top have moved out along the South-East Ridge. Then we scramble after them and catch up about noon at the site of the wind-ripped tent left there by Lambert and Tenzing in 1952.

A nice view from here. We photograph everything in sight and move up to the dump John Hunt had placed at 27,350 feet, two days ago. The idea of adding another ounce to our loads brings no cheers from anyone. But the stuff has to go up. Greg packs the oxygen. Lowe ties on some food and fuel, and we all look at the tent.

Campsite Slants Like a Barn Roof

Finally, I say to George: "Look, I'll take the tent if you'll make the route".

He grins and moves off in the lead. He is going extremely well. In fact, this is George's big day on Everest. He was good on the Lhotse Face, but up here he is really showing what he can do.

With 50 to 68 pounds on our backs, we plug on up the steepening ridge. By 2 p.m. we start casting around for a tent site, but the whole slope pitches away like a barn roof. For half an hour we search, climbing and traversing, until finally we come on a ledge about 6 feet by 4 angled downward at about 30 degree.

"Now, there's a lovely spot for a camp," says George enthusiastically, and dumps his load on it at once.

The others are pretty keen to get on down the mountain too, and we can't blame them. Ang Nyima, through his dead beat, asks politely if he can stay up here to help us down the next day, but we send him along. One more night this high on Everest would weaken him so much he'd be of no use to himself, much less to us.

A lonely moment, watching old George, Greg and Ang Nyima turn back. Now we are really alone.

The tent is our first job. For two hours we scrape at the rocks and the snow and the frozen gravel, trying to make a platform for it. We settle for two terraces about a yard wide, six feet long, and about a foot wide. Spend another two hours getting the tent itself up and securing it to some flimsy rock belays and to oxygen bottles which bury in the snow.

About 6:30 we crawl into our sleeping bags, light the primus, and get some supper: tinned apricots, dates, sardines, biscuits, jam, honey. The wind comes in a gust. When I hear it whistle up on the ridge, I brace myself against the canvas and try to hold the tent down as it gets ready to take off. In between squalls I doze, slumping on the upper shelf with my legs dangling over onto Tenzing's bench.

We use only four hours of oxygen, in two-hour shifts. In between, Tenzing heats up a few drinks. We don't talk much. I wonder to myself how George and the boys fared going down, what John Hunt must be thinking, even how those bees of mine back in New Zealand are getting along. And over and over again I do my mental arithmetic on the amount of climbing oxygen we have left, the amount we're likely to use...

Around 4 a.m. we poke our heads out of the tent door. The wind is mercifully still. Far off, the valleys of Nepal still sleep in darkness, but the summits of Makalu and Ama Dablam have caught the sun; and Tenzing, pointing past me, picks out the monastery at Thyangboche, 14,400 feet below us, where even now the lamas are offering special prayers for our safe return.

Boots Frozen Stiff as Armour

While Tenzing melts water for our tea, I had the oxygen sets inside, knock the ice of the valves, and test them. My feet had been a bit damp the night before and, in order to let them dry out and warm up without the risk of frost bite, I had pulled my boots up and used them to prop the toe of my sleeping bag off the cold ground. Now the shoes are frozen as stiff as medieval armour.

I took them over the primus. It takes me a good hour to thaw them, and the smell of leather and rubberized fabric roasting in the little tent is gruesome; but finally the boots are soft enough to wiggle into, and we can set out. Tenzing breaks trail through the powdery snow until my feet have warmed up; then I take over the lead.

Climbing strongly, with a good sense of reserve power, we make for the hollow where Evans and Bourdillon left their oxygen bottles. The cylinders are easy to spot. Pawing the ice from the gauges, I read the pleasant news: about 1000 pounds pressure, enough to take us down to South Col if we're lucky. In short, all the oxygen on our backs we can plow into our attack on the peak itself and our return to this niche.

Tackling the South Peak's Face

We push on. About 400 feet from the South Peak we are brought to a stop: which route? Bourdillon and Evans took the ridge to the left; then, on their way back, came down the broad face. But I think the ridge looks jolly dangerous, with all that loose snow masking the rocks. We decide on the face.

You can't zigzag up a steep slope like this or you'll undercut it and find yourself aboard an avalanche with a one-way ticket to the bottom. So we go straight up. At least, we go up five steps, like walking on eggs, and then the whole crust for 10 feet around breaks up and we slide down again three steps. We don't so much climb the face as swim up it.

Halfway, I turn to Tenzing and say: "What do you think of it?" "I don't like it at all."

"Shall we go on?"

He shrugs, "Just as you wish."

I make a quick decision. In ordinary mountaineering terms, the risk isn't justifiable. I know that. But this is Everest, and on Everest you sometimes have to take the long odds, because the goal is worth it. Or so I try to convince myself.

We go on and we get a break. A few yards higher up we get a break. A few yards higher up we run into some snow that is packed harder. Chipping steps, we make our way quite rapidly up to the crest. At 9 a.m. we are standing on the South Peak.

We have these advantages over Evans and Bourdillon: Thanks to a higher camp, we're here four hours earlier, and we have more oxygen and more strength left to finish the job. But just how big a job is it? That is something no one can tell us for sure.

To size it up, we scoop out a seat for ourselves just below the South Peak, remove our masks, and study the summit above. The true crown is out of sight, somewhere up above the ridge that turns its blade right in our faces now. It looks a fair cow, all right, as we'd say in New Zealand. Cornices on the right, overhanging a little drop of 10,000 feet to the Kangshung glacier on Everest's eastern flank; on the left, steep snow sloping to the lip of the big rock wall that looms over the Western Cwm.

We don't need to talk much. It is obvious that our only route lies between the cornices and the cliffs on the left; the joker is the state of the snow. If it is firm, we have a chance. If it is loose and dry, we've come a long way for very little.

We put our sets on again. I feel very fit and keen to get at the problem. We crampon down to get at the problem. We crampon down to the start of the ridge, and I sink my axe blade into the snow of the upward slope. It is everything we could have asked—crystalline and solid and well-packed. Two or three whacks chip a step big enough even for our elephantine high-altitude boots, and a good shove buries the axe shaft half its length, making a very decent belay.

Tenzing's Breathing More Laboured

Head off, cutting a 40-foot line of steps, resting, and taking a few turns of the rope around my axe as Tenzing comes up to join me. Then he belays me as I carve another flight. We move along steadily, giving the rickety cornices a fairly wide berth and taking an occasional gander over the rock face on our left. About 7500 feet below I can just make out the tents of Camp IV, and I flap my arms up and down like an Abominable Scarecrow, with no particular hope that anyone will see me.

Tenzing began to drag a little on the rope by now, and his breathing seems more rapid. As we halt on one tiny ledge, I ask:

"How does it go, Tenzing?"

"All right."

I knew, however, that like most Sherpas, Tenzing has only a vague notion of the way his oxygen set works. He may be getting groggy and not even realize it. So I check his exhaust tube and find the valves almost completely blocked with ice; he is probably been getting no great benefit from his oxygen for some minutes.

I examine my own tube; to my surprise, ice has begun to form here too, though not enough yet to interrupt my air flow. Obviously, this is something I'll have to keep an eye on for both of us. Fortunately, my habit of doing mental mathematics on our oxygen supply as I plug along, plus the fact that I'm leading the rope, will keep me fairly alert.

We resume the climb, and I cut another line of steps for perhaps half an hour. Then we find ourselves staring at an obstacle we've dreaded ever since we spotted it on the aerial photos and through our binoculars from Thyangboche: a ghastly great rock about 40 feet high, plonked down right across the ridge. No route on it worth talking about. And no way around it—except where the snow cornice on the right, pulling away a little from the rock, has left a thin gap, a kind of chimney.

Forty Feet in Half an Hour

We look at it with rather mixed emotions. I'm not one of those blokes who says to himself, "I'll get up, come hell or high water." Mountains mean a lot to me, but not that much. I just say to Tenzing:

"Well, we'll give it a good go."

He takes a belay, and I jam my way into the crack. With my back to the cornice, I face the rock and grope for handholds along it, kicking my crampons into the snow behind me and jacking myself upwards. I use everything I have—knees, elbows, shoulders, even the oxygen set on my back—trying to get a purchase and exert some critical leverage.

My tactics depend on one little consideration that the cornice doesn't peel off. Of course, Tenzing has me belayed on a bit of rock, which provides a certain moral support. But if the snow gives way, and I find myself dangling over the Kangshung glacier, it isn't going to matter enormously whether Tenzing can hold me for five minutes or fifty.

Foot by foot I hump and wriggle and pull myself up the chimney. The crack is only a rope's length long, but it is a good half hour before I can reach over the ledge at the top and drag myself onto it. I lie there, panting like a gaffed fish, surprised somehow that I've scraped together enough energy to make it. Then I give Tenzing a taut rope and signal him to come along. For the first time, the conviction seeps through me that we are really going to go all the way.

Always Another Ridge Ahead

I check the oxygen sets again. The flow rates seem all right. Turning to Tenzing, I say, "How do you feel?"

He just grins and waves his hand upward towards the ridge. Head off once more, cutting steps. My axe work is still pretty rhythmical and relaxed; I've been chipping away for well over an hour, but, so far, I've avoided the kind of tension that can turn up a sore arm.

One flight of steps, then another and another. We follow the ridge as it curves around to the right, wondering where the top can possibly be, or if it exists at all around the back of one crag, only to have a higher one stare me in the face. It seems endless.

Tiring, I try to save time on one stretch by skipping the step cutting and relying on my crampons. After a few yards I go back to my axe; the angle is still too steep, too dangerous. The crest we have known at the top of the rock step is draining away. Dully, grimly I hack a route around still another knob.

The Summit

One last question concerns me: is the top itself just a large, delicately poised cornice? I cut my way cautiously up the next few feet, probing ahead with my pick. The snow is solid, firmly packed. We stagger up the final stretch. We are here. Nothing above us, a world below.

I feel no great elation at first, just relief and a sense of wonder. Then I turn to Tenzing and shake his hand. Even through the snow glasses, the ice-encrusted mask, the knitted helmet, I can see that happy, flashing smile. He throws his arms around my shoulders, and we thump each other, and there is very little we can say or need to say.

My watch shows 11:30. Two hours and a half it has taken us from the South Peak: five hours from our tent. It seems a bit longer.

Photographs Prove Summit was Reached

I turn off my oxygen and remove my mask. In the thin air of 29,000 feet my breathing becomes slightly more rapid, but not too uncomfortable. I fish out the camera I have kept warm inside my shirt; it will be necessary to take shots down every ridge if we're to prove conclusively that we've been up here.

Moving down the cone a few feet, I snap a picture of Tenzing holding up his ice axe with its flags standing out stiffly in the wind, the flags of the United Nations, Great Britain, Nepal and

India. It would be nice to have Tenzing take my portrait too, in some heroic pose, but unfortunately he doesn't number among his many virtues a knowledge of photography, and the top of Everest strikes me as a poor place on which to conduct classes.

Scooping a small hole in the snow, Tenzing buries a few offerings to the Gods that Buddhists believe inhabit these heights: a small blue pencil given to him by his daughter, a bar of chocolate, some biscuits, a cluster of lollypops. I place near these gifts a little crucifix that John Hunt has received from a friend and passed over to me on South Col.

It is time to go down now. I replace my oxygen mask, suck the air in gratefully, and move off without a backward glance. Reaction has set in; we both are tired.

We crampon along the steps I have cut, moving last. We know the route; we know what is ahead and what isn't; the certainty gives us confidence and a lift to our stride. Even the rock chimney looks reassuringly familiar; we pop into it and skid our way down as if there is no more danger that the cornice will politely heave of the ridge.

Back on the South Peak once more, we halt for a swig of lemonade before tackling the section we both dread, the great snow slope on the reverse face. This nasty bit of work skids down the summit at an oblique angle aimed right at the Kangshung glacier. An ice-axe belay won't hold in the soft snow. If one of us begins to slide, both of us will enjoy a 10,000 feet jump without the benefit of a parachute.

Inching Down a Glassy Staircase

We begin our descent of this glassy staircase. Facing outward and down, we get the uncomfortable sensation of being too heavy, ready to sway forward and fall. We place our boots down onto each step as if we're walking a high wire. I mutter a few things under my breath when we come to a flight of steps Tenzing has cut with his usual ambitious spacing: I have to stop and chip a new step between each of his.

Forty steps more, Twenty, Five... we are done and I can slant over to the relative safety of the South-East Ridge. We look at each other, and with a kind of sigh shrug off the weight of fear that has sat on our shoulders all this long day. The worst is over; we are nearly down.

We trek down to our dismal little campsite; already the wind has ripped the tent half away. It is 2 p.m. Tenzing heats up some more lemonade on the paraffin stove, while I change our oxygen sets onto the last bottles and cut the flow rates down to two litres a minute. We sip our drinks, looking rather dazedly down at South Col where a couple of dots that may be Lowe and Noyce moving out from the camp.

On our feet again, we load up our air mattresses and sleeping bags and stumble off, numb with exhaustion, to the top of the couloir. Here we get a rude surprise: the wind has wiped out all the steps we cut the day before, leaving only a smooth, frozen slope beneath us. With a grunt of disgust, I start chipping a new flight, 200 feet down the gully, pausing only when a particularly vicious gust tries to tear me loose from the mountain and forces me to dig my axe in fast and hang onto it, shielding my face from the pelting snow.

Once at the couloir's foot, it is only a long, rough tramp down to South Col. Before we get there, a lone figure stumbles up to meet us—George Lowe, carrying hot soup and emergency oxygen. I grin weakly at old George and say:

“Well, we knocked the blighter off!”

It is rather pleasant to see his face light up. We have climbed a good bit together, George and I, and it does me good to have some decent news for him after what all he and the others have been through to put our team in position. But both Tenzing and myself are too fagged to chatter much about our experiences.

We totter down to the camp, my oxygen gives out before we get there; it doesn't seem to matter much any more. We crawl into the tents and collapse on our sleeping bags with a sigh of sheer delight.

Excitement Prevents Sleep

Yet we sleep very little that night. The wind, the bitter cold, the delayed-action burst of excitement within us keeps us awake, keyed up, reliving the best and the worst passages of the long assault. By morning we are quite weak, though by no means truly exhausted.

We pack up. It takes us longer than it should; Everest, right up to the end, is making us pay for the liberties we have taken with its heights. Trudging up the 200 feet slope above South Col, we begin the gruelling traverse across the Lhotse Face.

Tenzing and I have treated ourselves to the luxury of oxygen on the way down. We don't need it terribly; but we figure that perhaps we've earned it. Even so, we have to move slowly.

As we clamber down the ice steps to Camp VII, which we have assumed is deserted, we're startled by a loud, cheerful shout. It is Charles Wylie and his Sherpas, boiling out of the tents to greet us and press hot drinks into our numbed hands. Charles' voice has a curious effect on me; it seems so unnaturally strong and vital and fresh after our days of deterioration up above that I feel suddenly very relaxed and confident, as though sure at last that everything is going to come out all right.

Our news has an equally pleasant effect on the Sherpas. They crowd around and shake our hands saluting Tenzing, one of their own—with a new and even more affectionate respect. I hear the phrase popping up here and there:

"Everest khatm ho gya, Sahib! Everest has had it!"

Tenzing Norgay on return from Everest wrote:

"My name is Tenzing Norgay and I am a Sherpa; that is to say, I am of Tibetan race, for it was from Tibet that our people came, as I shall explain. I was born in Thami, a village close to all the great mountains of the Everest region and on the way from Namche Bazaar to the Nangpa-La, a high pass into Tibet. I was the eleventh of thirteen children and we were very poor until eventually it numbered some three or four hundred beasts. From then on we were modestly prosperous.

But my name was not always Tenzing Norgay. My mother's name was Kinzom and my father's was Ghang-La Mingma. Amongst our people, a child does not usually take a family name. In fact, I was first called Namgyal Wangdi, and my present name was given to me on the insistence of a lama who had found from the holy books that I was the reincarnation of a rich man of Solu Khumbu who had recently died. Tenzing Norgay was not that rich man's name, but the lama thought that a name that meant 'wealthy-fortunate follower of religion' would be best for one for whom he predicted great things.

My early days were spent looking after the yaks in the high pastures where I would go with them to a height of about 18,000 feet. There the grass ended and the rocks and glaciers began. And there it was that the dream—or ambition, call it what you like—took shape that drove me eventually through many adventures to the top of Everest, and afterwards to many parts of the civilized world, for around me in the pastures of the Himalaya stood the great mountains, Makalu, Lhotse, Cho Oyu, Nuptse, Pumori, Ama Dablam, and yes, Everest itself. Not all of them at any one time necessarily visible, but they were there in the foreground of my life. Even as a boy I had heard tales of the men who had tried to climb Everest from the other side. Other, older Sherpas had been with them and had brought the story back. Already I wanted to see it all for myself. So, when I was eighteen years old, that is in 1932, I left home and went to Darjeeling—where many Sherpas have always gone to seek a living—with the main intention of trying to join an expedition. Since then I have lived in Darjeeling continuously—for one thing it has been necessary for my work as a mountaineer—but it is also due to a certain amount of hostility to me in my native country of Nepal, not whilst I was unknown, but only since I acquired fame on Everest. I did not succeed, however, in joining the 1933 expedition and it went off without me. Meanwhile, I found other work to do and I married.

My first expedition to Everest was in 1935, the year my son Nima Dorje was born; it was the fifth British expedition to the mountain. On that attempt I was one of those who carried loads to North Col at over 22,000 feet; not bad for a beginner! But

unlike some of the Sherpas, it was not for the wages alone—they were small enough anyway—that I climbed, but from some other urge, to go high and still higher on that mountain.

There was another expedition to Everest the following year, when again I reached North Col; but the weather was fearful and the snow impossibly soft and deep, so we had to give up. And another expedition, also unsuccessful, in 1938, my third, when I went as high as 27,200 feet—less than 2000 feet from the top—and that was when I acquired my 'Tiger' medal. In between times there were expeditions elsewhere—Nanda Devi, Bandar Punch, Tirich Mir, Nanga Parbat, for instance. Later, after the war, there were journeys into the mountains with Swiss climbers, and of course that wonderful year-long journey into Tibet with Professor Tucci. But I got my fourth chance to climb Everest when I accompanied that lone climber, Earl Denman, in 1947—again from the North—and had to turn back below the Col. That had been an extraordinary adventure, even though I had not gone as high as before; for we approached the mountain on foot all the way from Darjeeling, through Sikkim and Tibet, which we were forbidden to enter. I may say that the weather conditions on the mountain were appealing. My account of Everest seems so much concerned with bad weather and especially the raging gales; but this is typical of the mountain, and indeed of the whole region, as other people's experience proves.

Then came the Swiss in 1952—after probing expeditions through Nepal by others the previous year—and they asked for me as *sirdar* of their expedition. This was the one on which Raymond Lambert from Geneva and I got so near to the top, within 800 feet of it, and had been forced back again by the terrible wind. In the autumn of the same year we tried again—my sixth Everest expedition—and that was a failure too. Last in the series, so far as I was concerned, for my life changed abruptly afterwards, came the British expedition under Col. John Hunt, later knighted; this was the expedition on which, with Edmund Hillary, afterwards knighted too, I reached the summit not only of the highest mountain on earth but also of my ambitions."



3

THE HISTORIC IAF FLIGHT

1953

Nalini Jayal

In 1933, the flight by two Westland aircraft over Everest was a creditable achievement, worthy of the best traditions of human enterprise and adventure. Aviation was then still in its infancy, and the numerous problems that confronted the organizers required thorough scientific investigation and research. The success of these flights, without doubt, achieved the main object of 'the desire to increase the human knowledge of Nature's greatest mountain stronghold.' The photographic record proved the efficacy of aerial survey from great heights in remote and inaccessible regions.

The Indian Air Force, in planning a flight over Everest, at the greatly advanced stage at which aviation was in 1953, set a comparatively easy task for itself. The four-engined piston-driven Liberator, fully fitted with oxygen supply system, was capable of exceeding the height of Everest by a safe margin, but required careful handling of controls, which have an inclination towards sluggishness in a rarefied atmosphere. The objective, stimulated by the interest of the world focused on the bid by Colonel John

Hunt's expedition to the summit in 1953, was very similar to that of the 1933 Houston flights—as they came to be known after the financial support given by Lady Houston. The original intention—that of synchronizing aerial photography of the Everest massif with the final attempt by the British expedition—was dropped in the interest of safety of the climbers, who might well have been disturbed in their arduous task.

Signal to Stand By

On June 2, the great news of the ascent of Everest on May 29 was announced. It was the signal for the aircraft appointed for the task, for which it had been carrying out intensive trials to ensure success, to stand by in readiness at the base of operations at Gaya airfield in the plain of Bihar, 250 miles due south of the objective.

On June 6, eight days after the ascent, which we estimated would allow time enough for the climbers to evacuate the region, our Liberator aircraft took off at 8 a.m. and headed northwards on a steady climb. The Captain of the aircraft was Flight Lieutenant A.E. Paul, supported by four aircrew. Two officers operated still cameras and two others, including myself, took cine-shots in colour. The plains of Bihar, baked by the intense summer heat, were shrouded by a thick dust haze. It was such a relief to climb above temperatures of 114° F into the cleaner and cooler upper atmosphere. But very soon we began to be bothered by the cold, and, when the altimeter registered 15,000 feet, we received orders from the Captain, through the inter-communication, to put on our electrically-heated suits and don our oxygen masks.

We were still over the plains, a hundred miles away, when suddenly, gigantic white towers loomed into view through the limpid higher atmosphere. Instantly, I recognized the Kangchenjunga massif to the extreme right and Makalu slightly right of the Everest group straight ahead. The foothills were obscured by a layer of strato-cumulus clouds, and it was a disappointment to be denied a view of the approach to Everest through the lovely valleys of Nepal.

Having gained a height of 32,000 feet after an hour and a quarter, we found ourselves spell-bound at the sight of Everest, profoundly impressed by the awesome beauty and magnitude of her form. It was late in the season and the monsoon was expected to break any moment. We were, therefore, not optimistic about views, but when we arrived, not a wisp of cloud shielded the massif, and it appeared as if Everest stood posing for the photographer.

Aerial Photographs

For over an hour, we circled south of the peak over Nepal, and 'shot' the region with the aid of four cameras, capturing every possible aspect and detail of the mountain. Port-holes were provided on the starboard side of the fuselage to enable proper aiming of the camera lens. The cold draught at -27° Celsius that entered these ports added greatly to the difficulties of handling the cameras, which were provided with electrically-heated covers. Despite this precaution, there were stoppages which made a second sortie the following day necessary.

It was perhaps unusual luck to be blessed by two splendid days in succession, with Everest in supreme repose during a somewhat prolonged pre-monsoon lull. The complete absence of the famed Everest 'plume' made us believe that very calm wind-conditions must have prevailed. At no time did the aircraft experience any 'bumps', indicating the absence of turbulence, which very nearly brought to grief one of the Houston flight planes in 1933. In such favourable conditions, only good photographic results were to be expected. It was a great thrill to observe our efforts yield excellent results.

Our photographs greeted the victorious Everest expedition members when they returned to New Delhi. Their appreciation was a source of deep satisfaction to us. It was interesting to hear that they had had a glimpse of our aircraft through the clouds from the Thyangboche monastery on their return journey, but had not, for a moment, suspected it to be a mission by some strange aircraft!



THE GOMBU FEAT

1963

James Ramsey Ullman

In the morning, Everest's first conqueror, Sir Edmund Hillary, looked up at the mountain from his camp at the base of neighbouring Tawache. Never, he said, had he seen its snow plume boiling more wildly, nor more impossible conditions for a try for the top. At Advance Base in the Western Cwm, Dan Doody wrote in his diary, "Expect all above are staying put for the day."

At first light, Jim Whittaker and Gombu were astir in their tent. From within they could feel the cold and hear the roar of the gale, but when they peered out they saw that the sky, above the driven veils of surface snow, was clear and almost cloudless. "It was not the weather we had hoped for," said Jim, "but we had climbed in worse, and we decided to go on up and make our try." Even in their sleeping bags they had been wearing much of their clothing, but now they put on everything else they had that could be fitted over their frames and still allow them to move. When Jim left the tent, he had on his feet three pairs of woolen socks and stockings, heavy climbing boots and, over these, nylon overboots that came almost to his knees. Covering his body, he

had, in successive layers, thermal cotton-wool underwear, a turtle-neck T-shirt, down underwear, a wool shirt, wool climbing pants, a pair of down-filled pants, a down jacket, a waterproofed parka and a down parka. For his hands he had cotton gloves, wool mittens and leather and canvas shells—which he later changed for down mittens. Protecting his head was the light helmet of his oxygen rig, a wool pullover toque, the hood of the waterproofed parka and the fur-trimmed hood of the down parka. Over his face went big skiing goggles and his oxygen mask. Onto his back went a pack containing two full oxygen bottles, rope, other climbing gear, a camera, a canteen, a bit of food and some extra clothing, to a total of about 45 pounds. Outside, with already cold fingers, he laced his crampons on over his boots. He tied on his end of a climbing rope. He hefted his ice axe. And he was ready. Gombu, similarly clothed and accoutered, was ready. It was 6:15 a.m. The sun was up. The wind howled.

Norman and Ang Dawa were still in their tent, not yet ready to leave; and it was decided that Jim and Gombu would go ahead on their own, for their pace, in any case, would be faster than that of the other two. Following after, Norman, with Ang Dawa's help, would try to film them through telescopic lenses higher up on the peak.

The two lead men started off, and in the beginning, as Jim reported it, "moved fairly rapidly up from camp; first traversing the slopes to the left of the ridge; then cutting back up to the ridgeline and following it toward the point where it steepens into the rise to the South Summit." The wind buffeted them. Worse, it half blinded them, carrying snow that coated their goggles and sifted in at the sides onto their eyelids and lashes. Even when they removed the goggles to wipe them—and this was dangerous, because of possible resultant snow blindness—they could see little beyond the white slant of the ridge. Off to the south of them, beyond the notch of the Col, was Lhotse; to the south-east, a mere 12 miles distant, was Makalu; but even the vast masses of earth's fourth and fifth highest mountains were only occasionally visible in bits and pieces. Soon they were higher than Makalu's summit—then higher than Lhotse's—but only their altimeter told

them so. Only the altimeter and their plodding feet told them that they were getting closer, ever closer, to the highest summit of all.

The snow on the ridge was deep. Taking turns in the lead, Jim and Gombu had to kick steps all the way. But at least the snow was of a consistency that they could kick; only at rare intervals did it become so hard that they had to cut steps with their axes. As they went, they kept looking for the remains of the highest British camp—the famous Hillary-Tenzing camp of 1953, which they now knew to be well above their own Camp VI. (It had been close beside the ridge and, if still there, would be visible even through the pall of snow.) But they found no sign of it. Unlike the Swiss and Indian camps lower down, it had apparently blown away, to its last remnants. They climbed on. A few steps. A pause for rest. Another few steps. Another pause. And at about eight o'clock they reached the point where the ridge steepens toward the South Summit.

Here they decided that, to lighten their loads, they would each dump one of their two cylinders of oxygen. They discarded the partly used ones, leaving them in a conspicuous place where they could find and retrieve them on the descent, then attached their regulators to the full cylinders and moved on again. As through most of the climb, there was rock on their left and snow on their right, both falling off into abysses below. And at the bottom of the right-hand abyss, some two miles down, lay the Kangshung glacier, in Tibet. Like the West Ridge, the South-East Ridge was the borderline between Tibet and Nepal, but, unlike the West Ridge climbers, Jim and Gombu got no more than a foot, or part of a foot, into Chinese territory. "A very delicate margin had to be maintained here," said Jim. "If we got too far out on the snow, it would almost surely avalanche, carrying us down with it, while the rock on the other side made for hard going with our crampons. So we stayed between the two, working back and forth, zigzagging, taking to the rock when it was necessary and hitting the edge of the snow when the rock became too steep."

Progress was now much slower than before. There were pauses

not only for rest but for protective belaying over the steeper pitches. During this stage Big Jim stayed in the lead, using a 3-litre flow of oxygen, carefully testing each step, each stance, before he used it. Kick, kick. Pause. Kick, kick.

Below, Norman and Ang Dawa had left Camp VI at about 7:15, and now they too were inching upward, bent almost double in the tide of wind and snow. With Norman's photographic gear—movie camera, two still cameras, tripod and film—added to oxygen bottles and other items, their loads were heavier than Jim's and Gombu's: more than 50 pounds apiece. And with such a burden, and in such weather, Norman had no illusion about making the top of Everest. His best hope was to reach the South Summit, at 28,750 feet, and from there to film the others on the summit ridge beyond. Even this, however, would depend on an easing of the wind and driven snow; and as the minutes, and then the hours, dragged by, there was no indication of this happening. The snow had blown so quickly into the tracks made by Jim and Gombu that Norman, who was leading, had to break trail all over again. "My back-pack," he said, "grew heavier and heavier, and I was taking three or four breaths for every step. I counted my steps, and after every twenty I rested. Then after every ten..."

Came a tug on the rope, and turning, he had to clean out his snow-filled goggles before he could see Ang Dawa gesturing. Even with the sound regulator he was now using, Ang Dawa's first oxygen bottle was used up, and, as he had on the previous day, Norman descended to him and hooked up his breathing hose to the second bottle. Then they went on again. They came, after a while, to a small snow shoulder where the ridge leveled off before beginning its steep climb to the South Summit. And here Norman's first oxygen bottle gave out. Taking it from his pack, he threw it off the right—the snowy—side of the ridge and watched it vanish into the mist on its 2-mile journey toward the Kangshung glacier: a gift for the honorable Comrades of Peking and Lhasa. He hooked into his second bottle. Then he turned to his companion and said, "Ang Dawa, this is it."

The little Sherpa wanted to go on. "But I explained to him,"

said Norman "though I didn't use such fancy language—that this was the point of no return. If we went on, we would run out of oxygen about halfway between the South Summit and the main summit, and that would be that: we would never get down alive. Also, we couldn't reach the main summit, so we wouldn't even be dead heroes on the top of Everest." In the prevailing conditions it would have been fruitless to struggle on even to the South Summit for photographic purposes. In the shroud of blowing snow, the main summit, Jim and Gombu, anything beyond the range of a few yards, would be as invisible to a camera's lens as to the human eye. It would be a matter simply of packing the killing loads up—then down again.

Through a brief rift in the shroud they had a glimpse of Lhotse. Its crest was 27,890 feet high, and they were clearly above it: about 28,200 feet was a fair estimate. Well, the goal was still 800 feet above. The dream of Norman's lifetime was not going to be realized. But at least he had climbed 4000 feet higher than he had ever in his life been before. He was at the highest point on earth ever reached by a man of his age or by the leader of an expedition.

"Well, Ang Dawa!"

Ang Dawa, a bare 5 feet tall, but with every inch indomitable, was not yet quite convinced. He pointed. "Up go, *Bara Sahib?*" he asked.

Norman shook his head. "No, Ang Dawa," he said. "Down go." And slowly, gropingly, down they went.

That was at 11:30 in the morning. At almost exactly the same moment Jim Whittaker and Nawang Gombu came up the steep slant of the ridge and stood on Everest's South Summit. Some 300 feet below it, Gombu's sharp eyes had spied a small green object lying on a patch of reddish rock, and picking it up, he had put it in his parka pocket. It was a metal typewriter-ribbon box. Inside it were a Catholic rosary and a medallion of Pope John XXIII that had been given to the 1962 Indian expedition by Father Marshall Moran of Kathmandu, and the top Indian climbers had left it to mark the highest point of their ascent. All this, however,

was not learned until later. At the time, Gombu simply shoved the box into his pocket. He and Jim had other things on their minds as they pushed on to the South Summit and stood looking at what lay beyond.

It was a scene which only eight men had ever looked upon before. First, there had been Hillary, Charles Evans, Tom Bourdillon and Tenzing, of the 1953 British Expedition. Three years after them, there had been four Swiss: Jurg Marmet, Ernst Schmied, Adolf Reist and Hansrudolf von Gunten. But, for Jim at least, who had repeatedly studied it in photographs, it was as familiar as the slopes of his own Mount Rainier. Familiar, yet at the same time un-familiar, at the same time strange and alien, for there is always a difference between picture and reality, and always a difference in the eyes that see them. The vertical distance from South Summit to the summit was only 278 feet. "But the climb," said Jim, "looked longer than I'd expected. It looked steeper than I'd expected." For five minutes he and Gombu rested, their goggled eyes moving up the ridge.

They had been late in reaching the South Summit than they had hoped to be, and they had used up a fair part of their second bottles of oxygen. It was still deathly cold. The wind still roared. But visibility was better than it had been lower down, with only a concentrated snow cloud blowing away to the east. In any case, there was little debating of pros and cons. The two men were committed. "I will," Jim Whittaker had said back home, when he had been asked if he would climb to Everest's summit. And now the time had come. "I will go where you have gone," Gombu had told Tenzing before he left his home in Darjeeling. The time had come for him too.

From the South Summit the ridge broke downward almost vertically for about 30 feet, and they descended cautiously. Then, from a small snow saddle, it rose again, and they followed it up. As before, they hewed close to a line where rock on the left met snow on the right; but this time they were even more careful not to venture far onto the snow, for they knew that here, on Everest's final heights, the snow projected from the mountain

wall in great cornices that could crumble without warning beneath their feet. Jim led a pitch, belayed, and Gombu followed. Jim led another pitch, belayed, and Gombu followed. And in the process, history, in a fashion, was repeating itself, for, as with Hillary and Tenzing ten years earlier, here again were a Man of the West and a Man of the East climbing together to the summit of the world. To whatever God, Christian or Buddhist, who may have been watching, they must have presented a strange contrast—these two dots inching upward—for one dot. Big Jim, was 6 foot 5, the tallest man on the expedition, and the other, Gombu, was more than a foot shorter. But in what it took to keep going they shared and shared alike.

Joined by their length of nylon rope, they were as alone as two men can be on earth's surface. Yet at the same time they were not alone, for, in all but the physical, palpable sense, other men were there with them. Hillary and Tenzing were surely there. The four Swiss were there. And not only these who had preceded them in their path, but many others as well. The old Everesters, from Mallory onward, who had first dreamed the dream and blazed the way; the later Everesters—British, Swiss, Indian—who had tried and triumphed and tried and failed: all who had struggled and aspired on the mountain were there beside them, and none knew better than Jim and Gombu what they owed to those who had gone before. They knew, too, what they owed to their own fellow climbers, American and Sherpa, now strung out down the mountain beneath them, and to the vast amount of labour, dedication and sacrifice that had put them where they now were. Norman, though now descending the ridge a thousand feet below, was none the less there with them. The second assault team, now at South Col awaiting their own chance, was there. The West Ridgers, also waiting, were there. The men at Advance Base and Base Camp were there. Above all, Jake Breitenbach was there, climbing beside them.

As now they approached the goal they came to "Hillary's Chimney," a near-vertical wall angling up between rock and snow cornice on which he and Tenzing had had their final great struggle.

But apparently the years had wrought changes in its structure, for now, mercifully, it presented no major obstacle. Jim first worked his way up the snow, taking great care not to move too far out on the cornice; then he cut back to the rock, clambered to a small platform above, and Gombu, without difficulty, came after. Beyond the platform, the slope eased off. There was still the rock on the left, the snow on the right, and still they followed the line between them. But there was no steepness now; only humps and hummocks, each just a little higher than the one before it; and there were ten of them, fifteen, twenty—rising, rising. Some were of rock, some of snow, some a mixture of both. Then there was no more mixture, no more rock, but only snow; only a rounded white dome curving slightly above them. Jim, in the lead, stopped and waited for Gombu to come up to him. "You first," he said. "No, you," said Gombu. Then, the dome being wide enough, they walked side by side to its top. Beyond, everything fell away. And there they were.

Jim speaking: "I slapped Gombu on the back. We hugged each other. I dug my ice axe in and slung my pack over it. It was very windy, very cold, and my fingers and toes were numb." (At that time—exactly 1 p.m.—a thermometer on South Col registered 20 degrees below zero, and a fair estimate is that it was 30 degrees below zero on the summit.)



LOBSANG TSHERING BHUTIA

1993

Tashi Tenzing

The year 1993 would be the fortieth anniversary of my grandfather's ascent of Everest. This seemed a perfect opportunity to make my own attempt. Yet the funds needed to field an expedition are great—the Everest peak royalty (climbing fee) alone was US\$ 10,000 at that time. Then there were the hundreds of other expenses: airfares, transport, oxygen, cargo, porters, food, equipment. How could I raise so much money? Judy was totally supportive—she knew only too well what Everest meant to me—so we decided to try, commencing in 1991.

Our first task, which for me was extremely important, was to request Lord Hunt, leader of the 1953 British team, to patronize my expedition in the name of my grandfather. I received a prompt and warm letter expressing his honour and delight. Another gesture of support from England came just as we were due to depart Australia for Nepal—a letter from Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who wished me a safe and successful expedition. Truly the spirit of 1953 was with me on this Everest attempt.

Fund-raising for climbing expeditions is a most daunting task, especially in a country like Australia where mountaineering is not a high-profile sport. Hundreds of letters fell on deaf ears and the entire plan looked doomed until one evening a fax came through from Paul Stuber, a most kind and supportive man who had known my grandfather and whose employer, Rolex, had sponsored him throughout his climbing career. Rolex offered enough financial support to get my plans up and running and, more importantly, gave us the hope to continue. Thai Airways International then came up with sponsorship for our airfares, and Mountain Designs kicked in with equipment. Clarks, a sink manufacturer, then promised to help on the condition that I take one of their stainless steel sinks with me to Everest! If they were prepared to support me then I was ready to do the same for them and the sink was duly packed and shipped. It lived at Base Camp throughout the expedition and did wonders for the kudos of our cook and Sherpa kitchen staff. It stands today in a small teashop near Everest. The total lack of plumbing there does not seem to detract from its prestige at all!

All of this was, of course, wonderful but I still needed cold, hard cash to cover land costs in Nepal. Enter Phillipa Saxton and Mike Ferris, a Sydney couple, who had attended one of my many promotional slide evenings and been inspired by my Everest dream. They did not know how but they wanted to help us raise the funds. By that time, January 1993, we were becoming desperate and willingly accepted their help. They phoned everyone from almost every company in the nation, always with an angle and an idea which might appeal to corporate Australia. We were given chocolates from Cadburys, muesli bars and snacks from Uncle Tobys, and radio phones from Motorola—all gratefully accepted—but were still without the cash so urgently needed. Then at the eleventh hour, Phillipa managed to convince Lipton's Teas to support this son of Darjeeling and the expedition was finally a reality! After our team had left for Nepal, Hyundai Australia also came to the party with a cash bonus. This expedition would not be on the scale of the 1953 attempt but there would be just enough to cover basic costs and fees, provided the team carried

all their own loads, including up the icefall and to the high camps. In fact, this was quite a unique role reversal in a number of ways, for not only would the Western climbers be the ones ferrying loads up and down the mountain but, to the best of my knowledge, it would be the first expedition in history in which a Sherpa was the expedition leader of an international team. This aside, I knew the lack of Sherpa support would put a great additional burden on the climbers themselves but there was no choice. It was now or possibly never.

Joining me on the climb was my uncle Lobsang Tshering Bhutia, the only son of Tenzing's sister Thakchey and her husband Lhakpa Tshering. Lobsang, then forty, was a veteran Himalayan climber and senior instructor at the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI). This would be his second expedition to Everest, having been a member of the 1984 Indian team. Like me, it was his dream to climb Everest and I had always known that when the time came for me to mount an expedition, Lobsang would join me. We planned to climb and summit together. I think he felt a little protective of me as I was young and he was such an experienced mountaineer. He was a quietly spoken man with a gentle face and perfectly groomed hair like an actor in a 1920s silent film—parted down the centre and never out of place. He carried himself with dignity and maturity and was loved by everyone in Darjeeling and throughout the entire mountaineering community in India and Nepal. Apart from being an absolute gentleman, he was a strong and determined climber and there were many on the mountain that year, especially from the Indo-Nepalese Women's Expedition, who had been trained by him at HMI and held him in the highest esteem. He was never without a place to 'dine out' at Base Camp, such was his popularity.

Whenever a member of our family has climbed Everest—and there have been several now—we are always asked if we felt pressured by the tradition of my grandfather to do so. I guess all descendants of the famous are asked similar sorts of questions, and certainly Lobsang and I discussed it on occasion. Yes, we were Tenzings and we had grown up with Everest—as I have said, she is like a family member—yet my attraction to her does not feel

for me as though it comes from Gaga, nor did it for Lobsang. In the same way that old Tenzing had no precedent for his personal passion for the mountain, neither did Lobsang nor I. We loved climbing—any climbing, any mountain. Yet Everest was always the one we dreamed of and the one we valued most in climbing terms. No doubt, part of this is due to the fact that Everest is the highest point on earth. Who could deny the romance and lure of such a challenge? Everest, too, had played such a prominent role in the lives and destiny of my family. Yet, for Lobsang and I, the real essence of our devotion to this quest was the sacrifice, the inestimable effort and the passion with which so many before, both Sherpa and Westerner, had tried to 'conquer' her; men such as Shipton, Ang Tharkay, Mallory, Irvine, Ang Nima, Lambert and, so many times, my grandfather. We felt we climbed for them all, but we also climbed for ourselves, for, when the flame of Everest burns inside you there is nothing that will quell it until the summit is reached; whether one person knows you have climbed it or a million pay homage to your success, it does not matter. In your heart you know you made it; you know your dream has come true.

Mine was a large climbing team, in retrospect too large for the funds we had, but when I was approached by climbers and asked for a place on the team I could not refuse. Two Macedonian climbers, Alex Aleksov and Dimitar Todorovski, respectfully requested places, in order to climb high above South Col and try and retrieve the body of a friend and colleague who had died on the mountain after reaching the summit in 1990. I could not refuse them. Andrew Locke, a Sydney climber, who I did not know well but who seemed to be prepared to make a strong contribution to the team, requested a place. I accepted. Then came Michael Groom from Brisbane who was an experienced Himalayan climber. I had heard great things about him in climbing circles in Australia. He had attempted Everest twice before and was meant to be fielding his own team for 1993 but this had fallen through. I called him a week before we left Sydney and asked him to join. I knew his determination to summit would match that of myself and Lobsang. Lastly, at the eleventh hour, came David Hume, a

Sydney computer programmer who had little climbing experience but who was so desperate to try I could not help but offer him the last place. Our all-important Base Camp manager was Mike Wood from Mountain Designs in Perth. Judy and I had known Mike from our Nepal guiding days; an old Himalaya hand, he was an experienced mountain guide and whitewater kayaker, and had a wonderful rapport with the Sherpas and Nepalis. He was also a superb organizer and a good man to have around when the going got tough—and the going did get very tough indeed.

Among the fifteen expeditions on the Nepalese side of Everest that year was the Indo-Nepalese Women's expedition whose deputy leader was Rita Gombu Marwah, eldest daughter of Nawang Gombu and, in the complex and intricate workings of the Tenzing family hierarchy, my second cousin. She was a strong climber and had attempted Everest herself in 1984, but on this 1993 expedition her role was as deputy leader and expedition coordinator with perhaps a chance to get to South Col. Lobsang and I were very fond of Rita and we were delighted to be all on the mountain at the same time. Rita had a well-equipped, well-staffed expedition and she knew that I was working with a skeleton crew. As she watched us haul our 'Sherpa' loads up and down the icefall and on to Camps III and IV, she resolved to help us. Some of our heaviest loads of oxygen, prepared one afternoon for the carry-up early the next morning, would miraculously disappear overnight and we would find them safe and sound at the appropriate high camp, having been carried up by the Indian team Sherpas on Rita's instruction. We never spoke about this but I will always be grateful to her. When I was at university in Delhi I would haunt the home of Rita and her husband Nilamber Marwah, and would always be fed or given a little pocket money when I could not make ends meet on the small allowance my parents managed to send to my brother and me from Darjeeling. Now Rita was taking care of me once again—this time at higher altitude and with greater risk.

In the old days of mountaineering, Everest was booked by one team per season and each team set up its own route through the

treacherous Khumbu Icefall and fixed its own ropes higher up the mountain. Those days are long gone and in recent years a system has been developed by which each expedition contributes financially to the setting up of the icefall route, i.e. one team opts to set up ropes and ladders from Base Camp to Camp I and the other teams using the route pay that team a fee; in 1993, it was US\$ 1500. It is practical but is not the way I would ideally like to attempt Everest. But much has changed in Everest climbing since my grandfather's days.

In his autobiography, *Sheer Will*, Mike Groom very accurately describes the Khumbu Icefall as 'a giant mousetrap ready to snap shut at any time on an unsuspecting climber'. As soon as the route was open on 1 April, our team started the ferry to Camp I. We were exhausted and concerned about the toll this exertion was having on our reserves of strength for the summit bid, but we were all strong and we had all been fully aware of this situation before we left Australia. Each of us believed we could make the summit and nothing would stop us if the conditions were right.

The following weeks were spent carrying, staying at the higher camps, and returning to Base Camp for a physical battery recharge. During these relays I kept my eyes and ears sharp for a sign of the *chowkidar* of Camp III. We Sherpas believe in ghosts and I had long heard stories of one at this camp who would walk around the tents at night keeping watch over the sleeping climbers. It is apparently the spirit of lost climbers on Everest and I had hoped to encounter its presence. Lobsang had heard his boots and crampons crunching in the snow beyond the tent walls on his previous attempt on the mountain, as had Mike Groom. Yet I neither heard nor felt a thing.

On one afternoon during this period, I had been in the Camp II tent of the Nepalese Sherpa team which was hoping to put the first Nepali woman on the summit of Everest. Pasang Lhamu Sherpa was a strong woman and had attempted Everest three times before, but this time she seemed nervous and not a little reluctant at Base Camp when we spoke of the coming climb. Pasang Lhamu and her five climbing Sherpas had gone early for the summit on

22 April—well before the usual timeframe for attempts in the first week of May—but word came down that, although they had reached the summit, their oxygen had run out and they were stranded in a semi-comatose state (as happens when oxygen use is terminated suddenly at high altitude) on the South Summit, just one hundred metres below the main summit on the way down to Camp IV. During the night of 23 April, three of those Sherpas made it down to South Col but two remained with Pasang Lhamu—Pemba Nuru and Sonam Tshering. By some miracle Pemba Nuru was able to descend the following morning after a night exposed near the summit. Sadly, Pasang Lhamu and Sonam Tshering perished. Pasang Lhamu became a national hero posthumously, her funeral procession being one of the largest gatherings Kathmandu has ever seen. Although she had achieved her dream—to be the first Nepali woman atop Chomolungma—it had come at the ultimate price. Her death worried me because I knew that I wanted to succeed on Everest as much as Pasang did and I did not know if I too would end up in a situation in which my dream meant more to me than my life, and I would push the limits as she had done. Climbing is as much a journey into your own mind as it is a physical one, and you do not know just how much it all means until you are faced with such choices. I was soon to find out where I drew the line.

At last, word came that there was to be a window of good weather on 10 May—just for twenty-four hours, not more. This was it; this was our time. We all began to make our way up to the high camps to prepare for the ascent. By the afternoon of 9 May, Mike, Lobsang and I were settled into our tents and preparing for the day we had so long waited for—the summit day. Andrew, Alex and David had decided to spend another night at Camp III before making their summit bids. Mike, then made the courageous decision to attempt the summit without the use of bottled oxygen. Lobsang, who had become very close to Mike over the course of the expedition, was very worried about this decision but respected Mike's judgment and supported his bid.

Fifty-one climbers were going for the summit the next day—a record at the time and a scenario that worried us all greatly. There

is only one route up the summit ridge of Everest, one path, and an extremely narrow and precarious one at that. The timing and rhythm of your climbing pace is of utmost importance at these altitudes and to have to alter and constantly adjust this pace to suit a stream of other climbers can conceivably mean the difference between success and failure or life and death. However, we had no choice and every climber on South Col that day was as determined as we were to make the summit. Mike, Lobsang and I were tense and strained as we squeezed into one tent amid oxygen bottles, rucksacks and cumbersome climbing boots. Mike worried that our tiny stove, on which I was melting snow for drinks, was dangerously close to the oxygen bottles and declared that if the bottles went up we would all be blown to the summit of Everest. My immediate comment brought the tent down: "Yes, but would it count as an oxygen-less ascent?" Our laughter eased the pressure and we tried to get some rest.

Mike left that night at 11 p.m. under a clear sky and full moon. Lobsang and I left two hours later, the last in a long queue of fifty-one, including New Zealand climbing legends Rob Hall and Gary Ball, which slowly and laboriously snaked its way up the South-East Ridge towards the summit. The speed at which this column was moving deeply concerned me and Lobsang since we knew it would be impossible to pass them and every second we waited used up precious oxygen and energy. At around 8200 metres (26,900 feet) we came across Gary Ball, who was clearly having problems. He was coughing blood and looked weak and had decided to head back down to the Col. At this point, Lobsang wanted us to increase our oxygen flow rate from one litre per minute to two litres per minute. I disagreed with this since I knew we had to conserve our supplies given the crowd ahead and how far we had to go. Finally I agreed to do as Lobsang requested and I turned up his valve. He looked at me and asked, "Are you okay?" I replied in a muffled voice through my oxygen mask, "Yes, I am fine. You carry on." He looked happy and was climbing strongly and set off at a faster pace to try to catch the queue that was now thirty metres ahead of us. I was in difficulty at this stage. I had been having problems the day before with my snow glasses;

the body heat generated on exertion was fogging them up so I had to keep removing them. Consequently, I had suffered some snowblindness and now, at this crucial stage and at higher altitude, the pain was worsening and my vision was becoming blurred. I struggled on for another hundred metres, then slumped in the snow. I sat in that spot for over an hour thinking of what my decision should be. I had worked so hard to get this far and it was unlikely that in the foreseeable future I would be able to raise funds for another expedition. Everest was my dream, my life's burning ambition. Would I let it end here, so close to my goal? But what was that goal if I lost my life? I had a wife and son at home; I had a family to whom I was far more important than Everest. I thought of my mother. What would she tell me to do? Descend, descend, descend. There was no choice. I had enough strength, vision and determination to get to the summit but in what state would I be making that all-important descent? All mountaineers know that getting to the top is only half the climb. The summit is important but the joy of the climb and the preservation of life itself must be more valuable. I turned and headed down to camp IV.

At Camp IV, I set out for the New Zealand tents where Gary Ball was resting. He administered medication for my eyes that by now felt as if they were being lanced by red-hot knives. I returned to my own tent and lay down to rest and await the return of my team. A voice outside my tent asked if I wanted to go down to Camp II—it was one of the girls from the Korean team. We had all become good friends at Base Camp and looked out for each other on the mountain. I knew my eyes would heal better at a lower altitude so I agreed to join her. Gary Ball was also ready to descend and we all headed down together. As we passed through Camp II, Gary received a radio message that everyone, including Mike Groom and Lobsang, had reached the summit at around 1.30 p.m. and were on their way back to Camp IV on the Col. I was overjoyed. Even if I had turned back from the summit, my team had succeeded—that was more important. I could just imagine Mike's and Lobsang's faces: sheer euphoria at having lived their greatest dream.

At Camp II, I took shelter in one of the Indian tents with Nima, the younger brother of Daku, my grandfather's third wife. He is a wonderful fellow and a fine climber and he took good care of me that day, ensuring my eye medication was administered regularly and keeping me informed of the climbers coming back to the Col after their summits. However, by late afternoon the weather had deteriorated. The wind was now howling over the summit and the cold was worsening with every minute. I knew Mike had reached Camp IV safely and was in his tent taking a well-deserved rest. I assumed Lobsang was also back at the Col; he had summited easily and was the most experienced climber on the mountain that season. By about 9 p.m. all the climbers had returned and been accounted for, except Lobsang and a British climber, Harry Taylor, who had climbed without artificial oxygen. I was very concerned and sent many radio messages up to various colleagues to try to locate Lobsang in one of the tents. The weather was by now so foul that the climbers coming in from the top were taking shelter in any tent that could fit them in. At 11 p.m. I received a radio message from Base Camp that Lobsang had been located in another team's tent. It had been a tough day for all of us—for me, for the other climbers of my team in Camps II and IV, and for Mike Wood at Base Camp who was frantically trying to keep track of everyone and let us all know the state of events as time went on.

By late on the night of 10 May, Alex, Andrew and Dave were in their tents on South Col preparing for their own attempt the next day and, as far as we all knew, Lobsang was asleep in a friendly tent somewhere nearby. Yet I could not sleep. I felt a terrible sense of foreboding. At dawn I radioed up and spoke to David. There was no sign of Lobsang; he was not in any of the tents. In the nightmarish conditions and confusion of the previous night, messages and confirmations had been vague and those who thought Lobsang had returned were mistaken. Deep down I knew the truth—as any Himalayan mountaineer would—but there is always that small ray of hope and I clung to that throughout the day of 11 May. The wind raged and visibility was zero. No one on the Col could leave their tents, so a search was impossible.

On the morning of 11 May, Alex shouldered his oxygen supply and, despite the blizzard conditions, set out to look for Lobsang. I had felt so helpless at Camp II but I was still unable to see clearly and knew that for me to add to the chaos of Camp IV would serve no purpose. Alex had come in search of a missing climber and now he was in search of another. After hours of scouring the slopes above, he finally found Lobsang's body just two hundred metres above Camp IV at the bottom of a gully. He was curled up in the foetal position, his face was unrecognizable and near his hand was an open Swiss army knife. His smashed wristwatch read 2.55 p.m. He appeared to have fallen from somewhere below the South Summit and, by all appearances, had somehow survived the fall, but with such horrendous head injuries could not have lasted long. I could not accept the loss; I could not even begin to think of how it had happened or what had caused the fall. I have never ever felt so lost and distraught. Lobsang was the only member of my family to lose his life on Everest. He had reached his summit, yes, but this price was far, far too high. I did not want to continue my climb—the expedition was over. Andrew, Alex and David returned to Base Camp, and Andrew and David headed for Kathmandu and back home to Australia.

Lobsang, like all Sherpas, was a devout Buddhist. Last rites are of utmost importance to us in terms of our transition to our next reincarnation. Mike Wood made the difficult call to our family in Darjeeling, and I then phoned to ask what I should do. I knew the answer before it came. Lobsang must be brought down and cremated in accordance with our rituals. This was to be the first and only priority for me now.

Rita and the members of the Indo-Nepali women's team were also bereft. No one could believe it; no one would believe it. We helped each other in those dark days and were strengthened by the members of our own team who chose to stay and see Lobsang's journey through to its end. They all had reasons to leave: Mike Wood had a wife and children plus a business at home; Mike Groom was newly married and had just climbed Everest (the first Queenslander to do so); and Alex and Dimitar

had not been able to retrieve the body of their dear friend, yet had helped us so much by finding Lobsang. I treasure these people to this day and will never forget their support during that expedition.

I stayed on in Camp II while a team of Sherpas sent by Rita and her colleagues went on to South Col to begin the slow and dangerous task of bringing Lobsang's body down. It was a strange time for me, being in limbo between Base Camp and South Col. The Sherpas were fresh and could handle the job they were given, yet I could not just leave and head back to Base. I wanted to wait for Lobsang and come down with him. It was during those days at Camp II that a strange accident occurred which served to completely destroy my already shattered nerves. As I stood on the glacier looking up towards the Col, I heard a wild and almost tortured scream coming from high above. I looked up and saw a member of the Korean team flying through the air—arms and legs spread-eagled, his dive accompanied by the clink and clank of tin mugs and other articles falling from his pack onto the rocks below. He hit the ground about two hundred metres from me and slid a few metres before being swallowed in terrible silence by a huge, gaping crevasse. I stood dumbstruck. It was clear he had jumped from the South-West Ridge and I could only imagine the sense of failure and shame that would prompt such a suicidal act by one who could not reach the summit. I had never questioned this mountaineering path so many of us had chosen, but on that dark day I thought a great deal about what climbing mountains, and especially this mountain, really meant to me. It was a sad and confusing time.

Another drama, at once alarming and humorous, was unfolding in this same camp one afternoon as I lay alone in my tent waiting for Lobsang's body to be brought down. Some other foreign climbers had set up camp nearby and I heard a very heated discussion via radio between them—their Base Camp and their Sherpas on South Col. Two members of the foreign team were caught in a blizzard on the summit ridge above the Col and were radioing down to their Sherpas on the Col begging them to come and help them down. The Sherpas, in rather shaky English, were

steadfastly refusing and the foreign climbers in my camp were trying to cajole them, obviously fearing the worst for their comrades. I could hear the confusion in the messages and the language problem that made it all worse, so I climbed out of my tent and went over to offer my help. In my heart I also felt that there had been enough deaths on Everest and if I could help avoid more I had to try. The foreign climbers welcomed my help and I took the radio and spoke to the South Col Sherpas. "I am the grandson of Tenzing Sherpa," I stated in Nepali, "and I have been listening to this problem. Tell me why you will not go and help these two men." Sherpas very rarely deny help on a mountain and I felt there had to be more to the story. In Nepali they could speak honestly. They said the climbers had been very rude to them and inconsiderate of their safety on the Col. They were very upset and I fully understood why. Yet I had to convince them to bring the climbers down—whatever it took. "I understand why you are angry," I told them sincerely, "but we are Sherpas and we have never willingly let anyone die on a mountain. It is not our way. We have a great tradition, especially on Everest, and to do this would bring great shame on our people." I had spoken from my heart but in response I heard only mumbling and whispering. They stood firm in their resolve to stay put. I had one last plea: "Okay, if that is how you feel, what can I do? But remember, one day your life will come to an end and you will probably be reincarnated as a ... Western climber." That did it. The thought was all too much and they quickly agreed to don their boots and head out. The foreign climbers were found and brought safely down and we Sherpas have a great laugh when the story is told now.

In all, it took ten days before Lobsang's frozen body finally rested at Base Camp, draped in the flags of Australia, India and Macedonia. The lamas of the Pangboche monastery, the oldest gompa in the Khumbu, did pujas (prayers) the entire night, and the next day we carried the body down to their monastery grounds for cremation. It was a day none of us will forget but I took consolation in the fact that Lobsang could now be released into his next life.

I then sent the others home—they had done enough—but I

waited several days until the pyre was completely extinguished before taking my leave and returning, with the ashes, to Kathmandu and straight on to Darjeeling and Lobsang's home. It was the hardest journey I have ever made. I did not know what to say or how to even try to explain. But the Tenzing family were all mountaineers or at least had lived in this climbing world all their lives; they understood that such tragedies occur without rhyme or reason. I needed to be home with my mother and my family. I was devastated and little more than a hollow shell of the Sherpa I had been when I began the climb.

My mother accompanied me when I carried the ashes to Lobsang's home. She too was devastated, for Lobsang was her cousin and she had been very fond of this true gentleman of the mountains. Yet grief affects people in vastly different ways and at Lobsang's home I was met by some with anger and accusation. I understood how they felt but how could they possibly imagine that I had deserted or failed him when everything had been done to try and save him? Would I deliberately leave him in dire straits on the mountain? Never! I tried to explain, to tell the truth, but their grief clouded their good sense and my mother and I left in a far worse state than when we had arrived. I had not expected this reaction and I had no idea how to handle it. I talked with my parents long into the night. As climbers who had faced death in the mountains before, they knew the risks and dangers and they knew how close Lobsang and I had been. After several days of discussions my mother and I decided to do what we could for Lobsang's family—his wife and son, as well as his ageing parents who lived with them. As an instructor at HMI, Lobsang had been given living quarters as part of his salary package. HMI agreed to house the family there until other arrangements could be made.

Adequate life insurance is difficult for climbers to procure; climbing is a maximum-risk activity and the fatality rate is far too high for most companies to accept us. Every climber, especially Sherpa mountaineers, goes to Everest knowing that should he or she not return there will be little for those left behind, save what the goodwill of family and friends provide. I was only too

aware that if I had been killed, my family would have been on their own and I knew that Lobsang's family was now in this situation. I do not know whether any offer of help came from elsewhere in the family but it was clear to me that they looked to me to provide for them. I am not a wealthy man and had ended this expedition in considerable debt. I could not obtain more credit, yet I had a personal and moral duty to see them sheltered and cared for. I sold my small house in the Blue Mountains near Sydney and my mother surrendered her retirement fund. As well, Hyundai made a generous donation and friends here in Australia gave what they could. With our combined efforts we were able to purchase a very comfortable house in a respectable part of Darjeeling, near the HMI. The ever-loyal and generous Mike Wood then offered to support Lobsang's son, Tenzing, throughout his school years. We could do no more and I felt Lobsang would have appreciated the great sacrifices we all made for those he loved.



IN MY FATHER'S FOOTSTEPS

1996

Jamling Tenzing Norgay

When I was young, my father took me for trekking in the Sikkim Himalayas, and he'd teach me how to climb. At the age of six I climbed a small peak with him. Ever since, I have dreamed of climbing Chomolungma, or the Mt. Everest.

I always wanted to be just like him, he was my mentor and role model, and I hoped that I could add to his name. That may be partly why, from a young age, it has been my dream to climb Everest. But climbing Everest was something I would have to do myself.

Traditionally, Sherpa sons follow in their fathers' footsteps. But when I told my father that I wanted to climb Everest, he said, "Why would you want to climb? I climbed so that my children wouldn't have to, so that you get the best education and won't have to carry loads on the mountain and risk your life". That's what he wanted: to give us everything. I grew up in a town, in a house with many comforts of a good home and modern living.

But, once I started climbing, he didn't discourage me. In the

St. Paul's School, Darjeeling, I put together rock-climbing demonstrations and he was proud of that. Climbing was in my blood.

In 1984, the Indian Everest Expedition put the first Indian woman on the summit. I was eighteen, and had wanted to join this expedition, and be the youngest climber to summit Everest. But my father was sick then, and he asked me not to go. He died in 1986. (My life did change after that, and my dream and determination of climbing Everest got even stronger). I tried to join a couple of expeditions to Everest in the coming years, but due to lack of funds and not having climbed any major mountain in the past I was not accepted. I however did mention to the leaders of these expeditions that if they gave me one chance I wouldn't let them down. I always knew deep in my heart that I would be able to climb Everest; it was only a matter of time.

In 1985, I came to the U.S. and went to a small college, Northland College in Northern Wisconsin. My father had received an Honorary Doctor of Law degree from this same college in 1973. I received my undergraduate degree in Business Administration, and then worked at Project U.S.E., an experiential education company in New Jersey. Later I designed and built high ropes courses and climbing walls and travelled around the U.S. to install them.

I liked America and the people there, but in the early 1990s, I began to feel something was missing. I needed to be back home in the Himalayas; I wanted to return home. My mother had died unexpectedly in the fall of 1992, and we needed someone to take care of the house in Darjeeling. My two brothers and sister, Norbu, Dhamey and Deki were in the U.S.

In 1993, I raised enough money to do a small expedition in the Sikkim Himalayas to commemorate my father's 40th anniversary of his historic climb with Hillary. After this I returned to Darjeeling and became engaged. My wife Soyang is Tibetan, but she was born in Kathmandu, Nepal. Her parents came from Tibet in 1959 and she went to school in Darjeeling. Our parents were very close family friends. So I got to know her at an early age. Our parents had sort of arranged this marriage. (The decision to

be married was all in our hands). I always knew, I'd marry her one day.

My father, Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, discouraged his children from becoming mountaineers because it was dangerous. He encouraged us instead to pursue other careers. So I did not become a professional mountaineer. Later, when I was studying in the United States, I had a job teaching rock climbing and ice climbing.

Despite my father's caution about mountaineering, and for reasons I myself do not fully understand, I had dreamt of climbing Mt. Everest ever since I was six years old. But it remained a dream because it is very expensive to climb Everest. An expedition member must come up with a minimum of U.S. \$ 35,000 to climb Everest on a private expedition, and if you go on a commercial expedition you must come up with US\$ 65,000, excluding personal expenses such as travel and hotel accommodation. I couldn't go as a 'Sherpa', portering loads for an expedition, because I felt I'd be dishonouring my father.

In 1995, the American Sagarmatha Expedition invited me to join their team. It was not a commercially-guided group but a group of professional climbers. Each member was responsible for his own finances. I joined them but couldn't go beyond Base Camp (17,500 feet) because I just couldn't come up with the money. But I enjoyed the experience.

My luck changed a year later. David Breashers, the leader of Mt. Everest IMAX Expedition 1996, was making a documentary about the Everest region, and he offered me a central role in it. I was also the deputy leader of this six-person (two women, four men) expedition. On May 8th, we planned to film our actual ascent to the summit of Mt. Everest. All six members—Araceli Segarra, Sumiyo Tsuzuki, Ed Viesturs, Robert Schauer, David and I would try to reach the top. Finally, after years of dreaming, training and planning, I hoped to achieve my goal.

Once we were in the mountains, things quickly began to go wrong. On the day we were preparing to ascend Camp IV (also known as South Col, 26,500 feet) from Camp III (24,000 feet), we noticed that there was a whole crowd of climbers, about 35

people, ahead of us, also on their way to Camp IV. There were two commercial expeditions led by American Scott Fisher and New Zealander Rob Hall, a South African group and a Taiwanese team and everyone decided to go up that same day. David said we couldn't join this crowd because our plan was to film when only two or three climbers were on the ridge as they made their way to the top. He didn't want to shoot with that crowd crawling to the top. The weather too, was turning ugly. Thus, instead of going to Camp IV, we actually descended to Camp II (21,500 feet).

The next morning, there was more bad news. At ten o'clock, a Taiwanese climber at Camp III slipped and fell 60 feet into a crevasse. When the team leader, who was already climbing towards Camp IV, was informed about this, he told his Sherpas to rescue the climber and take him down to the lower camp to recuperate. The leader then continued his climb towards Camp IV. Some of our Sherpas who happened to be coming down the mountain helped rescue the injured climber, but he died later that evening. This incident was a portentous prologue to the great series of tragedies that was to follow.

The following day, May 10th, still at Camp II, around one o'clock, we observed through our binoculars the crowd of climbers making their way towards the summit and we became uneasy because they were very slow. We calculated that a route that would take us three hours to negotiate would take them six. So we anticipated problems, meaning that they wouldn't get to the summit or that there wouldn't be enough oxygen left for them to make a safe descent. Without oxygen, a climber becomes disoriented, dehydrated, hypothermic and can die very quickly.

Around three in the afternoon, we heard over the radio that everyone was finally on the top. But this was not good news. The rule of the thumb on Everest is that you do not attempt to summit after one-thirty in the afternoon. You must descend. On that day, why the guides and expedition leaders pushed past that deadline, none of us knew.

Like a deadly avalanche, bad news began to roll in. Sherpas on Camp IV at South Col radioed to say only one or two climbers

had returned from the summit and that many were missing. We became very concerned when we were informed that expedition leader Rob Hall was still on the South Summit, which is 28,700 feet, with one of his clients, Doug Hanson. To make matters worse, higher on the mountain where the climbers were floundering, a fierce blizzard had developed. Winds howling at 80-100 miles per hour that quickly reduced visibility to a few yards, where the climber will see nothing but wind-churned snow. A whiteout!

At our Camp, it was chaotic and frustrating. I was translating messages being radioed by Sherpas about missing mountaineers, but because it was already dark and the weather terrible, we were helpless. There was nothing we could do for the rest of the night except wait and hope and pray that somehow the missing mountaineers would either find their way back to their tents or survive the night outside, a chilling prospect.

Naturally, sleep was out of question. Even under normal conditions, you don't sleep very well when you are in the high mountains. At three or four in the morning, we started getting calls again. Many climbers were still missing or dead. The blizzard had died down, so four of our members, Ed, Robert, Araceli and David headed up to Camp III to establish emergency relief. David had also sent a message saying that anyone at Camp IV was free to take our oxygen bottles, food and other supplies we had stored in our tent for our own climb. Sumiyo and I stayed behind at Camp II to organize our own rescue work. Again, I was busy doing translations and interpretations as simultaneous calls came in from Sherpas and foreigners. I sent our Sherpas to gather medical supplies and other necessities from other expeditions, and as survivors such as Sandy Pittman were brought down to our camp, we gave them soup and tea, massaged them and gave medicines. Frankly, I don't recall the next two days because we were so busy with the rescue work. We were no longer climbers but emergency medical personnel.

Near Camp I at 19,500 feet on the top of Khumbu Icefall, members of our expedition flattened out a helipad, pouring Kool-Aid into the shape of a cross to indicate to the rescue helicopter

pilot his landing position. At Base Camp, ten different expeditions merged into one huge rescue station. In those 48 hours, we helped many survive their ordeal, but not all.

After the helicopter flew out with the casualties, we assembled at Base Camp to relax and make preparations for our own attempt on the summit. Even though our supplies had been used up, we gathered what we required from other expeditions, since, of the ten expedition teams, two-thirds decided not to continue. But we remained optimistic and five days later, we once again headed for Everest.

On South Col, at Camp IV, our final rest before the climb to the top, after five hours of sleep, I woke up at eleven at night. I had some Tsampa (roasted barley dough) and dried meat, washed down with Ramen soup. Next, I gathered my equipment and put them in my pack—oxygen bottles first making sure that the regulators were working, tea in a flask, M&Ms and candy bars, extra goggles, gloves, socks, and batteries for the lamp. This fifteen-pound pack was the only thing I would carry. I adjusted my oxygen mask and harness, clipped on my crampons, put on the hat and switched on the headlamp. Then I picked up the ice axe and stepped out into a clear, cold, dark night.

As if to make up for its part in the recent tragedy, the weather appeared ideal. The wind, which can be the curse of climbing, was gentle, like a refreshing breeze; it was calm and quiet all around. This mild weather I felt was a good omen.

Ed, David and a few Sherpas had left an hour before and had broken the trail. Sumiyo was the only one who would not go to the top. Her health had deteriorated and she remained at the camp.

The first half hour was a gradual climb on rocky, icy, crevasse-splintered terrain, but this gentle sloping ended abruptly at a steep, straight ascent. The easy part was over. And for the next eight to ten hours, I was going to have to use every resource I had, every trick I had learned as a climber; this was my final test of all my years of learning. I was going to climb, crawl, clutch at the fixed ropes, trudge a few steps, pant for breath and rest for a few seconds and then start all over again using hands, feet, ropes,

axe—everything at my disposal to go up and not crawl back down.

As I climbed, especially when it was still dark, every step I took, I took with care; everything I did, I did it deliberately. Among these massive mountains, I was nothing. A splinter that could be blown away by a whiff of a breeze. And I said my prayers, especially when I suddenly came upon the dead body of Scott Fisher below the South-East Ridge (27,500 feet). It was perhaps three in the morning. It was still dark and my headlamp first picked out some ropes and clothes. I thought I had stumbled upon the remains of a previous camp. Then I noticed a pair of boots with the feet in them. Immediately I knew it was Scott's dead body, even though I did not look at it directly. A few steps past his body, there was another dead body, but it had been there for much longer, perhaps for two to three years already. For the first time, I became very scared. It was the only moment during my climb that I was caught by surprise and became unexpectedly frightened. In the Sherpa culture, it is very bad luck to come upon or touch a dead body. That is why I did not 'look' at the bodies. I hurried past them, if at all you can 'hurry' in such a situation, murmuring the '*Om Mani Padme Hum*' prayer many, many times.

David and Ed were waiting on the South-East Ridge for the Sherpas who were carrying the camera equipment. Resting on the Ridge, we witnessed a gorgeous sunrise and spent the next two hours filming, resting and fortifying ourselves with water, tea and chocolate bars. My next extended rest was going to be the South Summit, a steep, three-hour ascent over deep snow.

Throughout the climb, I felt strong and confident. It was the strongest I had ever felt in my life. I thought of my father, of course. He had been on this mountain 43 years ago. I felt his spirit and his support. That is why I knew in my heart, "This is it! I will be on top too!" Once the sun was out, during most of the climb, I had my oxygen mask off my face because it was uncomfortable. The hole in the mask that you breathe through freezes up and every few minutes you have to stop and break it up. So, as I breathed through the mask, my goggles outside the mask would fog or ice up, and I'd have to stop to wipe them. I

decided that the best thing was to climb with the oxygen mask and my goggles on and off. Because I felt so strong and confident, I also was using much less oxygen, around 1.5 litres per minute instead of the normal 3 litres.

I knew I was doing well, yet at the same time, I felt anxious. I just wanted to be on top. But I told myself to be careful. You look to one side, you see Tibet, and on the other side you see Nepal, and each a scary, huge fall thousands of feet below. I got a little unsettled looking down, looking around. So I just looked up, waiting to see the summit, but it was not there! You climb, cross a ridge, climb some more and there is yet another ridge. When I arrived at the South Summit, I was just 300 feet from the top, but I still couldn't see it. I then negotiated the treacherous traverse to get to the Hillary Step, a very precarious spot because you are totally exposed to the elements. I took care of that one too, and I began to think, well, yes, I've now seen and climbed these landmarks I'd heard so much about. But where was the top? There were two more ridges I had to get over. Just when I thought I'd never get to the top, I saw Ed coming down, and he said, "Hey, it is right there". We hugged and congratulated each other. With renewed strength and spirit, I continued.

I realized I was on the summit when I saw the prayer flags, left there by Sherpas before. I saw David and gave him a hug. I thanked him because he had made it possible for me to fulfil my childhood dream. Then I cried; I was so happy.

I thought about my parents and prayed. I scattered some rice grains in the air and did *puja*. I left a prayer flag, a *khada* (a white, ceremonial scarf), pictures of my parents and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. I also left a small toy of my daughter, just as my father had done.

I looked around. The summit sloped gently. You could fit 20 people comfortably. The view was stunning. I felt I could see everything everywhere, stretched out far, far away and far down below. Little puffs of clouds and gleaming Himalayan peaks, all beneath my gaze. I had my oxygen mask off but I had no trouble breathing. I only wore the thin polypropylene gloves. Even on top

of Mt. Everest, there was little wind. We stayed almost two hours photographing and filming, savouring our success.

I called Base Camp and asked to be connected to my wife in Kathmandu. I told her, "Hey, I'm on top of the world!" She too was excited, but told me to be careful coming down. Well, there I was, flooded with a great sense of personal accomplishment, though I also felt truly humble and grateful. I said '*Thu chi chay*' (thank you) to the Goddess Chomolungma (Mt. Everest) and asked her to safely get me down. More people get hurt or killed going down. For me and the Sherpas, climbing a mountain is a pilgrimage because the mountains are sacred to us. A foreigner sees a mountain and he wants to climb it because it is the highest or the more difficult. He wants to conquer it, subdue it. But for us, there is too much sacredness, too much culture attached to these mountains to merely look upon them as something to simply climb and conquer, as if mountains can be subdued by us, mere humans. That was why I felt humbled, and that was why I cried. Goddess Chomolungma had granted my lifelong wish. I was very happy. My family was even happier. I had promised my wife and my family that after I climbed Mt. Everest, I would never climb another mountain again.

Mountains are sacred places. These are places where the gods live, and where humans are not strong enough to survive. So when we go climb a mountain we always treat the mountain with a lot of respect hoping that the mountain gods will be in favour of our climb.



IN GRANDPA'S MEMORY

1997

Tashi Tenzing

I went home to Australia feeling lost and disillusioned and in a deep depression such as I had never experienced before. I missed Lobsang and while I knew I had absolutely nothing to do with his death, I felt guilty; guilty, I think, because I was still alive and he was gone. To those who knew me, I was a stranger—a man they did not recognise—and it took me many months to even begin to regain my old energy and zest for life.

Yet even in those darkest of days, deep down in my soul I felt that my Everest dream was not over. My mother had given me a small statue of the Buddha, blessed by our lamas and wrapped in a sacred saffron-coloured cloth, that I had carried with me on my climb. As I carefully returned it to my altar at home in Sydney, I felt a faint flicker of hope that my quest was not yet over. The day would come when the statue would be placed where it belonged—on top of the world.

It is said that time heals all wounds and after many months I was able to put it all behind me and set my mind and heart on rebuilding my life with my family. I also began working towards

buying a new home to replace the one I had. To that end, Judy and I established the Himalayan Travel Centre. The following year I had another dream fulfilled. I had always wanted a baby girl and in December 1994, Dekhen Lhamu was born. Her arrival took away a great deal of the pain of 1993 and for all of us life was good again. With this child we chose the name rather than ask the lamas, for I had always known what my daughter would be called. Dekhen was my only choice (it means 'joy and happiness' in Tibetan) and Judy chose Lhamu in honour of my grandmother. Dekhen was a lively baby and is a very energetic and charismatic child, full of energy like her father and great-grandfather.

By now I was happy and contented and we were slowly rebuilding our lives. All through this period though, the flame that burned inside me for my mountain had merely dimmed, not died. In 1996 it began to rekindle strongly and I told Judy I wanted to attempt Everest again. I could see the look of pain on her face but she told me she knew all along that this time would come and she was prepared to live through it one more time.

This time, however, I knew how it would have to be done: I had to join a good team and give myself every chance of summiting. No more exhausting carrying up and down from Base Camp to Col, which had sapped all our energies so greatly in 1993. I wanted the best back-up and support I could find. So in late 1996 I contacted Guy Cotter of Adventure Consultants in New Zealand and was asked to join his Everest 97 attempt. Guy had been part of the Everest nightmare of 1996, recounted in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*, when Himalayan legends Rob Hall and Scott Fisher perished with six others in a storm which caught them all high on the mountain. Guy had picked up the reins of the company—Rob Hall's and Gary Ball's dream—and revived it. Courageously he was going back to the mountain in the following spring as part of the 'Dream Team' which included American mountaineer extraordinaire Ed Viesturs, who featured in the tragedy of 1996 while filming the IMAX movie *Everest* but found himself a helpless observer to his friend Rob Hall's sad end; Veikka Gustafsson, a Finn and Himalayan veteran who was attempting Everest for the third time, this time without artificial oxygen; and David

Carter, an Indiana wood-miller who had attempted Everest once before but without success. In addition, we were joined by Peter Weeks, a South Australian. We were a small, experienced and well-equipped group who were determined to wipe the mountain clean of the bad press and gloomy reputation it had gained in the 1996 seasons.

Then, of course, there was the matter of money. Joining an existing team eased the financial burden but still, climbing Everest is a costly business, and when I knew I had a place on the team I began to look for supporters. Corporate Australia again proved uninterested in mountaineering, with the exception of the ever-supportive Thai Airways International. My airfares and cargo were assured but I needed funds. After yet another long series of disappointments and knock backs I took a deep breath and once more contacted Rolex in Geneva, not really expecting they would come to my aid a second time. Within days I received a fax from Paul Stuber, who offered me the amount I needed, along with my own borrowed funds, to pay my way. I can never express how grateful I was to them. Throughout both of my Everest attempts they showed faith in a man they had never met, based on the reputation of my family, and their long association with my grandfather. They asked nothing in return and I owe my Everest success in large part to them.

Finally, I was pleasantly surprised when the K2 Gear Shop in Brisbane and Patagonia in Sydney offered to provide me with clothing and equipment. I believe in *karma* and fate and deep inside I knew that this time Everest would allow me to realise my dream. My family and I had suffered enough. I left for Nepal on 12 March in the highest of spirits.

I arranged to meet the team at Base Camp, as I had some very important business to attend to in Darjeeling. I needed to see my parents before the climb and, in what seemed a most auspicious coincidence, I was scheduled to attend the unveiling of my grandfather's memorial statue at HMI. Sir Edmund Hillary was also present and before I left for Everest he came to my house and gave me his blessing. All in all it could not have been a more fitting prelude to my Everest attempt.

As planned, our climbing team all met at Base Camp in early April. Apart from Dave Carter and Peter Weeks, I knew them all and it was an easy transition into the team. We were all climbers and David and Peter were well-prepared and great company. We also had the 'Sherpa Dream Team' with us, four young and strong Sherpas who had gained vital experience with Rob Hall in their short climbing careers: Ang Dorjee (who has now summited on Everest six times); Ang Tshering from Rolwaling who, at that point, had summited thrice before and became a father for the first time during this expedition; Chultim from Khumjung, who had climbed Everest once before; and Gombu, another Rolwaling Sherpa who was an Everest veteran. On my walk-in I met with all of my relatives in the Khumbu, and there are a lot of them! They had all lived through the loss of Lobsang with me in 1993 and had given me their unequivocal support, both emotionally and physically. They helped me arrange the cremation and the *pujas* and took care of me on my way back to Kathmandu when I was alone and in such a terrible state. My Sherpa family is very important to me and this 1997 climb was as much for Lobsang and for them as it was for me. With endless *kadas* and *pujas* I passed through their villages, finally receiving a blessing from the Head Lama of Thyangboche monastery. I was told later that throughout my climb, each and every family home in Khumbu kept incense burning on the Buddhist shrines in their homes.

Base Camp brought back so many sad memories for all of us. We had all suffered nightmares in this place. Yet, this time felt different. This time there would be no tragedy and we would erase some of the pain of those earlier climbs. That said, Chomolungma deemed it necessary to remind us of her power and ultimate control over our fate. After weeks of carrying loads and establishing higher camps, we were back at Base, ready for the summit attempt, when the goddess delivered us unbreakable jet stream winds, which rendered climbing impossible. Many of the higher camps which had been so laboriously set up were destroyed—literally ripped to shreds by the 200 km/h winds. By some miracle, our tents at Camp II survived. We were thus effectively grounded at Base Camp from 2 May until 18 May. Waiting around for such

long periods is demoralizing and saps one's strength for when it is most needed—above Camp IV. I recall on our last retreat from the blizzard conditions of Camp III, calling my wife in Sydney and telling her that we would try once more to get to the Col and if we were again turned back would abandon our attempt. The monsoon was approaching and it was late in May and we were being worn down by the whole process.

Judy had been afraid of me climbing Everest again but this hint of surrender worried her more than her fear of the climb, for she knew what it meant to me. After our call, she phoned Mike Groom in Brisbane, a good friend and exceptional mountaineer who had faced this 'wall' countless times himself, and asked for his advice. "Get on the phone," Mike told her in a most calm and determined voice, "and tell him to get his arse moving and climb that mountain now." It was what she wanted to hear and the message came through to me loud and clear. In the interim, my mother who was living the expedition minute by minute from our family home in Darjeeling, had been to the family lamas, who prayed for me and told her that I must make my attempt on 23 May, the birthday of Lord Buddha. Not before and not a day later. "Oh, yeah, right," I said to myself when her message came through. "I'll just let the others know that the date is fixed!"

We moved up the mountain for one last push; the wind still howled across the summit but was calmer on the lower slopes of Everest. Taking a rest day in the Western Cwm, 23 May was looking very shaky indeed, lamas or no lamas. During our rest, we spent several hours discussing the criteria for our membership of the Everest Anonymous Club being mooted by American climber and cinematographer David Breashears. It was a most entertaining interlude for me, being in the company of some of the finest Himalayan climbers in history, and one that eased the tension for us all. Ed Viesturs, of course, had automatic membership, as did Guy Cotter, who had summited in 1992. David Breashears was most certainly a member of the 'club', having climbed Everest four times, and Veikka was in with his 1993 ascent, but Dave and I were questionable candidates. I had tried

and failed, as had Dave, but then I was a Tenzing, so that required special consideration!

On 22 May, all of us, both Western and Sherpa climbers, moved up to South Col, optimistic about our chances of summiting as the wind had miraculously dropped suddenly to five knots. Our fearless leader, Guy, must have been even happier than the rest of us, for as we all lay resting in our tents that afternoon we heard a wild scream and emerged to see him running around the Col (at 8000 metres!) wearing only his mountain boots. The Sherpas' longstanding doubts about the sanity of Western mountaineers were hardly allayed by this incident. As night closed in, the clouds blew away, exposing the most beautiful, calm, moonlit night I have ever experienced. I could feel my soul stir and my heart warm. Chomolungma had indeed saved her best till last for me.

At 9.30 p.m. we roused and began to pack for the summit. The most important item of all to be placed in my pack was the small Buddha my mother had given me years before to place on the summit. In all the years of Everest climbing, this had never been done and it was most important to me that this symbol of the deeply-held beliefs of all Sherpas and Tibetans be placed atop the highest point on earth, the abode of the gods. On the very top of my pack I had attached a small, fluffy toy bilby, which is a highly endangered Australian marsupial. My son had asked me to carry it and it also symbolized my heartfelt wish to conserve the wild places and creatures of this amazing planet.

We left quietly at 11 p.m. before the other teams, so as to avoid the queue which had caused such havoc and delay in preceding years. We barely needed our headlamps—the brilliant white snow of the summit ridge was cloaked in full moonlight. It was extremely cold (–30 degree Celsius) but the mountain was breathtakingly beautiful and, unlike 1993, I felt strong and happy and enjoyed every single step. This was how climbing Everest should be, how I knew it would be. I could not help but grin broadly under my oxygen mask as we made quick time up the South-East Ridge.

Our group made excellent progress to the South Summit, where

we stopped for tea. This gave us a chance to take in the beauty and scale of the Himalaya. Words cannot do justice to how one feels in a place like this, gazing down in silence on Himalayan giants such as Makalu, Lhotse and Kangchenjunga, watching the great mass that is Everest cast a morning shadow over the entire Khumbu region of Nepal. One cannot even imagine a shadow so vast, such is the scale and dominance of this great mountain. We knew we had to move on but every one of us could have happily stayed on in that place had we been able.

The ridge between the South Summit and the dreaded Hillary Step is one of the most dangerous and unforgiving sections of the ascent, the 'sting in the tail' of Everest, as Guy Cotter puts it. The ridge is just a metre wide and heavily corniced—one misplaced step on a weak section of ice and one will plummet down the Kangshung Face to Tibet or down the South-West Face to Camp II. There is no room for error and we all climbed on in silent concentration until we reached the Hillary Step, a hundred metres on.

We had known what to expect here, knowing fully well the extent of the tragedy of spring 1996. Bruce Herrod, a British member of a South African expedition, had summited but not until after 6 p.m. It had been an exhausting and slow climb from the Col and he had then faced the unimaginably dangerous prospect of descending in the dark. He had moved slowly and made it as far as the Hillary Step, but while climbing down this narrow gully of rock his crampons had become entangled in old climbing ropes and he was tipped backwards, leaving him hanging upside down and unable to pull himself up. He had died in this manner and other climbers passing him had not known what to do about his body. This might seem callous or uncaring but when such a death occurs in the mountains it is not always easy or safe to act as one would in other circumstances, were a body left exposed in this way. At great altitude, the exertion of cutting down a body is enormous and can easily endanger your own life. There is also the question of the wishes of the family. Many bereaved family members and comrades wish the body to be left undisturbed on the mountain. In the case of Rob Hall, his body remains where

he died—just a metre below the South Summit near a large boulder. His family had asked that his body not be disturbed. The climbers passing Bruce Herrod may have reasoned that his family had made a similar request. Retrieving bodies is a very sensitive issue and judgement should never be passed unless one has been in that situation. In Bruce's case, his family had requested that Himalayan climbing legend Pete Athans, who was part of a summit team in 1997, cut Bruce free and commit his body to the South-West Face. Pete had agreed and we all knew of this. Thus, David Breashears and I moved slowly and respectfully past Bruce's frozen body and up the Hillary Step. Pete was coming up quickly behind our team and, he, Ed and Guy all stopped to help release Bruce's body, after retrieving his camera and personal belongings. It was deeply distressing to see Bruce's frozen corpse fall to the valley below, but at least he would now rest in peace and those who had helped release him could climb safely on.

I can still clearly see in my mind that last snowy ridge to the summit. The summit is quite large—a snow cone—with a steep drop into Tibet beyond it. I had waited all my life for this moment and it was no disappointment. I picked up my pace a little and caught up with David, who was the only climber ahead of me. He then offered a gesture which moved me a great deal and which will stay with me all my life. He stopped before the summit, waited until I stood next to him, then offered his hand for us to step up to the summit together. He told me it was an honour for him but I felt the honour was as much mine, for he is not simply a fine mountaineer but a man who deeply loves the Himalaya and who climbs them with honour and respect. We Sherpas have known and climbed with so many climbers from foreign countries and when we sit and talk of climbs and expeditions and those who used to be called *sahibs* by our forefathers, we all know which climbers we respect and trust. David Breashears was certainly one of these climbers, as were my other Western colleagues on Everest on that day.

It was now 6.50 a.m. We had made exceptionally good time from South Col to summit—just over eight hours—but this really meant very little in the context of the whole achievement. The

joy of the climb and the safe return of all climbers are what counts. David and I had a wonderful ten minutes to ourselves on top of the world before the rest of our team reached us. We spoke little but rather just took in the wonder of this special place. People often ask me what I thought about and felt while standing on the summit. My first thoughts were for Lobsang; he was there with me at that moment and I felt very close to him. I thought of my grandfather and how he must have felt on that spot so many years ago as he and Hillary looked down over the world from earth's highest point for the very first time. Yet, my overwhelming emotion was one of unparalleled appreciation for where I was and just how unbelievably beautiful the scene before me was. I resented having to leave after so short a time; I wanted to stay there forever, feeling that euphoria and feasting my senses. I shed tears and laughed and prayed as I buried my small Buddha beneath the pure snow of the summit. My Sherpa colleagues were greatly moved by the placing of the statue; they felt it had kept them safe and that the mountain had now been duly honoured. I also unfurled the traditional Buddhist prayer flags as well as the flags of Nepal, India, Australia and, for the first time, Bhutan; I did so in honour of my family connections in that tiny Himalayan kingdom. I felt deeply satisfied and turned to head down.

The descent was considerably more hair-raising than the climb—you have to look down and it is rather daunting! I down-climbed with great caution and respect for these slopes which had seen the demise of many a successful summiter, Lobsang among them, but I felt strong and not too tired and soon was back safely on South Col. Base Camp patched through a call to Judy in Sydney, and I delivered an avalanche of garbled, adrenalin-fuelled expressions of euphoria. Judy just laughed and shared my unbridled joy; my high-pitched, over-excited voice told her enough. The feeling of relief was like nothing I have ever felt.

Back at Base Camp we packed up and our team set out for Kathmandu and home. I walked back through the Khumbu, visiting every Tenzing family home and lodge so that I could share my happiness with those who had shared my deep anguish in

1993. It was a wonderful walk—*kadas* were piled so high around my neck I could barely see!

As I landed in Kathmandu I saw my parents waiting in the airport terminal. They were so terribly relieved that I was safe and so proud of my success. My mother presented me with a beautiful gold chain as a memento of my climb and I wear it to this day. My friend from International Trekkers, Phintso Ongdi, and Chhunta Tuladhar from the Nirvana Garden Hotel both held wonderful receptions for me as I met a stream of Nepali, Indian and foreign media. Success on Everest is now not a unique accomplishment, however, I contend that the significance of a third generation of one family—especially the Tenzing family—reaching the summit holds an undeniable magic about it and the world responded with great interest and enthusiasm. Indeed the event even made it into the Guinness Book of World Records!

Yet, despite the celebrations at the Australian Embassy, with friends, and at various hotels and organisations, I felt most honoured by being presented with a small silver statue of Buddha from the Nepal Buddhist Association, in recognition of my placing a Buddha at the top of the world.

In rather an exhausted yet still euphoric state I flew home to Sydney. At the airport I was greeted by my family and a group of dear friends, all dressed in red T-shirts emblazoned with words commemorating my success. The dream had been realised.

Thuji chey Chomolungma—I am grateful.



KUSANG SHERPA

1998

M.S. Kohli

In 1998, a British Expedition led by Dave Walsh attempted Mount Everest. Kusang Sherpa, an instructor with the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute at Darjeeling, was invited to join. Kusang had earlier climbed Everest with an all-women team led by Bachendri Pal in 1993 from the South-East Ridge. Three years later he had climbed Everest from North Col with the Indo-Tibetan Border Police.

The 1998 British team consisted of five members, including two ladies and three Sherpas: Kusang, his brothers, Nima Dorjee and Nima Gombu.

During the Golden Jubilee celebrations of the first ascent of Kangchenjunga, I had visited Gangtok, from 16 September to 18 September, 2005. During my brief conversation with Kusang Sherpa, he gave me some details of his climb. Sherpas are a people of few words. They believe more in action than in words. According to him, on the 24th May they left South Col at 9.00 p.m. It was a moonlit night. Those years, the South-East Ridge was not fully roped. They had to fix rope at certain difficult pitches.

The entire group of eight persons on two ropes started together from South Col and reached the South Summit, about 250 feet below the summit. Here the two ladies and one member found it difficult to continue. Leaving the three behind, the remaining five continued their ascent and reached the summit at 11.00 a.m. After spending twenty minutes there, they started their return march. Kusang, besides carrying two oxygen bottles for his own use, had carried three bottles for others. This was a magnificent effort on his part.

After returning to South Summit they picked up the other three persons and all eight of them, now descended to South Col on one rope. Kusang was at the end of the rope belaying all of them.

Kusang also spoke to me about his ascent in 1999. He had climbed Everest from the Kangshung Face in an expedition led by Santosh Yadav. Fifth time he had climbed from the North with the Golden Jubilee Himalayan Mountaineering Institute Mountaineering expedition in 2003.

With these five ascents of Everest, Kusang has climbed Everest more than any other mountaineer in India. Unlike other Sherpas of Nepal who go with foreign teams every year, he was invited only on two occasions to climb Everest, that too after special approval from the HMI. Had he been a normal guide in Nepal, he could have climbed Everest on more occasions.

Kusang is married and has four children. At 46, he still looks extremely young and fit.

PART II

INDIA MAKES IT



INDIA ACCEPTS THE CHALLENGE

1960

M.S. Kohli

In early September 1959, the Indian Mountaineering Foundation decided to send a team to Mount Everest the following year. Col. Gyan Singh, then Principal of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, was appointed its leader. Originally Gurdial Singh of the Doon School was selected for this honour. But he had strong views against the use of Indian equipment. He considered it not up to the mark. This led to some avoidable conflict with the President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, S.S. Khera.

I suddenly received a letter from Col. Gyan Singh inviting me to join the pre-Everest trials in Darjeeling in early October. A couple of days after receiving the invitation from him, Gyan Singh gave me a pleasant surprise by flying to Vizag. He was full of enthusiasm and excitement and looked quite confident of leading India's first team to the highest peak in the world. He was in Vizag only for a few hours; but we were able to discuss in brief all aspects of the preparations, including the selection of the team.

I reached Darjeeling during the first week of October. Most of the climbers had already arrived. Some of them were familiar faces. Soon I also struck up acquaintance with others whom I had not met earlier. I looked forward to doing well in the pre-Everest trial. As usual, for a couple of days we were taken on a cross-country run to get fit and to get to know each other well. Gyan Singh was a good and efficient organiser. We were divided into six syndicates of four or five climbers, each looking after different tasks concerning the expedition. Each syndicate was required to work out an elaborate list of items required for the expedition. I was given the task of working out a list of clothing and technical equipment.

We left Darjeeling for field training on 11 October 1959. Each day during the trek we discussed our plans and put down our views. My early experience in Saser Kangri and Nanda Kot was useful only to a point. I had no idea about oxygen supply, highly sophisticated mountain clothing, boots and sleeping bags required for the 'death zone' beyond South Col.

I was delighted to see Tenzing and the band of his world-famous instructors joining us. They had moved before us and had located the site for Advance Camp at a height of nearly 15,901 feet at the junction of the Ratong and Kabru glaciers. After a day of rest at Base Camp, we moved up, but not before each member was given a chance to show his culinary skill. I volunteered to make *halwa* which turned out to be not too bad. Before we set off, Tenzing briefed us in detail about the problems of Everest, the Kabru Icefall, and the steep face of Lhotse.

The next ten days were spent in hectic activities on the Kabru glacier. According to Tenzing, the Kabru Icefall was technically as difficult as the Khumbu Icefall on Everest. He gave us adequate warning of the types of problems that we were going to face on Everest.

The highest point we reached was 18,883 feet. Late in the night I was awakened by a huge avalanche which slipped through our camp. We were nine climbers and Sherpas in the camp. The main victim was the Leader, Col. Gyan Singh, whose tent had been

ripped open due to strong winds, sweeping in a huge amount of snow. Somehow, we were able to clear the snow and spent the night half-awake. It was at this camp that we heard the tragic news of the death of Madame Claude Kogan and Madame Claudame Van der Stratten who were attempting Cho-Oyu. Tenzing was very disturbed as his two daughters Pem Pem and Nima along with niece, Doma, were also on that expedition.

On return to Darjeeling after completing our syndicate plans, we discussed and finalised the ultimate plan for Everest. On 16 November, the team for Mount Everest was finalised. I was thrilled to find my name in the final list. Others in the team were Keki F. Bunshah (Deputy Leader), Flt. Lt. A.K. Chowdhury, Capt. S.K. Das, Nawang Gombu, C.V. Gopal, Sonam Gyatso, Narinder Kumar, B.D. Mishra, Da Namgyal, Rajendra Vikram Singh, Ang Temba, C.P. Vohra and Capt. A.B. Jungalwala. Later, Lt. N.S. Bhagwanani, the doctor, was also included.

Before leaving Darjeeling, I was asked by the leader to take over the task of organising equipment for the expedition. Col. Gyan Singh and I both proceeded to Kolkata to visit the ordnance factories and discuss with their management the chances of their manufacturing crampons, pitons and ice axes. Next, I proceeded to Kanpur to place orders for tents and sleeping bags with the Harnesses and Saddlery Factory.

Regarding the import of equipment, I was asked to proceed to Mumbai and help Keki Bunshah who was incharge of placing foreign orders. To facilitate my movements, I was posted to *INS Angre* for a few days. Capt. Kumar was also transferred to Mumbai. We, the three Ks—Keki, Kumar and Kohli—galvanised ourselves fully to procure all the required equipment.

Towards the end of December, I was asked to conduct a final trial of all equipment procured from the ordnance factories at some Himalayan location. I was given just five days to complete the task.

After careful consideration, I decided to fly to Srinagar and try all the equipment at Alpathar beyond Gulmarg. This was the quickest way of reaching snow to test the equipment. There was

no possibility of getting into any obstruction. Gulmarg, during the last week of December, was freezing cold. In Gulmarg, I met the local Army Battalion Commander who requested me to take a company of *jawans* to Alpathar so that they could also visit the nearby posts which had not been visited due to heavy snowfall.

I started with nearly 100 men but, when I reached Khilanmarg, only 20 were left with me and the others had turned back, finding it difficult to negotiate the deep snow. When we reached Alpathar, only four Army *jawans* were with me.

I completed the trials and returned to Gulmarg. During this visit I felt that the Army men posted to the mountain areas needed to undergo some sort of mountain training so that they could operate in high altitudes. I believe, my report was sent by H.C. Sarin to General K.S. Thimayya who was then the Chief of the Army Staff. It became instrumental in establishing the High Altitude Winter Warfare School (HAWWS) in Gulmarg. After the 1999 Indo-Pakistan conflict in Kargil, the necessity for mountaineering training in the Army became all the more obvious.

By the middle of February, our preparations for Everest were complete. The entire team assembled in Delhi by 20 February 1960. We were given rooms in the Air Force Officers Central Vista Mess which has since been demolished. The packing operation was colossal. We had to mark boxes in different colours and give them serial numbers for various stages of the expedition and for various camps.

After a courtesy call on the Prime Minister and some senior government officials, the expedition left Delhi for Jayanagar by train on the evening of 2 March 1960. When we arrived at Jayanagar, the place was humming with activity. Some 700 Sherpas and porters had already arrived there. Sonam Gyatso, who had proceeded to Nepal, arrived with Rs. 100,000 in Nepali currency and one escort. The total budget of the expedition was about Rs. 600,000.

Finally, we marched off from Jayanagar. Nearly half of the town's population was at the border to give us a warm send-off. There was a decorated arch with a message in Hindi: 'May you achieve

success'. Local girls performed *aarti* with an earthen lamp placed on a tray which had a map of India and Nepal, showing Everest and our route, in vermilion powder.

The next day of our journey lay through a wooded country over undulating hills. It was hot and sultry and the going was heavy as we moved through sandy patches in the jungle. The approach to Base Camp was beautiful. We trekked through paddy fields, Terai jungle and picturesque mountains decked with colourful rhododendrons, magnolia, cherry and apricot blossoms. We crossed and recrossed turbulent streams at frequent intervals. We came across different communities of Nepalese—*Magars*, *Tamangs*, *Chhatris*, *Rais* and *Sherpas*—each slightly different from the other in looks, customs and dress. They were most friendly and hospitable.

On 21 March, we reached Namche Bazaar, the prominent village in the heart of Sherpaland. I had heard of it from several friends and mountaineers and was delighted to be in this beautiful village. Boiled potatoes were distributed free to all of us by the local Sherpas. I remember that night in Namche. It snowed heavily. But the warmth and hospitality of the local Sherpas made us very happy and comfortable. Two days later we reached Thyangboche monastery where we called on the incarnate lama at a simple but solemn ceremony. We were offered Tibetan tea and blessed by the incarnate lama. After spending a few days for acclimatisation, we proceeded to Base Camp.

The team was divided into three parties. The first consisted of Ang Temba and myself, with five Sherpas. The instructors of HMI, Da Namgyal, Ang Temba and Nawang Gombu, were put in different parties so that each party could benefit from their rich experience.

The first party was asked to reach Base Camp and establish the route through the icefall, the first major hurdle on Everest. We reached there on 6 April but the inclement weather and snowfall prevented work on the icefall until 10 April.

The Khumbu Icefall is an awe-inspiring mass of broken ice grinding down a steep incline. It presented a confused and terrifying

disarray of giant seracs, gullies, ice faces and crevasses. It was like an animated monster, unpredictable, relentless and forceful.

To open a route through the icefall was a very arduous task. But more daunting was the fact that it was so unpredictable. There was a change in its configuration every few hours. Crevasses widened and then suddenly filled up, ridges appeared and disappeared, seracs toppled. So you had to open the icefall not only once but keep on working at it to make it safe for the groups which were following you, especially the heavily-laden Sherpas.

There was a delay of four days because of bad weather. After that our small group set about tackling the icefall. Cutting steps, laying the rope, blasting overhanging ice cliffs and bridging crevasses, Ang Temba and I managed, after very strenuous work, to establish Camp I. The other members of the forward group followed, wielding ice-axes and securing the route. The next day we reconnoitered the route to Camp II, very near the top of the icefall.

Having successfully overcome the icefall, we proceeded to Lhotse Face. That turned out to be much harder than any of us had foreseen. It was an obstacle which would put to the test all our climbing skills and our endurance. High-speed winds blew relentlessly across its bleak rocky surface, leaving hardly any snow on its turreted top.

Climbing up South Col at 26,000 feet, establishing and stocking camps on the way was agonizingly slow, for now the height began to tell too. Towards our right was the 'glaciated slope' of Hunt which appeared to me like so many vertical ice walls, while on the left was the Geneva Spur. At the lower end of the Geneva Spur was the 'Yellow Band' of limestone slabs.

Sonam and Gombu made good progress. Fixing hundreds of feet of rope lines and dumping a tent at Camp V they returned to the Base. Ang Temba and Da Namgyal, whose turn it was next to work on Lhotse, were unlucky. They ran into bad weather. Kumar, Chowdhury and Vohra followed, cutting steps and making the rope lines secure. On 9 May, South Col was reached by Ang Temba and Jungalwala.

The South Col was a desolate spot, a windswept platform known as a high altitude junkyard by various expeditions. Tent poles, cylinders and empty food tins lay scattered all over there. The weather again played foul. We could not establish our camp at South Col for another four days. Fierce winds and intermittent snow made it impossible for the Sherpas to bring up all the loads, equipment and food that were needed for setting up this camp. Satish Nanda, however, managed to set up a record of his own. He laid the highest telephone cable in the world! It was from Base Camp to the Advance Base.

Now there was great expectancy in the air. The summit teams were to be announced. They were to be two, and I was thrilled to be in the second team, together with Vohra and Ang Temba.

Towards the middle of May, before the summit ascent was to be launched, Kumar and I were asked to climb to South Col as a trial run to prepare ourselves for the ordeal. We both proceeded to the Lhotse Face and looked forward to our first visit to the famous South Col about which we had read a lot in the accounts of Lord Hunt and Albert Egger. We were both full of excitement. We spent the night in Camp IV fairly well without using any oxygen. But getting up early in the morning became a serious problem on account of freezing cold. Doctor had given us some nicotine tablets which bring heat to the blood. This really helped both of us. We were soon moving up towards Yellow Band. This was our first visit to South Col and we were naturally excited. It was as large as a polo ground. But the winds were so strong that we were nearly bodily lifted. I visited South Col many times subsequently and found the wind velocity was never less than 100 km an hour. This was the highest funnel in the world between Lhotse and Everest.

On 24 May, the weather was fine. The first summit team consisting of Gombu, Sonam Gyatso and Kumar set out in high spirits, accompanied by seven Sherpas. That afternoon, Camp VII was established at a height of 27,600 feet and the Sherpas returned to South Col. At night, however, it became extremely cold and windy. They waited for the wind to recede the next morning; but,

by 7 a.m., it had not abated. They could not wait any longer. Strong winds notwithstanding, they decided to make a bid for the summit.

With Gombu in the lead, they had climbed to just below the South-East Ridge when Kumar's oxygen mask froze. Fortunately, he had a spare mask and was able to change it immediately. Sonam's oxygen apparatus also froze twice. Strong winds whipped powdery snow into their eyes. Visibility was almost nil. At 28,306 feet they had to face the stark truth. They could not go on in the face of such strong winds. It would have been suicidal to climb the last two hundred metres in those extremely hostile weather conditions. And so they turned back.

It was on the same day, we came to know later, that a Chinese team claimed to have reached Everest from the north-east route. Their claim, however, became controversial and remains so. To surmount the well-known hurdle called Second Step, the Chinese claimed, one climber took off his boots, stood on the shoulders of another in his stockings, and hoisted himself up.

It was our party's turn now to try its luck. Ang Temba, Vohra and I left Camp III for Camp V on 24 May, arriving at South Col the next day. Undeterred by the fate of the first summit party and the unrelenting weather conditions, we were determined to climb to the top. But it was not to be. We waited hopefully for the weather to relent but it became worse and worse. Tons of fresh snow buried all our hopes. The monsoon had broken over Everest and we were in a death trap.

On 27 May, we too decided to give up the attempt. Hoping for better luck next time we started our descent. Vohra and Ang Temba decided to stop at the Lhotse Camp while Sherpa Nawang Tshering and I continued our descent. Moving through deep snow was a trying experience. On reaching Camp IV, at the foot of Lhotse, I felt it was unwise to continue further to Advance Base Camp. It was still snowing heavily. Nawang, however, was obstinate. Camp IV was never a popular place for the Sherpas, as they all believed that the ghost of a Sherpa who was killed in 1952 in an ice storm haunted the area.

Our separation, I thought, would be suicidal for both of us. I decided to accompany Tshering. We reached Advance Base Camp late at night in trying conditions. We survived. As fate would have it, during our second attempt on Everest two years later, Nawang Tshering was killed at the same spot near Camp IV, hit by a falling stone.

The entire team was now at Base Camp. A bottle of brandy was opened for the first time on the mountain. Each member was given hardly half a peg. But it left the dozen of us high because of the dehydration. My experience on Nanda Kot had been similar. It confirmed that drinking at high altitude was unwise.

During the return march, we tried to forget our disappointment of missing the summit, by getting into a light mood. There were practical jokes around. The main target was poor Sohan Singh, Secretary of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. One morning, he found that his dentures, which he had placed in a mug of water the night before, as well as the spare set, were missing. This nearly created a major 'disaster' for Sohan Singh who was very fond of chicken. He found himself helplessly dentureless: he could not eat anything! He could not bear the thought of having to go without chicken on his return march. However, after a day of marching, his dentures were mysteriously restored.

Because of too much dehydration, our appetites had become enormous. Bed tea was now accompanied by a full plate of rice. For breakfast, lunch and dinner each member had a chicken and a full plate of rice and a mug-full of tinned food. Besides, incredibly, each member ate about five to ten *parathas* and a four-egg omelette for breakfast and ten to fifteen *parathas* for lunch and dinner.

At Jiri, the owner of the Swiss Cheese Factory, in response to a letter from Tenzing, brought a slab of fresh butter weighing about 10 kg. Gyan Singh asked me to distribute about one-third to the members and retain the balance for the next two days. Before I could do anything, the entire slab was gone!

During the last three days, due to rain, leeches had appeared in hundreds. It was difficult to protect us fully from their attacks.

At the end of each day there were several sights of blood oozing out from the feet of members in the camp.

On our return to Kathmandu, we were warmly received by the Indian Ambassador, Harishwar Dayal, and his wife Leela, who had been particularly fond of mountaineering. She was a tennis champion of the early forties and was a great exponent of Sanskrit plays. She was very fond of the Himalayas and it was because of her that we were given the best of treatment. There were plenty of functions, lunches, dinners and 'at homes'. On 18 June, the team called on the Nepalese Prime Minister.

On 20 June, we flew by an IAF Dakota to New Delhi where the External Affairs Secretary-General, N.R. Pillai, the IMF President and other members of the Sponsoring Committee greeted us. The Indian Mountaineering Foundation had produced a special brochure giving stage-by-stage progress of the team.

There were several engagements in Delhi. The last, and to us the most important, was a call on the Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru on 24 June. Nehru was delighted to meet us. He made it a point to assure us that, despite failure, we had done an excellent job and we had no reason to feel disappointed. Dr. Radhakrishnan, the then Vice President of India, also graced the occasion. He recited to us some Sanskrit verses which mean:

"In all human actions, there is an unaccountable element which is called luck, destiny, fate or the force accumulated by the acts of one's past lives. In the language of the *Gita* it is called *Daivyam*. The first four factors can be used by man as he wishes but he has no control over *Daivyam*. There, his duty is to do his best without any regard for the result."

Remarks by Dr. Radhakrishnan made me renew my realisation of the spiritual and divine elements which I had earlier encountered near the Amarnath Cave and on Nanda Kot.



THREE NIGHTS AT 28,000 FT.

1962

M.S. Kohli

India had booked Everest for 1962. Normally, the leader and the team should have been announced by the end of August, but somehow the Sponsoring Committee could not make up its mind about the leader.

During the first week of September I was asked to take over as deputy leader and start preparation immediately. Among the major items of urgent procurement were oxygen cylinders, oxygen masks and eiderdown. I ordered these immediately from a French firm which was then considered the best in the world. I also ordered some equipment from various ordnance factories and tied up the supply of fabric from a firm in Bombay.

By the end of 1961, Major John Dias was appointed leader of the expedition. I had never met him before but had heard of his reputation. During the expedition I found him a lovable companion. Since most of the climbers were known and experienced, it was decided not to hold any pre-Everest expedition and instead

select the team based on the previous performance of climbers. The team included Gurdial Singh (Guru), the veteran mountaineer from the Doon School, with Hari Dang and Suman Dubey, also from Doon. Then there were K.P. Sharma, O.P. Sharma, Mulk Raj and two doctors, Nanavati and Soares. There were four others with previous experience—C.P. Vohra, Sonam Gyatso, Jungalwala and A.K. Choudhury.

As soon as the high-altitude symposium in Darjeeling ended, I proceeded to Delhi and joined John Dias. After a week of consultation all plans were finalised and we proceeded to make full-fledged preparations for the task ahead.

We succeeded in recruiting the 'Grand Old Veteran', Ang Tharkay, as our Sherpa Sirdar. He had been on more expeditions than even Tenzing, eleven with Eric Shipton alone. He was the famous Sirdar on the Annapurna I expedition in 1950, and despite a generous offer from Maurice Herzog, declined the fruits of the summit. Phu Dorje, a burly Casanova from Khumjung, who was with us on the 1960 Everest expedition, was taken as Assistant Sirdar. He was undoubtedly the strongest Sherpa we had on the mountain.

We were to take as much indigenous equipment as possible. By the end of February, after months of planning, procurement and packing, we were on our way, taking the previous route from Jayanagar to Namche Bazaar.

On reaching Base Camp, following the traditional practice, we broke into three parties. John Dias, Hari, Jangu and Chow were to tackle the icefall first. Cutting steps, fixing ropes and laying bridges, they set up Camp I by the first of April. They were closely followed by the second party consisting of C.P., K.P., Suman and myself. Overcoming giant crevasses, going under ominous-looking ice blocks, we somehow managed to climb past these overhangs. The third party consisted of Guru, Sonam, O.P., Mulk Raj and Ashok.

By the time we set up Camp IV, at the foot of the Lhotse Face, the weather was already showing signs of becoming freakish. We did not know how bad it would get. We only realised that the

wind speeds across the Lhotse Face were very high. John's advance party cramponed up the Lhotse Face with great determination, only to be halted by an absolutely unbridgeable crevasse. It spanned the width of the Lhotse glacier. The startled party was helpless till Ang Tharkey suggested the 1952 Swiss route as an alternative. It was to prove tragically dangerous.

They hugged the edge of the natural chute, seeking shelter and dodging the stones that constantly rocketed down it. Almost halfway up, they heard a great rumbling roar. Lumps of ice and rock hurtled past them. A pineapple-shaped stone hit Sherpa Nawang Tsering and shot him down the ice slope. He was carried in great pain to the doctors at Camp III. His liver had been shattered and the poor man did not survive. Two years earlier, in 1960, while returning with me from South Col he had refused to spend a night precisely at this very spot, fearing death.

Though saddened, we could not afford to lose heart having reached so high on the mountain. We had to continue; and continue we did. We abandoned the Swiss route and tried to tackle the safer British route again, even though it had seemed impossible earlier.

Three more weeks of perseverance and patience, a grim determination to win and the magnificent effort put in by some expedition members brought us to South Col by the last week of May. Before we reached South Col, the weather gave us a couple of nasty days. Lhotse hit back with an avalanche which carried a whole rope of climbers down the length of the glacier. Mercifully, this 210-metre fall did not result in more casualties, only a couple of fractures and shaken nerves.

Having made it to South Col and set up camp there, we were, at last, ready for the climax. We, the summit party comprising Gurdial Singh, Sonam Gyatso and myself, and the support party consisting of John Dias, Hari Dang and Suman Dubey, had been training and working for months for this final climb. Helping us were 18 Sherpas led by Sirdar Ang Tharkay.

Once again, the weather gods seemed bent on defeating all our efforts. A 70-kmph gale hit us as we reached South Col. Instead

of the usual pre-monsoon lull, we were doused by chilly winds, clouds and snow. The Westerlies reigned supreme. Exhausted, we slept through the night in spite of fierce winds which threatened to blow away our tents.

Our immediate problem was oxygen. We had carried enough for only one night at South Col plus the amount needed for the summit ascent and the journey back, including the night to be spent at Camp VII by the summit party. An extra night at the Col meant dipping into the summit supply. That, we were loath to do. So, we decided to do without oxygen during the extra night we were constrained to spend at South Col. It was already the night of 27 May. We had three more days left to climb and descend. The monsoon was officially expected on 1 June.

The morning of 28 May was better and we moved on. Before we reached Camp VII, however, Guru started feeling unwell and rather than spoil our chances, decided to go down. We were worried as Guru would be alone and unroped. However, there was no help. A few hours later, Hari Dang took his place.

We sucked four litres per minute of our bottled oxygen. Through occasional windows in the clouds, we relished the sight of the Everest massif which lay ahead of us. We cut steps up the 'leap frog gully', so christened by Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon in 1953.

By late afternoon, we reached a small levelled area where a Meade tent was already pitched by our strong team of Sherpas—Ang Tharkay, Phu Dorje, Mingma Tshering, Norbu and Ang Tshering.

Our Meade tent was meant for only two persons. We managed to squeeze in three air mattresses sans their pillow sections. In one corner we placed butane gas burners, a bag of snow, crampons and oxygen gas cylinders. Each one of us needed two cylinders for the summit bid and one for the night. Each cylinder would last eight hours at two litres per minute. Sonam was in charge of our dinner at the last camp. Roasted chicken, *parathas*, *sattu* (flour of parched gram), aerated juices and tea provided a sumptuous meal.

On 29 May, I woke up with great hope and expectation. Hari was still in his sleeping bag and lost in his own world. Sonam, with the zip of the tent open, was peering outside. My hopes were shattered on noticing a fierce blizzard blowing outside. Our tent had slipped during the night and was overhanging a bit but held by the pitons driven into the hard ice. "What happened to the Himalayan dawn?" Hari muttered as he woke up. Obviously, there was no chance of moving up that day. Even to venture outside the tent became a major challenge. I did go out to answer the call of nature and felt being blown off my feet.

After a cup of tea and some biscuits we settled down to a debate. There were only two alternatives. Either call it a day and descend as soon as the weather permitted or to spend a day and a night without oxygen, conserving two bottles each for the summit attempt on 30 May.

'Mountaineering is just a sport, not to do and die' and 'to retreat now would mean condemning to an objective negation the efforts of last two years' was the main thought. The final and unanimous decision was to stay put and try the summit on 30 May.

Twenty-ninth May was also a day of introspection and the role of God for me. Lying the whole day in my sleeping bag I was lost in thought. Without oxygen we did not have much energy for any useless chat. Hari was engrossed in his own thoughts. Sonam, with his unshakable faith in his Buddhist lamas and prayers, kept on silently reciting '*Om mani padme hum*'. In my mind I recited the first stanza, the *mool-mantra* of our Sikh prayer, *Japji Sahib*, a thousand times.

Though cramped and unable to toss around in the two-man tent, the three of us went to sleep early in the hope of achieving our goal the next day. With oxygen flowing at one litre per minute I tried to fall asleep so that I could wake up early next morning fresh and fit.

As I closed my eyes and zipped the sleeping bag up to my nose, a caravan of thoughts started passing through my mind. Flash-backs of my early childhood and how political upheavals and

circumstances had catapulted me from Haripur to the upper reaches of Everest at 27,650 feet. Tomorrow, would we become the third nation in the world to reach the top of Everest? There were sweet visions of my stepping onto the summit of Everest. Some random thoughts of my father and brother in Delhi flipped past but were soon submerged in the overwhelming prospect of our struggle to get to the top.

The night of 29 May was to be one of the longest of my life. A partially-used oxygen bottle was taken by Sonam. Another, with hardly two hours of oxygen, was shared between Hari and myself. We changed over every fifteen minutes. When the oxygen mask was put on Hari's face or mine, we would instantaneously fall asleep, as if mesmerised. I could write a book on how we spent that unforgettable night! We were in the Death Zone, hanging on for life on fast-vanishing oxygen and unrelenting weather. I realised the great value of life-giving oxygen, the moments of silent struggle and the acceptance of God's will. We three were destined to become the only ones in the world to stay at this height for so long.

But all our troubles were forgotten when we heard Sonam's shout of delight, for the 30th had dawned clear. "See brothers, see! What did I tell you? Twenty-one lamas do not pray in vain!" Sonam was exclaiming with great excitement. "What about my thousand times reciting the basic Sikh prayer, what about my *ardaas* at Sis Gunj, Delhi?", I said to myself. We rushed through our preparations and by seven in the morning we were struggling up the thin slabs of the South-East Ridge. Two hours later, we had almost reached 28,000 feet.

Confidently, we started for the South Summit. As we trudged slowly up, sharp winds started to blow. We realised there was a subtle difference in the air. The complexion of the sky had changed. The snow swirled around our knees, the wind rose and howled with rising ferocity. Our glasses were fogged and visibility was reduced almost to zero. It took us five hours to snail up an additional two hundred feet.

We stopped for a brief rest. Removing our masks, we downed

cans of mango and pineapple juice, kept warm in our eiderdown jackets. In the distance, Makalu and Lhotse, which were shining in the early morning sun, now looked hazy. We were now close to our goal, and were getting somewhat apprehensive of the elements which were gradually closing in on us.

We were soon facing the South Summit looming in front of us. We dumped our half-used oxygen bottles and looked at the steep slope that led to the South Summit. Hari Dang, in his article *Nights of Agony*, described these moments in a very poetic fashion which I admire:

"We realised vaguely that something had gone awry. Optimism lost its way in the snow that increasingly swirled round our knees, as we sank deeper and deeper each step into yielding drifts. The wind rose in a whirl of great intensity, concentrating upon our own ridge while Tibet remained clear. Gusts began to sting our faces and fog our glasses as soon as we had laboriously cleared them. We began to hug the outcrop of rocks that bounds this face of the South Summit on the side of the Cwm, in fact the termination of the bare south face of Everest. Deeper drifts forced us onto rock, but the rock was no longer the friendly upward-sloping slabs which had helped us down below. This was like the crumbly shale of Nanda Devi, coming apart easily and a constant danger to the members below. Striking a varying line between crumbly rock and deep drifts into which we occasionally sank to our thighs, and always ploughed a wake to the knees, we continued upwards, ever so slowly; a painful contrast to the exuberant trio that had sipped mango-juice and disdainfully cocked a mental snook at the summit ridge a while earlier.

Beautiful crystals of ice rose and did their best to bury our breath, our very life, under their cold embrace; normally a nuisance, then a desperate menace, appearing to our slow, anoxic minds an affront to our existence. But the wind was again the master, and vengefully guffawed around us, angry at our recent ebullient confidence.

'Where was that Universe of Peace and Love and Acceptance?, where is its tranquillity and when is the cessation of struggle?'

It is to answer these questions that one climbs and climbs again, till each hardship and every pain and sorrow inflicted on the unwilling self in pursuance of some disinterested purpose becomes a sufficient accumulation of indifference to transmute human sufferings into that very tranquillity which really does not exist, except for brief and rare moments. But one thinks of all this on hospital-beds and in prison; not when a gale overtakes one on the South-East ridge of Everest five hundred feet short of the summit."

On that wretched ridge, in that frenzied squall, all we could do was to concentrate on the next step, the next breath of rich, essential oxygen, the rope ahead, the tug behind; the danger of a slip, the hiss of small avalanches that might become bigger, the fogged glasses and the firm belay.

The logic of the weather was conclusive. It was 3.30 p.m. We had been climbing for eight and a half hours. It would have taken us at least one more hour to the summit. Perhaps, close to two in deteriorating weather. I thought it would not be possible to return to our camp in sunlight. Human faculties are often impaired at such altitude. Thank God, I was quite clear in my mind. I shouted to the others to stop. They were keen to continue and so was I, but there was no doubt in my mind that we would not survive to tell the story of our success. After some discussion, both of them agreed with me that it would be a one-way journey to the top leading to death and so, just about 300 feet short of the summit, we were compelled to turn back.

Success had again eluded us. The descent was nightmarish. Belaying each other at every step, we retraced our steps down the South-East Ridge. At 8 p.m. we were still far away from our last camp. I had thrown away my oxygen bottle and the mask. At about the same time, Sonam and Hari too had discarded their oxygen equipment. The sun had hidden behind Pumori. Soon it would be dark which would engulf us and overpower us to settle down under the shadow of Everest to eternal rest.

And then the worst happened. Sonam, who was leading the rope, suddenly slipped, taking down Hari who was caught

unawares. We were now heading for a several thousand feet of vertical fall. Intuitively, I had dug my ice-axe in the hard ice. It held us back. Thunder and lightning roared and glinted all around. The wind, which had dogged our footsteps all along, rose in all fury again. Then, benumbed and exhausted, we lost our way. There was no sign of our tent. It was soon pitch dark. Surprisingly I was not scared of death. Having reached near the top of the world we were totally in the hands of the elements and the Almighty. Of course, we knew that we should continue our effort so long as our tired limbs allowed us to.

After stumbling about in the darkness for a long time we were in despair. We gave up the search for our tent. Perhaps, the wind had swept it away. On two occasions we almost gave up and said our last prayers. Amazingly, all of us had lost any fear of death at that time. Before embarking on the expedition we all believed that a small calculated risk was necessary but no more. Now we were fully committed. I was prepared to accept whatever would happen. Of course, I had full faith in my prayer and knew that the Almighty could still take us out of most dangerous situations. Hari and Sonam must have had similar thoughts.

As the end approached, from an almost crawling situation I stood up. The South-East Ridge here was not so steep. Sonam and Hari too had stood up. I was now leading the rope. Almost dazed I looked for a suitable site for my eternal rest. The blizzard was still in full fury. In my stupor, only two faces came to my mind. My father was praying at Sis Gunj alongwith Pushpa, my future wife. Before embarking on the expedition, my father had introduced me to her and on my return from Everest, I hoped to get married.

And then a miracle happened. It was 10 p.m. As I took just one more step, a black object rose before me. It was our tent, half buried in the snow. What fantastic luck! God was merciful. The prayers of my father and Pushpa were answered. We had enough energy to remove our crampons. With boots on, we entered our tent and sank into our sleeping bags, without food or oxygen. This was the third consecutive night we were to spend

in the Death Zone. Would we get back alive? But none dared to speak his mind. Utterly exhausted, and without oxygen, we slept like logs. On the 31st we made it to South Col where Guru and Da Norbu awaited us almost without hope. We were absolutely exhausted.

We descended further to find that a rescue party had been organised for us. They were all overjoyed to find us alive. Having lost contact with the lower camps for almost three days, we were presumed lost and dead. The newspapers in India had more or less pronounced this. Yes, we had escaped the jaws of a cruel, cold death at high altitude. I was grateful to the Almighty. Gurdial and ailing Nima had spent six nights without oxygen at South Col.

The three of us had set up a world record for many years to come by spending three nights at nearly 28,000 feet, two of them without oxygen. Apart from its other features, the 1962 Indian Everest expedition, which again missed the summit, was to remain one of the major high-altitude survival stories. It had some remarkable 'believe it or not' elements too.

On return to Delhi, like the 1959, 1960 and 1961 expeditions, we were feted by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, the Service Chiefs, Defence Minister V.K. Krishna Menon and Prime Minister Nehru. After a week of hectic receptions I relaxed for a day in the company of my father. As I closed my eyes to relax, the grim drama on Everest came before my eyes. In silent bliss I realised that I had learnt the greatest lesson of my life: to take just one more step. On Everest, this had saved our lives.



THE FIRST INDIAN SUCCESS

1965

M.S. Kohli

On 15 August, 1964 the Indo-Tibetan Border Police celebrated Independence Day at Rai. That day, due to a heavy monsoon downpour, the entire ITBP establishment, including our house, had been marooned. Water, at least a foot high, swirled in our living rooms. Pushpa, my wife, and I were sitting on table-tops. To get to the Grand Trunk Road nearby, which was at a higher level and had escaped flooding, one had to wade through water, carrying clothes and shoes on or above the head.

Looking out of my window I saw a postman in his drab khaki uniform. He capered around the house hoping to find some way of getting in. Finally, he rolled up his trousers and stepped into the water. He had hardly gone a few yards when he retraced his steps towards the Grand Trunk Road. He took off his uniform, entered the water in his underclothes, carrying his mail bag, boots and trousers on his head. Crossing the moat, he came, or rather floated, to our door-step. He brought a big bundle of mail.

There were a few telegrams and many letters. I was busy opening and reading the letters. Pushpa picked out the telegrams.

One, in particular, looked important to her. She read it aloud. It was from Chakravarty, Secretary of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. It read, 'See Sarin positively by 16 August'.

The next morning, I saw H.C. Sarin in the South Block of the Central Government Secretariat. As usual, he was half hidden behind heaps of official files. Several telephones, on his large table, kept ringing intermittently. Sarin was an important member of the Sponsoring Committee of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. He was later its President. He was also the Member-Secretary of the Executive Council of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, and had administered this institute from its inception in November 1954. He had been devoted to the cause of mountaineering in this country for over a decade. Raising his head above the stack of papers, Sarin looked at me and said, "I am glad to say that the Sponsoring Committee has decided to offer you the leadership of the Third Everest Expedition. The third time, I hope, will be lucky. We must make it this time."

Excitement gripped me. My thoughts raced to Everest. This time we had to reach the summit! I was already climbing up the mountains. The last camp had to be higher, higher than ever before. Meanwhile, Sarin went on, "Kumar will be the Deputy Leader". I was too moved to speak. Suddenly, I found myself burdened with heavy responsibilities. I stood up a little dazed, shook hands with Sarin, thanked him and the Sponsoring Committee for reposing so much confidence in me and assured him that I would do my best.

I set up my headquarters in Delhi on 1 September 1964. Kumar was already there. We got busy with our planning. The expedition was to leave for the mountain around mid-February. We had barely five and a half months to complete the preparations. And in that period, a special pre-Everest expedition had to be organised with the help of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, Darjeeling, to select a suitable team. I chose the 21,911 feet Rathong, an unclimbed peak in the Kangchenjunga range, for this. This was to last about five weeks. That left us just about four months for the gigantic organisational task. There were countless things to

be done and thousands of loose ends to be tied up. A great deal had to be thought out in the limited time available.

The Rathong expedition was to start around mid-October and the Everest team could not be selected till a month later, at the end of the Rathong expedition. Till then, Kumar and I had to handle all the work and it was essential that we attended to some of the urgent and vital problems without any delay.

The pre-Everest to Rathong attracted a large number of climbers. We assembled in Darjeeling on 13 October. The pre-Everest run-up was exciting. Everyone was keen to show his talent. At the end of the trip, 11 members reached the top. How wonderful it would be, I thought, if we could put the same number on top of Everest! And why not? I had great hopes. If only the weather-gods would be kind.

We returned to Darjeeling on 11 November. Khera and Sarin arrived the following day. Two hours after their arrival, I was closeted with them in the guest room of HMI for a long session to finalise the selection of the team. Regarding one of the two climbers, Balwant, whom I wanted desperately for the team, there was a heated discussion. Khera announced the principle of selection. Neither the leader of the expedition nor the Sponsoring Committee would force a climber. Both would enjoy the veto power. I accepted the formula and soon the team was finalised.

The selected team, besides Kumar and myself, comprised Nawang Gombu, Gurdial Singh, Sonam Gyatso, C.P. Vohra, A.S. Cheema, Mulk Raj, Sonam Wangyal, H.P.S. Ahluwalia, H.V. Bahuguna, J.C. Joshi, H.C.S. Rawat, Ang Kami, and B.P. Singh. Lala Talang and Soares (later replaced by Chakravarty) were the two doctors. Gurucharan Bhangu and Balakrishnan were to look after the communications. To the 19-member team was added Lt. Bhagirath Rana, the Nepal Government's Liaison Officer.

Our long trek to Base Camp, like the previous two, started from Jayanagar, a town on the Indo-Nepal border, on 26 February. Bathing in innumerable streams, and gently rubbing ourselves against the fragrant silk-cotton and flame-of-the-forest, we made our way through the terraced fields and forests. And then, the

Sherpa districts of Solu and Khumbu with prayer flags, *mane* walls, *gompas* and *chortens*; all chanting *Om mani padme hum*, the Buddhist prayer. The fierce winter was on its last legs and crisp-yellow grass, flowing water and swaying bushes welcomed us into a new world where time stands still. The heady *chang* and *rakshi* flowed eternally with which our Sherpas and porters drowned their sorrows.

Climbing up and down, and up again, rising higher after every plunge and enjoying cursory glimpses of the high mountains, we reached the famous and heavenly lamasery of Thyangboche on the 17th day of our march. In an atmosphere vibrant with the chanting of prayers, tolling of bells and with occasional blowing of a conch, we settled down in the colourful rest-house for a short period of reorganisation and acclimatisation. We chose the adjacent slopes for our training climbs.

After four days rest at Thyangboche, our advance parties left for Base Camp, reaching there on 22 March. We were now in the great amphitheatre of Everest with Pumori (23,409 feet), Lingtrense (21,969 feet), Khumbutse (21,782 feet), Changtse (24,777 feet) inside Tibet; the west shoulder of Everest itself, Nuptse rising into the sky in semicircular grandeur. We were on the Khumbu glacier with its icy-blue lakes, its glistening smooth towers. Its gurgling streams rushed under the ice, its huge waves of frozen fury were curtained with incomparable hangings, hugging its exciting course from Lobuje to this rubble-covered patch. Under the shadow of Khumbutse and Lho-La, we set up our Base Camp.

A day's rest and we were up on the icefall. The glittering smooth towers threatened to tumble down with fearful thunder, huge unshapely blocks rumbled and screeched and came shattering down at will. Frightening crevasses yawned, gulping tons of debris hungrily and closing in as fast.

It was a weird jungle of ice, phantoms playing their unearthly game. This was the first awesome taste of an entry to the sanctuary of Everest.

Although we had twice before been close to Everest, the ever-

changing icefall was always a new challenge, always a new problem. Four days of hard work and we were on top of the icefall. That was on 27 March, the earliest ever an expedition had got to the Western Cwm.

Beyond the bizarre labyrinth of the icefall, whose savage wilderness presented a constant danger to life, lay the gently rising and placid slopes of the Western Cwm, only to be disturbed by the peeling of avalanches from the steep slopes of Lhotse.

After about a week of ferrying loads up the icefall, we moved further to face the challenge of Lhotse Face, the second major hurdle on Everest. Directly ahead of the Western Cwm, at the end of a gentle slope and barely five miles from the top of the icefall, rises the steep face of Lhotse crowned with its 27,891 feet high rocky summit. On the right is the almost vertical Lhotse-Nuptse Wall. To the left is the south-west shoulder of Everest. In between lies the Valley of Silence.

The good weather held on and our first ferry reached South Col on 16 April. Two days later, another ferry of 16 repeated this performance. As usual, South Col ferries rummaged around the 'highest junkyard in the world'. The luckier ones returned with hundreds of feet of cine film left by the Americans in 1963, as also oxygen regulators, strips of tent fabrics (which they used as scarves), and most surprising of all, Hari Dang's wallet containing a couple of hundred rupees in Nepalese and Indian currency, a leftover of the 1962 Indian Expedition!

We were now poised for the crucial phase. The morning of 20 April dawned bright and clear, and our first summit party consisting of two pairs, Gombu and Cheema, Gyatso and Wangyal, supported by Gurdial and me moved up to the Advance Base. A team of 14 strong and selected Sherpas accompanied us. It was the first time in the history of Everest that a summit attempt was being launched so early in the season. If all went well, the summiters might reach the top on 27 April. The weather seemed fine and the Lhotse Face, usually wind-swept, with frenzied gusts of driving snow, looked serene and peaceful. There was no plume on Everest and our hopes were high.

On the morning of 27 April, we moved up from Advance Base Camp (21,297 feet) to Camp IV (24,997 feet), and on the following day we went up to South Col (26,200 feet). As is usual with South Col, the winds were blowing furiously.

For Cheema and Wangyal, this was their first visit to this famous place. They spent almost two hours pitching tents in the strong gale. The old empty oxygen bottles came in handy for anchoring the guy ropes of the tents. The cold gusts of wind hit us in our faces and swayed us from side to side, rocking us and sending a chill down our spines. We soon crawled inside our tent with a sigh of relief. Guru, Dawa Norbu and myself were in one tent and the 'four summiters' in the other. The wind raged for the whole night and we hoped that the following day would be quiet.

The wild flapping of tents went on ruthlessly and unabated till the next morning. There seemed no chance of our moving up that day. We waited for another day, spending most of our time lying inside the tents and imbibing lots of fluids. There were a few minutes of respite from winds and we were out rummaging through the 'highest junkyard in the world'. We found some cheese and ovaltine tins at the 1963 American camp-site. The cheese had turned sour but the ovaltine came in handy.

The second night was also spent under the fury of strong winds. This continued till the morning. Any remaining desire and determination on our part to spend one more day at South Col was finally squashed by the 9.15 a.m. weather forecast announcing bad weather for the next three days. We considered it prudent to withdraw and were soon climbing down the slopes of Lhotse.

The winds continued to howl and roar for several days. The days of forced rest and long wait at last came to an end. The turmoil of winds, which blew in relentless fury and with no respite for almost three weeks, stopped on the morning of 14 May. Indications of fair weather were given in the weather forecast by All India Radio. The time had now come for us to move again.

Establishing the last camp was the crux of our Everest climb.

The higher it could be set up on the summit ridge, the nearer one would be to success. I had long appreciated this fact after our 1960 and 1962 expeditions. I had taken particular pains to impress upon Phu Dorje, our assistant Sirdar, and other last camp Sherpas, the significance of this plan. We had shown them the photographs of the hump at about 28,000 feet. That was intended to be our site for the last camp. We had all scanned the ridge through binoculars from Camp IV and South Col for the exact position of this hump and had made it amply clear to all. They all agreed to do their best.

Sixteenth May was chosen for our upward move. I announced the summit parties the day before. Instantly, the camp that had been restive for the last two weeks sprang into activity. Gombu and Cheema, as the first summit pair, started packing their gear. Sonam Gyatso and Sonam Wangyal, the second summit pair, held important discussions with 'Brigadier' Thondup, our cook, about menus suitable for their highest climb. C.P. Vohra and Ang Kami were to be the third summit pair. Rawat and Bahuguna the fourth and B.P. Singh and Ahluwalia the fifth.

There was no oxygen left for more parties and even the chances of a fourth and fifth pair would depend on how smoothly the first three parties succeeded in their mission.

The morning of the 16th dawned clear. The icefall glittered in the bright sunshine. I performed the *ardas* before the departure of each summit team. One last look behind and Cheema and Gombu were off and up the icefall.

The next day, the two Sonams moved up. Warm send-offs after the *ardas* were going to be a regular ritual. Prayer flags were fluttering everywhere. Sonam Gyatso's prayer wheel was majestically turning round on the red medical tent, telling us that all would be very well!

Owing to shortage of oxygen and because of the successful wireless contact of Advance Base Camp with various camps, including South Col, I dropped the original intention of going to South Col as a 'support' and instead, thought it better to stay at Advance Base Camp.

Gombu and Cheema moved up from Advance Base Camp to Camp IV, from there to South Col, reaching there on the 18th along with their supporting Sherpas led by Phu Dorje. The South Col was inhospitable as usual, but the winds were less furious than in April.

The flattened tents came to life again. Everything seemed to be in order except the 16 mm movie camera which had found the cold a little too much. Oxygen pressures were checked, food was made ready for the morrow and the summit party snuggled into sleeping bags for the night, with oxygen on. The Sherpas too used oxygen.

Cheema lay awake for some time, thinking of the unknown before him. Gombu was now an old hand at the game. He had already been to the summit and knew every inch of the way. He went over in his mind the entire anatomy of the summit ridge.

The next morning was calm, clear and bright. Taking advantage of the weather, they left early in the morning. There was loose powdery snow in the couloir above South Col, and the summit party sank knee-deep in the snow. By and large, the going was good. The South Summit was visible. So was the hump below it. Nearer and nearer it came, till finally it loomed directly ahead. They continued ascending higher and higher and then they were on top of the hump. A little below it, taking shelter from the winds, ten men went into action to pitch a tent. After 90 minutes of huffing and puffing, a red two-man drawtite tent was erected. So, here it was: a tent at no less a height than 27,930 feet, the highest ever camp on the Everest. We received the news at Advance Base Camp with great relief and joy.

Twentieth May, D-day, crept silently upon the two sleeping climbers at the last camp. They had slept well with oxygen but not before both of them had prayed. Gombu wondered whether he would do it again. With Cheema, everything was well. He looked forward to the morning.

Cheema got up at 3 a.m. and said 'good morning' to Gombu. Indeed, a good morning it was to be. After some hot coffee, and having put on all the necessary paraphernalia, including the

crampons, the pair left at 5 a.m. They had already spoken to me at Advance Base Camp on the wireless before starting.

Excitement surged through the whole expedition team, both at Advance Base Camp and Base Camp. None of us had really slept well. We were eagerly waiting with our binoculars firmly focussed on the summit ridge.

The day was partially cloudy and a strong wind was blowing. There was soft snow on the ridge and both Gombu and Cheema went along, stamping their steps. At 7.30 a.m., they were directly below the South Summit. After a sip of coffee, they dumped their partially-used oxygen bottles for moving up again. At 8.10 a.m. they were at the South Summit, where they were seen from various observation posts on the Pumori Ridge. The other observation posts were at Camp IV and at Advance Base Camp.

The summiters moving rapidly and without difficulty, reached the well-known Hillary Chimney and were seen above it. A few steps cut and there lay before them the final summit ridge.

Hearts thumping, not so much with exhaustion, they climbed up foot by foot on the last lap to success till they sighted the American flagpole pitched by James Whittaker and Nawang Gombu on 1 May 1963.

Ten feet below the top, they stopped and undid their rucksacks. They took out the cameras and the various flags they had carried and then climbed together. The Indian Tricolour was on top of the world at 9.30 a.m. on that May day.

Both Cheema and Gombu had a tremendous sense of relief on having done a job well. Otherwise, there were no particular emotions. It was so difficult to think or feel anything at that altitude when the oxygen mask was off, they said later.

They stayed on the top for about 30 minutes. The view to the south and east was obscured by a cloud. But to the north, Rongbuk glacier and Tibet were distinctly visible. Cheema planted some silver coins given to him by his mother. Gombu left a scarf given by his wife and a statue of Lord Buddha sent by Tenzing Norgay.

The descent started at 10.05 a.m. after a hearty handshake. A few rocks in their pockets from the summit formed their only souvenirs and, of course, the glorious memories of the ascent. The South Summit came at 10.45 a.m. The wind had now gathered momentum. Snow was being flung in their faces. Goggles had to be removed often to clear them of snow. At times it became so bad that Cheema had to crawl on all fours. Eyebrows and beards became snow-coated. Still they continued their march down.

Below the South Summit, the dumped oxygen bottles came back into the rucksacks. The empty ones were discarded. Down they went in the fierce wind. It was 12.45 p.m. when they entered Camp VI. The visibility was so poor that they could not even see each other. The first thing they did was to warm themselves up and drink a lot of fluids. Next, they opened up the wireless set and flashed the good news to me.

It was 1 p.m. The news was also passed on to us from Camp IV where Guru was based. All of us were thrilled. Everyone danced on air-mattresses, embraced one another and jumped with joy. A message was flashed to Kathmandu and thence to New Delhi.

Sonam Gyatso and Sonam Wangyal had, in the meanwhile, moved to South Col from Camp IV. Their ascent was uneventful. They could see Gombu and Cheema descending from Camp VI which they had left at 2 p.m.

Gombu and Cheema faced a terrifying blizzard as they came out of the tent. They decided to press on however, and inched their way up the couloir where they were welcomed by both the Sonams. Cheema's oxygen mask was damaged by the wind. Sonam Gyatso's fur cap had been blown off his head.

All of them came slowly back to the tents at South Col and the exhausted summit pair crept into the sleeping bags at 3.30 p.m. All had not gone so well as it might appear. They had their share of troubles. Cheema was snow-blinded, the price he was paying for having had to remove his goggles. Gombu had developed a sore throat. They had some food and juices and dropped off to sleep.

The weather turned bad that night. It snowed heavily over the

Everest region. In fact, it snowed so heavily that the big, blue mess tent in Base Camp collapsed under the weight of snow, pinning Kumar and Lala under the debris. They had to cut their way out of the fabric.

Next morning, in spite of the soft snow, Gombu and Cheema decided to come down to Camp IV. The route had been obliterated and they lost their way just short of the camp. After a search of about 15 to 20 minutes and shouting for someone to come out of the tents at Camp IV, they finally noticed moving figures on Lhotse and then made their way to Camp IV. They were warmly received by Vohra and Ang Kami, our third summit pair who had moved up from Advance Base Camp.

Higher up, the drama of the two Sonams was being enacted. They had started early, at 8.25 a.m. Gyatso had a select band of three Sherpas with him. This was his third time on that ridge.

The weather had been fine during the night, but had rapidly deteriorated. It had become very windy and snowfall had started, notwithstanding the prayers of Sonam, who was a very pious man.

Having passed the American site at 12.30 p.m., they went on, only to realise to their dismay that they had lost their route. Prodding in the knee-deep snow and wiping the snowflakes from their eyes, they finally heard Da Norbu shouting: "Here it is". They had found the camp.

Ang Dawa had suffered frostbite in three of his fingertips. Gunden was snow-blinded. Da Norbu was terribly exhausted. Sonam himself had suffered what looked like an ultraviolet burn, later to be diagnosed as frostbite, on the left side of his back. Of the two air mattresses in Camp VI, one was punctured and rendered useless. Wangyal slept on it. Sonam tossed in his sleeping bag, due to pain. Both did not sleep well that night.

The Base Camp was now decorated. Banners made on the spot from marking flags were fluttering colourfully on all tents. A big procession went up to the Crampon Point to receive the heroes. Cheema's famous *Bhangra* (Punjabi dance) followed, with active participation of Kumar and others, to the chant of *taka naka taka dhin*. Thus ended the saga of the first summit pair, physically,

that is. But it would remain in mountaineering history, always as '*Gombu's double*'.

The Sonams, the second summit team, left Camp VI at 6.45 a.m. on 22 May. The weather had improved considerably but they were going slow because of Sonam Gyatso's pain. The South Summit was reached at 10.20 a.m. They plodded on and finally stood on the top at 12.30 p.m. It had taken them six hours from the last camp. This pair, in contrast to the first one, had been clearly seen stepping on the summit by Kumar from the Pumori Ridge. We thus knew of their success almost as soon as they reached the top. The Sonams performed the summit ritual. They hoisted flags. Sonam Gyatso placed a scarf, a statue each of Lord Krishna and Lord Buddha and some sweets on the top. Wangyal left a ring and a prayer flag. They had a clear view all around.

At 1.15 p.m. they left the summit. By the time they reached the chimney, their oxygen had run out. From the South Summit downwards they went without oxygen. Progress was naturally very poor, what with no oxygen and Sonam Gyatso's pain. They retrieved a bottle of oxygen at the South Summit and continued slowly on their way back. At last, at 6 p.m. they finally staggered into Camp VI, ready to drop, through sheer fatigue and exhaustion.

Vohra and Ang Kami could not move up to South Col from Camp IV, due to fresh snow that day. The Sonams had not been seen or heard of, till as late as 3 p.m. We were naturally getting anxious. Vohra and Ang Kami got on to the wireless and tried to contact Camp VI. They failed. They scanned the summit ridge. They could not see the second pair. We were all praying for their safety. Finally, at about 6 p.m. came the voice of Wangyal on the walkie-talkie. He confirmed the second party's success. He also assured us that both of them were just fine. Thank God!

Things moved like clockwork after that. Vohra had a slight sore throat. Otherwise both members of the third party were fit. Fried chicken, rice and juices formed the summiters' dinner. For them, the night passed blissfully. The weather gods, who had been rough with the Sonams, smiled on them and they started on their climb

at 6 a.m. on a bright morning. Vohra mentioned in his diary: "While I was climbing the rocks, my oxygen ran out. I had to climb about five metres without oxygen. It was a revelation."

The two were on their upward move. To their joy and relief they saw both the Sonams coming down the ridge. Looking exhausted, the Sonams explained the final climb to Vohra and Kami, and went down to South Col.

The third summit party reached Camp VI at 10 a.m. It was early in the day. The South Summit looked near and it was tempting to start for the top right away. The view was breathtaking. The Sherpas dumped half-full oxygen bottles at Camp VI and went down to South Col without oxygen.

Twenty-fourth May was to be a glorious day. Both Vohra and Ang Kami got up at 1.30 a.m. Both, however, decided it was too early yet and promptly dropped off to sleep. At 4 a.m. they were up again, heating juices and packing rucksacks. They left at 5 a.m. They had a fine day. The wind had died down and they continued their journey up, sometimes wading in soft snow, sometimes trudging on rock. At 9 a.m., they were on top of the South Summit.

They passed the Rock Chimney and stood on the summit at 10.45 a.m. Vohra had carried a movie camera and he set about taking shots, while Ang Kami tied flags to the pole. Their return to the last camp was uneventful except that, at the Rock Chimney, Vohra slipped and lost his ice axe. This slowed down progress. In addition, Vohra's oxygen supply ran out and he had to descend without oxygen for some time. His feet began to get cold. Ang Kami complained of the same trouble. They reached Camp VI at 4.15 p.m. The sun had passed over the ridge and both decided to stay there. They had been sighted by Kumar through binoculars. Now they got on to the walkie-talkie and confirmed the news. Meanwhile, both Sonams had reached Base Camp that day.

Rawat and Bahuguna, B.P. Singh and Ahluwalia, forming the fourth and fifth summit parties respectively, moved up. In view of the short climbing period which was almost coming to a close,

it was decided that both these pairs should push up together and attempt the peak on the 24th. But on the following day winds, once again, reigned supreme. Dried snow swept over the mountain, making visibility poor.

The third summit party, then at Camp IV, could not move up to South Col and accordingly the fourth party had to stay put at Advance Base Camp. A special weather forecast that evening indicated adverse weather conditions on Everest from the afternoon of the 24th to the afternoon of the 27th. That necessitated further postponement. It was thus decided to send the party up on the 26th for an attempt on the 29th.

A summit party of four needed at least 25 bottles of oxygen and we had just about that number left. If only the first three parties returned without any accident and if no party spent an extra night at South Col or the last camp, the oxygen would be just about enough. An all-out effort was, therefore, made to secure each available bottle for this party. Out of the remnants of various expeditions around Base Camp, one full oxygen bottle was retrieved. Of the four oxygen bottles kept at Advance Base Camp for medical purposes, two were released to the fourth party. It was also planned to pick up some half-filled bottles lying at the American Base Camp.

On the morning of 25 May, a huge ice avalanche from the Lhotse Face swept over the unoccupied Camp III, burying the tents and equipment eight to ten feet deep and twelve precious oxygen bottles. That also buried the chances of the last summit pair. Ahluwalia, B.P. Singh and Bahuguna, with their support Sherpas, spent the whole day probing the avalanche. Fortunately, towards late afternoon, they succeeded in digging out the twelve oxygen bottles. There was jubilation all around. The third summit pair that day returned to South Col and reported the latest position regarding oxygen bottles at the Col. We now had about 30 bottles, sufficient for not only four but five persons to attempt the peak.

I decided to include Phu Dorje in the summit team. In view of the excellent work done by the Sherpas, I thought it fit to

include one of the them in the summit party. Phu Dorje, who had led the support party carrying loads to the highest camp on Everest, deserved this honour more than anyone else. Phu Dorje was at that time at Base Camp. He was asked to make South Col in two days and join the summit party on the 27th. Phu Dorje declined the offer. However, Guru succeeded in persuading him to agree.

On the morning of 26 May, the fourth summit party, with their Sherpas, left for Camp IV. They were in high spirits and made Camp III in good time. A short distance up the Lhotse Face, B.P. Singh suddenly developed some heart strain and, finding it difficult to continue, returned to Advance Base Camp. The others carried on to Camp IV and the next day to South Col. Phu Dorje had in the meanwhile come up to Advance Base Camp and made to South Col on the following day.

True to the weather forecast, the morning of 28 May dawned bright and clear. Ahluwalia and Phu Dorje on one rope, Rawat and Bahuguna on the other, accompanied by seven Sherpas, moved up to the last camp. They carried an extra Indian Ordnance Factories' light-weight tent and two sets of sleeping bags and air-mattresses. Ahluwalia was doing some cine photography en route. They moved fast and were soon at the South-East Ridge, the 1962 Indian camp, then the site of the American camp. They had a short rest, some coffee and Phu Dorje bagged an extra bottle of oxygen from the American camp. Soon they were at the last camp.

With the help of Sherpas, they levelled a platform for another tent. Walkie-talkie contact was established in the afternoon. They were informed that the weather was likely to deteriorate in the afternoon of 29 May and they were advised to leave early next morning.

Next morning was clear throughout and calm. They were all up around 3 a.m. melting snow and preparing liquid food. At 5.30 a.m. they were on their way. Unfortunately, Bahuguna had developed an itch all over his body and had to spend a miserable night. He now discovered that he was unable to go as fast as Rawat. Feeling that Rawat's chances might also go down, he detached

himself from the rope and asked him to carry on. Bahuguna descended to South Col and the same day to Camp IV, where Dr. Chakravarty was staying in support.

Rawat continued alone for a while but later he roped up with Phu Dorje and Ahluwalia. They dropped one bottle each just below the South Summit, and at 8.45 a.m. they were on the South Summit. While going down the 299 feet descent from the South Summit, they had a glimpse of the summit hump and the Indian flag fluttering. They felt excited and rushed on to the Chimney and soon were above it. Footsteps of previous parties were still there. When they were just a few feet below the summit, they walked arm-in-arm and reached the summit together. It was 10.15 a.m. The Indian flag was fluttering and they saw various other mementoes left by previous summit parties.

Ahluwalia took some pictures. To their great disappointment, the 'huge' cine camera, carried by the trio all the way to the summit, refused to function. Ahluwalia placed his wrist-watch and a photograph of Guru Nanak on the summit. Rawat placed an image of Goddess Durga, and Phu Dorje placed a silver locket containing the Dalai Lama's photograph.

On 31 May, all of us were at last down at Base Camp. There were celebrations throughout the night and on the following day, we felt contented and thankful to Providence for the wonderful luck we had.

On 1 June, we started our return march full of excitement. Many of us were out of our sleeping bags quite early, making the most of the last morning at Base Camp.

At Thyangboche we were received by the incarnate lama with great affection. The President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, S.S. Khera, along with V.N. Chakrapani of All India Radio and a cameraman of the Films Division had arrived there to meet us. We were greatly moved by his gesture.

We selected eight Sherpas to accompany us to Delhi. Those who were to make the trip to Delhi were our Sherpa Sirdar, Ang Tshering, Assistant Sherpa Sirdar, Phu Dorje, the pig-tailed Nawang Hilla with a girlish face, Ang Tshering II, Tashi, Dawa

Norbu I, Ang Dawa IV and Ang Nima. All of them had carried loads to the last camp, and Phu Dorje had carried himself to the peak.

On 19 June, when we had reached Banepa, we were given a fond reception by the officers of the Indian Embassy and the Indian citizens of Kathmandu. My wife, Pushpa, along with Suloo Telang, and Sita Gombu, Mrs. Gyatso and Sonam Gyatso's father had arrived there to meet us. After a warm reception by the citizens of Banepa when welcome addresses were presented by many local organisations, we were taken to Kathmandu in a triumphant procession, and were received by our Ambassador, Shriman Narayan.

On reaching Kathmandu, we came to know that while Khara had come to meet us, Sarin had done another exciting thing. After a lot of efforts with the Nepalese and Chinese governments, he had gone on a special flight using Air Force aircraft AN-12. On 9 June, Sarin and Situ Malik flew over Everest. Spending over 45 minutes taking aerial photographs from all angles, during one of the runs they noticed two huge lakes on the south-eastern side near the base, their blue water presenting a strange contrast to the higher, white, snow-covered slopes of the massif. After eight fly pasts over the summit, it was decided to add just one more to match the figure '9', the number of climbers who had reached the summit.

Our stay in the Nepalese capital was full of parties, including a reception by the Indian ambassador where we had the honour of meeting His Majesty the King of Nepal. Phu Dorje proudly presented to the King, the Nepalese Flag, which he had hoisted on the summit of the Everest. The Indo-Nepal Friendship Association held a big reception at which a gold and silver replica of the Pashupati Nath temple was presented to us and souvenirs were given to every member of the team.

During a dinner at the house of M. Ramunny, Chief of the Indian Aid Mission in Nepal, our ambassador received an important message from New Delhi which was read out to all of us immediately. Some of the highest awards of our country were

announced by the Government of India. Padma Bhushan was to be given to Sonam, Gombu and me. Both Sonam and Gombu had received Padma Shri before. Other members of the team, who had reached the summit, and Kumar were to get Padma Shri. I wished the remaining members of the team could also be included in this list, but perhaps it was already a very large number. I was sad and hurt that other expedition members were left out. I kept quiet then but made up my mind to take it up in Delhi.

There was a large crowd of officials, friends, relations and others at the Palam airport to receive us on our return home. Gulzari Lal Nanda, the then acting Prime Minister (Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri was abroad); Y.B. Chavan, Defence Minister; A.M. Thomas, Minister for Defence Production; Bhakt Darshan, Deputy Education Minister and H.C. Sarin, on behalf of the IMF, honoured us with their presence at the airport.

The reception at the airport over, the motorcade made straight for the Shanti Vana to pay floral tributes to Jawaharlal Nehru who loved the mountains passionately. The next visit was to the Prithviraj Road Cemetery where the members stood in silence by the side of the grave of John Dias placing wreaths and some garlands from their necks on the tombstone of the great mountaineer who had led the Second Indian Expedition and who shared the honour and the credit which our successful expedition had received.

In one of the evening receptions in New Delhi, Dr. Ram Subhag Singh, Indian Minister of State for Railways, was the Chief Guest. He announced something for the Everest team during his speech. After a lot of reluctance I told him that perhaps the Railways could offer complementary passages for the entire team to tour various parts of India from where we had received invitations from the chief ministers. He agreed. This announcement was published in the newspapers the following morning.

That morning, I remember, I suddenly received a phone call from the Cabinet Minister of Railways, S.K. Patil, inviting the expedition members and their wives to have a cup of tea with him in his office. During this reception he remarked to my wife

Pushpa: "I hope the ladies are happy about their husbands going on a one-month special tour of India." My wife promptly replied, "How do you expect us to be happy when we have already endured separation from our husbands for four long months?"

Patil got the hint and in his speech announced that the three special trains carrying members of the Everest team would also include the ladies.

Three days after our stay in Delhi, Sarin wanted me to come to his office. He wanted to give me some happy news. He informed me that, for the first time in the history of India, 11 members of the Everest team, comprising the leader, the deputy leader and nine summiters, would be given the Arjuna Award, the highest honour conferred on sportsmen. Instead of being happy I was shocked. I opened my heart to Sarin. I told him that after 11 awards of Padma Bhushan and Padma Shri were announced in Kathmandu, I had almost decided not to accept them. Khera had firmly told me that this would mean disrespect to the President of India since the announcement had already been made. The awards should not be turned down. On the other hand, I felt very strongly that our exceptional success on Everest was due to the hard work of each one of the members and, therefore, everyone should have been awarded. Now that the Arjuna Awards had been announced, I insisted that I would not accept the award unless every team member could be included.

Sarin felt it would not be possible to give 20 awards in one particular sport. S.N. Ghosh was then the Education Secretary and we both rushed to his office. In the meanwhile, the press release concerning the Arjuna Awards was withheld for the time being. Our meeting went on for several hours. At the end, a happy compromise formula was worked out to which we all agreed. Instead of 11 awards, there would be only *one award and that would be for the entire Everest team*. The award would be presented by the Prime Minister, and each and every member of the team would be considered an 'Arjuna awardee'. In the history of the Arjuna Award this was the only exception when the entire team had been honoured.

Much later, after several moments of pride and triumph, my wife Pushpa was to tell me the story of the 'lizard' which had given her the shivers while I was away making preparations for the 1965 Indian Everest Expedition. She said she was alone at home when a creepy, little, moth-eater lizard fell from the roof on her shoulder, spreading a frightening sensation all over her body, before slipping down and slinking away. A little later, another lizard fell on her head. She was scared and depressed, she thought it was an ill omen. She went pale and was extremely worried about my safety. She had read in a magazine that if a lizard falls on one's shoulder, it may portend the death of a close relative. If it falls on the head, there will be a certain death.

Summoning courage, she narrated the story to my father. He was the wise one about these things and all matters religious and spiritual. He smiled and reassured her. He told her that she had not really understood the true import of the omen. It was in fact a very good omen. The real interpretation of the 'lizard' omen was that, "My son and your husband, Mohan, will be victorious and will come home in crowning glory". Pushpa recovered from the shock but not fully. The next day my father brought her a book where what he said was written in black and white. This made her feel normal. How right he proved to be. The 'lizard' story now was a much retold family legend.

At the end of the expedition I felt overwhelmingly grateful to God. It was He who made it all possible. I was only an instrument of destiny. India's magnificent Everest success placed her on the world map of mountaineering. She emerged as the fourth nation in the world to climb the Everest. I received tons of mail from all over the world. One letter—I do not know how it reached me—had an interesting address on the cover: Commander Kohli, Mount Everest, India.

K.C. Pant, Secretary General of the Congress Party in Parliament, invited me to address Parliament Members of both houses in the Central Hall on 8 September. Leaders of all political parties, who normally fight each other, were united in their praise for my colleagues and the Chief Ministers of almost all states invited

the entire team to visit their states and attend receptions. Taking advantage of the free passes issued by the Ministry of Railways we accepted their invitations and proceeded on *Bharat Darshan*. Along with our wives, including a number of new brides, it was one of the most enjoyable tours. At Kolkata, where, like Australians, the Bengalis are most sports-loving people, there was over a two-kilometre long queue of admirers garlanding me and presenting gifts. The pile of garlands, I recall with humility and pride, exceeded my height.

Mountaineering in India received a big boost. The number of Indian expeditions to the Himalayas, usually about two or three, rose to fifteen per year. I bowed my head with gratitude to God for including it in my Himalayan destiny.

Our 1965 Everest team was a unique family. All of us got along very well with one another. I cannot recall even one incident of friction amongst us. Each and every member of the team deserved to be given credit for maintaining such extraordinary cordiality throughout the two months of our expedition.

In May 2005, Mr. Sunil Dutt, the then Minister of Youth Affairs and Sports, Govt. of India had said,

“In 1963, Late Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru had held a reception in honour of the returning American Everest Expedition team. The same day my wife Nargis and I had returned after entertaining the troops in Ladakh and were invited to the Teen Murti, the Prime Minister’s residence. The Americans had become the third nation in the world to climb Everest. During the reception I met Captain Kohli and was sorry to learn that our Indian teams had missed the summit by sheer 200 metres in 1960 and only by 100 metres in 1962 when Captain Kohli, Sonam Gyatso and Hari Dang survived three nights at 27,650 feet. But I was sure that India will soon become the fourth nation in the world to climb Everest. So in 1965, when I heard the thrilling news of India’s spectacular success on Everest, I was overjoyed.

In the annals of Indian Mountaineering, our 1965 success will remain the most significant feat. The team was given unprece-

dented honour by the nation. For the first time the entire team was given the Arjuna Award, the highest sports honour in India. The leader and two other members, who were already recipients of Padma Shree, were given Padma Bhushan; the Deputy Leader and seven other summiters were given Padma Shree. Awards were announced even before the team reached Delhi. The Prime Minister honoured the team by heading the reception at Palam Airport on their return from Kathmandu. The leader was invited to address Members of both the Houses of the Indian Parliament. Almost all Chief Ministers invited the team to their states for state receptions; civic receptions were held in many cities; people all over India danced with joy."



NINE TIMES AROUND THE PEAK

1965

Neel Batra

June 9, 1965 was a sultry hot morning. The giant aircraft lurched forward on the runway at Palam as Basu released the brakes and the heavy transport plane slowly started gathering momentum before taking-off. The acceleration tended to throw us back or sideways in the bucket seats, depending upon which way we were seated. The rumble of the wheels suddenly ceased as the aircraft cleanly got airborne and the runway began rapidly to fall away below us. With a short metallic clang felt in the passenger compartment, the wheels smartly got themselves tucked in, and we were on our way towards the highest point on earth—the point which had been the object of only two earlier properly organized flights.

The Houston Mount Everest Expedition of 1933 was the more hazardous. The difficulties they had to surmount were numerous. More than that, the equipment used by them was not fully proved, for the flight was the first of its kind and, therefore, a

pioneering venture in the true sense of the word.

This expedition was the result of the dream of a Major in the Regular Reserve of the British Army, L.V. Steward Blacker. His plan, which was approved by the Royal Geographical Society, resulted in what was a very important mission, the British Air Ministry agreeing to give facilities for the expedition. This approval placed all the technical know-how at the disposal of this venture, together with facilities for testing the equipment and training in its use. The financial backing was provided by Lady Houston, after whom the expedition was named.

It took almost 13 months between the time the expedition was conceived and the date when the first flight took place.

This flight was remarkable, when one considers that it was undertaken in an aircraft which had originally been designed as a single-engined bomber with an open cockpit for the pilot, and another uncovered cockpit for the observer. It was a biplane, its aerodynamic shape encumbered with struts and wires. This Westland PV 3 was powered by a Bristol Pegasus radial super-charged engine, which had just been developed and had not even been fully tested. But being the only engine at that time in the United Kingdom, powerful enough to take up the lumbering PV 3 to a height of 33,000 feet or above, the choice was limited to this engine.

More than the aircraft, the problem of choosing the cameras and the methods of keeping them working in the extreme cold had to be devised. One of the primary tasks, on the basis of which the expedition had obtained the blessings of the Royal Geographical Society, was a survey of a limited area around Mount Everest, by taking vertical pictures along the route followed by the aircraft from Purnea.

On April 3, 1933, the two aircrafts of the expedition took off from Lalbalu. Piloting the Westland Houston was the Marquess of Clydesdale with Blacker in the rear cockpit and flying the Westland Wallace was Flt. Lt. McIntyre with S.R. Bonnet as his observer. Both aircrafts climbing through the haze-ridden atmosphere over the plains, crossed the Indo-Nepalese border at 13,000

feet, and only when the aircraft reached 19,000 feet were they able to see Everest above the haze. They made Chamlang at 31,000 feet still climbing. Near Lhotse, however, Clydesdale's aircraft stuck a down draft, which made it lose height of almost 1,500 feet, with the result that he crossed over the summit of Everest, at 10:05 hours with only 100 feet to spare.

Blacker, who was in the rear cockpit, was having an extremely busy time, working the vertical camera, a cine-camera and then taking oblique photographs of the peak by leaning out of the cockpit and shooting in all directions. These were the first ever pictures taken of Everest from the air.

This historic flight, which not only tested aerial equipment and aircraft under strenuous flying conditions, but also covered uncharted territory, ended at 11:25 hours when both the machines landed back at Lalbalu. It was a great day for British aviation.

A second flight by the expedition was made over Everest 15 days later when, on April 19, the two aircrafts flew over the Everest region again.

Twenty years were to pass before another 'authorized' and planned flight to Mt. Everest was undertaken. This was on June 6, 1953—the first such flight by the Indian Air Force.

Aviation had progressed tremendously in the intervening period. The selection of aircraft did not pose many problems. Accommodation was no problem either, because the aircraft chosen was the freighter version of the Liberator. The four engines of this machine had been thoroughly tested during the war. Its huge fuselage, originally designed to carry many tons of bombs, provided enough elbow room for the cameramen. Flight Lieutenant Paul, captain of the aircraft, and other members of the crew were thoroughly familiar with the aircraft and proficient in their task. The camera-crew included Sqn. Ldr. (now Group Captain) Situ Mullick, Flt. Lt. N.D. Jayal (now a civil servant) and Flt. Lts. Banerjee and Kothari.

The author of this project was Air Vice-Marshal A.M. Engineer, D.F.C., then Deputy Chief of the Air Staff and, later, Air Marshal and India's Air Chief.

The aerial pictures and footage, which the camera crew were able to take, were to earn a big name for the Indian Air Force the world over.

The immediate impetus for this flight was provided by the historic ascent of Everest by a British team led by Sir John Hunt.

Electrically-heated suits had to be worn to guard against the extreme cold of high altitude; the cameras had to be kept in electrically-heated covers to ensure their smooth working and to prevent the films from snapping due to extreme cold. Oxygen apparatus had considerably improved over the two decades enabling the cameramen to move around with portable cylinders, but still the face was encumbered with the oxygen mask, and the hands ensconced in heavy gloves.

“While our cameras greedily ate as many films as our semi-paralysed hands could feed them with”, Situ Mullick commented, “our imagination took wings. There, in its naked majesty, half platinum, half bronze, stood the multi-faced pyramid of Everest. Its mighty shoulders towered above countless other heaps of silver, set on a massive bowl of copper under the delicate azure veil of the sky.”

This flight, as also the second one next day, provided some of the most classic pictures of the Everest massif and of her well-known landmarks and routes to the peak ever taken. These photographs today adorn innumerable books on mountaineering, and specially those written about Mt. Everest.

The news of the Indian ascent of Everest during the latter half of May 1965 had electrified the country as it was one of the best things that had happened in the fields of human endeavour to us for a long time.

Twelve years had passed since the last photographic flight to Mt. Everest. It was time to make another flight to the peak.

Unlike the flights of 1933 and 1953, we were not allowed to fly too near or around Everest. The Nepalese Government had kindly consented to an Indian Air Force aircraft flying over their territory in the vicinity of Everest, but had made it a definite condition that we would remain some distance to the south of

the peak and make passes at the peak only in an east-west or west-east direction.

The aircraft made available by the Indian Air Force for this venture was the AN-12, a four-engined turbo-prop with a pressurized and air conditioned passenger cabin and cockpit.

Instead of the passengers and crew kitted as if for an Arctic expedition, we all were comfortably attired in our summer clothes. Instead of operating from an airfield much nearer the Everest region, this time it was possible to fly direct to the mountain from Delhi, spend a considerable time there and reach back Delhi, all in a matter of a few hours.

Purely from the photography point of view, there was a slight disadvantage. In the Liberator, a few hatches could be opened in flight so that the camera could have an unobstructed view of the peak and the massif, whereas in the AN-12, all the shooting was to be done through Perspex; whether through the narrow strips that comprise the nose, or the square and triangular side clean-view panels in the cockpit, or the slanting front screen.

Special care had been taken to clean all these Perspex strips and windows. But, then, in the clear sunlight of that altitude, Perspex gives a lot of reflection which, if one is not careful, can spoil the photograph.

On the other hand, the cabin being pressurized, there was automatic temperature control, which obviated the necessity of keeping the cameras warm by wrapping them in cumbersome covers, or having intricate electrical wiring for this purpose, as had been done 12 years earlier.

Climbing fast after take-off, we headed on a direct course to Everest. The June dust haze that perpetually hangs over the plains of northern India gradually softened the outlines of landscape below. As the aircraft reached for the crystal clear atmosphere of Himalayan heights, till finally we reached 29,000 feet and leveled out, we were looking at fields and hamlets on the ground, as if through a thin gauze of light brown. Once settled at the cruising altitude, there was not much to do for the passengers, who included Upadhya and Lt. Col. Bisht, representing His Majesty's

Government of Nepal; H.C. Sarin, member of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation; Wing Commander (now Group Captain) S. Mullick also a member of IMF, and myself for still photography, and Robi Dhar of the Films Division for cinematography.

While we, the passengers, made ourselves comfortable and gave another 'once over' to our equipment, the crew were busy at their jobs. The captain, Sqn. Ldr. Basu, was busy hand-flying the aircraft, while his co-pilot, Sqn. Ldr. A.J. Maitland, kept a good lookout and helped in adjusting the innumerable controls which go into the flying of modern heavy transport aircraft. Flight Engineer Sqn. Ldr. G.S. Panicker, perched on his swivel sway seat, between the two pilots, tending to his own set of switches and gauges and working out fuel consumption, kept a watch on r.p.m. and oil temperatures and pressures of the four engines as also monitored the pressurizing of the aircraft and temperature control.

Signaler, Warrant Signaler R.D. Samuel, with headphones stuck on his ears, was busy in his well-like corner seat, transmitting position reports and receiving messages from the Air Traffic Control. Navigator, Sqn. Ldr. S.P. Kohli, who had Flying Officer B.G. Fernandez as his under-study, was the busiest of all. This was because the Nepal Government had specified the exact points of entry and exit over Nepal. Accurate navigation would in any case provide us the most direct route to Everest, which would enable us to spend the maximum time in its vicinity.

The loneliest perch was that of the load-master, Sqn. Ldr. V.S. Sinha. Confined all alone in the tail, the only company he had on this five-hour flight must have been that of his thoughts, the scenery outside, and the conversation he could have with the rest of the crew over the intercom. He had retired to his compartment, just before take-off, with a flask of tea, some sandwiches and a book.

All the while, we flew towards Nepal. Bit by bit, the distant, jagged line of the Kumaon and Garhwal Himalayas began to unfold itself, with the Indo-Gangetic plains below.

One could make out the unmistakable tri-headed Trisul that has continued to attract several mountaineers—foreign and Indian.

To its east lay the musically named Mrigthuni and a little further away, the towering, platinum-headed Nanda Devi. Even at this distance, the sphinx-shaped 25,645 feet high queen of the mountains, the highest peak in the Kumaon Himalayas, seemed an almost impossible peak to climb, but on top of which the Indian Tricolour had been planted in 1964. Nearby stood another little goddess, Nanda Kot, and the pleat-skirted Panch Chuli.

We were now beginning to cross over into Nepal. Dhaulagiri and the Annapurna massifs, with their satellites, followed by Manaslu, the Himal Chuli and, a little lower, the Ganesh Himal began to show up. At some distance we spotted the 26,291 feet high summit of Gossainthan. A little further Gauri Shankar and, towering above it, Cho Oyu. This 26,750 feet high peak in the Nepalese Himalayas really has a lasting place in the history of our mountaineering, for it was the first successful major Indian expedition in 1958 to Mount Cho Oyu that ushered in a new era of organized mountaineering in the country, through the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. The newly-found love of our youth for the Himalayas, which led to scores of expeditions to known and unknown peaks and finally to Everest, were truly inspired by the success on Cho Oyu. It is also on this mountain that one of India's greatest mountaineers, Nandu Jayal, lost his life and upon whose slopes he eternally sleeps.

And then suddenly we closed in on the last and the highest of the Himalayan ranges at a tangent. What confronted us was a long solid wall of jagged snow, the peaks rising sharply and etched clearly against the cloudless sapphire-blue sky.

There was a sudden steep break in the continuous chain of peaks and ridges of snow. And just beyond this sharp decline, there rose a massif which seemed to rise higher than the aircraft.

But then, there were two peaks which seemed to rise to the same height. Which one was Everest?

As the aircraft drew near, the difference in height became more apparent and we all recognised Everest which stood clearly above all neighbouring peaks in its majesty. It stood almost five-and-a-half-mile high, lightly snow-flecked, towering proudly over the

lesser giants, its western ridge looking like a monstrous arched spine ending in the small cornice of snow that capped the top.

Sqr. Ldr. Basu had pulled down his anti-glare goggles as he edged the aircraft nearer the massif. Panicker and Maitland could hardly take their eyes away from the peak, while the others crowded round the circular windows on the left in the passenger cabin, or stood on tiptoe in the entrance to the cockpit, trying to get a good view of the mountain.

We had to dislodge the navigator from his seat. Kohli slid his seat back, and we scrambled into the nose. Robi Dhar slid the seat forward again and sat on it. This gave him a solid perch, while I sat on the floor, wedged forward against the Perspex cage of the nose.

The western face of Everest was completely bare of snow, except for what had been caught in the crags, crevices or rock faults. It was, therefore, with a shock or surprise that we beheld its eastern face, as we flew along the southern side of the range.

The transition was as if from night to day, thousands of tons of ice was piled in solid eddies all along the slope to the top, with hardly a rock visible. It seemed as if at the slightest touch or with another snowflake falling, the whole mountain-side of ice and snow would come cascading down.

This first run had been a dry one, in that none of us had taken any pictures. Continuing in the right-handed turn, we seemed to skim over the Makalu peak and then straightened out flying in the reverse direction.

The Everest massif passed on our right this time, an awesome spectacle of rock, snow, ice and glaciers. Mother Earth with her seriated hills, mountains, oceans and rolling plains and deserts seemed far, far below.

The next forty minutes or so were full of hectic activity. Lining up the peak, or other features in the view-finder, making sure that the lens was clear of all obstructions and then clicking the shutter, then a frenzy of changing the film pack, or the roll, and continue shooting.

While squirming in the narrow Perspex-striped confines of the nose to line up the camera lens on Everest, I would suddenly feel a tap on my head, which indicated that I was getting in the way of Robi Dhar's camera. That was the signal for me to lower myself further on the floor and draw away to the side opposite Everest.

It was during the third or the fourth run, that we noticed two huge lakes on the south-eastern side near the base, their blue water presenting a strange contrast to the higher, white, snow-covered slopes of the massif.

All too soon, the runs were over, and we realised that we had run through almost all our stock of films. The floor was covered with pack paper strips, film wrappers and empty boxes.

Basu manoeuvred his giant charge into another right-handed turn, and this time we almost grazed Makalu and straightened just in time into a westerly course. We were startled to find that, but for the towering peaks that stood near and around Everest, everything south of it was covered by a thick-rolling layer of strato-cumulous clouds. This transformation had taken place within only a few minutes.

About ten minutes before we completed our task, we saw a thin wisp of cloud float past the Everest peak, and then another. And then turning to Makalu, we saw a few puffs of cloud suspended over the lower hills to the south. We had now completed eight fly-pasts. It was decided to have just one more to match 9—the number of our men atop Everest. This done we turned home. It was cloudy now to the south. Thus, much as we tried we could not spot our mountaineers when we were approaching and leaving Everest. Then we all had one last wistful look at Chomolungma, Mother Goddess of Earth, but now it was gone, fully covered by clouds, once again mysterious and distant.



THE SHERPAS OF DELHI

1965

Situ Mullick

The news of the first ascent of Everest on May 20 loosened the country's taut nerves that had been under some tension during the pre-ascent weeks of uncertainty. It had the same effect, perhaps, as the first stiff 'tot' would have. The second success, two days later, had a deeper effect bolstering, as it did, the national prestige and pride that had remained to be regained since the unsavoury winter of 1962. With the third successful ascent on May 24, the national spirits soared sky-high as would of any individual with stimulants in that quick and generous measure. But with the fourth ascent, five days later, the performance seemed to engender the effects of having had one too many. Everest climbing no longer looked the outcome of a super human endeavour and endurance. Someone even suggested that a rope ladder had been set up from South Col to the Summit!

'The attendance at the Press Conference in the evening was not to its usual packed capacity', I wrote in my diary on May 29. 'Nor did Harish Sarin have any press queries to answer today, or have an occasion to display his usual skill in winning over the

most skeptical of pressmen by his frankness and under-statements. And the pressmen, too, were noticeably restrained today, though they cheered as the spokesman made the announcement with touching humility about the success of the fourth summit party'.

Room No. 136 in South Block has a relevant place in this narration. It was in this office of Mr. H.C. Sarin, now President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, that an unbroken communication link with the Expedition was maintained. This room was literally to become the solitary nerve-centre in New Delhi, which remained in constant touch with the Expedition in all its different phases and fortunes.

The south-western corner of this large and high-walled room became virtually a miniature operations-control cell. Charts and maps and graphs surrounded a triangular pennant of the Expedition on one of the walls. And they were more than mere decorations. The day-to-day progress that came over the wireless and the teleprinter lines, bringing the Everest region within one or two-hour distance from Delhi, would be immediately translated on to the graphs. The latest weather reports and what the outlook would be like during the next 24 hours, or even over the whole of next week in and around the Everest region, were readily available from day to day; at times, even hour to hour.

In the midst of many labeled piles of papers and dictations, and during the brief gaps when there would be no visitors and no conferences, Mr. Sarin would somehow manage to find time to attend, with the utmost priority, to the messages from and about the Expedition that would pour in unannounced. In between, the weekly newsletters, meant for the anxious parents and relatives of every member of the Expedition, would be dictated and dispatched. From this busy room the messages would also flash back to the Expedition, after consulting the best available medical advice, giving precise instructions as to how to treat either one of the members, the Sherpas or the porters, stricken with some unfamiliar or major ailment. The atmosphere in this room would, thus, be almost identical to that of a top field comman-

der's busy HQ—with tangible air of urgency without any trace of panic. The finalized plan having once been put into operation would, thereafter, be worthy of only being watched carefully through its ability and skill of the leader and his team in the field. The main job for Delhi would now be to back them with every material support and advice. This was done with the same degree of thoroughness and speed as characterizes the actions of, and would do credit to, the most competent of the general staff supporting the forces engaged in battle.

The very room also became an effective information bureau. Like a news agency, it kept every anxious and interested ear, in and outside India, fully posted with the fortunes of our boys especially as Destiny had twice before, in 1960 and 1962, deserted them, just when the fruit was almost in their hands.

Along with the existence of this Everest newsroom and with hardly any prompting from us, a full-fledged, know-all, Everest Press Corps came into being. This newly-born Press Corps, whom we preferred to call by an apt epithet 'Everestpress', came to handle the mountain news with such dexterity and expertise in its reporting as would be mistaken for the actual recordings of the jargon of professional alpine guides.

Our stray suggestion to the national Press and resident correspondents of the foreign news agencies to nominate one of their representatives specifically for handling the Everest news, met with a whole-hearted response. The Everestpress was, thus, not just national in composition; representatives of practically all-international news agencies were also its enthusiastic members. The Everest news, which they handled, was given its recognized status, for it knew no holidays, no pre-allotted time or place. And there was always enough of 'Everest talk' to keep the Press and the PRO occupied.

The leader, Lt. Cdr. M.S. Kohli's graphic dispatches came in with predetermined regularity. But they also brought in some additional work, for they had to be gone through carefully for verification of factual data, and 'subbed' and fair-typed with the utmost speed and accuracy so as not to attract more than our

due share of the wrath and rebuffs of the news editor of the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* of Calcutta, and of the Editor-in-Chief of the *Hindustan Times* in Delhi. These two national dailies had acquired the sole first publication rights of the leader's dispatches. It was the accompanying set of pictures that always presented problems; for the two or, at the most, three-word captions, which were presumably written by half-frozen fingers in the midst of snow-storms and arctic conditions, left little choice for us but to 'divine' the venue and the action they represented, to pass the editorial muster.

Added to the hind-sight that still lingered from the time of the past two Indian Everest expeditions, were Kohli's descriptive pieces, which made it possible for us to avoid being caught napping when the real news at last broke. Sitting inside the air-conditioned comforts of the South Block, we knew exactly how the hissing, wriggling, agitated Khumbu glacier behaved and how the boys felt against the blizzards that howled and struck with unabated fury for hours; the regal manner in which the Everest held her court in public and private, now wearing plume, now gone behind the cloudy veil, now shimmering again in solitary splendour. We knew all this and a little more through the growing number of volumes on the office-rack, which were borrowed and bought to assist us in preparing backgrounders and meeting the interminable queries of the ever-curious Everestpress.

The standing orders from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation's Barra Sahib were to avoid playing up the initial spurt of successes, however morale-boosting those might appear. And there did pour in the news of many a new 'record'. This 'low-key' handling did payoff rather spectacularly when we mellowed down the very first bid for the Summit, which happened as early as in the first week of May. There was no mistaking the fact that the none-too-promising weather, as forecast by the Met prophets, might offer but slender chances of success. It thus became comparatively simple for us to explain away the decision of the leader in resorting to a 'tactical retreat' of all the prospective summiters to the Base Camp for rest and recuperation. And this difficult but vital decision saved the Expedition from wasting

valuable oxygen; undeniably, it was the most important single factor, which contributed to the subsequent spectacular series of successes.

The hunch that inexplicably makes itself part of mental processes and often converts itself into an obsession, meaningfully kept whispering within me on May 20: 'Today's the day'. As part of the intended background material for the Press, we had kept sufficient copies of the now internationally known aerial pictures of Everest taken by the Indian Air Force in 1953. But the individual portraits of all the climbers from whom alone could be chosen the summiters had been late in coming from the Expedition. In fact, the missing ones arrived only a day or so earlier. Even the office staff, especially my Personal Assistant, Om Dutt, who had suffered the Everest fever like some of us, refused that day to be in any hurry for home, and lingered on with my orderly, Shankar Singh, in the deserted corridors of South Block.

'Who could they be?' I kept on repeating to myself without succeeding in provoking the intuition to answer back. Mr. Sarin, I was sure, knew who they were, being himself a party to the overall plan. On that fateful day, he might well have surpassed the most secretive of bureaucrats having chosen to keep the secret even from his own PRO. Perhaps, the latter sounded too loose-tongued in his over-excitement that day, to be trusted just yet....

'You better keep a watch tonight'; Mr. Sarin rang up late that wistful afternoon of May 20, adding, 'The first attempt should have been made this morning'. I looked out of the office window, and the mustard-coloured, overheated dust of Delhi's summer stood suspended in space under a cloudless sky, and the air seemed hopefully still. The throbbing right eye provided the additional right omen for fair weather and everything else that our boys needed for a successful bid for the summit some 600 miles away!

For the next hour or so the tension made the mouth bitterly dry and the anxiety mounted, for nothing came over the creed from Kathmandu. Under Mr. Sarin's instruction, a query was flashed back to Mr. Khanna, First Secretary (Information) at the

Indian Embassy, our most effective contact. Hardly had it been transmitted when Mr. Khanna came over the line to ask: 'Anxiously awaiting reply to my earlier message....' What earlier message? We didn't know anything about it. He was requested to repeat, and I took the calculated risk of asking him to send it 'open', to cut short the decoding time.

I was far too excited to wait for the ticker to stop. Tearing off the first few lines, I rushed to the nearest telephone to ring up Mr. Sarin: 'Congrats, Sir they have made it', I chokingly managed to complete a sentence, the heart's thud almost puncturing the eardrums. 'How do you know?' Mr. Sarin queried; and then coming over the line again he said, 'Wait on: someone has just brought in a message'. Again he said, 'Why should they take so long to decode this message.... Kathmandu has also asked for the embargo for giving out the news simultaneously in India and Nepal, and H.M.'s Government have been informed already.... Tell them they can break the news to the Press at 7-30, and you better call your own Corps here round about that time....' And the line was abruptly snapped.

Mr. Sarin got busy in breaking the news—quite the happiest event for the country in years—to President Radhakrishnan, Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri, Defence Minister Y.B. Chavan, to Mrs. Indira Gandhi who, with her father, Jawaharlal Nehru, shared an abiding interest in mountaineering, and to the President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation, Mr. S.S. Khera, and all others immediately concerned. I got busy in clearing the message to Kathmandu and contacting the Everestpress. Never was a PRO in greater luck and better rewarded than I was that day, for none of the PP calls to each of the Platoon-strong Everestpress, drew a blank. Pressmen, as a rule, are a superstitious lot. Most of them must have had their right eyes throbbing or seen some such other omens which goaded them to hang on near the telephone, waiting for my call expectantly.

The whole Press Corps, Indian and foreign, was soon at the barred South Block entrance pleading, by no means politely, with the armed sentry to be let in. Short-circuiting the defence security

procedures, I led the Everestpress platoon de vanguard to the de facto Everest operations room upstairs, which was especially reopened to receive the newsmen for a briefing. But, between the South Block's main gate and the entrance to the OPS Room, I was accosted most pressingly by the friendly but inquisitive news-hounds with the solitary query: 'Is it yes or no?'

Leaving the pressmen in Mr. Sarin's Private Secretary's room, I entered Mr. Sarin's own room where I found him juggling with three or four telephones at the same time. I heard him say: 'Mrs. Gandhi, we are extremely pressed for time. My Private Secretary will hold the line. Kindly give him the message'. He was then talking to the Secretary to the President and taking down the President's message: 'I send my heartiest congratulations to our heroes and they may be assured that their nation is proud of them'. Hardly had he finished when his Private Secretary brought Mrs. Indira Gandhi's message: 'This is truly wonderful news. We are all tremendously proud of your achievement. I cannot help thinking how thrilled and how happy my father would have been'.

Messages were now pouring in, but the pressmen could not be made to wait. Addressing the Press, Mr. Sarin said: 'Our national flag has finally today been planted on Everest by our own Expedition.' He did not give the names of the summiters, explaining that the credit for the success went jointly to the whole Expedition. Nobody pressed for the names, for, by now, the Everestpress was well-versed in Everest etiquettes. They all lustily clapped. 'The news may be used and flashed any time after 7-30 p.m. in order to honour the understanding we have with Kathmandu,' Mr. Sarin enjoined. Then he gave a few other details about the flags put on the four-foot high pole, planted by the American Expedition, which was still standing, defying the weather for the past three years.

There were no questions. As soon as Mr. Sarin had finished, the correspondents, foreign and Indian, made a maddening dash, all at once, all for the nearest telephone. But all doors along the South Block corridors were firmly locked, and the dim light, on the high ceiling, added to the confusion. The colliding pressmen

almost skipped over the stone-stairs and were still rushing all over. They were soon in full occupation of the PRO's room on the ground floor. Om Dutt, who had neither anticipated nor provided for such desperate need for a series of telephones, was nonetheless resourceful and had the entire Defence Public Relations offices opened within seconds. For the next few minutes the Indian success story was going round the world.

I had flattered myself on the lucky start, and thought that I could do with another pat from my boss, Mr. G.G. Mirchandani. So I settled down to a chat over a drink with him at his house, narrating the day's doings. Then the telephone rang. It was Mani (K. Subramaniam of the P.T.I.) of the Everestpress: 'I say, old boy, what did your chappies do with the Nepalese flag? Not a word has been said either in your own release, which has just come in, nor at the press briefing'. Checking this up with Kathmandu and reconfirming with Mani as well as the rest of the Press Corps kept us busy for the next two hours or so.

In the middle of the night, the telephone by my bedside rang up again. It was Bali (of the *Times of India*): 'Who are the next two to go up after Cheema and Gombu who got on top this morning?' Blast me, how the devil he knows? Bali, who was still on the line, added: 'Kathmanau's story, which has just come in, gives the names of only the first summit party's members, and they want us to check with Delhi on the next assault party'. The ripple of laughter that started from the other end of the line, was the inevitable reward, or punishment, or both, that befalls the lot of every professional PRO, owning loyalties to more than one party. Mr. Sarin was in turn woken out of his sleep and forewarned of the possibilities of the papers carrying the names of the two summiters next morning.

The public interest in Everest was whipped up by the Press which displayed the big news on the front page with banner headlines, embellishing it with portraits of the leader and aerial and other pictures of Everest which we had distributed in advance just for such an occasion. The de facto newsroom in the South Block would no longer be large enough to contain the majority

of resident correspondents in addition to the regular Everestpress. The venue for the next day's briefing and for the subsequent ones had thus to be shifted to the more central and appropriate P.I.B. conference room in Akashvani Bhavan. And the Everest news-briefings continued to draw crowded attendance.

On the morning of Saturday, May 22, when the names of the first team were already out, Mr. Sarin took me into confidence and said that the next two summit parties would comprise Sonam Gyatso and Sonam Wangyal, and C.P. Vohra and Ang Kami. 'You had better fix the press-briefing for 8-30 this evening', he suggested. In the forenoon a message came that the two summiters had been seen going up, some 50 feet below the Summit and again, after an hour or so, below the Summit, returning. But the weather had suddenly turned foul and the wireless link had snapped. At the briefing, Mr. Sarin said that he felt convinced that the two Sonams had made the Summit, though he could not confirm this until he got word from the summiters themselves.

Till the early hours of Sunday morning, I just couldn't have a wink of sleep and did little beyond answering countless calls, 'Any further news?' There was none. This continued until the papers themselves finally went to bed. The last ring came from Bali just after 3 a.m. All our frantic efforts to contact the leader via Kathmandu had failed. Even the AIR's special announcements broadcast as part of their regular news bulletins before they closed down after 11 p.m., asking the Expedition to contact Delhi, brought no response. We were later to learn that the Expedition did hear AIR's repeated announcements but their own transmitter had become unserviceable.

We had fixed the next briefing for 4 p.m. on Sunday, expecting some news to trickle in by then. Till ten minutes to 4, we failed to even stir up Kathmandu. Then while preparing to ring up and inform all Press correspondents of 'no news' and of the briefing's postponement, the T.P. lines suddenly came to life and the message came in: 'From Kohli for Sarin. Second party succeeded in reaching Summit 12-30 p.m. May 22. All well'. A happier man than Mr. Sarin at that time would have been difficult to meet.

Nor would it have been possible to see a larger group of pressmen with personal concern and anxiety writ large on their faces when the Press conference began a few minutes later than scheduled. The Press cheered lustily as the news of the double success and the two Sonams' safety was given out.

There was the news of the hat trick on May 24 when C.P. Vohra and Ang Kami successfully got to the top. Thereafter, there was a wait. Dr. P.K. Das of the Meteorological Department had been the most unfailing ally. He had worked out a perfect system. His forecasts were broadcast to Everest three times a day and the readings from Everest were transmitted back to him twice a day. With these checks and re-checks, Dr. Das's forecasts never went wrong. He held the key. Even on 22nd May he had said: 'Disturbed weather likely to last two days from 24th afternoon.' On the 24th the report was: Thunder showers with snow likely towards afternoon/evening. At altitude above 7.5 km, wind strength likely to be above 90 km per hour. Decrease in wind strength speed at high altitude'.

It was during these informal and friendly meetings with the Press and from what they wrote the next day, that a number of uncommon features of the Expedition unfolded themselves. For instance, the Press flatteringly pointed out that out of a total of 20 climbers of the summit of Everest (two climbers of the British Expedition in 1953, four of the Swiss in 1956, six of the Americans' in 1963 and, now, nine of the 3rd Indian Expedition), as many as nine were Indians, for Tenzing and Gombu had reached the Summit in 1953 and 1963 respectively; that Gombu was the only climber in the world to have been twice on the Summit; Gyatso (42) was the oldest and Wangyal (23) the youngest ever to have reached the top; it was the only Expedition which took a wireless set up to the Ridge Camp and used it successfully to maintain an unbroken communications link with the Base and, through Kathmandu, with Delhi: it was the only Expedition in which three climbers had stood at the top together. Similarly, every aspect of the Expedition came to be sharply re-examined by the Press, to find an additional or a new peg, to hang the story on.

The Everestpress had thus to hold their breath for the 'Grand Slam' up to the 29th May which was also the twelfth anniversary of Everest's first climb.

It is not necessary to recapitulate what the world Press or our own leaders and other eminent men, especially from the mountain world, had to say on the Indian feat. Only one observation by a national daily, *The Statesman*, would suffice: '....to every one of the members and high-altitude Sherpas, to the humble Nepalese porters, and to all those in the ordnance factories and other establishments in India who helped to equip the Expedition, is due the credit for success and our pride in it.... And today, because of that success, India takes an honoured place in the exclusive club of international mountaineering, and we are all a little taller.... The Everest Epic is a thrilling one; India has now added a special chapter well worthy of a country for which the Himalaya is of such deep significance.... India salutes the gallant nine; so does the world, Nor do we forget the men who did not reach the peak but who made the way possible for those who did'.

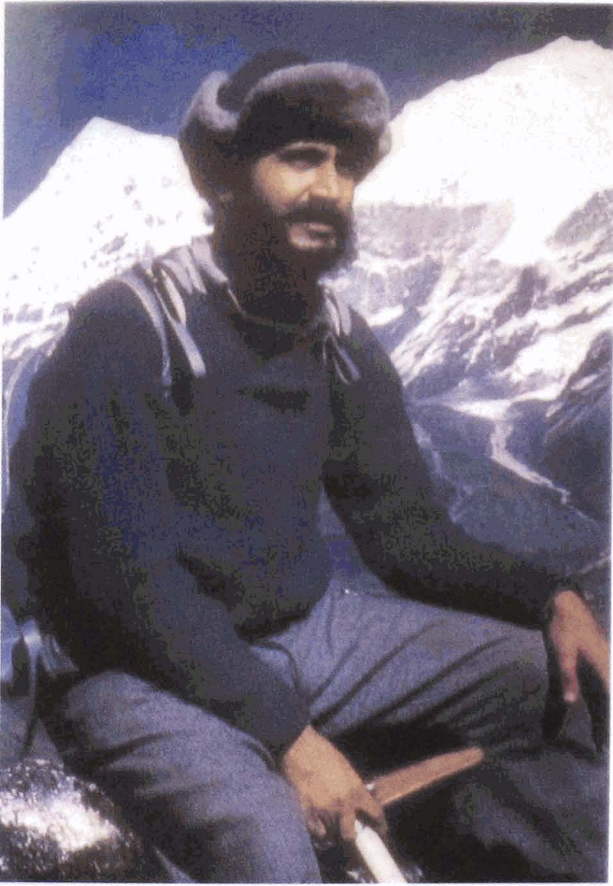
While preparations were being made to finalise the spate of receptions which the national leaders, the citizens of Delhi and a number of clubs and associations wanted to hold for the Expedition (a spate indeed, even after reluctantly declining quite a few invitations), the work was simultaneously started on bringing out a commemorative souvenir. Some of the illustrative material, particularly the pictures of the summiters affixing flags on the peak, were still to come from the Expedition, which was on its way trekking slowly back. Finally, we did succeed, and a copy each of the brochure was presented to the members soon after they landed in Delhi.

A few days later, on June 30, the Everestpress was back in room No. 136. The attendance was not particularly large. The President of the I.M.F. was meeting some of the Sherpas who had served the Expedition conspicuously. Mr. Khera expressed his formal appreciation in Hindi before giving away gifts to them in token of the Foundation's sense of gratitude for their unremitting support throughout. Then, raising his voice, he called out in

English: 'Honorary Tiger Sherpa Sarin....' Mr. Sarin markedly lightened from the load of Expedition's problems, somewhat self-conscious and embarrassed, stepped forward, Mr. Khera pinned a silver Sherpa-badge on his jacket.

And hardly had the hugging and handshakes stopped when Mr. Khera called out the name of the second Honorary Sherpa, the Foundation's unassuming but indefatigable Secretary, Mr. R.M. Chakravarty and pinned a bronze Sherpa-badge for having carried the Expedition's many loads though not quite to the Summit's height which Mr. Sarin had. The third and last badge, which I found myself receiving in half stupor, half disbelief, is now one of my most prized possessions.

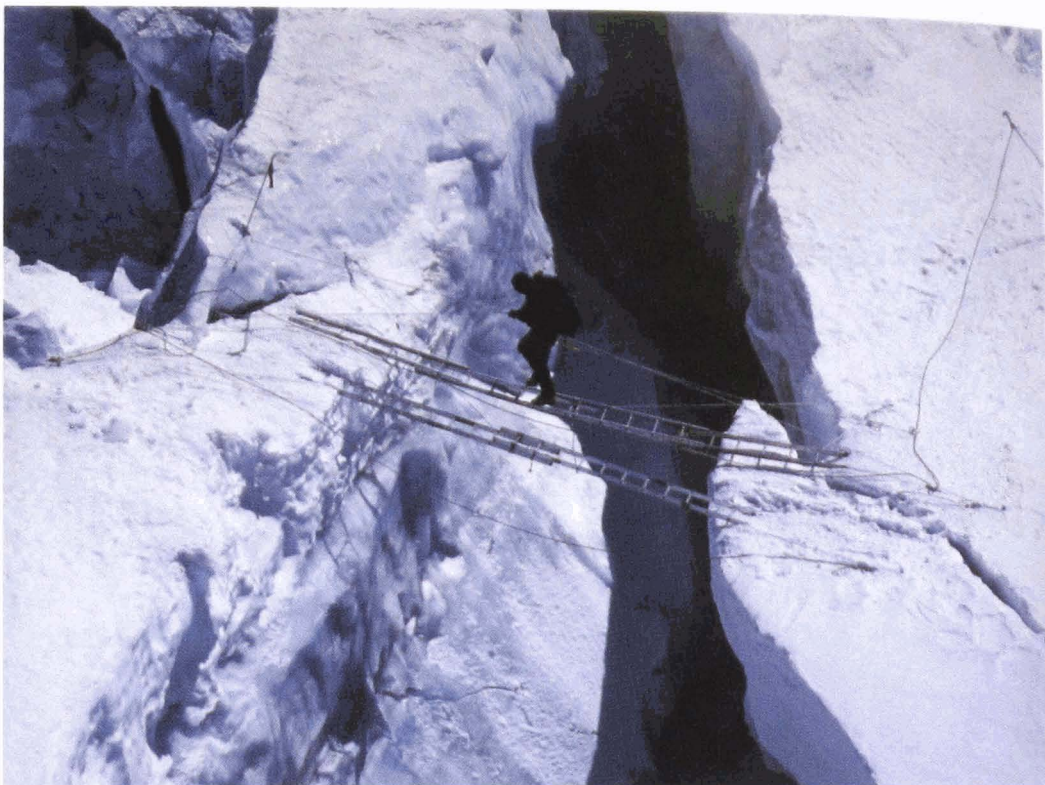
I have often thought, quite seriously, though perhaps unlawfully, to have a replica of this Sherpa-badge made in a somewhat larger size for it to be permanently hung in the Press Club of India. For it is at that rendezvous of Delhi pressmen where the PRO, even now occasionally bumps into some of the old Everest press—the sturdy, skilful, smiling lot—who really carried more than their share of the Sherpa-load, making it possible for the whole world to know of our Expedition.



1. Capt. M.S. Kohli, leader of Indian Everest Expedition 1965.



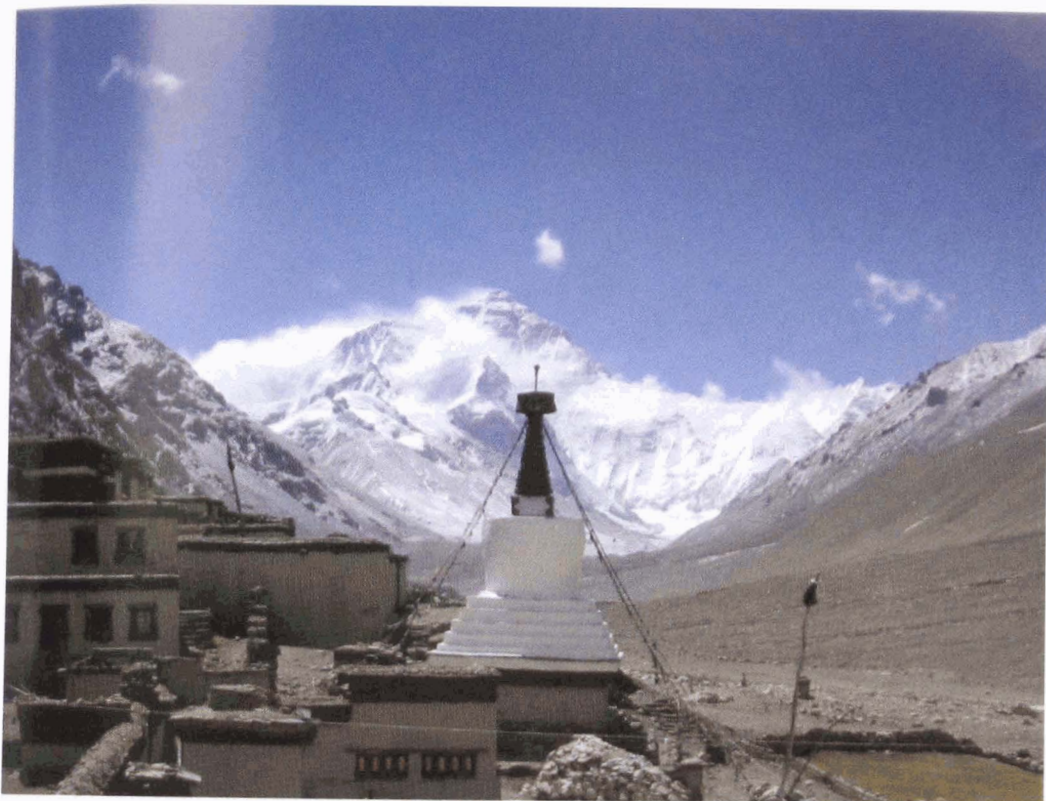
2. After Second Step (Maharashtrians Expedition 1998).



3. Negotiating a treacherous crevasse on a rope ladder (Army Everest Massif Expedition 2003).



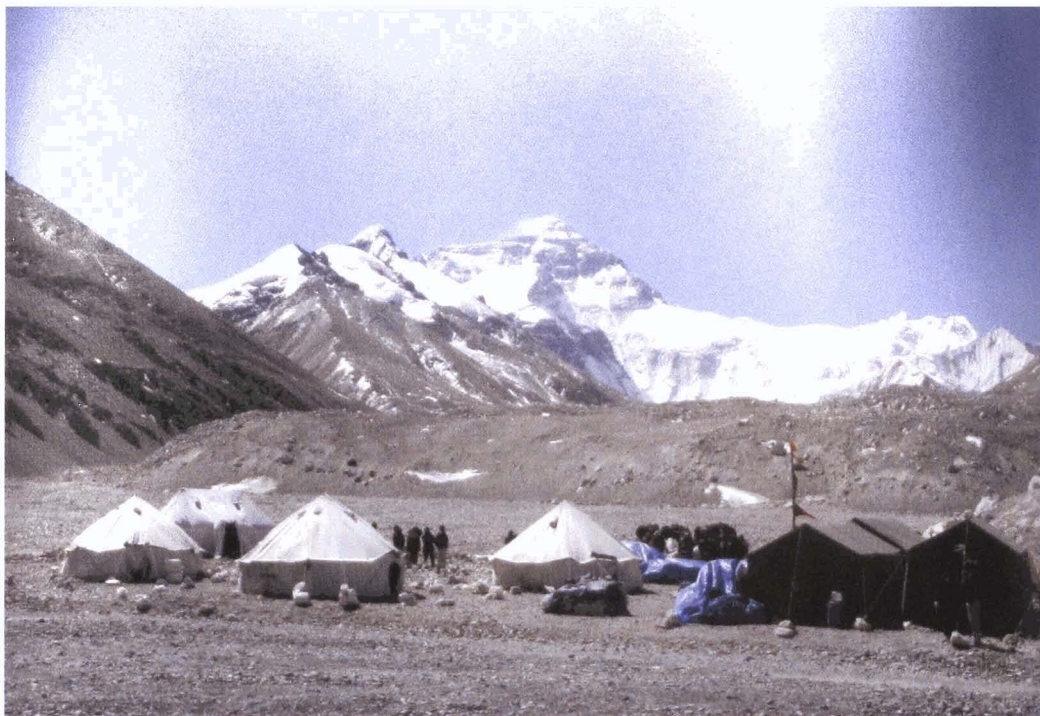
4. Tricolour atop Everest (Army Everest Massif Expedition 2003).



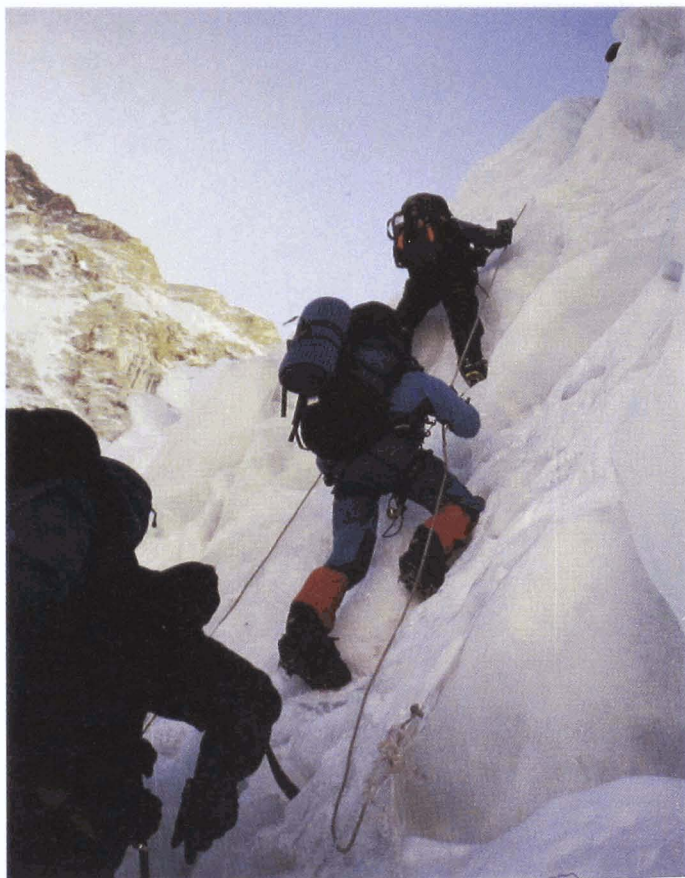
5. Rongbuk monastery (Navy Everest Expeditions 2004).



6. Cruising up (Navy Everest Expeditions 2004).



7. Base Camp under the shadow of Everest (Army Women Expedition 2005).



8. Negotiating steep slope (Army Women Expedition 2005).



Bachendri Pal



Santosh Yadav



Dicky Dolma



Kunga Bhutia



Radha Devi



Deepu Sharma



Savita Martolia



Suman Kutiyal



Capt. Sipra Majumdar



Capt. Ashwini AS Pawar



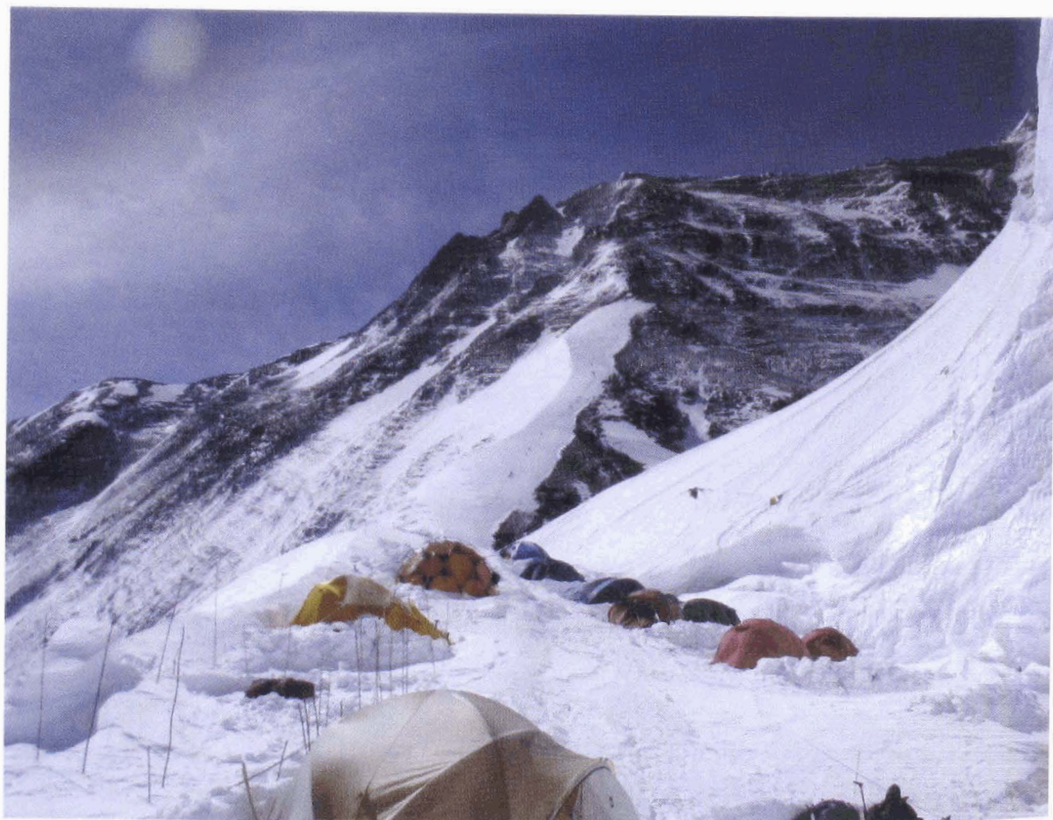
Dechen Lhamo



Cdt Tsering Ladol



10. View from summit (Indian Air Force Expedition 2005).



11. Camp I North Col (Indian Air Force Expedition 2005).



12. Ice wall ABC to camp I (Indian Air Force Expedition 2005).



13. North Col Camp IV (23,100 ft) (ITBP Expedition 2006).



14. ITBP team atop Mt. Everest on 14 May 2006 (ITBP Expedition 2006).



15. BSF climbers atop Everest on 20 May 2006 (Border Security Force Expedition 2006).

PART III

INDIAN ASCENTS GALORE



FIRST WOMAN ATOP

1984

D.K. Khullar

Any attempt to climb Everest is an ambitious and mammoth undertaking which has to be planned precisely like an efficient army operation. The 1984 expedition, after the 1965 expedition with 9 atop Everest, seemed redundant specially as the route being followed was the traditional South Col. The obvious reason was that only four women had been to the hallowed peak out of the 170 odd mountaineers who had scaled it. Our own women having blazed trails on Kamet and Nanda Devi were to be given the chance to prove their mettle. Thus, this fourth Indian expedition was our first mixed one and had 13 men (including a doctor and a signaler) and 7 women (including a doctor). No member had any previous experience of climbing in Nepal.

Since the announcement of the team on 18 October 1983, four months of hectic activity ensued. Training, purchasing equipment, logistics, transport, enrolling Sherpas, it all sounds routine unless it is actually experienced. Thanks to Lt. Gen. J.N. Malhotra, Director General of Artillery, we had a blanket sanction for just about anything as regards accommodation and logistics in Delhi.

These and many others made this concentrated administration possible and successful. Thus the work of 12 months was completed in four, an achievement in itself, thanks to the guidance and help by H.C. Sarin and Capt. Kohli of the IMF.

Seventh of March was the scheduled date of departure from Delhi with our supplies. Much preparation, logistics and planning were now behind us and it felt good to be on our way to Kathmandu with 15 tonnes of equipment, 5 tonnes having gone earlier. Everest veterans like Brig. Gyan Singh and Col. N. Kumar were among the well-wishers along with our families and friends who 'flagged' us off.

By mid-day, the Indian Air Force plane landed at Kathmandu and we were received by H.C. Sarin, our Ambassador to Nepal, and Capt. M.S. Kohli. Jyoti Khanna of Yeti Travels was there too who was to look after our logistics from Kathmandu. On 11 March, after a sumptuous breakfast in style, courtesy Yeti Travels, we were seen off at Dulikhel by Sarin and Jyoti Khanna on our journey to Jiri, the road-head.

Main Party's Approach

Three days trek to Everest Base Camp is a well-beaten affair. Scores of tourists of all ages, mostly from the West, are continuously on the trail of pilgrimage to the world's highest mountain. Lodges are to be found on all regular halts where reasonable fare may be obtained. It took us eight days to reach Namche Bazaar. Till then, our journey, devoid of any real aesthetic scenery, did a lot of good to our physical well-being as running against the grain of the country, it involved regular ascents of nearly 3000 feet to reach the ridge crests on our way before descending to the succeeding valleys where our camp sites usually were.

It is only when one reaches Namche Bazaar that one becomes aware of the high mountains and the whole environmental changes. We had two days sojourn at this lively Sherpa township which boasts of unexpectedly smart three-star lodges in more than one sense. Our next halt was at Thyangboche. Known for its

famous monastery where we participated in a ceremony specially organized by the lamas to seek the unknown's blessings. With the towering but breathtakingly majestic Ama Dablam above us, we made our way to Pheriche, an extensive grazing ground along the Dudh Kosi, the area set for the acclimatization phase of our expedition.

Advance Party on the Ice Fall

While the main party was more or less in the process of taking off from Delhi to Kathmandu, our advance party consisting of Prem (Deputy Leader), N.D. Sherpa, Dorjee Lhatoo, Phu Dorjee, Dr. Minoo Mehta and film crew man, Sanjeev Saith, were advancing deep into the Khumbu region.

Theirs was the major task of opening the route through the Ice Fall to coincide with the arrival of the main party at Base Camp. We had to resort to this arrangement so as not to fall behind schedule on the mountain. The Khumbu Icefall, a massive cataract of tumbling ice, is relatively stable in March and it was therefore necessary to tackle it before the spring thaw set in. Our advance party, composed as it was of the finest climbers, made an excellent job of it in just five days. By 23 March they had carved out a good route. The first kilometre ran left of centre to a height of 19,000 ft and was devoid of any serious hazard. There on, it involved cutting across to the right of centre through a flat section where the ice blocks in chaotic mess lie suspended over a deep hollow. It is an unnerving experience to negotiate this portion for one never knows when the jumble would shift, shaken by frequent cataclysmic icequakes, and swallow the unlucky climber should he happen to be there at an unfortunate juncture. The crevasses are at their deepest here and come into existence literally in an instant, and the width can vary from a few feet to a hundred feet over the span of a night. This area requires constant caution and rebridging. The Sherpas refer to this portion as the 'Daam' which in their language means death. The route thereafter cuts upwards through innumerable ice seracs, towers and ice walls and involves a degree of technical climbing and jumaring at

places. The advance party had found as safe a route as is possible and had used only 16 ladders through the entire course of the Ice Fall. This proved deceptively shortlived because as the summer set in, we ended up by using up to sixty ladders. Their task finished well in time, Prem moved down to Pheriche with his party, leaving Lhatoo and Dr. Mehta as caretakers to be relieved by the leader's group on the 28th.

Everest Strikes

It was 26 March, and we were at Pheriche, looking forward to begin the acclimatization phase prior to moving to Base Camp for the expedition proper. Was there death in the air? If there was, we were oblivious of it, immersed as we were in our pleasant conversation in Hilla Tashi's lodge. Sherpa Ang Ringzin had been killed by an ice avalanche that swept down the Lho La and buried him under four feet of debris when he and a party of about fifteen Sherpas were on their way to the Ice Fall, hardly fifteen minutes walking distance from Base Camp. It was a sad event and highly unexpected. Without upsetting the acclimatization plan, N.D. Sherpa, Phu Dorjee and Sanjeev Saith of the advance party, who had come down for rest and recuperation, were dispatched to Base Camp to help Dorjee Lhatoo and Dr. Minoo Mehta in the evacuation of the other casualties as four others had been injured and needed helicopter evacuation and the dead had to be brought down to the Everest cremation ground at Thukla, a place which bore the morbid evidence of the mortality rate on the mountain. There were scores of chortens that were lined up on this windy spur on the way to Lobuje. The leader with K.I. Kumar, Rattan Singh, Lopsang, Chandra and our liaison officer followed the same day, but unlike the first group were to make it to Base Camp in two days. The rest of the team stayed on at Pheriche and were to remain there for a week to acclimatize properly.

While the first group with N.D. Sherpa arrived at the Base on 27 March in the evening and extended help, the leader's group halted for the night at Lobuje and had just crossed Gorak Shep, for many the last stage to Base Camp, when I saw a party of

Sherpas moving down carrying the deceased. I was certain I wouldn't be meeting a happy group considering what they had just gone through but I wasn't really expecting what followed. Was their mood foul? It was terrible. Reeking of *chang*, for it is the Sherpa's way of life to consume large quantity of this country-made brew in sad as well as happy moments—not an altogether disagreeable philosophy to their own selves, but entirely discomfoting for the others. On coming to know that I was the leader or '*bara sahib*', they let loose their emotional selves bursting with genuine and not so genuine grievances. This was natural. For half an hour there was kind of empty violence in the air and we were finally able to pacify the group. By 1 p.m. I had arrived at the Base and was surprised to see Prem who had taken a lift in the chopper from Pheriche. After about an hour's stay, the liaison officer and I moved down to attend the funeral. Prem, ND, Phu Dorjee, Sanjeev and Lhatoo also came along leaving the rest to keep Base Camp organized.

So far we had taken this painful experience with equanimity but it was as though only the beginning of our troubles. Half way down to Lobuje, the next shock followed when we found Jang Bir, one of our kitchen boys, lying unconscious by the side of a small rock. He was probably dead but the body was still warm. Strangely, none of the local people, chiefly the yak *wallahs*, had bothered to help as he had been sent down with them. Prem and Phu Dorjee in their characteristic way wasted no time and carried him downhill before we had agreed to pay them Rs. 500 for their labour.

We now had two dead men and the expedition had hardly begun. It was important to keep the team together, refurbish the morale and win back the confidence of the Sherpas. The leader, deputy leader and other member's presence at the funeral and our generous contribution in cash and in kind in meeting the expenditure on the ceremony and ex-gratia grant to the families of the deceased was definitely a beginning in this direction.

Back to Work

Formalities over, I moved up with the liaison officer to Base Camp on 30 March. Prem with the rest moved down to Pheriche for recuperation. The two Assistant Sirdars, Ang Dorjee and Pasang Temba, dispersed to the local habitat with the message that they would need a week's time to get over the traumatic experience and to assess whether the expedition was worth their effort. That left us with just about 20 Sherpas who declined to do any climbing without their Sirdars. We, therefore, utilized them for organizing the camp site, stacking loads, pitching tents and so on. It was a precious loss of 10 days work on the mountain, and the Ice Fall route fixed earlier on by the advance party would require a major effort all over again. For the members at the Base, however, life was far from inactive. A study of the Lho La and the threatening hanging glacier on it and the configuration of the lower branches of the Ice Fall was carried out, and by 3 April we had carved out a safe but a little tedious route, giving Lho La a wide berth and it set our minds at some rest.

By 5 April, our Base Camp was fully occupied. The complete team, less Sonam Palzor and our communication officer, Flt. Lt. T. Sridharan, who were chasing up loads from the rear, had settled down and now awaited the attempt on the mountain to begin. The two Assistant Sirdars were back, and the Sherpas were set to work, reluctantly though, as they feared the expedition would not honour its financial commitment. Quite erroneously, an impression of financial bankruptcy had been created, which had to be removed and remove we did. Forty Sherpas is a big number to handle and there were a dozen other camp followers and this is when we realised the need to take care of non-climbing Base Camp affairs. Inevitably, the task of handling Base Camp affairs fell on Dr. Meena Agarwal and she did a diligent job of it under the circumstances.

There were some good Sherpas and strong climbers amongst them. Assistant Sirdar Ang Dorjee, literally a king of climbers, slight of build but so tough that he carried the heaviest loads and yet moved far ahead of others and generally came back to help

the stragglers with their loads. He was a simple man in all matters except money. Without doubt he and his band of ten Sherpas from Thame were to remain our most reliable load-carriers, till injuries put them out of reckoning.

Fixing the Lhotse Face

Prem, ND, Phu Dorjee and Bissa had blazed their way to Camp II at 21,600 ft midway in the Western Cwm. The first two returned to Base by 6 April. The leader with KI, Jai, Lopsang, Ang Dorjee and ten Sherpas moved to Camp I on 8 April. A spell of bad weather had set in but fortunately it lasted for only four days. Phu Dorjee and Bissa moved down and the leader's party moved up to Camp II. Dr. Mino Mehta who was at Camp I was given charge to regulate movement between the camps. The party was now set to fix the route up the Lhotse Face, the last technical hurdle on the way to the top of Everest. Operating from our comfortable site at Camp II, the party worked in pairs. While the major work was done by Ang Dorjee and Lopsang, KI and Jai did the initial route finding. By 15 April, fixed rope had been laid up to 24,000 ft, our Camp III site. The next 2000 ft to South Col involved a vertical climb of nearly 1000 ft and the Yellow Band till one reached the Geneva Spur from where one could trudge on to South Col. Besides the technical work which can prove to be trying at such a big height, progress on this particular pitch often gets seriously affected by other hazards like high wind, snow avalanches down the couloir and salvos of stone falls during rough weather. This particular task was taken on by Dorjee Lhatoo, Rattan Singh and Phu Dorjee. Prem, ND and Mino Mehta along with four Sherpas supported them from Camp II. Ordinarily, this task, given good conditions, can be done in a matter of two to three days. But this group, though technically very well-qualified, lost some valuable time in orientation. When they finally moved up to Camp III on 20 April, the weather on the mountain turned really bad and it became practically impossible to work on the mountain. The winds were simply furious. But in spite of this, Dorjee Lhatoo, Ratan Singh and Phu Dorjee did a magnificent

job by fixing route up to the Yellow Band, a little over 25,000 ft. They were recalled to Base Camp for recuperation. Phu Dorjee still looked remarkably fit even though he had used no oxygen, but the other two had been done in. They had a grueling time under very adverse conditions and the fact that Phu Dorjee was still so fit was an indication of his extraordinary physique, an attribute which was even more pronouneably demonstrated at a later stage. Meanwhile, the mission to reach South Col still remained incomplete and we were falling slightly behind schedule. The weather was now good and it was important to reach South Col without further delay. Ang Dorjee, Lopsang and Bissa did this for us, when after fixing the remaining route, they reached South Col at 3 p.m. on 29 April.

During this period, the Bulgarians made what could be termed as a pre-emptive bid on the mountain, prompted no doubt by the relative calm that prevailed in April. One of their members, Christo Prodanov, who had earlier the solo climb of Lhotse to his credit and was an outstanding mountaineer, reached the summit of Everest on 21 April by the difficult West Ridge. It was done solo and without oxygen, but sadly he could never return and perished somewhere very high up on the mountain. Never before had Everest been climbed in April and this was a record but at a very high price.

Build up

By 1 May, after some sustained performance, KI, Jai, Palzor and for a change by our otherwise muddle-headed Asstt. Sirdar Pasang, Temba and his band of Sherpas were able to place 12 loads on South Col. We had planned for 20 but 8 loads remained abandoned at various points on the Lhotse Face/Geneva Spur as some Sherpas simply gave up inspite of the incentives. We were confident of organizing another big ferry later on along with the first summit party.

With most of us down at Base Camp now, it was time to recuperate, rest and prepare ourselves for the climax. All, excluding the leader, KI, Jai, Palzor and Minoo, left with Prem for a four-

day sojourn to Lobuje-Pheriche. I discussed the strategy with Prem and it was decided to announce the summit parties on the morning of 4 May. The film crew meanwhile crossed the Ice Fall.

The Summit Plan

We planned to send three summit parties. The first was to comprise Prem, Rita, Phu Dorjee, Chandra and Sirdar Ang Dorjee. They were to leave Base Camp on 5th May for Camp II, arrive at South Col on the 7th. While Prem, Rita and Ang Dorjee were to attempt direct from South Col on the 8th, Phu Dorjee and Chandra were to establish the summit camp and stay there for the night and attempt the mountain on the 9th. The latter were to be accompanied by eight Sherpas.

The second summit party, comprising ND, Lopsang, Magan Bissa and Bachendri were to move up a day later, reach South Col on the 8th and attempt direct on the 9th. In case of trouble the summit camp was always there to fall back upon.

The third party consisted of Lhatoo and Rattan Singh and they were to be accompanied by two Bulgarians. They were to reach South Col on the 10th. KI, Jai and Palzor were to be in support. This only left out three other girls who, being in the second string, had to stay as reserves.

Attempt

The night of 5-6 May was an uncomfortable one. The weather was bad. Wind had picked up considerably and to add to our discomfiture, Camp II was over-crowded and the Sherpas had spilled over to the members' medium arctic tent. A couple of them smelled and we had a miserable night. Rita didn't look healthy herself as the journey through the Cwm in that repressing heat had affected her. The others were as fit as they could be. There was that atmosphere that precedes the summit attempt then at Camp II, somewhat heightened by the squally weather.

Sixth May began with a threat of uncertainty as the wind instead of letting up, increased its velocity. But Prem was confi-

dent that it would die down with the coming up of the sun and it reasonably did. Prem, Phu Dorjee, Chandra, Rita and Ang Dorjee were soon on their way to Camp III. The second summit party arrived soon thereafter. The high journey to the summit had truly begun.

Seventh of May appeared to pass on without any extraordinary event. Things were going smoothly until reaching the Yellow Band when Rita was found swooning because of lack of oxygen. The Sherpa moving past her was carrying a couple of oxygen bottles and gave her one. She went on smoothly thereafter. Slight discontent set in when only four of the eight Sherpas meant for supporting the summit camp were able to reach South Col. Of the ferry party to South Col also, only six of the original twelve reached, the others having abandoned their loads on the way, returned to Camp II. Not an encouraging development to come about at the end of the day but the situation wasn't desperate either. We had at this juncture twelve Life Support and five Bulgarian cylinders, eight Salewa tents, requisite number of sleeping bags and other essentials at South Col. It was enough for two attempts but a lot depended on whether all four Sherpas would make it to the summit camp the next day.

The second summit party under ND made it to Camp III. They were all in fine shape. ND was moving with perfect ease and was going to be our man to climb without oxygen. Lopsang had come to thrive on the mountain and in fact looked fresh even after having been twice up the Lhotse Face and once to South Col earlier on. Bachendri was her normal steady self and that she had an unusual grit was to be known later. Bissa was still essentially an unknown commodity. He had shown great promise by having reached South Col earlier on 29 April, in good wind.

We Drew Blank

Eighth May produced excellent weather. Summer lightning in the distant horizon could be seen through our tent entrance as Siddharth made ready his recording equipment and switched on the walkie-talkie to contact the summit party, but they did not

come on till 6 a.m. Prem came on and informed that they were about to leave. They left at 6.30 a.m. followed soon by the support group. At 8 a.m. Phu Dorjee informed us that only two Sherpas were able to come up with him and Chandra. This was a very serious setback and worse was to follow. At 11 a.m. Prem, after reaching the proposed summit camp, took the crucial decision of not proceeding further. He was not certain of reaching the summit well in time to ensure a safe return to the summit camp in the daylight hours as it would be risky, he thought, to be with a lady climber at that height. This implied that two of the members would have to sacrifice their chance and return to South Col as the summit camp was hardly a camp. There was only one tent, two sleeping bags but what forced the decision was the oxygen. While there was enough oxygen for one woman, there were only two half cylinders for the men. Prem had a very hard decision to take. In his unselfish manner he opted to go down. Of the two girls, he asked his '*rakhi sister*' Chandra to come down with him. When he told me of his decision on the walkie-talkie, I concurred with him. I felt sorry for both of them. Both had upheld the greatest tradition in mountaineering by giving up their life's ambition in the interest of their younger colleagues. Could we say we had been let down by the Sherpas? They had done their best and there weren't just enough number of the really tough ones with us. The two who reached the summit camp were Kami and Gyaltzen, both Ang Dorjee's men from Thame. With even two more to accompany them, we would have had a different story to tell.

While we had drawn a blank on the eighth, the Bulgarian pair of Ivan and Metody were making their slow progress to the summit. It was nearly 7 p.m. when they reached it and there was once again going to be trouble. Their Base Camp was out of reach. By 9 p.m. the pair could proceed no further. The Bulgarians were obviously worried and the memory of Christo's death on the mountain was still very fresh. I had no intention to disturb the summit plan but the people at South Col were warned to be prepared to help. By then, realizing also that Bachendri had gone up from Camp III late in the evening and might not be in a

condition to make it directly to the summit on the next day, I called off the second attempt and instructed all others, save ND and Lopsang to move down.

Phu Dorjee's Solo

We now waited for better things to happen on the ninth. We failed to make any walkie-talkie contact as Phu Dorjee's set had gone defective. They had left summit camp at 7 a.m. After having gone for over an hour, Ang Dorjee decided to turn back as his feet were getting very cold and he feared frostbite. Rita was with him. Phu Dorjee, who was ahead by about fifty yards, waited for Rita to come up. She was in two minds. There was the temptation to turn back as her other companion had done. The fact that the weather was not really ideal with a strong wind blowing and a thin haze of clouds swept over the mountain, she succumbed to the weaker of the two decisions. She was then 180 metres from the summit, within easy reach with a little more determination. But these things do happen in mountaineering and have to be accepted.

Phu Dorjee's was a different story. He was leading the way and had to plod through knee-deep snow. His oxygen supply was limited and just as Rita and Ang Dorjee turned back, his oxygen cylinder ran out. For him it was a question of just 200 metres to the summit and it looked so near. The thought of turning back was the least in his mind. He decided to give it a try. He was soon met by the Bulgarian climber (Ivan) and spoke to the leader. It took him two hours to reach the South Summit where he found the second Bulgarian (Metody) lying prostrate on the snow. He thought the Bulgarian was dead and in any case had nothing on him to give help. Short of Hillary Step, he met the second summit pair of the Bulgarians coming down the summit. They had made it in excellent time, no doubt spurred on by the need to reach their teammates of the first summit party. This is when he again spoke to the leader and informed him about his determination to go on. I asked him to turn back, but he knew better and carried on. Who could turn back when the inner confidence

and physical strength of the person are so exceedingly strong. By 12.30 p.m. Phu Dorjee was atop Everest by the sheer act of an extraordinary feat. India had achieved success and this was the first solo and oxygen-less climb in the last crucial 200 meters by an Indian. It was a great achievement, fantastic by some standards. Of course we had yet to have a woman from our team to reach the summit and were sure it would follow in the coming days.

The Second Evacuation

With the summit behind him, Phu Dorjee's main concern now was to reach down as quickly as possible. He wanted to help our Bulgarian friends. When others walked, he glissaded, overtook and led them to the summit camp and brewed some hot tea and water. Metody was also there having been resurrected with oxygen and drugs by his colleagues. ND moved up a few hundred yards from South Col with hot juice and oxygen. We had four of our Bulgarian friends at South Col. Ivan and Metody were given due attention by ND, whose performance must rank on the superlative. The next two days passed with the two expeditions actively involved in evacuation. It was a neat example of international cooperation. We were glad we had been of help. The Bulgarians, their task accomplished, wound up and left for home leaving behind with us their very efficacious and extremely light walkie-talkie sets and eight more of their excellent light oxygen cylinders making a total of thirty-two. It was a very generous help and indeed made our task so much easier.

Everest Strikes Again

It took us a couple of days to regroup our forces for a renewed attempt on the mountain. Dorjee Lhatoo, Rattan Singh, Sonam Palzor and Rekha Sharma were put in the lead and reached South Col on the 15th. ND, Lopsang, Bachendri with seven Sherpas occupied Camp III on the same day. This second party looked so strong, fully acclimatized and confident. The weather never too bad earlier, was getting better and trifle warmer. When I parted

from them at their comfortable sites, I left a very beaming group behind and thought the mountain gods were similarly disposed. Alas! No. Everest was yet in no mood to relent and it struck where it mattered most. Our strongest party was soon to be put out of reckoning. We had our walkie-talkie set on the whole night which incidentally was a Full Moon night and more so Budh Purnima, considered a very sacred and auspicious day by the Buddhists. At 12.30 p.m. a mighty serac broke off from the Lhotse glacier and rolled down to Camp III. Seeing its magnitude, there should have been nothing left of the camp. Luck is a relative factor. While we were thoroughly unlucky in that this had to happen, we now considered ourselves very lucky that no one lost his/her life. A Sherpa had a broken leg, injuries and others painful bruises. Destiny had spared Bachendri, who came out unscathed and she must also thank Lopsang for rescuing her from their beleaguered tent.

The Third Evacuation

Without losing much time, Sanjeev, Minoo and that wonderful man Ang Tshering, with Sherpa Lakpa Dorjee (junior) and our Camp II cook, left for the accident site. Our eight other Sherpas too dog-tired to stir, refused to budge. Life or death meant little to them. This was quite a disappointment. KI, Jai and Bissa were summoned to come up from Camp I with as many Sherpas as they could bring along. Prem along with his bunch started up the Ice Fall. Sharavati who was with us at Camp II swung into action in the role of Florence Nightingale.

By 8 a.m. all, less the leg injury case, had arrived at Camp II. By 1 p.m., Sanjeev, Minoo, KI, Jai and Bissa were seen approaching with their improvised sledge. A remarkable feat in high altitude evacuation had been accomplished by their people and it was high time that Goddess Everest took notice that ours was not the team to give in.

There were no visible sentiments when I received Bachendri. There was a glitter in her eyes and when I asked her if she would go again, she said "why not?" or words to that effect. The accident,

far from frightening her, had as though awakened in her the indomitable will to succeed. She was not an ordinary woman. She stayed on at Camp II while an old male companion of hers, physically stronger, scooted down the mountain. Meanwhile, we had kept the details of the avalanche away from Dorjee Lhatoo's party at South Col, hoping that they would make their bid. Rattan Singh fearing frostbite (he had already suffered earlier on Nanda Devi in 1981) had bowed down the previous evening. But when by 9 a.m. on 16 May, they could not make up their minds as the Sherpas with them were unable to move up, I called them back to Camp II.

The Last Effort

There was nothing left of Camp III save a torn tent. Supplies at South Col were limited to seven tents, six full and six partially full-life support and three Bulgarian oxygen cylinders. Most of our capable Sherpas had been injured, the others were too exhausted. The majority were convinced that the expedition was jinxed, thanks no doubt to the dubious prediction of a lama. He did not have to be a genius; accidents on Everest are a common occurrence. Even Sherpa's Sirdar Ang Dorjee wanted us to wind up and leave. We were not the best of friends when he left with casualties, for I warned him that the team this time would climb without the Sherpas if necessary. And I think this, and more than that, his rapport with Prem brought him back to us on 20 May, in the company of three of his gallant Thame colleagues, the last of what was left.

The situation had changed radically. The mountain had to be climbed and that too by a woman. We had to put in everything we had. It was KI, Jai, Bissa and Minoo's chance and Bachendri would go with them. I had called up Prem to replace me at Camp II. He, with Lhatoo, Palzor and whatever Sherpas we could muster, would support them to Camp III or South Col. Lhatoo and Palzor would attempt a day later. Logistics would not allow a woman to accompany them. There was one possible contender, Chandra. She was reported to me not fully recouped when I had

inquired and as it later turned out this was a misunderstanding. It was sad even, for she had been deprived unfairly by circumstances and I shall always feel sorry that this had to happen.

The attempt was to be made on the 23rd. The summit party left Camp II at 8 a.m. on 21st. Sanjeev, Sharavati and I moved down. Prem took charge. With the increase in Sherpa support to six, Lhatoo and Palzor were spared the ferry. All was set for the last ditch effort.

The 22nd brought in some interesting development. Lhatoo and Palzor, uneasy about their chance, made plans to beat the summit party to South Col and lay their claim. Prem went along with them and kept this information from me. When I learnt of it from KI at 8.30 a.m., it was too late to act. I let the now not-so-holy race to the summit continue with the thought that maybe it would produce results. Lhatoo and Palzor, using oxygen, overtook the first party and reached South Col by 1 p.m. Bachendri was close on their heels. Bissa, after faltering midway, switched on his cylinder and joined them at South Col by 1.30. Our other friends, slightly demoralized and without oxygen, moved on at a much slower pace. When by 5 p.m. they had failed to show up, Bachendri could no longer contain her anxiety; after all, that was the group she was a part of. Defying the men then at South Col, she moved down the Geneva Spur with hot liquid in her thermos. When I learnt of this, I was livid with Bissa and Lhatoo and sent them packing after her, the latter not without an unbecoming altercation. By 8 p.m. the situation had been restored but a fresh summit plan was necessary. After prolonged communication over the walkie-talkie it was decided that Lhatoo, Palzor, Bachendri and the fittest from KI's group would move to the summit camp on the following morning. And Dorjee with Sherpa Kami were to support if possible. All this, of course, proved to be infructuous as the 23rd was to be a day extraordinary.

Bachendri—The Star is Born

At 6 a.m. Lhatoo came on the walkie-talkie with the information that Bachendri and Ang Dorjee were ready and raring to

go for the summit and that for Ang Dorjee it was either direct to summit or he would move down. There was an oxygen crisis; the six life-support cylinders were found to be empty and why it was so could hardly be a matter for investigation at that time. I asked Ang Dorjee and Bachendri to move off without further delay and Lhatoo to follow them taking three Bulgarian cylinders as quickly as possible. Ang Dorjee and Bachendri left at 6.20, the former as an oxygenless climber. I had wanted Bissa also to go with the two partially-filled life-support cylinders then in Palzor's custody, the intention being to give both groups an even chance. While Lhatoo took some time to check pressure, Palzor was not the one to give up his chance. Picking up his cylinders, he literally ran off after Ang Dorjee and Bachendri. This happened at 7 a.m. At 7.30 Lhatoo followed. The race for the summit had begun.

The 23rd proved to be a magnificent day. It was perfect weather. Sarin's prediction from Kathmandu was more than true, there had not been a better day so far. The progress was fast. Bissa moved down periodically to the Geneva Spur to report progress. Within two hours Ang Dorjee and Bachendri had crossed the summit camp. Lhatoo having overtaken Palzor was in hot pursuit. The route lay along the eastern slope of the South-East Ridge and cut directly across to 100 metres beneath the South Summit from where it is difficult to proceed. Lhatoo caught up at this stage and made Ang Dorjee and Bachendri to rope up and moved unroped alongside with them. He came on the walkie-talkie and reported their fine progress. By 12 noon they reached the South Summit and soon the Hillary Step was negotiated. The fact that all difficult stretches had been fixed by the Japanese in the preceding winter and by the Bulgarians recently on their descent, definitely helped. It was joy, it was relief, it was a terrific event. At 1.07 p.m. the trio of Lhatoo, Bachendri and Ang Dorjee had reached the highest summit. It was Ang Dorjee's day; his second ascent of Everest without oxygen, and Bachendri's and his spurred-up energies that made the climb. Palzor carrying the much heavier life-support cylinder reached 15 minutes later. To think of Bachendri! A star had been born.

After 43 minutes on the summit, the group began their retreat. Bissa, far from sulking, rose to the occasion by going as high as the summit camp with juice and oxygen.

That then is our story of Everest—a story of success by a team that worked hard inspite of hardship and probably that is what makes it noteworthy. We had the first Indian woman, the fifth in the world, on the top of Everest. Given some luck, there could have been more summiters and many people happier than they are because, like it or not, for all mountaineers on Everest it is the summit they come to seek and conquer. I wish it was a successful quest for more of them.



INDO-TIBETAN BORDER POLICE EXPEDITION

1992

S.D. Sharma

The year 2003 is being celebrated to commemorate the Golden Jubilee of man's first ascent of Everest. To mark the occasion, it will be nice to remember the moment of my ascent of Everest in 1992. It was a glorious moment of my life when I set foot on the summit of Mt. Everest on 10 May 1992. It was a fairly large expedition led by our organization's (ITBP) great mountaineer, late Shri Hukum Singh Pangty. This was purely an ITBP expedition and a major maiden expedition outside the country. The advance party left by road in three 5-ton vehicles on 4 March 1992 for Kathmandu and the remaining team left by air on 8 March 1992. A befitting send-off was organized at the airport to the team by ITBP. After landing at Kathmandu, lots of official work as well as purchase of fresh eatables were done in the next 10 days. The team was also given a warm send-off at Kathmandu by the Indian Ambassador in Nepal. As I said earlier, the team was fairly large because of which the administrative tail was too big, from the

last road-head up to Base Camp. It was a long trek for thirteen days which required a large number of porters and yaks. This involved a lot of expenditure. To cut short the expenditure, some of the loads were sent by helicopters to Lukla, the last airport near Base Camp. This airport is also unique in the sense that it is full of potholes, gravels and it gives the look of an abandoned one. By sending a greater share of load by copters, we could reduce the number of porters and expenditure. The team engaged more than 100 porters and around 150 yaks to ferry the expedition store. It took full thirteen days to reach Base Camp.

On 2 April 1992, Base Camp of the expedition was established at an altitude of 18,000 feet. There were twelve other expedition teams camping in the vicinity of our Base Camp. A bird's-eye view from a nearby hillock gave the appearance of a small hamlet at Base Camp area. This also gave us an idea how much revenue is being earned by Nepal Government from eco-tourism and adventure sports. The Base Camp was established on Khumbu glacier, which has a notoriety of frequent movement or shift. It keeps on changing its course because of which the route opened for higher camp needs daily maintenance. The mountain takes its toll for any carelessness and the same thing happened on 4 April when one of the high altitude porters had a fatal fall on an ice wall. The HAP (High Altitude Porter) was evacuated from the ice wall to a makeshift helipad prepared at Base Camp. Majority of the team members took it as a 'bad omen' since the 'monsoon climbing season' of this year had just started with an accident. Everybody feared that the worst thing may happen in near future. The ITBP expedition also started its route, opening and establishing various camps with combined efforts of other team members from various countries. By 22 April, all the four camps up to South Col were established and when stocking of all camps was done, and the final climb for attempting the summit was to be made, the first rope for this purpose was selected. The leader placed himself at Camp II and the first summit party left Base Camp on 24 April. The first summit party reached summit camp at South Col on 27 April and was planning to make the summit attempt on 28 April, as the best time for summit in pre-monsoon

season is from 28 April to 10 May. But nature had something different in store for ITBP and other expedition teams. The weather turned hostile and it started snowing heavily on 28 April. A strong blizzard blew away our tents and it was difficult to stay confined at the summit camp. The leader called back the summit party. There were twelve other expedition teams and they also tried to climb the peak but failed. Members of all the team were demoralized and returned to Base Camp due to bad weather. All the teams suspended their attempts till the weather improved. Now, heavy snowfall created hurdles all along the route as fresh snowfall completely blocked the route to camp and walking in fresh snow (3-4 feet) is really a tiresome job. Nobody wanted to exhaust their energy before the summit attempt, as it was a lifetime opportunity. Climbing activities in Everest Base Camp remained suspended from 30 April to 7 May. All the other teams were looking for someone to take lead in that inclement weather. The leader of ITBP held a meeting at Base Camp to formulate the strategy of the climb. There arose a firm opinion to send a strong, experienced and technically strong team to attempt the summit as nobody was coming forward for this job. There was pin-drop silence in the tent and everybody was looking left and right. At this point the leader expressed his trust in me and asked, "S.D. Sharma, will you take up this responsibility?"

As a true soldier I said, "Yes Sir", and I was selected as the leader of the rope comprising of Prem Singh (now DC), K. Lal (now DC) and two other members. Along with us one more rope was sent. I decided that I would prove my mettle. All of us, along with one HAP as guide who had already scaled the Everest, started from Base Camp. On 6 May, after performing *puja*, the leader handed over the national, ITBP and IMF flags to me to be hoisted on the summit. It was a quite sunny day and it seemed that nature was welcoming our move. On 7 May 1992, we occupied Camp-I and all the thirteen teams from various countries watched the maiden ascent of Everest in pre-monsoon season of 1992. My fellow countrymen's expectations rose very high and they were looking for some miracle to happen.

On 7 May, the HAP/guide who knew the route to the summit

started throwing a tantrum. He asked for bonus money assurance from the leader for guiding us to the summit. The discussion kept on through walkie-talkie thereby delaying our move the whole day and the HAP was adamant not to move ahead unless high bonus was assured. Finally, he returned back to Base Camp as negotiation did not yield him his desired result. This was our first setback in our mission. The leader again spoke to me on walkie-talkie and exclaimed, "S.D. Sharma, you can still make it to summit without any help and guide." As the leader had shown trust in me, I replied in the affirmative. The leader heaved a sigh of relief and praised my fighting spirit. I was worried as we were the trail blazers and if by mistake we climbed a different peak or remained short of the summit, the Nepal Government will disallow us the credit of climbing Mt. Everest. We all started on 8 May for Camp III and reached there and in the evening K. Lal said that he was not feeling well. Somehow I motivated him and he agreed to pull on with us. All six of us reached the summit camp (South Col) at an altitude of 26,000 feet on 9 May.

The South Col is known as the windiest place in the world. As is its characteristic, the wind was blowing away our tent; I was a little bit worried and kept on asking Prem Singh, AC, to look outside and check the weather condition. He said, "Don't worry, it is quiet and clear." Being senior, I instructed my fellow climbers to check their oxygen cylinder apparatus and their climbing gear. I told them that everybody should sleep early and get up at midnight. We will be starting from summit camp for the summit ascent at around 0300 a.m. in the morning. I instructed everyone and we prepared our food, soup, had a meal and went to sleep. We had three small oxygen cylinders, one for the night, and two for the final summit. I woke up at 0030 a.m. in the morning and checked the weather outside. It was cloudy and not clear as it should be for the summit. Everybody started complaining that the oxygen was not properly working and crampons were not fitting on shoes and other problems. P.S. Papta, DC (now Comdt.) told me, "Sharma, the weather does not seem to be good and I would like to return to lower camp." He along with another member went back. My rope member K. Lal was also in dilemma

and had a problem with his crampons. I told Prem Singh to help him. But it was taking too long and I was anxious to move ahead as the leader, entrusted with a responsibility. I decided to climb along and to open the route. As I started climbing, the weather started improving slowly.

I kept climbing along continuously for five hours opening a route in fresh snow of 4-5 feet. After five hours of a gruelling steep climb, I decided to take rest for a while. While sitting, I saw a person down below following me. I decided to wait for him as it is always better to move in pairs. I slowly kept on moving so that the other climber reached me and he turned out to be Prem Singh, AC. After a short while we both saw another climber following us and then we decided to wait for him too. The other member was K. Lal. Again my rope united and we all three moved ahead. I was happy that my two fellow climbers had joined me. We all were carrying two oxygen cylinders each and the weight was 19.5 kg with mask. At this height, carrying even a 100 gm of extra weight appears to be too heavy. I told both of them that we can leave one oxygen cylinder here which will be used by us on our return journey and that way we could reduce our weight. We unloaded our oxygen cylinder and marked the area. The fresh snow hampered our movement. Finally the moment arrived when we reached atop Mt. Everest, it was 1600 hrs on 10 May 1992 and I spoke to my leader on walkie-talkie. There was joy at Base Camp. All the leaders of thirteen countries were waiting in the ITBP tent at Base Camp to hear the news of our first ascent of pre-monsoon 1992 of Mt. Everest. We hoisted the national, ITBP and IMF flags atop and took photographs. There were celebrations at Base Camp. Everybody congratulated our leader for the success.

Once we made it to the top, fresh worries started for the return journey as maximum casualties had occurred in mountains while descending. It was already 1600 hrs and was getting dark and we did not have any guide/HAP with us. After spending 30 minutes on the summit, we started our return journey. Again, I took the lead and started descending. Exhaustion made our movement slow. Meanwhile, K. Lal started complaining of stomachache and was resting after every 2-3 steps. I was literally pulling him along.

Twice we had a fall and went inside a crevasse. But somehow I managed to bring my rope back to South Col camp at 2100 hrs. K. Lal was completely exhausted and continued to complain of severe stomachache. I spoke to Base Camp and asked the medical officer for treatment. Dr. C.R. Patnaik advised treatment on walkie-talkie and I gave some medicine to him. It was an arduous journey to the summit which took 18 gruelling hours. On 11 May, after us, 40 climbers made it to the summit. Three of us reached Base Camp on 13 May 1992 safely. After that, there were a series of functions at Kathmandu. Celebrations went on for the next three months in India.

I still think if I had not started along on 10 May 1992, the credit for making history by ITBP would have gone to someone else. I still cherish the memories of my climb and when I close my eyes I can remember the gruelling efforts step by step and second by second.



FIRST WOMAN TO CLIMB TWICE

1993

Bachendri Pal

On return from Everest in 1984, I dreamt of coming back to Everest, this time to lead an expedition for giving maximum opportunity to other women. The preparation for the Women Everest Expedition started in 1990, with letters being sent all over India by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation for women to apply, for taking part in the selection of the Everest expedition. Only 34 women from all over India applied, which really showed that women had yet to identify with mountaineering as a sport. Still, inwardly I was happy about one thing. There were a lot of women from rural background amongst the 34. This was also the highest number of women to be selected for any expedition in the history of Indian mountaineering. When the women assembled in Delhi on August 1991, there was one thing evident in all of them: although inexperienced, they all looked determined and exuberant.

Out of the 34 women of the first selection to Mt. Kamet and

Abigamin, the team was pruned to 17 of the better climbers for the second pre-Everest selection expedition to Mt. Mamostang Kangri (24,626 ft.) in 1992. In this pre-Everest expedition, we recorded the first women ascent of Mamostang Kangri.

The final Everest team was announced in November 1992. The team assembled in Delhi in December 92. Already valuable time had been lost. But the women were aware as to what they had to do. All of them rose together in unison for the enormous organizational work, required for an Everest expedition. It was only with their honest and dedicated efforts that the work which could have normally taken 12 to 18 months was completed in just 3 months.

The team left Delhi on 3 March for Kathmandu and we began our approach march on 10 March. It took us 12 days to reach Namche Bazaar from Jiri. This journey helped us a lot in our physical conditioning and was to prove extremely useful later. It is in Namche Bazaar that the team had the first good view of the top of Everest and the young women stood watching in awe. The high mountains all round change the total scene and one becomes aware of the serious climbing ahead. From Namche we reached Thyangboche, where we offered prayers in the famous monastery, which was newly built after it was destroyed by fire in 1984, which I found to look different altogether.

Finally on 27 March we reached Base Camp. The Base camp which we had selected was well-chosen and the place was converted into our temporary headquarters, from where we would launch our expedition. There were about 14 expedition teams in all, attempting Everest from different routes. Later, however, when they failed in their attempts they came back to the same route. So far, things had gone according to our plan.

A peculiar situation also arose which became a cause for worry. The men's Korean team who had found a route through the Ice Fall were demanding 200 US dollars per head for using their route. Rita met them again and again for negotiations. I had already made up my mind not to concede to their demand. However, I found other expeditions paying up. I told them that we had purchased equipment in Nepal and if they wanted they could have the

equipment in Nepal which otherwise we would have used in the Ice Fall. They got quite fed up with my tough stand and remarked "Indian women are big problem."

When they found it futile to get money from us, a compromise solution was worked out. We gave them some equipment like carabiners, ropes, pitons, aluminium ladders, and 50,000 Nepalese rupees. We also kept two of our Sherpas to maintain the Ice Fall route throughout, which ultimately helped everyone. For load ferry and acclimatization two teams were made—A and B. I led team 'A' whereas Rita was with team 'B'.

Women carried loads of 12 kg and Sherpas carried 15 kg. Two ferries to Camp I were made compulsory. Everyone rose to the occasion and performed extremely well. Chandradidi had some problem at Base Camp, but later improved. For eight days continuously, load ferry was carried out by both 'A' and 'B' teams. Camp I was occupied on 10 April by 'A' team consisting of Sarla, Deepu, Radha, Anita, Kunga and Nima.

It took nearly two hours to reach Camp II (21,600 ft) from Camp I. While 'A' team was ferrying loads from Camp I to Camp II. 'B' team occupied Camp I at the same time. It is at Camp II we heard the news of a Korean and a Sherpa reaching the summit of Everest from north side and descending from south-east side, because of bad weather. The news was well received by all of us and it did boost our morale. It was the first success on Everest in the season.

One load ferry to Camp III was made mandatory for everyone. The movement plan to Camp III was divided between both 'A' and 'B' teams. On 16 April, 'A' team ferried to Camp III while 'B' team ferried to Camp II.

On 18 April, 'A' team including the leader occupied Camp III. I had made it a point to go to Camp III to remove the psychological fear in my team. They were aware that I was trapped under an ice avalanche in 1984 and nearly lost my life. The camp at Lhotse is very precariously placed and there is always a lurking fear of an avalanche. Coming again to Camp III, as I did, restored the team's confidence. The team members later acknowledged

this. Down below, 'B' team ferried to Camp II and occupied it on 18 April.

On 19 April, 'A' team went further up and reached beyond the Yellow Band, Rajeev accompanying them. This was more of an exercise to test the endurance of the team at high altitude where oxygen is less. I talked to Rajeev on the radio-set from Camp III, and I was very happy to see them. After putting the camp in order we returned to Camp II. The 'B' team which was resting that day welcomed us with hot drinks and there was much merry-making. The cold desolate place did not dampen our spirit.

On 20 April, while 'A' team returned to Base Camp, 'B' team went into action for load ferry to Camp III. Baldev was with 'B' team. Dicky, Savita and Nimmi completed their ferry to Camp III. Few of the other women who could not complete the ferry that day, did so the next day. As already mentioned, two women (Bimla and Harsha) had returned to Base Camp. 'B' team occupied Camp III on 21 April. The next day as per schedule they were to go up to Yellow Band and come down to Camp II. However, because of the acclimatization problem faced by some of the members as reported by Baldev on the radio-set, 'B' team could not go up, and descended to Camp II.

30 April was a good day. The weather had cleared raising the team's spirit. I was just waiting for such a day to announce the team. The first team comprised of Deepu, Kunga, Santosh and Dicky. A reserve team of Suman and Savita was also announced. This was done to avoid any confusion, as to who would fall in line in case such an eventuality arose or in case we had additional resources and time at hand. This was keeping in line with the plan when I had set out to climb Everest.

Both summit teams set off for Camp I on 1 May, with the leader. In the meantime all the Sherpas with Rajeev occupied Camp II. The plan was to ferry some vital loads, not carried earlier to Camp IV. Since there were quite a few expeditions going on simultaneously, we had heard of equipment getting stolen. Items like oxygen cylinders, tents (only few had been put earlier) etc. had to be carried to Camps II and IV. The Australian team helped

us by giving their tents for South Col. We in turn helped them by letting our porters carry their loads from Base Camp to South Col. It was nice to cooperate closely with other countries in situations when one could count on only each other for support. Humanity prevailed over all other issues like caste, colour, creed, religion etc.

On 2 May, the first summit team occupied Camp II and the next day it moved to Camp III. On 4 May, Deepu, Anita, Nimmi and Radha left for Camp IV at South Col (26,000). All of them except Radha reached South Col; she returned from below the Yellow Band. She was feeling giddy because of lack of oxygen. Nimmi, Deepu and Anita arrived at South Col in perfect physical condition. They used oxygen only while sleeping, that too after my persuasion. I wanted them to preserve their energy for the next day.

The unpredictable weather again showed up on 4 May, all of a sudden. I talked to Rajeev and told him to proceed to Camp IV, spend a night and try for the summit only if the weather improved. Other teams were found returning from Camp III and Camp IV couple of days later, a decision which they regretted, when they found our team had kept up the progress.

The second summit team in the meantime had progressed to Camp II on 3 May and stayed there the next day also. On 5 May, the second summit team reached Camp III, but had to return as the day's drama unfolded.

At 0030 hrs on 5 May, Nimmi, Deepu, Anita, Rajeev, Nima Norbu with Sherpas Nima Dorjee (who had climbed Everest twice already), Sirdar Nag Temba and Nima Rita set off for the summit. All of us were very anxious and were eagerly waiting to hear the news from the summit party. Rajeev came on the air at 0700 hrs much to our relief and informed us of the slow but good progress. There was too much snow deposited which made movement difficult. We could make out the tremendous effort and struggle made by the team from what Rajeev narrated to us. The weather was however good. There were mixed feelings amongst the team at lower camps. With anxiety, anticipation, expectancy, urging

them on, there was also a feeling that it was possible against all odds. Then, at 1530 hrs Rajeev again came on the air. They were very close to the South Summit. What was to be done? I told him to keep in mind the time, weather and physical fitness before proceeding. Rajeev reported that although weather and physical fitness was good, it was late to carry on. Still, they persisted with the climb. The women displayed tremendous courage and tenacity in the face of adverse ground conditions and extreme physical and mental effort. At 1630 hrs the team had braved their way to the South Summit. It was great going till then. But it had become too dangerous to carry on, even though only 72 metres remained for the summit—about an hour's climb. Rajeev reported on the position at that height and said weather was good, fitness of climbers was good, but the snow condition on the ground was bad. I told Rajeev to return keeping the safety of climbers uppermost in mind. It was decided to retreat as time was fast running out. The women were very disappointed. Deepu even argued. Nima Dorjee, the high altitude Sherpa, retorted, "You sleep on the summit?" It was the correct decision. If we were alive we could always make a second attempt. The team finally descended—exhausted, disappointed but safe to South Col at 2230 hrs. They were on their feet for 22 gruelling hours. The two Sherpas kept for support at South Col were of great help. They went up to receive the team with tea and hot water. Although we had to pay extra for the security and safety of climbers, it gave tremendous psychological boost to have support at that attitude.

Tired as they were, the summit team had to spend an uncomfortable sleepless night at South Col. The next day, on 6 May, they set out early from South Col for their descent.

Although the failure of the first attempt had created a temporary setback, we took it in our stride. I had seen triumph and tragedy on Everest before, and I knew Everest represents the ultimate challenge to any mountaineer. The morale of the team was kept high and they were explained that in such expeditions, success and failure went hand in hand.

With renewed vigour and morale, 'B' team consisting of

Santosh, Kunga, Sarla, Dicky, Baldev and four Sherpas moved up and occupied Camp III on Lhotse Face on 8 May. The next day this team reached South Col from where the summit bid was to be launched.

At exactly 0100 hrs on 10 May, the summit team excluding Sarla left South Col for the summit. I was monitoring all movement from Camp II where I had stationed myself since 1 May. The progress was agonizingly slow. Weather was relatively stable and as the morning dawned, puffs of clouds could still be seen above in the distance. The climb was slow and steady. We crossed the South Summit and then the Hillary Step. Suddenly the clouds lifted and so did the spirit of the climbers. Battling some of the world's toughest terrain through snow, ice and chilling winds, the team reached the summit at 1215 hrs in the afternoon.

It was a momentous day for India and the entire expedition. Eight persons including three women stood atop Everest. Santosh Yadav became the only woman in the world to climb Everest twice, and Dicky, the youngest woman ever to reach the summit at 19 years of age. The team spent half an hour at the top offering prayers and taking photographs and then started to climb down. They reached South Col by 1630 hrs. They were on their feet for nearly 17 gruelling hours. They had to spend the night of 10 May at South Col.

On 14 May, the third summit party of Radha, Deepu, Suman, and Savita with Rajeev, Nima and four Sherpas left Camp II for Camp III at 0630 hrs. They reached Camp III in good time. At 1100 hrs Kunga, Dicky and Santosh went back to Base Camp. Deepu, who had to return just 200-odd feet short from the summit on 5 May, was persuaded to go for the summit again. On 15 May, the third summit team occupied Camp IV.

16 May proved to be one of the better days as far as the weather was concerned. At 0130 hrs, early in the morning, the team set out on its journey to the summit. The strategy of sending big groups worked wonderfully before and I was confident that it would work again. The route lay along the eastern slope of the South-East Ridge (a virtual knife's edge with vertical drops of

thousands of feet on either side) and cut directly across to the South Summit, from where it is difficult to proceed. The Hillary Step is a short vertical ice wall, which has to be climbed by fixed ropes. With chilling winds hitting them and each step laboured, the team of four women, two technical advisers and four Sherpas finally reached the summit at 1045 hrs. It was a significant, proud and historic moment for India and Indian mountaineering.

After staying on top for about half an hour, the team beat a hasty retreat considering the unpredictable weather. On 17 May everyone reached safely at Camp II where there was a mini celebration. On 20 May, Base Camp was reached. Everyone was safe which was the most important thing.

This was a historic expedition in more ways than one. For Indian and Nepalese women, to have achieved success as a team on their first expedition to Everest was indeed a world class achievement. It was not my aim and objective to lead the expedition for creating records. But, that the expedition created as many as seven world records only went to reinforce the objective of motivating women of both countries to be independent, resourceful and enterprising. As Sir Edmund Hillary summed up: "The women did not conquer the mountain but conquered themselves and the heart of millions of people of both India and Nepal." Our gratitude goes to Captain M.S. Kohli, President, Indian Mountaineering Foundation, who, against opposition from some eminent mountaineers, persisted in making our expedition possible.

Team Members

Bachendri Pal (Leader), Santosh Yadav (Dy. Leader), Nimmi, Sherpa, Upasana, Malla, Chandra Prabha, Deepu Sharma, Kunga Bhutia, Dicky Dolma, Radha Devi, Bimla Negi, Savita Martolia, Suman Kutiyal, Sarla Negi, K. Saraswati, Dr. R. Patel, Harsha Panwar and G. Anita. Technical advisers: Rajeev Sharma, B. Kanwar and Nima Norbu.



ITBP CLIMB FROM THE NORTH

1996

M.S. Kohli

Towards the end of my tenure as advisor, I decided to spend all my energies towards preparing the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP) team to take up the challenge of Everest from the formidable northern route. We decided to attempt Everest in 1996 from the difficult northern route, once followed by Mallory and Irvine in 1924. Little did I know then that 1996 would become a year of triumph and tragedy for the ITBP.

To prepare the team adequately, I planned two pre-Everest expeditions, to Mana peak in the Central Himalayas during 1994 and another expedition to an un-named peak in Ladakh during 1995. There was considerable difficulty in selecting the leader. The choice finally fell on Mohinder Singh, a highly experienced mountaineer.

The progress during the next few weeks was satisfactory. Six camps were set up, one after another, on schedule. Camp III at 21,399 feet was Advance Base Camp and the main centre of the

expedition. Two months of gruelling efforts on the difficult northern route offered new dimensions of experience to the ITBP mountaineers. The route involved meticulous planning and a high degree of physical endurance.

On 9 May, the summit party moved up to the highest camp at 26,994 feet. That year, there were a total of 15 expeditions attempting Everest from various routes on the northern side. Eight of these teams, including the ITBP team, were following North Col route on which Mallory and Irvine had met with a fatal accident in 1924. A few years ago, Mallory's body was found by an American team. The camera that Mallory was using was not traced.

Of the eight teams on North Col route, the Japanese and the Indian teams were ahead of the others and had moved up to the last camp the same day. Between the summit and the last camp there were two major obstacles—First Step at 27,844 feet and Second Step at 28,192 feet. It was obvious that the first team which surmounted these two obstacles would have to do the major task of tackling these two steps and fixing ropes on their steep faces. The ITBP team and the Japanese team, as I understood later from Junko Tabei, had decided to attempt the peak the same day, i.e. on 10 May.

The tenth of May dawned bright and clear. I woke up somewhat tired and disturbed. I had not slept well due to the excitement. The summit team, I thought to myself, must be negotiating the treacherous last bit followed by Mallory and Irvine 72 years earlier.

Tall trees in our Sainik Farms residence attract hundred of birds early in the morning whose chirping, whistling and singing act as a wake up call. As I walked out to the lawn a pair of lapwings welcomed me. As a normal routine I would enjoy watching the birds and playing with our black dog. But on that eventful day my thoughts were at the dizzy heights of Everest.

My cordless telephone rang a few times but all were local calls. I had arranged a satellite telephone for the expedition and during the past few weeks Mohinder Singh had been regularly contacting me, almost daily. Till 9.30 a.m. there was no call from him. It

was a very windy morning, not a welcome sign for the summit day. Delhi and Everest are more or less on the same latitude. During the past few years, during my three Everest expeditions, I had noticed that whenever Delhi faced strong winds there was every likelihood of Everest too being lashed by the elements.

I kept my fingers crossed and proceeded to the ITBP headquarters. During the whole day I was anxiously waiting for news. Finally, after lunch, Mohinder came on the line. A few messages on the fax and satellite phone followed. The summit party consisting of T. Smanla, Tsewang Paljor and Dorje Morup was now on its way up. The subsequent story of triumph and tragedy can best be described in Mohinder's own words:

"The wind began to gather speed and became threatening. After a tiresome ascent of about 200 metres on the edge of the ridge, they reached the base of First Step. No need arose to lay or fix rope. The clouds had started drifting along. The climbers' hearts were beating steadily. A slight slip on this tricky route could be extremely difficult. Roping up was a must on that section of the climb."

Looking upward at the precipitated rock of 20 to 25 ft coated with granular snow, it looked as though it was going to be the most difficult patch to ascend. They looked around to find an alternative to avoid this First Step of 8498 metres. They tested the old ropes already hanging and climbed up. They installed a new fix-rope and old ones were shifted to a side.

Harbhajan and three others were trailing behind. Their progress was slow due to severe wind. They reached Step I at about 1130 hrs. Smanla waved at them. Harbhajan and Jot Singh signalled them to wait then and there. But the signals could not be seen clearly in the strong winds and they failed to understand each other's message.

Smanla and the party continued its climb on a narrow snow arête and passed the projected rock, nearly half way from Step II. They trudged and traversed through exhausting snow conditions. It was a tricky and dangerous ascent of about 150 metres that brought them to the base of Second Step (8600 metres). From a

prow, 90 to 100 ft high, they moved up and reached closer to the aluminium ladder. They found the ladder intact and re-adjusted it. There were five or six nylon ropes lying in different directions on the rock face of 80 to 90 degrees. To the left, there was a chimney-like snow gully of about 10 ft which was not accessible. They climbed up the ladder with the help of ropes. The three-part aluminium ladder was about 12 ft (four metres) and one had to maintain balance carefully at the upper end of the ladder.

The last stretch of a 30-ft rock was approached from the right side as they went up further. They carefully skirted the area above the steep cliff around the slope. After about half an hour and moving a little further on snow slope, they stood on top of Second Step which was at 28,250 ft.

By now they were being hit by a stronger wind. Smanla's party was braving the fearful weather as they continued their climb with a display of over-confidence and untiring efforts. But deputy leader Harbhajan and three others were very tired and fatigued because of their slow progress to First Step. Smanla, Dorje and Paljor looked behind them and saw they had left Harbhajan's party far behind. It was not going to be easy to narrow the distance between the two parties. Smanla's party was heading for the summit with full determination. They decided not to give up the climb. They assessed the situation. For them it was a matter of pride to be able to go ahead for the summit despite the unfavourable weather and the odd time. Their continuous climbing and united efforts in roping up had cemented their confidence. They were sure that they could make it and reach the summit.

Their will-power was indeed very strong. They had to struggle hard to get to where they had reached in difficult conditions. Further 200 metres on the route they had to confront another 30-ft rock, a snow and ice knoll which was usually known as Third Step. Trudge along the northern slope, traverse westward around the cliff and you reach the ridge in the north-west.

At the base of Third Step, there was a lee of small rocky ice ledge, about 5 to 6 ft in size, where the climber re-checked their oxygen bottles and changed it. Reserves are normally kept at this place for use while returning.

They moved up laboriously on the dangerous hard snow slope of a gradient of 50 to 60 degrees. They ascended for about 300 metres roping up. Prem and his men at camp IV (North Col) were continuously watching their progress through binoculars. They witnessed their entire day's activities at Step I, Step II and further. Camp IV used to transmit climbing reports on radio set to the leader at ABC (Camp III). But Smanla did not open his radio set. Harbhajan and his three-man party did not carry radio sets when they left Camp VI. Harbhajan as a group leader should have taken along the radio set as is the usual practice. The Sherpas of the Japanese team and the Norwegian expedition members also focussed their telescope and kept their radio set on, the whole day at Camp IV and Camp V. As the leader of the Indian expedition, I was eagerly awaiting radio contact from the advancing party. They were last spotted at about 1530 hrs at an altitude of 28,550 ft. Prem had seen three black moving figures. The wind had gathered speed and the powdery snow had started lashing higher mountains.

At 1430 hrs, Harbhajan had abandoned the climb a little above Step I (8500 metres) and returned to Camp VI with Jot Singh, Lobsang and Wangchuk. Harbhajan and Lobsang were frostbitten. They were in agony. My first summit party had been divided into two groups. The advance of the four-man group of deputy leader Harbhajan had been halted by bad weather. The three-man group with Smanla had a very tough job ahead, engulfed as it was in cruel weather. At this juncture, what should a leader do? It was a crucial moment for the expedition.

At 1735 hrs, the walkie-talkie crackled again. I picked up the set from Kanhaya. Everyone ran towards me to hear the conversation.

"Smanla on the line, Sir."

"Yes carry on, this side is the leader."

Smanla: "All three of us have reached the summit."

Leader: "Congratulations. Well, look around, if any item has been planted or a Chinese device (tripod) left."

Smanla: "O.K."

The following day, hope turned into anxiety and, finally, into gloom. Just before lunch Mohinder rang up and gave the shocking news that the three summiters had not returned to their camp the previous evening. The weather during the night had been murderous and there was now no hope of their survival. During the course of the day, there were several messages from the expedition, some confusing.

When Smanla, Paljor and Morup did not return to their last camp, Mohinder reported that he went to the leader of the Japanese team on the 10th night to request for help to rescue the Indian climbers. The Japanese team was scheduled to attempt the summit on the 11th. According to Mohinder the Japanese leader assured him that his team would carry out the rescue instead of making its own summit bid. Mohinder himself felt helpless, being unable to use his own climbers for any rescue operation.

Two Japanese climbers, Eisuke Shigakawa, aged 21, and Hiroshi Hinada, aged 36, belonging to the Fukuoka Mountaineering Expedition, accompanied by three Sherpas, left Camp VI at 4.00 a.m. While going up they came across one ITBP climber lying unconscious near First Step.

This was apparently Paljor who was perhaps in a semi-conscious state. He was, in fact, still alive because when the Japanese team later returned to this place after climbing Everest, he was no more there. One of the Sherpas later reported in Kathmandu that when they reached First Step at 6.00 a.m. on their way up, Paljor was lying in snow, terribly frostbitten. He had spent the night without shelter and oxygen, and was moaning unintelligibly. Not wanting to jeopardise their ascent by stopping to assist him, the Japanese team had continued climbing towards the summit.

On 10 May, weather played havoc on the Nepalese side too. There were about a dozen expeditions on this side of the mountain. Twenty-four climbers from five expeditions had moved up to the summit. They were also caught in a desperate struggle

for their lives as they fought one of the severest blizzards that threatened to blow them off the mountain. The dead included some of the world's most skilled climbers. One victim left behind his seven-month pregnant wife. A Taiwanese climber who had spent 63 hours on the world's highest peak in treacherous snow without food, oxygen or a sleeping bag, was found crawling into his tent on South Col. He was later rescued by a helicopter. "I spent 63 hours with no food, no water, no oxygen, no sleeping bag and no tent," said Gau Ming-ho, the 47-year-old leader of the Taiwanese Mountaineering Expedition—his frostbitten hands and feet in bandages and his nose blackened by the bitter cold. Gau was stuck up at 2591 feet and could manage to get only up to 2530 feet where he spent the night of 10 May when he was given up as dead by some of his colleagues.

Amongst the dead was also New Zealander Robert Hall, 35, who had reached the Everest summit five times and was leading a commercial group. He died while trying to help one of his clients till it was too late in the evening. Also dead was Scott Fisher of Seattle who was leading the Everest Environment Expedition. There were some miraculous survivals, including that of an American celebrity Sandy Hill Pittman.

Subsequently, the leader, Mohinder Singh, was in a quandary whether to call off the attempt or move up. He gave a graphic account of his feeling and subsequent happenings in his book *Everest—The First Indian Ascent from North (Col)*.

Organising the second summit party was a daunting task. It demanded undivided attention of mind and a spirit of frank enquiry. However, it was conveyed over the satellite telephone that the ITBP headquarters wanted us to resume the climb. They had given their approval after great deal of thought. The idea was that a feeling of resentment or jealousy should not intrude the team. A tragedy was already in the kitty. I wanted to take measures, even extreme and unpleasant ones, to ensure unblemished success the second time around. The North Face and Second Step features looked very steep and fraught with danger.

The second attempt was going to be very sentimental for all

of us. It would brook no divided attention. It called for intensive preparations. It was not just a matter of will and vision, but also demanded patience and perseverance in abundance. I had to select members for the second summit party and keep a team of standby members also. I had to scan the mind of each and everyone who was considered physically fit.

Finally, a decision was made to select the team for the second attempt. First we announced our second line of the summit party—Ang Therkey, Sardari and Rajan Towang. Deputy leader Harbhajan with Lobsang, Jot Singh, Poonam and Wangchuk went down to Base Camp for recuperation on 15 May. Prem, who was selected as second summit party's leader, had backed out. He had, no doubt, acted on receiving some unfavourable indication from his family and priest on the phone about the likely fate of the second summit expedition. It was a good enough reason for him to decline a historic opportunity and responsibility.

What happened subsequently will be described by the deputy leader of the expedition Paras Moni Das.

“On 15 May, the second group led by Sangay Sherpa moved up to Camp V. On 16 May the group consisting of four members and Kusang occupied Camp VI. The summit teams of the Norwegian and Japanese groups had also occupied Camp VI. On 17 May, our second group along with the Norwegians and Japanese climbed in copybook style. We watched through a telescope at ABC as the climbers emerged from Second Step, crossed over a snow field, ascended the fixed ropes on a rocky section joining with the Great Couloir before climbing onto the final summit slope. They were on the top by 0955 hrs with Smanla's prayer flags, before turning back. The weather was stable and they were able to descend to the safety of Camp VI without difficulty. On the way down, they spotted the body of Smanla, lying without a jacket and crampons, 20 metres away from their route above Second Step. His rucksack was missing and so was his red Goretex Jacket. Lower down, they spotted the body of Dorje lying under a boulder near their line of descent, close to Camp VI. His jacket was intact and his rucksack lay by his side. The bodies

continued lying in their resting places high up on Chomolungma in the finest cenotaph in the world."

The summit party moved down cautiously on 18 May past Camp IV and I met them with others at the ABC.

In the next few days, the rest of the team wound up the high camps and most members were back in Base Camp by 10 May with the weather packing up.

After a brief visit to Lhasa, on 1 June we flew from Lhasa to Kathmandu and reached Delhi by another flight where the rest of the team had reached by road. The team was lost in the world of the media, receptions and controversies but the climber knows that 'the Effect of Everest' is upon him forever.



MAHARASHTRIANS ATOP

1998

Hrishikesh Yadav

Sahyadri is the training ground of trekking and mountaineering activities for Maharashtra. It has given many good mountaineers to Maharashtra. The activities here have resulted into three expeditions from Maharashtra to eight-thousanders. With the support of several leaders and friends, particularly Tatas, the mountaineers have succeeded in overcoming obstacles that came their way.

On 12 March 1998, an expedition left Mumbai. Loads weighing 7.5 tons were carried to Kathmandu and then to Tibet border by a truck of Prakash Roadlines, the official transporter of the expedition. This truck was accompanied by Bharat Yadav to ensure its safety. Immediately thereafter, the team left by train.

On 20 March, the team members left for acclimatisation trek to Langtang Himal. Uday and Jayawant, both deputy leaders, stayed back as some expedition work was to be completed in Mumbai and New Delhi.

In New Delhi, the two deputy leaders underwent a formal training for using the Inmarsat-B equipment at VSNL, New Delhi.

This equipment was used by the expedition for satellite communication with India from Tibet. VSNL had become 'official telecommunication service provider'.

On 30 March, the team of thirteen members, eight Sherpas and two cooks left Kathmandu for Kodari. Instead of five days it took thirteen days to reach Base Camp. Two small trucks took food and equipments to Kodari.

Officials in Chinese Customs checked the equipments at the crossing of the Friendship Bridge. The Tata Sumo, Tata Mobile and the equipment truck travelled up to Friendship Bridge. After the bridge, in Chinese territory, two trucks were hired for all the equipment, team members and Sherpas to reach Zangmu. There, at the Chinese check-post, a representative of the China-Tibet Mountaineering Association received the team.

At Zangmu, due to a blockage of road, the team had to stay here for six days. Meanwhile, to be fit and acclimatised, the team members climbed around and played volleyball or football.

On 9 April, the team moved in a convoy of jeeps to the next location Xegar (4350 m) 230 km away from Nyalam. The journey during this 230 km distance was memorable. En route, the team drove through a pass called Lalung La (5050 m). Xegar was the last destination on the route to Base Camp of Mt. Everest. A two-day halt at Xegar, brought the team members closer to the Tibetan culture. At Xegar, there is a fort at a height of 4750 m. A climb to the fort helped in acclimatisation.

On 10 April, Narendra Keni and others joined at Xegar, along with all the goods. Through the avalanche-prone area between Zangmu and Nyalam, Narendra Keni, Mukesh Maiseri, Paraga Sahsrabudhe and the Sherpas did a great job of transporting the seven and half tons of loads, using local Tibetan porters. Not a single box was damaged.

On 11 April, the team left Xegar early in the morning and reached Base Camp at 10.30 a.m. The BC at Rongbuk glacier looked like a village of small tents with their colourful national and organisational flags rising high over the tents. There were 14 teams from different nations gathered there. Sherpas, yaks,

mountaineers in different coloured outfits presented a beautiful sight indeed! All the tents were pitched on the east side of the glacier. The Indian team fixed its Base Camp on the other side of the hillock where getting water was easy and there was some protection from the winds. Along with the camp, the communication equipment was set up.

It is a tradition of the Sherpas that any movement up the mountain is started after performing the *lama puja* at the BC. Sherpa Sardar Dawa and his team started the preparations for the *puja*. It was a very windy and chilly day. Sherpa Dawa Norbu performed the rituals of the *puja*. The team members also joined Narendra Keni in performing the *puja* according to Hindu rituals.

On 13 April, weather was very bad. There was a fierce wind blowing from south to north. The team could not make any movement that day. All activities were suspended. The movement of yaks towards Advance Base Camp was postponed till the next day. The following day, an advance party moved towards Camp I (5500 m), reaching there by 11.30 a.m.

On 15 April, the sky was too cloudy and the temperature had gone below zero degree. The advance team now moved from Camp I to Camp II (6000 m). It took nearly six hours to reach Camp II. On 16 April, it was decided to take rest for a day at Camp II. Only three Sherpas moved to ABC with the yaks for occupying Camp III.

On 18 April, three members and two Sherpas moved from BC to Camp I along with 30 yaks carrying loads. Jayawant alone undertook the job of BC management. In the next two days, the advance team established Camp III in bad weather. Above the ABC, the lateral moraine was negotiated to hit the Everest massif tackling steep, unstable and dangerous ice walls, criss-crossed with crevasses. The route to Camp IV (7000 m), North Col, was now open.

A Chinese-Slovakian team had reached BC well in advance and had opened the route to Camp IV (North Col, 7000 m). The team used the ropes fixed by them. Other expeditions did the same. But the Slovakian team was demanding royalty for the same. We

called a meeting of all the expeditions at the ABC along with the liaison officer of CTMA to sort out the issue. In the meeting it was decided that instead of giving royalty, we would open the route to Camp V and VI which could be used by everybody. This proposal was accepted by all the expeditions. The American, Japanese and South African expeditions extended their full support for this task.

The three Sherpas, Phinjo, Dawa Norbu and Nima, along with the Sherpas from Japanese, American and South African teams opened the route to Camp V (7600 m). They fixed the rope and shifted some loads to Camp V.

The ferocious weather thwarted two attempts on 29 and 30 April to open the route to Camp VI. On 1 May, the determined Sherpas finally fixed the ropes up to Camp VI (8300 m). Above this point is the death zone and the real danger begins from here. It is a steep and highly risky route. Nearly 4000 ft of rope had to be fixed for safety.

The stage was now set for the final assault. The summit team was announced. Surendra and four Sherpas were to make the first summit attempt. Lovraj with two Sherpas would support them and if possible would make the second summit attempt. On 4 May, Rajesh and Mukesh moved to ABC.

On 5 May, the Chinese-Slovakian summit team reached Camp VI using the ropes fixed by the joint Sherpa team. On 6 May, the Chinese-Slovakian summit attempt started from Camp VI. They could reach only up to First Step on the North-East Ridge. Due to heavy snow deposits on the mountain, their progress was very slow and they had to return. This was the first ever summit attempt of the season.

On 6 May, following an unsuccessful attempt by the Chinese-Slovakian team, the Indian summit attempt moved up. The climbers hounded by the foul weather could only make it to Camp IV. On 7 May, at midnight, the weather threw another tantrum. It snowed heavily for ten hours and terrible winds raged the whole day forcing postponement of the summit attempt.

On 13 May, the charged-up team unleashed their energies on

the mountain. The weather was quite ideal for climbing but only Nima and Zambu, two Sherpas, moved to North Col to check the condition of the tents there. After preliminary repairs they halted overnight at Camp IV.

On 14 May, the weather seemed favourable for climbing. Surendra and Mingma Sherpa started from Camp III early in the morning and reached Camp IV and later reached Camp V in the evening. Four other Sherpas followed them to North Col. On 15 May the weather turned foul again. Nature tried to test the patience of the climbers in its own way. But, come what may, the goal has to be achieved! It was snowing heavily. A restless day it was.

On the 16th, there was a ray of hope. The sky was clear. Snowfall had stopped, but it was still windy. The weather forecast received from Mausam Bhavan, New Delhi, proved accurate. Surendra and Mingma stayed at Camp V and other Sherpas at Camp IV for three days. The summit team planned to reach Camp VI on the 17th and make final summit attempt on the 18th.

On the 17th, the summit party reached Camp VI to confront an unexpected obstacle. The two tents could not withstand strong winds and had collapsed. One tent was salvaged with difficulty. There were 16 other climbers and Sherpas from different teams gathered at Camp VI to follow the route to the summit. On the same day, our second summit party reached Camp V.

On 18 May, Surendra and four Sherpas, Dawa Tashi (Sardar), Dawa Nuru, Tamtim and Tenzing set out at 3.00 a.m. (IST) from Camp VI. After negotiating the hurdles on the rocky slopes they reached the North-East Ridge. Surendra made a call at 5.30 a.m. that they had reached the base of First Step. At 7.30 a.m. they cleared First Step. At 9.30 a.m. Surendra again called up to say that they had reached Second Step. Everyone was excited. Suspense filled the air. All eyes were set on the towering pinnacle. Suddenly, there were clouds bellowing, and the view from the BC was cut off. Now only ABC could see them. At 11.30 a.m. Surendra informed that they had crossed Second Step and were moving up.

At 12.15 (IST) the walkie-talkie crackled: "This is SA speaking

from the Top." That's all. He could speak no more. Tears of joy trickled down our cheeks. All the members gave vent to their suppressed emotions. The slogans '*Vande Mataram*' and '*Bharat Mata Ki Jai*' filled the air. Surendra again called on the walkie-talkie. His voice was heavy and saturated with joy. This call on the walkie-talkie was connected to Mumbai through satellite hook-up. The control room in Mumbai connected the call in turn to the PM's house in New Delhi, Manohar Joshi, Sharad Pawar, Pramod Mahajan and Tata House. This epoch-making achievement was the 'First Successful Indian Civilian Ascent' and the 'First Successful Summit Attempt of Spring 1998' on Mt. Everest.

After half an hour, Surendra started descending. He had reached safely Camp V by 5.00 p.m. Now, Lovraj reached Camp VI with two Sherpas for the second summit attempt.

On 19 May, Lovraj Dharmshaktu left from Camp VI with two Sherpas, Phinjo and Nima, at 3.00 a.m. (IST). At 9.45 a.m. he once again unfurled the Tricolour and the Golden Jubilee flag on the top of the world.



THE FORMIDABLE KANGSHUNG FACE

1999

Santosh Yadav

A clear, cloudless dawn on South Col of Everest. I hadn't slept all night. High above on the final pyramid, pinpoints of light from climbing lamps had danced their way up through the moonlit night. I knew the Col well, having been there thrice before on my way to the summit twice. This time, there would be no summit attempt for me. And we'd come up a different way, not the usual route through the Icefall, the Western Cwm and the Lhotse Face. Our route in April and May 1999 was up the dangerous and technically demanding Kangshung Face, a sheer drop of over 3000 metres to the Kangshung glacier now, far below.

Now, as the sun lit up the upper reaches of Everest, I could see three dots high up on the ridge, making good progress. At about 6.00 a.m. they reached the South Summit and disappeared from view. They must have climbed fast. Less than an hour later my walkie-talkie crackled to life. The voice of Amar Prakash came across the airwaves: "*Pahaunch gaye summit par, bahut achcha*

lag raha hai." Even in this day of commercial climbing and overcrowding, Amar and his two summit companions, Sange and Kushang, had the top of the world to themselves. There were no other climbers above South Col, a reminder of what climbing Everest was in the old days before the advent of commercial expeditions. I spoke to all three; there was a sense of accomplishment releasing the tension of the past few days. It was a perfect end to a magnificent climb.

The journey to the top was not without its anxious moments and setbacks. Our relatively small expedition was conceived during conversations only months earlier. One day, in December 1998, I was talking with my husband, Uttam Kumar Lal, and Colonel Narendra Kumar, and discussing an attempt on Everest by the North Col route. We had already sent a proposal to the Human Resources Ministry, which also looks after the Department of Youth Affairs & Sports, to ask for funding, when Colonel Kumar suggested, "Why not the Kangshung Face?" My first reaction was cautious. "Let me first read about it and think it over", I said. But Uttam seemed to have no doubts at all. He interjected and said, "Done!"

I looked up Stephen Venables' account of the first ascent, and set about collecting articles. Some research was necessary to examine technical and other problems. Finally, I jotted a plan of action and in early January went to the concerned official, Joint Secretary P.K. Sinha, to tell him of our change of route. He was supportive, and the very next day, on January 11, I visited Kathmandu to discuss about the Kangshung Face Expedition with the travel agents and Sherpas.

Strangely enough, they tried to dissuade me. You won't get to Base Camp because the local people, especially the yak herdsman in Tibet will not cooperate, they warned. They had found the Lagma La (5500 m) full of snow, something Venables had also written about, making it difficult for yaks. I cross-examined Sherpas about the mountain and the route and they were no less pessimistic. Above Base Camp, the face was prone to avalanches and stone fall. Camps had been swept away in 1994. What they

said was demoralizing, but I realised they had no spare tents and gear. Armed with this, I took an immediate decision to take plenty of extra tents and other gears, a decision, which proved its worth once we were on the mountain.

On my way back to Delhi, I listed the problems we might face. They were:

- Sherpas.
- Equipment—I decided to take enough to spare.
- Local people—I was confident I could motivate them.
- Above BC, there was technical climbing, the objective dangers such as stone fall and snow avalanche—I felt, we could do it and play safe by timing our climb to avoid them.
- Finally, I had to convince myself that I could lead the expedition.

After this, I questioned myself, and felt I could do it.

Decision taken, at the end of January we got approval for the changed route and set about collecting funds. Our need, we estimated, was for Rs.70 lakh. The Ministry at first sanctioned Rs. 40 lakh, and Sheila Dixit, the Chief Minister of Delhi, contributed another Rs.15 lakh. When I told them we were still short, the then HRD Minister, Government of India, offered to increase it

History of the Kangshung Face

1981—First attempt by an American Expedition.

1983—Second attempt, in a changed route, by an American Expedition.

1988—First ascent of Kangshung Face by joint British-American-Canadian Expedition.

1988—Unsuccessful attempt by American Expedition.

1992—Second successful climb by Chilean Expedition.

1994—Unsuccessful attempt by American Expedition.

1999—Millennium Indian Expedition, third ascent of Kangshung Face.

right away but was advised that another grant meeting would have to be held. Eventually, the Prime Minister, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, intervened and another Rs. 15 lakh was quickly sanctioned. In the end, we managed to save some, and returned almost one lakh rupees to the government.

We were already into February and time was short. It was not, unfortunately, the end of our problem. In choosing my team, I had selected two climbers from the Indo-Tibetan Border Police (ITBP). I had great confidence in ITBP, and the ITBP at first readily sanctioned their deputation but then it was decided by the DG, Gautam Kaul, at the last minute that they should go on leave. Since this had many implications—insurance, for example—we were taken by surprise. Eventually the matter was sorted out at the last minute—just after Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Prime Minister of India, flagged off the expedition on 19 March, through high-level intervention by O.P. Arya, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs.

We also had problems getting our equipment. I was busy with organising the expedition. My Japanese climbing friend and co-leader of our 1992 Saraswati Expedition, Riko Terasawa, who treats me like a younger sister, helped us tremendously by spending her own money, visiting stores in Japan and getting us good deals, and organising equipment for us. Yet, someone had to go and bring it to India. Originally, a senior colleague from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and a former Everest, H.C.S. Rawat, had offered to make a quick trip to Japan to collect the equipment and bring it to India. He was supposed to leave on 20 March but told me on 19 March, after the flag-off ceremony, that he couldn't make the trip, without giving any reasons.

Abandoning all that was now underway—we had already been flagged off—I realized that I would have to move fast. The Japanese Embassy generously opened their Visa office on that Saturday to issue me the necessary Visa. Air India came forward with a ticket for that night. The Oriental Bank of Commerce at first took the view that they could not transact large amounts of foreign exchange on Saturday, but when I pointed out that the Japanese Embassy had gone out of their way, an alert and kind official of

the bank came forth with the amount I needed to pay for the equipment.

My trip to Japan was the quickest I'd made abroad. I took the flight, was met by my friend who had the equipment, and caught the same airplane back to India after just four hours at Narita Airport!

That wasn't all. On the night of 27 March, one day before we were to leave for Kathmandu, we were told that our tickets could not be confirmed for the next day, but were for the 30th. Once again, kindly officials from the Civil Aviation Ministry came to our rescue in this instance.

D.K. Arya, IPS (Retd.), ex-Director General of ITBP, M.P. Police, NSG, BSF, the President of Indian Adventure & Mountaineering Association, and the Vice President of Indian Mountaineering Foundation and Uttam K. Lal, my husband, are the men without whom it was impossible to organise this expedition. Their support, physically and mentally, was always with me, as a guide and guardian. They took all risk and pain to send my expedition and me. With them I was in constant touch from the Base and higher camps through satellite phone. When the expedition was struggling in the Everest zone, D.K. Arya and Uttam kept working and making necessary arrangements for the expedition in Delhi. When news of the success of the expedition reached them, I believe they were the happiest persons on earth. I salute their dedicated comradeship for mountaineering.

We were nine members who set out for Kathmandu and Tibet. In addition to Sange and Tashi from the ITBP, there was a doctor from the Indian Army, Serdendu Upadhyaya, Ms. Nari Dhami from Kumaon who was strongly recommended by the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM), Jagmohan Singh Rawat, an instructor from NIM, Loveraj Dharamshaktu from Kumaon who had just joined Border Security Force, Amar Prakash from Assam Rifles, currently posted to HMI as Instructor, and Kushang Dorje, also an Instructor from the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI). To our team, we added four Sherpas from Nepal as high altitude porters, and one cook and one kitchen boy.

Three days of preparation in Kathmandu, and we were on the bus to Kodari on the border with Tibet. After crossing the Friendship Bridge in Zangmu on the other side, we were received by our Liaison Officer, Dorje, and after due formalities, we departed in comfortable Land Cruisers the next day for New Tingri, which leads to North Col route, and diverted to Kharta, the road-head for the Kangshung Face.

We spent two days there because the yak herdsman had to round up their animals from the grazing ground. We also found out that while the accepted yak load was 60 kg, the herdsman were not willing to load that much. Our yaks are weak and will carry less, they said, leading to our hiring an extra 45 yaks for the journey!

I was determined that we would have none of the problems that earlier expeditions had with the yak people. So I consulted them on arrangements and route. The yak leader advised us not to go over the snow-bound Lagma La but to take the slightly longer Sao La, which would meet up with the shorter route at Pethang Ringmo. We agreed, and throughout the 9-day walk in, we got on fine. This was a big contrast with the Venables expedition, which had spent 21 days on the Lagma La route, thanks to heavy snowfall.

On schedule, more or less, we did our *puja* and established Base Camp on 14 April at the site of the American Advance Base Camp, at about 5500 metres on the moraine of the Kangshung glacier.

The view from the camp was stupendous, as we examined our objective for the first time. We could see the Kangshung Face rise sheer in front of us and it was awesome. To reach the foot of the Face, we traversed a moraine for about 30 to 45 minutes without much difficulty. The route up the Face began with a short rocky traverse, which led to rock climbing, including an overhang, and taking us almost three hours to reach the Scottish Gully. Amar Prakash, Sange and Kushang were the main route makers at this point, as they were high up the Face.

We fixed the ropes from the starting point almost continuously.

The gully, about four rope lengths long, presented immense stone-fall and avalanche, and it was never without fear that we crossed this gully. It wasn't technically difficult, but the rocks sometimes raced past us with the zing of a bullet.

Atop the gully, a long traverse on rock led to mixed ground and on to a sheer ice face, almost a wall, which had to be ascended direct. It was tough with no place to rest, and after the route was opened, we jummed up. This led to a small ice overhang, beyond which at about 6450 metres we leveled some tent platforms for three 4-man tents to set up Camp I on 23 April.

On 25 April, I was at Base and got the news at 10.30 a.m. that Loveraj had been hit by a stone on the face near the Scottish Gully while on a load ferry. It was clear that his eye was seriously injured. The doctor and I left immediately to help bring him down. The minute Dr. Upadhyaya saw him he turned sombre, and I knew we had a serious problem on our hands. But to make things easier for Loveraj, he made light of the injury, telling him it did not look too bad though we would have to evacuate him.

Our Iridium satellite telephone came in handy at this point. From Base, I called an eye specialist, Dr. Tatyal, at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi who guided our doctor in handling the injury. We were advised to come down immediately. I spoke to the Indian Embassy in Beijing to ask for helicopter evacuation, all the while keeping up efforts to reassure Loveraj. Since he could walk, the doctor took him down the next day with Tashi Ram to Kharta, which they reached in two days over Lagma La. I penned a letter for the Liaison Officer appealing for help and he obliged by evacuating Loveraj through the night. As a result, Loveraj reached Delhi in just three days from Base Camp and in Delhi, D.K. Arya, President of IAMA and Uttam took care of him and now his eyes are fine.

The route from Camp I to Camp II took longer, 12 days, largely because of bad weather, although the actual route making was only three days. Leaving Camp I, we quickly came upon a sheer ice slope, which we tackled direct, and the slopes above began to undulate on a steep gradient. This was technically less demanding

than the first part of the Face, where we encountered soft, deep snow, which was more exhausting. Crevasses, mostly hidden, were another problem as we rose up the Face, which was also avalanche prone, originating on the slopes of Lhotse.

Close to Camp II we came across a broken ice wall, less sheer than it was in Venables' time, but an obstacle nevertheless. The higher camp was set up at 7400 metres on 5 May, a comfortable spacious site. But almost immediately, bad weather sent us down the Face back to Base, and for 14 days we were confined to our quarters.

This was the first time I faced such a situation. It would sometimes clear in the night but the whole day it would snow. Since the Kangshung glacier emerges from a deep bowl, there was no wind and the snow kept accumulating. When we began our ascent again, we could not find our camps because they were buried under snow. The route had to be cleaned up again, along with having to dig the camp out of the snow. The tents were squashed, their poles broken, which proved the wisdom of our decision to over-stock on tents, broken poles.

There was also deep snow on the Face. We had to reopen the route to Camp II, leading to some amount of duplication of route making. In all this, however, I was proud that route-making was all the work of members, not hired Sherpas. They did splendidly on the ferries, of course, but the hard climbing work was done by our members. Camp II was reoccupied only on 21 May and the next day Amar, Kushang and Sange began to make the route above, the rest doing load ferries.

Above the Camp was a steep fissure in the Face, christened Flying Wing by the Venables' expedition. Earlier expeditions climbed this steep feature, we traversed below it and found a weakness to cut above and zigzagged our way on the slopes above, towards South Col. This was not difficult climbing. But we ran into a rope shortage.

Monitoring the situation from Camp II, I had to ask the lead climbers to return to camp. This was the 25th, and I sent them down to the slopes between Camps I and II to retrieve ropes where

they weren't absolutely necessary. While Amar and Sange went down, the rest of the members took a ferry load up to where the route had been roped up.

As a result, we were able to rope the rest of the route and the first climbers dumped loads on South Col on the 26th. The next day, seven members set up camp at South Col, with four HAPs who returned towards Camp II.

They had a harrowing return. That morning, about 90 minutes after leaving Camp II, we had heard a loud noise below us, but because of clouds, we could not figure out what had happened. It sounded like an avalanche but it was below us and without bothering, we continued up towards South Col.

When the four HAPs came back to Camp II, they radioed me to say that they could not find their way back because Flying Wing had broken and swept our camp away. That was the noise we'd heard. There was no route and no rope and no camp left. What normally took 15 minutes to traverse downhill took them 5 hours. I radioed them that they should under no circumstances stay in the open. I wanted them to make their way to Camp I in spite of the fact that ropes had been removed. They did, arriving at camp close to midnight.

That wasn't the only bit of bad news we had on South Col that evening. Just as I finished talking to them, I was told by members that three oxygen masks and regulators were not working. Each of us had one but this was a blow. I summoned everyone to my tent to give them a pep talk to keep up the morale. We only have one day, I said, and it is a crucial day. To have a chance to succeed we would send only three people on summit attempt. My regulator and mask were working and I said this would be a survival back up for the four people staying at South Col.

Then came the hardest part. Everyone in the camp was fit and it was going to be a tough decision to choose the summiters from among them. In my mind, the basis of the decision was quite clear. I chose the three who had opened most of the route. It was teamwork, yes, but in my mind they were sure summiters.

I told my members that the three people going up would get media attention, but that everyone's contribution was important, something I would endorse in my talks and book. If any benefits were to accrue, they too would be shared. It was difficult, but we were able to handle it.

On 27 May, the weather was very good, and my husband Uttam sent a message that the weather forecast for the 28th was also good. My priority was to come back safe and not lose any one to the mountain. The South Col is dangerous and the weather can change suddenly. The route down was broken already and if we left it later, we could have greater difficulties, especially if the weather changed.

So, sooner than we would have otherwise done, the summiters were ready to move. A little after midnight, on the 27th, after only a few hours rest, they moved up the final pyramid, a well-trodden route but not without its dangers and risks. I wanted them to reach the top between 6 and 8 a.m. to get good photos and reduce objective dangers. It was a moonlit night, there was no wind and they made very good progress. And they could not have done better, reaching the top at 6.55 a.m.



SOLDIERS ATOP

2001

Anand Swaroop

Draped along the greatest heights of the Himalaya, the kingdom of Nepal is a land of eternal fascination, a place where one visit is rarely enough. It is a land of ancient history, colourful cultures and people, enticing scenery and some of the best sites for trekking on earth.

Behind the time-worn temples and palaces of Kathmandu valley, above and beyond the hills that ring the valley, another 'kingdom' rises skyward. The 'abode of snow', which is what Himalaya means in Sanskrit, is a natural kingdom and a magnet to mountaineers from all over the world. Nepal's stretch of the Himalayas includes eight peaks over eight thousand metres, including the highest of them all, the mighty Mount Everest (8848 m). Known to the Tibetans as Chomolungma and to the Nepalese as Sagarmatha, the world's highest peak has been an overpowering attraction all over the world.

During the 1950s and 60s most of the important Nepalese peaks were scaled. But just because it is no longer possible to be the first to set foot on top, it has certainly not diminished the

attraction of Himalayan mountaineering. Climbing these giants today is often an adventurous sporting activity, whereas 40 years ago it required huge and well-sponsored expeditions.

There are 14 peaks over 8000 m in the world and no less than eight of these are in Nepal. Although some of the peaks actually straddle borders like Everest in Nepal and China and Kangchenjunga (8598 m) in Nepal and India. Recently, Lhotse Middle has also been added to the list of 8000ers. Nepal's magnificent mountains can be enjoyed in three distinct fashions. The easiest way is to simply look at them. This can be done by flying past them on regular flights. Or you can admire them from various popular viewpoints. If simply looking at the mountains isn't enough, you can get right in among them by trekking. Finally, there is mountain climbing.

Mountaineering became a fashionable pursuit in Europe during the second half of the nineteenth century. Having knocked off the great Alpine peaks, the much greater heights of Himalayas were the obvious new challenge. An Englishman named W.W. Graham made a mountaineering visit to Nepal in 1883 and reached the top of a 6000 m peak. Another Englishman, Tom Longstaff, who climbed Trishul in 1907, bettered him and for the next 20 years, this remained the highest summit reached in the world. Two years later, an Italian attempt on K2 was the first of the huge Himalayan expeditions with hundreds of porters.

During the 1920s and 30s, reaching the top of Mount Everest came to be seen as the major goal but apart from the inherent difficulties in reaching such heights, there were also political constraints. Nepal continued to be totally secluded and attempts on Everest were all made from the Tibetan side. British attempts were made in 1921, 1922 and 1924. The 1922 expedition used oxygen to reach 8426 m while the 1924 expedition fell just 300 m short to the top, reaching 8572 m without the use of oxygen. Apart from numerous climbers and support staff, the 1924 expedition utilized no less than 350 porters. Such massive number of porters and support staff set a pattern, which was to continue until recent years. The discovery of the body of British climbers,

Mallory and Irvine, and frozen on the north face, added a new chapter to one of the enduring mysteries of mountaineering history. In 1925, Mallory and Irvine had disappeared within sight of the summit. However, Mallory did leave behind his famous explanation of mountaineering; he said he was climbing Everest "because it is there". Further expeditions followed through 1920s and 30s but no real progress was made.

The West's new found affluence after its recovery from World War together with more modern equipment, vastly improved oxygen apparatus, new mountaineering skills and the reopening of Nepal, led to a golden age in Himalayan mountaineering. In 1951, a climber who would soon become very famous took part in an exploratory expedition to Everest—he was New Zealander Edmund Hillary. The conquest of Everest finally took place in 1953 when the British team led by Colonel Sir John Hunt put two climbers—Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary, on top of the world's highest peak.

The first Indian attempt on Everest was made in 1960. The team was led by Brigadier Gyan Singh and managed to reach the height of 28,300 ft before being defeated by bad weather. The second attempt was made in 1962 under the leadership of Major John Dias. This time the team reached 28,700 ft and was again defeated by persistent bad weather. The third Indian expedition was attempted in 1965. This was led by Capt. M.S. Kohli. This time they were successful and managed to put nine people on top within eight days. More attempts were made subsequently by teams mainly from ITBP and some clubs in 1984, 1987, 1993 (an all-women's team), 1997 and 1999 (Kangshung Face).

Though these were not purely Army expeditions, a majority of the members in these expeditions were from the Army. An Indian record was created in 2001 when 10 climbers of the Indian Army Everest Expedition scaled Everest on 23/24 May 2001 and seven Sherpas also made it to the top. An impressive record of 17 atop from one team. I wonder how many more years shall pass before this record is broken.

The first exclusive Army Expedition was launched in 1985. The

expedition turned out to be a failure due to unprecedented bad weather resulting in the death of five officers. The expedition was called off prematurely due to these tragic events. After that, attempts were made in 1992 to plan another expedition to Everest but due to various reasons it did not materialize. In pursuit of the undying spirit for mountain adventure, the Indian Army launched a pre-monsoon expedition to Everest in 2001. In doing so, our team paid homage to those five climbers of Indian Army Everest Expedition 1985, who lost their lives while attempting the mighty mountain. The proposal for the second Army Everest Expedition was initiated in 1998, and final sanction of the Government of India was received in 2000. The Army Adventure Wing, under Military Training Directorate was responsible for forging the dream of summiting Everest, from just an idea into a reality.

The expedition was led by Colonel Krishan Kumar, AVSM, who himself is an outstanding mountaineer. He had led several mountaineering expeditions including one in Alaska (USA) and had operated for a considerable period on the Siachen glacier. The other members of the expedition also had an enviable record of mountaineering feats. Most of them had served in Siachen and Kargil, besides participating in several national and multinational mountaineering expeditions.

A total of 193 army personnel volunteered for the expedition, out of which 60 were shortlisted for the pre-Everest expedition-cum-selection camp, in Garhwal Himalayas. During this camp, an expedition to the technically difficult Mana peak (23,610 ft) was organized. After training, 24 climbers were selected. The team was then sent to mountain ranges beyond Manali for some extensive winter training in January 2001, where Everest-like extreme cold conditions and high-speed winds prevailed. This enabled the members to gain first-hand experiences of the newly imported equipment and forge into a well-knit team besides physical toning up and building stamina. The systematic and scientific approach to training paid rich dividends during the actual expedition.

The expedition was flagged off on 2 March 2001 by the Chief of Army Staff, General S. Padmanabhan, PVSM, AVSM, ADC.

The team travelled to Nepal by road till the road-head, which was at a place called Jiri, located about 180 km north-east of Kathmandu. The climb to Everest starts with a 14 days gradual trek from Jiri to Base Camp. Initially all the members felt extremely tired, but as the days passed, the walk became more tolerable and pleasant. One gets to know one's mates, as well by one's footprints, as by one's face. One day blended into another, then another, then another, walking steadily across the grain of the countryside, over high ridges, and down into the valleys. After Jiri, the main township along the trek is Lukla, where an airstrip caters to all the needs of trekkers and the locals. Many of the foreigners, who come to climb Everest, come from Kathmandu to Lukla by air. They have to spend some days of acclimatization before proceeding onwards to Namche Bazaar, lest they develop medical problems due to high altitude.

Namche is a bustling large village, where last moment shopping is generally done by all trekkers and climbers. Enterprising Sherpas own most of the lodges here. Namche is the capital of the land of Sherpas who migrated here from east Tibet centuries ago. Their adaptability to the tough terrain and their feats in the field of mountaineering has made them well-known the world over. The last inhabited village before the Everest Base Camp is Pheriche. It has a medical facility set up by the Hillary Foundation, and run by volunteer doctors from different parts of the world. The world famous Thyangboche monastery is located midway between Namche Bazaar and Pheriche.

At the Everest Base Camp (17,700 ft), one is struck by the sight of prayer flags fluttering above the ice-mud-rock moraines. The tents are seen pitched in an untidy manner around the rocks and the boulderous area. The sight of Base Camp gives the impression of a small township. This spring, there were 12 teams attempting Everest and six teams were exclusively attempting Lhotse, which at 8578 m is the fourth highest peak in the world. Imagine 18 teams from different countries camping together at one place, hugging each other!

It indeed looked like an international place with a variety of

skin colours and several languages spoken at the same time. It was indeed a wonderful experience interacting with the best mountaineers of the world. Before the start of the climbing season sometime in the month of March, there is a mad rush of teams to get a better or the best place on the rocky Base Camp. We had also sent an advance party but it also reached late as Sherpas from other teams had already arrived and laid claim on the best patches depending on the availability of the potable water near the respective camps. Our team managed to find a site quite close to the start of the Khumbu Icefall. The Indian camp was the biggest with 6 big tents and a proper cook house made of rock walls and a tarpaulin top.

The route to Camp I goes through the frightening Khumbu Icefall, where one feels the same way as one always felt—dwarfed. The whole twisted and broken melee was in constant motion, creaking and wailing like a tortured beast. Most of the deaths on Everest have taken place here due to deep crevasses and the hanging seracs. Each climber attempting Everest has to cross this at least 6-8 times. About 60 ladders are used to open the route through Khumbu and they often have to be replaced as they keep falling into crevasses or they get twisted due to heavy seracs falling on them. To reduce chances of accidents and also to reduce the environmental pollution, the Nepal Government has approved an organisation called Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC), which opens and maintains the route through Khumbu glacier during the climbing season. They also regulate and clean the camp locations of human and food waste. Of course, all expeditions have to pay a hefty fee for the efforts.

Camp I (19,500 ft) is situated on top of the Ice Fall. The climber takes at least four hours to reach the camp and one is never sure of getting back in one piece. Our team crossed Khumbu eight times during the expedition but we were extremely lucky to have come back without any casualty. Camp I was like a small township with at least 40-odd colourful tents of various teams strewn all over. We had taken a much bigger Army Arctic tent up there and being white it was a stark contrast to the more brightly coloured ones.

Camp II (20,500 ft) is a 3-hour climb from Camp I at a gradual gradient in the Western Cwm. It is here from where the real expedition is planned and controlled. There is a long crevasse en route, which keeps widening as we head into May and June. The whole route is over the glacier and snow, and the fear of lurking crevasses here is only second to Khumbu Icefall.

Camp III (23,500 ft) is on the Lhotse Face, the slope leading to Yellow Band, from where one goes to the summit camp of Everest or to the Lhotse summit camp. The location of Camp III is scary as a mistake can elicit a hefty price. There is little place here to pitch a tent as the slope is quite steep. The team has to dig into the ice a tent, as the slope is quite steep and it is necessary to make a temporary base just to spend the night. Unarguably, the worst camp to stay. Our team had a near miss here, when they got caught in a miserable blizzard on their way up to Camp III during one of the load ferries. An ugly reminder of the moods of Everest.

Above the realm of endless snow is the last camp to the summit: on South Col. Here, each step appears increasingly impossible. Disorientation and fatigue make the climber's head swim and the body threatens to collapse. No wonder the region above 26,000 ft is known as the 'Death Zone'. It is heartening to note that our Army mountaineers not only overcame this 'Death Zone' but also did it in style. Our team reached South Col on 22 May. The same night, the first summit party left for an attempt on the summit. It is a bit strange to learn that, on Everest, one has to start early in the night to reach the summit by morning and start the descent in time to reach South Col by mid-day. This has been learned after the sacrifice of so many climbers, who thought otherwise. The weather at those heights is so unpredictable that making a firm plan is purely theoretical in nature. What matters is endurance and having a feel of the mountain.

Our first summit party of nine climbers started from South Col on the night of 22 May. They continued to trudge on till the fittest of the lot reached the top of the world at 0755 hrs on 23 May. It was a golden day in the history of Indian Army moun-

taineers who had been dreaming of this day for a bit too long. The complete party reached back safely at South Col by late afternoon.

As if this was not enough, the second summit party of eight left for the summit on the night of 23/24 May, and they too were successful in reaching the top. This was a memorable day for all Indians as our team had broken the record of maximum Indians atop Everest in one expedition. The last was nine atop Everest in four days. We made it ten atop Everest in just two days.

Thus, the Indian Army added another feather to its cap on 23 and 24 May 2001, when they successfully scaled Mount Everest and put a record ten men and seven Sherpas on the summit. Amongst the summiteers were Capt. Saurabh Singh Shekhawat SC, Nb. Sub. Amar Prakash SC, Nk. Mohinder Singh, Nk. Neel Chand, Nk. C.N. Bodh, Nk. Bhag Chain, Nk. Palden Giaccho, Hav. T.B. Budhathoki, Hav. Chanchal Singh, and Sec. Ldr. Jigmey Namgyal. Besides these, seven Sherpas also made it. Incidentally, Nb. Sub. Amar Prakash is the only serving soldier who has summited Everest two times. Last time he climbed Everest was in 1999 from Kangshung Face, in Tibet.

The grand success of the expedition is a tribute to the determination and hard work of many people and different agencies within and outside the Army, in India as well as in Nepal. The Ministry of Human Resources Development and the corporate sector helped financially. Various departments of His Majesty's Govt. of Nepal and Royal Nepal Army extended help and cooperation to the Army Everest team. Dr. L.S. Rathore and his team of officers from National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF), worked round the clock to keep the expedition updated on the movement of weather window. It is worthwhile to mention here that the weather forecast of NCMRWF was found more reliable than that of the Americans, British and other countries who initially took weather reports from their respective agencies but during the later stages were solely dependent on Indian forecasts.

The Army Everest team apart from showing exemplary physical

fitness on the mountain, was never found wanting in times of help and need. There were occasions when our members brought down casualties from higher camps. The doctor treated them and managed three patients of other expeditions. By their timely evacuation, they could be saved. Our climbers helped in recovering the body of Babu Chirri Sherpa, the legendary mountaineer of Nepal who had unfortunately fallen into a crevasse near Camp II and died.

The success is all the more laudable as there was no injury of any kind. In the same period, three persons from other expedition teams lost their lives on the mountain.

Everest has always been and will remain the ultimate challenge for all mountaineers because of its vastness and immensity. Everest is intimidating. It is enticingly benign and also ruthlessly cruel. It demands Himalayan courage and strength more than mountaineering skill. Its armaments are colossal, its problems unique in their mammoth proportions. It is the ultimate test of human endurance as well as physical effort, to the limits of the known and unknown.

Everest has the right aura to strike fear into the heart of any climber, no matter who and how many climbers have trudged to its summit. The only predictable feature of Everest is its unpredictability. Everest is not just a sport. It is an adventure with a big capital risk associated with it. Therefore, good organisation, strict discipline of thought and good decision-making are essentially required, if the team must achieve its mission to succeed.

Till date, over 1000 mountaineers including 58 from India have successfully summited Everest since 1953. However, Mount Everest is not everyone's cup of tea. Even though so many people have reached the top since the first ascent in 1953, it is not easy to forget what a monumental challenge the entire operation is. Moreover, vagaries and unpredictability of the weather, the dangers through the Khumbu Icefall and the chances of the Sagarmatha allowing a safe passage across it, still remains the same. They haven't changed by any measure, since the first climb of Everest.



ARMY EVEREST MASSIF EXPEDITION

2003

Ashok Abbey

In 1921, a British Reconnaissance Expedition led by Lt. Col. Charles Howard Bury, while crossing the Kama Valley and the northern edge of the Kangshung glacier, observed a gigantic, monolith of a mountain to the south of Everest, with its sharp summit jutting out to the sky. The mountain though marked as E1 by the Great Trigonometrical Survey (GTS), was unsurveyed and had no local name. Bury christened this mighty peak as 'Lhotse' meaning 'South Peak' in Tibetan and continued westwards. Further west, the peak dominating the skyline had to be the focus of their reconnaissance—Everest, its unmistakable distinct form! Thus, Lhotse became the south peak of Everest and both became indispensable partners in the highest mountain massif of the world!

The Everest massif lies in north-eastern Nepal. To the north is Tibet. The massif, apart from Everest (8850 m) comprises of Lhotse (8516 m), Nuptse (7861 m) and Changtse (7583 m). Nuptse virtually means the west peak of Everest and Changtse,

which lies in Tibet, China, means the north peak. It is interesting to note that all attempts and reconnaissances to climb Mt. Everest, prior to 1950, were made from the north (Tibetan side). After 1950, this process reversed. This was primarily because Tibet, which was open till 1950 after the Chinese occupation, closed its frontiers to mountaineers. Nepal which was hitherto closed and under wraps, opened its door and the first Anglo-American Nepal Reconnaissance expedition was allowed access into the Solu Khumbu region. This was followed by the British Reconnaissance Expedition led by Eric Shipton in 1951. So began efforts to climb the mountain anew from its south face, which falls in Nepal.

In 1847, Andrew Waugh, the then Surveyor General of India (later Sir Andrew Waugh), sighted a snow-covered mountain, which looked higher than even 'Kanchenjunga' (later spelt as Kangchenjunga), which was hitherto regarded as the highest mountain of the world. John Armstrong, an officer of the Survey of India, also saw the same snowy summit and recorded it as Peak 'b'. Mt. Everest was thus initially recorded as Peak 'b'. In 1849, James Nicolson, another officer of the Survey of India, used a giant Theodolite (each weighing almost 1100 lbs and needing 12 men to carry it) to observe Peak 'b' from a distances of over 100 miles. Nicolson recorded 36 observations from five different stations, the closest being almost 108 miles from the peak. His work was unfortunately cut short as he was struck down by malaria and had to return to England. Everest's true height was first calculated by an Indian Bengali clerk, Radhanath Sikdhar in the year 1852 working in the Survey of India office. Subsequently Peak 'b' became Peak XV, after the mountains were given a new nomenclature starting in roman numerals from east to west by another Survey of India officer, Michael Hennessy. 'Kanchenjunga' thus became Peak IX. That Peak XV was perhaps the highest in the world was only disclosed in 1856 by Andrew Waugh, in a letter written to his deputy, Major Thuiller. Despite reservations by Sir George Everest himself, the mountain's name of Mt. Everest was finally adopted by the Royal Geographical Society in the year 1865—one year before Colonel George Everest died!

The pioneering efforts to climb Mt. Everest from the north were made by the British. In the 1924 British Expedition, the now famous duo of Irvine and Mallory disappeared in the upper reaches of the mountain, giving vent to intense speculation as to whether or not they reached the summit. Ironically, the mountain, though once described as unclimbable from the south by none other than Mallory himself, was finally climbed in 1953 by a British team from the South-East Ridge led by Colonel John Hunt, with Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary reaching the summit. Ever since then, nearly 15 routes have been pioneered on this great mountain with many variations. Today, despite over 1300 ascents, the lure of the mountain has in no way diminished and the tally of successes on Everest includes the first solo ascent, oxygen-less ascent, first husband and wife team, first handicapped person, first woman, fastest husband and wife team, fastest ascent, longest stay atop the summit, youngest, oldest mountaineers and various other records and landmarks which have been created.

Lhotse, the fourth highest mountain in the world, though lying in the shadow of Everest, is a mountain to be reckoned with. The summit ridge, which is about one kilometre long, has two subsidiary summits. At the eastern edge of the ridge is Lhotse Shar (8398 m) and in the center is Lhotse Middle (8413 m). The mountain is a difficult proposition and along with Annapurna is one of the least often climbed 8000-ers. The Swiss in 1952 and the British in 1953 were the first to identify in passing, a prominent narrow couloir on its west face as a possible line of ascent. A Swiss-American Expedition under Norman Dyhrenfurth was the first to attempt the mountain in 1955 from the west. Five camps were established and a high point of 8100 m was reached by Ernst Senn on 16 October. In a remarkable effort, a Swiss team in 1956 led by Albert Eggler climbed Lhotse on 17 May. Ernst Reiss and Fritz Luchsinger, leaving Camp VI at 0900 hours, reached the elusive summit at 1445 hours. They descended safely to their high camp, Camp VI, at 1815 hours. The second ascent came 21 years later by an Austro-German team (Dr. Gerhard

Schmatz). Lhotse Shar was first climbed in 1970 by an Austrian team (Siegfried Aeberli). The south face of Lhotse has seen some of the finest climbings in the Himalaya, namely by the Czechs and the Poles in 1989, Russians in 1990 and Yugoslavs in 1981. Possibilities of new routes and variations still exist on Lhotse. Prior to our attempt, Lhotse had been attempted by 96 expeditions, and only 48 of them had succeeded in reaching its difficult summit.

The Swiss Expedition in 1956 was the first expedition in the world to scale two 8000-metre peaks successfully, namely Everest (23 and 24 May) and Lhotse (17 May), a remarkable effort indeed! It was 32 years later that a South Korean team repeated their feat and climbed both the peaks as part of the same expedition. Since then Czechs in 1988, Yugoslavs in 1989, Americans in 1990, French in 1993, British in 1997 and 2002, and two South Korean teams in 2004 have the distinction of scaling two of the highest peaks of the Everest massif as part of the same expedition. In an outstanding mountaineering effort, Viki Groselj, a Yugoslav, scaled both Everest and Lhotse in 1989. This feat was repeated by Nuru Sherpa of Nepal in 1993.

India's tryst with Everest has been a long drawn 'passionate' affair. Chomolungma, as the Everest is known in Tibet, has indeed fired the imagination of Indian climbers for over four decades. The first Indian Expedition was launched in 1960 (Brig. Gyan Singh) followed by 1962 (Major John Dias), in which heights of 28,300 feet and 28,600 feet were reached, respectively. In 1965 (Capt. M.S. Kohli), nine Indians reached the summit, a record, which held good for 17 years. In the 1984 (Brig. D.K. Khullar) Indian Expedition, Bachendri Pal became the first Indian woman and fifth in the world to climb Everest. Major Indian expeditions to Everest were launched in 1985 (Brig. Jagjit Singh), 1992 (Hukum Singh), 1992 (Deepak Kulkarni), 1993 (Bachendri Pal), 1996 North Face (Mohinder Singh), 1998 (Hrishikesh Yadav), 1999 Kangshung Face (Santosh Yadav) and 2001 (Colonel K. Kumar). In 1993, Santosh Yadav became the first woman in the world to climb Everest twice. We were thus the next major expedition in line. However, we were saddled with the twin objectives of

climbing Everest and Lhotse, which was hitherto unprecedented by any Indian expedition.

To commemorate fifty years of the historic ascent of Everest in 1953, a proposal for a joint venture to the Everest massif was mooted by the Chief of the Royal Nepalese Army (RNA), which was accepted by the then Chief of the Army Staff (COAS), General S. Padmanabhan, PVSM, AVSM, VSM, ADC. The expedition was launched under the aegis of the Army Adventure Wing, Directorate General of Military Training, Indian Army. The expedition was led by Colonel Ashok Abbey.

A pre-Everest expedition-cum-selection camp was conducted by the Indian Army in Sept. 2002 in which 66 select personnel participated. These were selected from over 300 volunteers of the Indian Army. Training was conducted in the Rudra Ganga valley of the Garhwal Himalaya. Apart from technical proficiency and physical conditioning, 40 soldiers in three attempts scaled Gangotri I (6672 m). Some members of the Indian Army along with members of the RNA under Major S.S. Shekhawat, crossed the 5968 m high Kalandani Khal and traversed from Gangotri to Badrinath. The joint team in phase two training underwent three weeks of intensive winter conditioning in January 2003 in the Dokriani Bamak, a training area of the Nehru Institute of Mountaineering (NIM), Uttarkashi, in the Garhwal Himalaya. The final team selected was a blend of youth and experience—twelve for Everest and five for Lhotse!

After intensive training, preparation and planning, the team was flagged off by General N.C. Vij on 10 March 2003. The Indian Army team after marrying with the RNA team, which was led by Lt. Col. Surya Sen Thakuri, flew from Kathmandu to Lukla (2840 m) on 20 March. Lukla is the gateway to the Everest region. A sprawling mini township, predominantly of the Sherpas, prosperity is evident in the small resident population. The heart of this township is a fascinating airstrip, which has been cut on a mountainside. The take-off and approach reminded us of landing on an aircraft carrier. In 1964, a mere 62 visitors reached Khumbu region; when the airstrip was built in 2001, visitors numbering

more than 21,000 arrived, almost six times the resident Sherpa population in the region.

The Everest massif lies in Sagarmatha National Park, which is 1600 square kilometres in area. To the north, the park is capped by the Mahalangur Himal. To the east and the west it is enclosed by the Hinku and the Luming Himal, respectively. To the north lies the Chomolungma National Nature Reserve in Tibet, where fewer than 80,000 people live within 13,000 square miles. To the east of the part lies the Makalu Barun National Park, while to the west is the Langtang Lirung massif. In the southern periphery lies the Kyashar Himal with the shapely Kusum Kanguru (6367 m) dominating the horizon.

At Tawa, near Monjo (2848 m), the team entered the sacred gates of the Sagarmatha National Park. Moving along the Dudh Kosi, which takes birth from the Nagzumpa glacier, we crossed the first settlement of Jorsale (2740 m) on the Everest trail. From the confluence of Dudh Kosi and Bhote Kosi rivers, members climbed up steeply and reached Namche Bazaar (3440 m), the Sherpa heartland of the Khumbu region, on 22 March. Namche Bazaar, or Nauje as it was earlier called, is the hub of this region. Lying on the crossroads to Everest and Thame, the settlement of Namche Bazaar is an inverted horse shoe, in a bowl dominated by the majestic Kongde Ri, which comprises of the shapely summits of Nup (6035 m), Cho (6187 m) and Shar (6093 m). Namche today is a flourishing settlement where the Everest franchise and flavour is omnipresent in just about everything! The team witnessed the famous 'Saturday market' of Namche, which was truly a unique experience!

On 26 March, after acclimatizing at Namche, the expedition team moved further and reached Tengboche or Thyangboche (3860 m). En route, trekking through the fascinating and awe-inspiring Everest trail, we crossed the majestic south-west face of the 6828 m high Mt. Ama Dablam, as the Sherpas describe it, which means 'Mother's Amulet for the Deities'. The monastery of Thyangboche is a landmark of the region. It was established in 1923 by Lama Gulu as the first celibate gompa and belongs to

the Nyingmapa sect of Vajrayana Buddhism. The gompa, which houses almost 40 monks, controls the religion of Khumbu. The monastery, which was tragically destroyed by an earthquake in 1934 and again by a fire in 1989, today stands as a timeless testimony to the historic events on Everest. The team prayed in right earnest in front of the 15-foot gilt colossus of Buddha and the numerous religious thangkas, frescoes, carvings, murals and other artifacts which adorn the walls of this historic monastery. Towering behind the gompa in the background is the mighty protector Kumbi Yul Lha (5761 m), which is at the southern tip of the Khumuche Himal.

En route to Pheriche (4240 m) the team also prayed at the famous Pangboche gompa at the village of Pangboche (3930 m), which is the oldest monastery of the region. From Pheriche en route to Lobuje (4910 m) the famous Thokla pass (4830 m) was crossed. On this pass are erected numerous memorials, which is a gory reminder of the human lives lost on Everest. From Lobuje, we reached Gorak Shep (5140 m) or the 'grave of crows' where, apart from two lodges, is a dried up lake-bed. It also houses the last recognised helipad on the Everest trail. On 1 April, after reaching Gorak Shep, the team climbed up to Kala Pathar (5550 m) for acclimatization, which is the high point on the south ridge of Pumori. From here, we saw an awe-inspiring sight of Sagarmatha (as the Everest is known in Nepal) for the first time!

The final walk to the Everest Base Camp from Gorak Shep was along the south-western lateral moraine of the Khumbu glacier. There was the all too familiar skyline of Pumo Ri (7165 m), Lingtren (6749 m), Khumbutse (6665 m), Lhola (6026 m) with Changtse (7583 m) and Everest. Towering above the west shoulder in the far distance, was the Khumbu glacier, shrunk in length but also dwindled in height. The high lateral moraine en route to Base Camp was a clear evidence on their way to Base Camp—the Everest season was in full bloom!

Just before Base Camp, as we crossed over from the lateral moraine on to the Khumbu glacier, we noticed a frozen glacial pool with contrasting blue ice rising through it! A peculiar glacial

formation, it reminded us of 'cold coffee' and 'ice cream'—the very thought of which took us back to civilization!

Base Camp was established on the northern lateral moraine of the Khumbu glacier, under the shadow of the South-West Ridge emanating from Khumbutse. It was established by the advance party under Major Shekhawat on 29 March and was occupied by the team on 3 April at an altitude of 17,700 feet. The Base Camp itself was an amazing sight. With almost 30 expeditions attempting Everest and Lhotse from all over the world, it was like a mini township spread over almost two kilometres. The multi-coloured tents and numerous Buddhist prayer flags, brought life to the otherwise desolate moraine. It could take anything up to 30 to 40 minutes to traverse Base Camp from one end to the other. From the highest cyber café in the world, to an oxygen-filling plant, from special 'ironing' teams to journalists and press people, from Boeing 747 pilots to geologists, Base Camp 'circus' was well represented by people from all walks of life. It was without a doubt the biggest human settlement on the Everest trail!

After reaching Base Camp, we organized ourselves quickly for the onward climb, and amongst the foremost of chores, we prepared for the traditional *puja*. We constructed the Ihap-so, the worship site, to propitiate and seek blessings of Miyolangsangma and the Khumbu gods. The lama from Pangboche monastery conducted the ceremony with a happy smile and ritualistic fervour. The ceremony ended with everyone singing and dancing with foot tapping in unison. Tsampa was thrown in the air with bouts of *chang* being served amidst loud chants of "*Lha Gyalo*". Kaji, our Sherpa Sirdar, was in high spirits as he pointed out a chaff sitting on top of the Ihap-so to the leader! "That is a good omen, *saab*," he exclaimed in sheer delight!

The route ahead of Base Camp lay across the most fascinating portion of the Khumbu glacier, the Khumbu Icefall. The 18-kilometres long Khumbu glacier breaks into an icefall below the Western Cwm. It is ironical that the mountain was declared unclimbable by Mallory in the 1921 British Reconnaissance Expedition from this approach, when he viewed it from the Col

to the south-west of Lingtren. The Khumbu Icefall is a big unstable conglomeration of seracs, ice towers, ice blocks and crevasses and has claimed more lives than any other part of the mountain. Our first ferry over the Icefall went on 6 April and thereafter this movement became frequent till the team initially acclimatized, inducted and finally cleared the mountain.

Our strategy to negotiate the Icefall was straight and simple. Move fast, move early and pray hard to the Khumbu gods to be kind! In retrospect it all worked well. In all, there were 53 ladder sections between Base Camp and Camp I, spanning horizontal, diagonal and vertical crevasses. At places, there were 6 to 8 feet aluminium ladder sections joined at a single crossing. Eric Shipton in 1951 thus described the Icefall: "It was a daunting place, a wild labyrinth of ice walls, chasms and towers". As per the present regulations, a team of 'Icefall doctors' of the Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee (SPCC) maintains the route over the Icefall, for the duration of the climbing season. Each team member has to pay 450 US dollars as fee for using the route.

Camp I was finally established and occupied by members on 13 April at an altitude of 19,500 feet, at the tip of the Western Cwm. The route from Camp I to Camp II was through the Western Cwm. The Western Cwm is 4½ kilometres long and 500 to 700 metres wide. From the top of the Icefall, the Cwm takes a south-easterly direction towards the steep Lhotse Face. The 1951 British Reconnaissance Expedition under Eric Shipton negotiated the Icefall, but could not make further progress as they were confronted with a crevasse, which was 100 m wide, 300 m long and 100 m deep. As per Bill Murray, it was the biggest crevasse, which was immediately after the Icefall; they turned back. The route between Camp I and Camp II was riddled with crevasses and at places there were deep chasms—these were sure jaws of death! There were 13 ladders, which the team negotiated between Camp I and Camp II. The Western Cwm separates the west ridge of Everest from Nuptse. Both the steep walls are prone to frequent avalanches, which the team witnessed in plenty.

Camp II was finally established at an altitude of 20,500 ft on 17 April, on the lateral moraine directly under the great south-

west pillar of Everest. The camp was spread out laterally on a bleak strip of glacial moraine and it took almost 30 minutes to traverse from end to end. Like at Base Camp, there was a scramble amongst the Sherpas of various teams to get a good campsite, which in retrospect was perhaps inevitable.

The route from Camp II to Camp III entailed an hour's walk on the broken icefield, to the head of the Western Cwm. Here a bergschrund spanning the headwall of Lhotse was negotiated to gain the Lhotse Face. Thereafter, a steady climb on blue ice led us to this most uncomfortable camp on Everest. Camp III was established on 23 April, at an altitude of 24,000 feet. Owing to a number of expeditions, the camp was split into two locations, an upper and a lower Camp III. The wind-gods giving us but a small glimpse of their fury, unleashed themselves on the mountain between 25 April and 5 May and wrecked our six tents established at Camp III. Subsequently, this camp was re-established, before the attempt on Lhotse on 10 May.

On all mountains above 8000 metres, good weather is one of the key factors to success. High winds on an otherwise clear day can mar any summit attempt, and on Everest and Lhotse this was no exception. Throughout the expedition, the leader's decision-making was based on the excellent weather input that the team received from Dr. L.S. Rathore and Dr. Akhilesh Gupta of the NCMRWF (National Centre For Medium Range Weather Forecasting), New Delhi. The team on a regular, daily basis was passing to the NCMRWF the physical state of the atmosphere from the upper reaches of the mountain. Technology, in the form of satellite phones, made this possible. It is also one of the many wonders of nature that though Everest and Lhotse are like too inseparable brothers, the two mountains make their own weather. Thus when a fleeting weather window opportunity knocked on the door, the crucial decision to launch the summit attempt on Lhotse was made by the leader.

Above Camp III lies one of the most conspicuously visible landmarks of Everest, a streak of yellow rock, called the Yellow Band. It is often referred to as the highest geological default in

the world. The yellow tinge comes from the sedimentary rocks, which were weakly metamorphosed. The remains of marine animals of the Tethys sea, namely the clays and salts, were transformed into shale, pelites, sandstone and limestone. The rock on the Yellow Band in texture is also similar to the Cambrian marble, found in the Rongbuk valley on the north. As I saw it, the Yellow Band can truly be described as nature's streak of brilliance on Everest!

On a mountain like Everest, there is always a possibility of a big disaster. And if there was one thing which gave sleepless nights to the leader—this was it! Movement in the Icefall, the avalanche-prone Lhotse Face and a traffic jam on the Hillary Step, as it happened in 1996, were potential choke points. The large number of expedition teams and the number of climbers in the Golden Jubilee year was indeed a grave cause of concern. It was therefore imperative to coordinate the final push in terms of the route opening from South Col to the South Summit and then on to the summit. As it was unfair to expect any one team to do it alone, the effort had to be coordinated. A consensus amongst different leaders and their Sherpa Sirdars was a must for a coordinated effort on the mountain. The joint Indo-Nepalese Army Expedition took the initiative and on 25 April, a coordinating conference was chaired by the leader in the dining hall of the expedition team at Base Camp. It was a full house and despite minor differences, leaders and teams agreed to put in their act together for the final push from South Col to South Summit and beyond.

Ascent of Lhotse

On 9 May, the first team under Major Shekhawat moved up from Base Camp to occupy Camp II. However, the NCMRWF forecast was that Everest was going to be lashed by high winds of over 100 kilometres an hour. But as the high winds were coming from north-west (Tibet), Lhotse would be shielded and winds on it would range from 40 to 50 kilometres an hour. The leader decided to attempt Lhotse and make use of the fleeting weather window, which the mountain offered. On 11 May, I and

the Lhotse team moved up from Base Camp II. On 12 May, the team left Camp II at 0430 hours and in a remarkable effort reached Camp IV at 1230 hours, the same day. Camp IV on Lhotse was established at an altitude of 25,600 feet. The route from Camp III crossed the Yellow Band and thereafter climbed steeply up to the area of boulder, directly below the entrance of the couloir. The team, which was led by Sub. Palden Giacho, comprised of Nb. Sub. Cherring Bodh, Nb. Sub. Neel Chand, Hav. Surjeet Singh and Champa along with Jamadar R.C. Shrestha, Hav. Rudra, Cpl. Karki of the RNA and four Sherpas. Four tents were pitched and as high winds lashed Everest in the afternoon, the team rested for the grand finale on Lhotse.

The team left Camp IV at 0100 hours on 13 May and climbed towards the couloir, reaching its base at 0330 hours. The team after entering the couloir traversed and kept to the left. After climbing for an hour the couloir got constricted; here it was 2 metres wide and 50 to 70 metres long. After crossing this constriction they kept to the left during the climb in the couloir. They finally hit the base of the Col, separating the south-west ridge of Lhotse (going towards Nuptse) from the main summit of Lhotse. They reached the base of the Col at 0715 hours and from there climbed to the left, up the broken rock face for another 150 metres till they could climb no further. At 0805 hours, my radio set at Camp II, crackled with life. Nb. Sub. Paldan Giacho and his team of 8 members and four Sherpas were standing on the fourth highest mountain of the world with the Tricolour and the Nepalese flag fluttering high! As not more than two to three members could stand on the top, they took turns to do so. Spectacular views of Everest, Nepal and Tibet were witnessed by the summiters. After spending 45 minutes, the members commenced their descent and descended down to Camp II, to a resounding welcome by the team.

In retrospect, Lhotse had been most kind. Despite rotten rope on numerous sections of the route and numerous shooting 'killer' stones and rock fall in the steep couloir—the ways of providence are many—the summiters returned unscathed!

Golden Jubilee Ascent of Everest

High winds continued to lash the Everest massif, after 13 May. Amidst intense speculation, the NCMRWF confirmed that an attempt on Everest was feasible after 20 May. As all plans were flexible and hinging on the weather, the leader decided to launch the summit bid for Everest after 20 May, with both the teams virtually moving in tandem, with a gap of 24 hours. South Col was fully stocked for 24 members by 19 May.

On 17 May, team one under Major Shekhawat comprising of Major Abhijeet, Sub. Laxman Singh, Sub. C. Angchuk, Nb. Sub. Mohinder Singh, Hav. Jagat, and five Sherpas and five RNA personnel, under Capt. Sunil Rathore, moved to occupy Camp II from Base Camp. On 19 May, the team moved up to Camp III and reached South Col on 20 May, in high wind conditions. Meanwhile, the second summit team comprising of myself, Sub. Lalit Negi, Nb. Sub. Lal Singh, Hav. Tashi Gyapo, Hav. Rajendra Singh and Rifleman Kunwar Singh reached Camp II on 20 May, alongwith six RNA members under Major Nabin Kumar Rai. On 20 May, both the summit teams were poised at South Col and Lhotse Face, respectively.

On 20 May, team one under Major Shekhawat moved from South Col at 2140 hours. It was a windy evening and soon the winds picked up. Near the Balcony and above the bulge, spindrift hit them hard and visibility lessened. Soon they were engulfed in near flat light conditions. As the joint Indo-Nepalese Army Expedition was to open the route for all other expeditions climbing from the south, on their progress hinged the further progress of other teams. At 2300 hours Major Shekhawat spoke to me and informed me about the worsening weather condition. A decision was taken to call off the attempt. Almost 150 climbers and Sherpas turned back and returned to South Col.

On 21 May, the team under me was to move up to occupy South Col. Major Shekhawat requested for another attempt by his team. In all fairness team one had availed their chance. Their staying for another attempt meant use of oxygen and rations, which were actually to be used by the second team. However as

success of the team was first and foremost and team one was in good physical condition, the leader decided to give another chance to team one. However, only three members of the team, along with four members of the RNA were to attempt, and other members of both the teams were to move down. Accordingly, Nb. Sub. Mohinder Singh volunteered to stay in support of the attempt at South Col. Major Abhijeet and Sub. Laxman alongwith two RNA members moved down to Camp II.

On 22 May, the reconstituted team commenced move from South Col at 2200 hours and reached Balcony at 0120 hours. At 0600 hours they reached the South Summit and by 0645 hours they had negotiated the Hillary Step. At 0800 hours, after the leading Sherpas, Sub. Angchuk and Hav. Jagat Singh reached the summit and unfurled the Tricolour and the Nepalese flag. They were the first climbers in the Golden Jubilee year to reach the summit from the route pioneered by Col. Hunt's team in 1953. They were followed by Major Shekhawat (for whom it was a second time) and the rest of the team. The team descended down to South Summit by 1030 hours and reached South Col by 1400 hours.

After a lot of deliberation, a bold decision was taken by the leader to launch another summit bid. Team two, which was fit and raring to go after moving down to Camp II on 21 May, in a remarkable push moved up on 24 May to occupy South Col directly from Camp II. The team was led by Sub. Lalit Negi and comprised of Major Abhijeet Singh, Sub. Lal Singh, Hav. Tashi Gyapo, Hav. Rajendra Singh and Rifleman Kunwar Singh and six members of the RNA. On 25 May, the team left South Col at 0830 hours. At 0430 hours on 26 May, an 'overwhelmed' young Abhijeet, spoke to the leader, "Sir—we are there on top of the world." Six Indians and six Nepalese soldiers stood firm on the summit for a second time—a living testimony to the intense camaraderie, cooperation and brotherhood between soldiers of the Indian and the Nepalese armies.

On 27 May, high camps were wound up. A special effort was made to leave the high camps as clean as possible. The cleaning

of Base Camp and high camps, was an ongoing process throughout the expedition and our expedition endeavoured to leave the mountain absolutely clean. Major C.S. Manda, the deputy leader, had done a commendable job in this regard. The team concentrated in a record time at Base Camp on 27 May for onward move to Kathmandu, where the historic Golden Jubilee celebrations were being celebrated.

As we wound our way for the last time down the Khumbu glacier, I noticed that our 'ice cream' and 'cold coffee' had vanished. We crossed numerous yaks and yak-herders walking and singing merrily towards Base Camp, reminding us that another climbing season on Everest was coming to an end. It was twilight and I looked back to see 'Chomolungma' towering above its west shoulder and Nuptse and radiating its magnetic presence against a crystal clear sky. As I looked back one more time hoping to catch our last glimpse of 'Sagarmatha', to my utter amazement the 'Forehead of the sky' which was till then visible a few moments ago, had suddenly vanished from the horizon, leaving a void of crystal blue sky!

In that timeless moment of serenading splendour, the 'Mother Goddess of the World' to me, seemed to be merging with the heavens. I closed my eyes in ecstasy to capture that enrapturing moment of a lifetime. The words of Mallory echoed in my mind—why climb Everest? Why? Why? Because it is there! There! As long as the world's highest mountain stands, the eternal challenge to climb it will always be there!

Lalit nudged me, it was time to move on and we continued our descent in the dark.

Summary (Indian Army)

Expedition	: Joint Indo-Nepalese Army Everest Massif Expedition.
Leader	: Colonel Ashok Abbey.
Date of Ascent	: Lhotse—13 May 2003. Everest—22 and 26 May 2003.

- Route : **Lhotse**—West Face.
Everest—South-East Ridge.
- Summiters : **Lhotse**—Naib Subedar Palden Giacho, Naib Subedar Chhering Bodh, Naib Subedar Neel Chand, Havaladar Surjeet Singh and ASL Champa.
Everest—Major S.S. Shekhawat, Subedar C. Angchuk, Havaladar Jagat Singh, Major Abhijeet Singh, Subedar Lalit Negi, Havaladar Lal Singh, Havaladar Rajendra Singh, Havaladar Tashi Giapo and L. Nk. Kunwar Singh.
- Sponsored by : Army Adventure Wing, Directorate General of Military Training, Indian Army.

Summary (RNA)

- Leader : Lt. Col. Surya Sen Thakuri.
- Summiters : **Lhotse**—Jem. R.C. Shrestha, Havaladar R.P. Timil Sena and L/Cpt. R.S. Karki.
Everest—Capt. S.S. Rathore, Subedar H.B. Basnet, Sgt. L.B. Thama, L/Cpl. D. Bahadur, BHM B.B. Gurung, Sgt. D.B. Thamang, Sgt. Tenzing Sherpa, Cpt. S.B. Thamang, L/Cpl. K.J. Hamal and Gnr. K.B. Amao.
- Sponsored by : Directorate of Military Training, Royal Nepalese Army.
- Team Summiters : **Lhotse**—12 (5 Indian Army, 3 RNA and 4 Sherpas).
Everest—31 (9 Indian Army, 10 RNA and 12 Sherpas).



GOLDEN JUBILEE CLIMB

2003

Kulwant Singh Dhami

The year 2003 marked the Golden Jubilee of the first successful ascent of Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and late Tenzing Norgay. Since then, Everest has become the most sought after mountain in the world. Each and every mountain climber wants to be on the top of the world but it is a bitter truth that only a small fraction out of them really cares for the mountain, its ecology and environment and its importance in the lives of native people. In its five decades of existence, the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI) felt the necessity to educate the trainees not only in climbing mountains but also in preserving them for generations to come. This, however, is not an easy task.

Trainees come here from all walks of life and from all parts of the globe. In order to provide good mountaineering training and environmental value-based education to them, we needed to train our instructors first. They should have the first-hand knowledge of what harm man could bring to the mountains and what steps must be taken to preserve them. Unless this is done, mere celebration of 'International Year of Mountains' or 50th anniversary

of first successful ascent of Everest would be meaningless.

This Institute, which has had the privilege of having most of the Everest legends in its fold, had planned to celebrate the 50th anniversary of first successful ascent of Everest, not by holding functions and throwing parties but by taking an expedition to the Everest itself and educating its instructors, which we hope would immensely help to generate environmental awareness amongst our younger generation who come here for training.

The expedition was flagged off at Darjeeling by Padma Bhushan Nawang Gombu (the first man to climb Everest twice) on 29th March 2003. The team left for Kathmandu on 30 March by bus. Spending three days in Kathmandu for last minute details and necessary purchases, the team headed for Zhangmu on 3 April to Base Camp. Colonel Vijay Singh was the leader. (This writer was designated as the deputy leader.)

Move to Everest Base Camp from North has little advantage and a big disadvantage. Advantage—one reaches Base Camp in the comfort of luxurious Land Cruisers without taking a single step on ground. Disadvantage—reaching 17,400 ft without carrying load and without walking a single step. This takes its toll when one has to move further from Base Camp. However, since it is a must, the team left Zhangmu on 4th morning, driving alongside the Bhotay Koshi and spending two days each at Nyalam and Tingri for acclimatization. The team reached Base Camp on 8th at 11 a.m. Immediately, Base Camp was established and *puja* was performed on 10 April.

After spending three days at Base Camp for acclimatization, the team was divided in two groups—(i) advance party, and (ii) main body. On 10th evening, Col. Vijay Singh, briefed the entire team and asked the advance party to proceed to Camp III the following day. This writer led a five-member advance party to Camp III on 11 April. After spending the night at Camp II, Camp III (22,300 ft) was established on 12 April. The main body, which comprised of all remaining members, started off for Camp II along with expedition loads on 14 April and reached Camp III on 15 April.

Here again *puja* was offered for safe and successful climbing. First load ferry was conducted to North Col on 17 April. Kushang Sherpa, N/Sub. Amar Prakash SC, Mr. Nadre Sherpa and two Sherpas accompanied this writer. Campsite was selected at 23,500 ft on North Col. Three tents were pitched there. On 18 April a second load ferry to North Col was conducted by the second team. Barring a few, the entire loads were ferried by the team members themselves. As the load ferry was going on in full swing, the weather turned bad compelling the whole team to go down to Base Camp on 19 April. However, two members, viz. Kushang and Nadre stayed back to look after the camp, and weather permitting, to open the route from Camp IV to Camp V. The route was opened on 23 April. The team again moved to Camp III on 29 April. The first party comprising Kushang, Nadre, Amar Prakash and this writer went to Camp IV for load ferrying and spent the night there. Next day, damaged ropes were replaced between Camp IV and Camp V by this party which returned back to Camp III due to bad weather. The team came back again to BC on 3 May due to very bad weather and snowstorm.

Weather remained very bad for eight days, forcing the team to mark time. Physically, the team might have been resting but mentally all were very restless. Camp III was occupied again on 10 May. Bad weather continued to prevail. Under the circumstances, Camp VI could not be established. It was decided that the summit attempt would be made from Camp V itself, which was almost an impossible task and in fact a risky proposition. Finally, on the 19th, the weather condition improved a bit and the first summit party comprising Amar, Kushang and Nadre headed for camp IV and occupied it. Despite bad weather conditions they managed to reach Camp V (26,000 ft) on 20 May.

The first summit party left for the final push from Camp V on the night of 20/21 May at 0005 hrs. They were stuck up at the treacherous Second Step for five hours due to the casualty of members of another team which was ahead of them. With great difficulty, Kushang and Nadre managed to cross Second Step but the third member, Amar Prakash, got stuck up there trying to

rescue the injured person. After great difficulty, and in spite of heavy wind, Kushang and Nadre reached the summit at 1230 hrs on 21 May 2003. Thus, the expedition created a history of sorts by putting on top two climbers from Camp V, which was hitherto not done.

Considering the ongoing bad weather conditions and its unpredictability, a second attempt was abandoned. The summit team came back to Camp III on 22 May. After closing all higher camps and collecting all garbage and equipment, the team finally reached Base Camp on 23 May. All the garbage collected by the team was deposited with the Chinese authorities at Base Camp, the equipment segregated and the team safely reached Kathmandu on the 25th and Darjeeling on the 28 May.

This was the second Indian ascent from North Col. The team members ferried loads themselves. The route from North Col to Camp V was opened for all other teams who would follow. It was an Alpine-style expedition on a shoestring budget.



SAILORS ATOP

2004

Satyabrata Dam

By the end of spring 2004, the number of Everest summiters had reached around 1400 and the number of deaths on Everest were 183 including 8 confirmed deaths this year on the North, making this the second worst season in the entire history of the mountain. Three notable world records were made, two from the South and one from the North: Appa Sherpa climbed Everest for the 14th time, Pemba Dorjee claimed to make the fastest ascent from Base Camp to the summit in an unbelievable duration of 8 hrs and 10 minutes (both from the South), and Indian Navy team from the North became the first all-Navy team in the world to climb Everest.

With its inception deep in the bowels of a submerged submarine in the Arabian Sea, the Indian Navy team carried the national flag and the naval ensign to the top of world in a remarkable display of their mettle and proved that the guardians of the oceans were equally at home amidst the highest mountains.

The idea of attempting Everest was conceived by the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Madhvendra Singh, PVSM, AVSM, ADC

and he set things in motion right after the day of taking over in December 2001. With the sole aim of promoting mountaineering in the Navy, the Indian Navy Mountaineering Cell was created in February 2002 at Naval Headquarters and as its first and prime agenda, the preparation for Everest attempt in spring 2004 began in right earnest. Volunteers were sought from all over the Navy and they were imparted training. The first preparatory expedition attempted the virgin peak of Mt. Suj Tilla (6573 m) in autumn 2002, putting a record number of nine members on the top of this extremely technically difficult and dangerous peak that had thwarted five earlier attempts by some of the best climbers from all over the world. This was followed by two major expeditions in 2003 where the team climbed Kamet (7756 m), Abi Gamin (7354 m) including a new route on Kamet in spring, and the Saser Kangri IV (7368 m) in autumn. The provisional team thereafter underwent extensive winter training in the Siachen glacier, where the members faced the worst kind of weather that prepared them further for Everest. The final team of 14 was selected in February 2004. Till the last week prior to their departure from Delhi, the team was put through intense fitness regime that included power yoga, weight training, special cardio-vascular exercises and breathing exercises at one of the country's leading gym and health clubs.

The advance team of five arrived at Base Camp on 31 March 2004 and the main team joined them on 6 April. From the North side Base Camp, Everest presents an awesome sight as its proportions are projected from horizon to horizon, dwarfing everything else in sight. The white plume that the crown is perpetually adorned with, draws one's eyes hypnotically. Everest north side is notorious for foul weather and it is much more objectively dangerous and technical than the south side. Far less people succeed from the north than the south. Two thoughts that immediately came to our mind were: 'mountains are beautiful but they are not worth dying for', and 'summit is optional but getting down safe is mandatory'. In the days to come, these would become our *mantra*. Dotted with hundreds of tents of every conceivable colour, the wide field of Base Camp looked straight out of the Alice's 'Wonderland', and the people we met were no

less amazing than the ones Alice came across in her journey. Our camp became a favourite haunt for people with maladies and those without shelter or food as we helped everyone in distress round the clock.

Leaving Base Camp on 13 April, we established and occupied ABC on 15 April for our first phase of route opening and acclimatization. Located deep amidst the towering ice penitents of the East Rongbuk glacier, the ABC tents looked even more colourful in contrast to the endless sea of white all around. It was very windy and cold. The ice wall of North Col rose sharply to our west and the North-East Ridge of Everest covered almost the entire southern horizon. We could see the three pinnacles and the final ice wall below the summit. Somewhere on the knife-edge ridge lay the bodies of two of the finest climbers that the world has known: the British pair of Pete Boardman and Joe Tasker who disappeared near the second pinnacle in 1982. At ABC, life slowed down as we gradually acclimatized to the rarefied atmosphere and did short climbs to gain height progressively.

On 22 April the route to Camp I was finally opened when we got a small weather window. After several load ferries we occupied Camp II on 25 April. By now we were well acclimatized and the steep ice walls did not feel so steep any more. Being among the first team to reach North Col, we gave places to several other expeditions who arrived later and could not find a safe camp site. Our immediate neighbours at Camp I were Bulgarians (two of whom died later), British, Austrians and the Koreans (three of whom died in front of our eyes later). With about 50 tents perched precariously together, we could overhear almost everyone. We were like a large family and it was a great place to strike new friendships and renew the old ones. Friendships made in mountains last a lifetime. The next day we climbed to 7800 m and then returned to Base Camp to wait for the weather, recuperate substantial amount of body mass for which it was imperative to gorge on carbohydrates before we went up again. We returned to ABC on 12 May and our first summit team went up to Camp I on 15 May, followed by the second team on 16 May.

Team 1 occupied Camp II on 16 May, which remained clear and sunny. At Camp II we were well inside the 'death zone' that starts at 7500 m. It was paramount that our exposure to this altitude was kept to the minimum. The single most important factor that decides the outcome of an Everest expedition is the weather, since it is impossible to sit out the foul weather on Everest, like in other mountains of lesser proportion. On Everest either you climb or you come down. We would die even if we just rested in the higher camps. Our summit attempt dates were 18 and 19 May and to follow that we had to ascend to higher camps everyday without rest and even a day's loss due to bad weather could result in failure. The first thing we always noted on waking up was the barometric pressure, the wind speed, humidity and the concentration of clouds. Our portable weather-tracking devices functioned perfectly and we had the most accurate predictions from Delhi, both of which helped us in making the right decisions. We shared our weather information, which is generally a closely guarded secret, with other teams, many of whom followed us up the mountain. Spread across a zone from 7800 to 7950 m, Camp II was a very steep field of loosely perched slabs of limestone. Far below us Camp I looked like tiny colourful dots on North Col. The north-westerly wind constantly lashed us. With half a litre of oxygen flooding our lungs every minute, we had a restive sleep in the chilling confines of Camp II.

On 17 May, five Frenchmen became the first summiters of the season from the north, while we climbed to the last camp. It was again a bright and sunny day though the wind picked up towards the afternoon. The entire route was a diagonal climb and traverse across the sheer North Face with spectacular views all around. To our north rose the hulk of Cho Oyu, and ice-clad summits pierced the sky as far as our eyes could go. No one spoke and all we could hear were the laborious breathing and gasps as we climbed slowly and steadily, resembling an astronaut in our down suits and masks. From Camp III we could clearly see the North-East Ridge with the prominent features of mushroom rock, First, Second and Third Step and the ice wall before the summit hump. The true summit was hidden, though we could place it

by the long plume that etched clearly against the blue sky. On 17 May our first team was on the verge of creating history and adrenalin flowed heavily. They rested and drank as much fluid they could for the summit attempt the next day.

The three musketeers: Surg. Lt. Viking Bhanoo, leading medical assistants, Rakesh Kumar and Vikas Kumar, along with Sherpas Tamtin, Nima Gyaljen and Aaj Tenzing, left Camp III at 1 a.m. and headed for the summit. Our entire expedition team, right till Base Camp had been awake through the night and now we followed the first team's progress over the radio with bated breath. Viking relayed their progress periodically and everything seemed alright. In about four hours they were across First Step, climbing steadily towards the summit. Meanwhile, the second summit team climbed to Camp III. Around 8 a.m., Viking's emotionally-charged voice declared that they had summited and the Indian Tricolour and the Naval ensign were fluttering on top of the world. Everyone jumped and thumped each other in jubilation.

The second summit team comprising myself and Lt. Cdr. Abhishek Kankan along with Sherpa Nima Tenji, Cheddar and Ang Tashi left Camp III around 11.15 a.m. on 18 May. It was a cold and windy night and the weather window was about to close very soon. Several other expedition teams followed up the ridge. By now, everyone knew of the three Koreans, who were dying or were already dead near the summit ridge. We climbed in the fierce blizzard and with every step we distanced ourselves from safety, moved further into the death zone. Around 5 a.m. we were across Second Step beyond the point of no return. By then the wind and the snow blizzard were in a hurricane proportion and both of us were nearly blind in one eye. Our progress was slow. Occasionally we had to take the refuge of a rock to prevent getting blown over the Kangshung Face by the sudden gusts of 150 km/hr. Abhisek stepped on the summit a little after 8 a.m. followed by me. In all we put 11 people on top and it was now time to head for home. We left Base Camp on 26 May and reached Kathmandu on 1 June. We reached New Delhi on 4 June to a resounding welcome from our family, friends and the Indian Navy.



ARMY WOMEN MAKE IT

2005

S.S. Shekhawat

Climbing Everest remains every mountaineer's dream. Mt. Everest is considered as the ultimate in mountaineering. But for the Indian Army, Mt. Everest marked the beginning of another quest—to climb all the fourteen 8000-ers of the world. In 2001, Indian Army had put 10 army climbers on 'Top of the World'. The success kick-started the army's foray into the thin air of world's highest peaks, 'The Eight Thousanders'. In quick succession Annapurna-I (8091 m), Lhotse (8516 m), Kangchenjunga (8586 m) have been climbed. Mt. Everest was again climbed from the South-East Ridge in 2003, but the North-East Ridge still remained unclimbed by the Indian Army till this year.

Indian Army Women Everest Expedition was planned to initiate fledgling Army women mountaineers in extreme altitude climbing. The women climbers were made to undergo an extensive selection and training programme at Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkashi and Siachen glacier. Finally, ten women climbers were selected out of 140 volunteers. Eighteen seasoned mountaineers of Indian Army were hand-picked to assist the women climbers.

'Chomolungma' as Everest is called in Tibet, tested the mettle of these climbers by exposing them to extremely high winds and rough weather. But finally, dogged determination and the will of the climbers prevailed and Mother Goddess granted them audience on 2 June 2005 when the entire first team comprising of 15 members, including four women climbers, reached the summit of Mt. Everest.

The expedition was flagged off on 18 March 2005 by the COAS Gen. J.J. Singh, AVS, PVSM, VSM, ADC at a simple function held at South Block. The team left Delhi on 27 March 2005. We flew to Kathmandu and then to Lhasa on 29 March. From Lhasa we journeyed in Land Cruisers travelling the vast expanse of Tibetan plateau, halting at Gyantse, Shigatse, New Tingri and reached Base Camp on 4 April. Our luggage was already there along with the Sherpa team. We rested for a day and then started our acclimatization. Normally, there are three stages of acclimatization, at 9000 ft, 12,000 ft and 15,000 ft; beyond 16,000 ft it is said that the body does not acclimatize, it only deteriorates. But on Mt. Everest this rule does not apply, since Base Camp itself is at 17,200 ft. We started our first stage of acclimatization by touching 19,000 ft by climbing nearby mountains. Once the initial acclimatization was over we moved up to Intermediate Camp and then to Advance Base Camp.

Advance Base Camp was established at 21,000 ft at the base of eastern flank of Changtse. This is the place from where the East Rongbuk glacier starts. Advance Base Camp became the hub from where we coordinated the highest climbs. As second stage of acclimatization, the team climbed up to North Col 7050 m (23,565 ft). After touching the height of 7050 metres, it came down to Base Camp for rest and recoup. At Base Camp, to keep ourselves fit for the last stage of acclimatization, we undertook regular endurance marches for 6-7 km and practised *Pranayam* for increasing the lung capacity.

We moved up again on 23 April 2005 and started our climb for Camp II which was located on the steep scree slopes of the North Ridge. Camp II is the place where due to funnel effect the

wind speed remains high. Tents have to be tied up with rope nets to prevent them from being blown away. We reached Camp II on 23 April without oxygen and stayed there for one night, completing our third and final stage of acclimatization. Now everyone was ready for the summit attempt.

The team was now a bit exhausted by one month of oxygenless climb. We descended down to old Tingri, a small village at 14,000 ft. At Tingri the team enjoyed the bath in hot-water springs and relaxed their tired muscles. After three days of rest, fresh food and hot water bath, the recovery was remarkable. Everyone was rejuvenated and was now ready for the summit attempt.

The team came back to Advance Base Camp on 15 May to launch the summit attempt, but the weather played tricks. The weather remained bad with intermittent snowfall and high winds throughout the month of May. Many teams attempted the summit in these conditions and had to pay the price. Many climbers who summited suffered frostbites and some lost their lives.

We were taking continuous weather forecasts from National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF) which predicted a clear weather window from 1st to 3rd June. We decided to attempt summit in this weather window. The team comprising of four women climbers, five male climbers and six Sherpas reached Camp I at North Col (7050 m) on 29 March from ABC. The summit is three-days climb up the mountain. We reached Camp II on 30 May 2005. During the night of 30 May, winds blew touching 80 km/h and on 31 May wind speed went up to 100 km/h making any movement very difficult. As per NCMRWF, winds were to subside to 60-70 km/h only after midday of 31 May. We took a decision and postponed our move up for 1 June. The second summit team which was climbing on the heels of the first team had come up to North Col. They were told to stay put at Camp I. Out of second team few climbers were told to return back to ABC since one extra day at Camp II had caused depletion in oxygen reserves. The first team started for Camp III on 1 June at 0830 hrs. The winds were still high and the ropes which were fixed on rocky slopes of North Ridge were flying as if they were

tied to a kite. The team trudged up, negotiated this rock and ice climb and reached Camp III between 1130 hrs and 1445 hrs.

At Camp III we pitched our tents, organized ourselves for the night's summit attempt. These 10 hours were spent in heating up some dry *chapattis*, water and MREs. We ate and hydrated ourselves for the long climb into the thin air. Finally, we came out of the tents at 2215 hrs. The wind had subsided; it was only a cold breeze blowing in our faces. In the light of our head-lamps we wore our crampons and checked the oxygen cylinders. I made the team fall in a line and took a roll call to organize the members and Sherpas in groups as per their climbing speed and rate of breathing oxygen. Male members were told to carry three 1200-litre oxygen cylinders, two for self, and one reserve for the lady climber whom they were assisting. They were also told to take oxygen @ 2 lit/min. Women climbers were told to carry one cylinder and breathe oxygen @ 3 lit/min. All the male members and Sherpas were given responsibility to assist women climbers if they face any difficulty. After the groups were organized, the team started the final ascent. Climbing in a pitch-dark night with the help of head-lamps we picked our way. It was difficult to climb in the night. Climbers were getting unbalanced since they were walking with crampons on the rocks. At some places some of them fell but were saved because they were clipped up on the fixed rope. Negotiating First, Second and Third Step was a very difficult proposition. It was all-rock climb and we were finding it difficult to find footholds due to our diminishing head-lights. My head-lamp went off while negotiating First Step. From First Step to Third Step it is the most dangerous climb, as at places, there is space only enough to accommodate just a foot. I climbed with great difficulty in the dark using my ice-axe like the stick of a blind man. It was an exhausting experience. As we approached the Third Step, the dawn broke somewhere in the eastern horizon and we could see our steps. On the final summit pyramid, we encountered Slovak climber from the Russian team who had died on 21 May. It was a shocking sight; seeing him, one of our lady climbers sat down and started crying. The Sherpa climbing with her sought my assistance. To get her moving I shouted at the

top of my voice. Finding my voice more frightening, small Dechen got up with alacrity and caught my harness to hide herself behind me as if the dead man will jump and catch her. She climbed hiding behind me until the dead climber was out of sight. We cleared the last rock climb and reached the crown of the summit pyramid from where the summit was only a 10-minute climb. The first group comprising myself, Sub. Surjeet Singh, Dechen, Cadet Ladol, Pemba Gyalzen Sherpa, Nigma Gyalzen Sherpa and Sherap Sherpa, reached the summit at 01615 hrs on 2 June 2005. The second group comprising Capt. Ashwini, Sub. Jagat Singh, Hav. Topgey and Cdo. Kaman Singh and Ang Kami Sherpa reached the summit at 0820 hrs and the third party comprising of Capt. Sipra, Cherring Dorjee Sherpa and Dome Sherpa reached the summit at 1020 hrs.

Climbing down is always a difficult task. Ninety-nine percent of mishaps on Everest happen because climbers are exhausted and hypoxiated, due to which they make mistakes in clipping up to rope and fall down to their deaths or they get so exhausted that their legs give in and they just sit down to die. We also faced a similar kind of situation when Capt. Sipra after reaching the summit was unable to move unassisted due to exhaustion. By this time I had reached Camp III so I could mobilize the second summit team for the task of getting down a tired Sipra safely. The members of the second summit party Hav. Champa, Nim Bahadur and Sherab rose to the occasion. When I told them that their summit attempt is over, for them the summit was getting Sipra down. Their reply was *Theek Hai Saab, Aap Chinta Mat Karo*, we will get her down. The rescue lasted for 17 hours in which the members of the second team battled with death itself and snatched the climber from its jaws. Capt. Sipra had stayed for 26 hours beyond 8300 m and arrived at Camp III at 0030 hrs on 3 June 2005. There was another incident where Indian Army soldiers showed their mettle. During the night when we were climbing, one of the Sherpas supporting Capt. Ashwini came down due to chest pain without informing me or Sherpa Sirdar. This Sherpa was carrying the additional oxygen. To add to this, two more cylinders malfunctioned near the summit. This created a

serious shortage of oxygen when the climbers were coming down. Hav. Champa along with one Sherpa went up to the Second Step and delivered the oxygen. On the Summit Ridge, when this crisis arose Sub. Jagat and Hav. Topgay readily gave their cylinders to the needy and descended without oxygen. At 8700 metres, oxygen is life, no one parts with his cylinders, but soldiers of the Indian Army did it without caring for their lives.



IAF LANDS ATOP

2005

Amit Chowdhury

When the Director, Air Force Adventure, called me up and asked me whether I was interested in leading an expedition to Everest, I was a bit surprised. The Indian Air Force (IAF) had not really been into anything big since Kamet West Ridge in 1990, and I had only been climbing recently for fun on small 6000 m routes since then. I found the idea a bit too ambitious. Unlike the Army, IAF does not operate at many high altitude areas. Here too, no one is deployed in mountainous terrain. It does not have many people from Ladakh, or Lahaul-Spiti who can be turned into mountaineers overnight. But never having shirked away from a challenge, I agreed to work on the idea. It was the foresightedness of the then Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal Krishnaswamy, that we did not rush onto Everest in 2003, but instead went in for a three-year programme to train for Everest.

Ever since my early days of climbing weekends in the rocks of Susunia and Joychandi in West Bengal, I firmly believed that a strong foundation in the use of mountaineering hardware, dexterity with ropes, mountaineering theory and literature were as

important as physical conditioning and training. Anticipation, knowledge of modern technology and weather forecasting has now become equally important. So when I drew up a training schedule for the young climbers, selected after a physical and an interview, I knew I would have to give them an intravenous dose of all that I had learnt in my 25 years of climbing. Whatever skepticism I may have had vanished after the first training camp we held in Deo Tibba area of Himachal in September 2002. Of the 30 who were there, 25 climbed Deo Tibba and Norbu. They fixed rope, ferried loads, practised ice climbing on the glacier near Base Camp, cooked, spent nights under rock shelters, played high altitude volleyball for nearly a month, and looked very happy at the end of it. To round-off things the Air Force way, we did a skydiving jump at 4300 metres.

We followed this up with a winter camp at Siachen in January 2003. I was perhaps slightly over-confident about the boys. Guruhari, an engineer by profession, suddenly developed HAPO and had to be evacuated. Siachen was otherwise a great experience and the boys learnt a lot about surviving and climbing in extreme cold and dry climates. For our next outing in May 2003, I chose the Beas Kund area. Here I broke up the team into two parts and sent them off in two directions, to climb alpine style. From Base Camp at Bakkar Thach, we were carrying everything we needed for six days, on our backs. It was creditable that while one team climbed Hanuman Tibba, the other climbed Manali, Ladakhi and Shitidhar. We held another winter camp at Auli in winter the same year.

It was now time to test the Air Force mountaineers at altitude. Kamet (7756 m), I felt, would give us the right exposure to really high altitudes. By late April 2004, we were at Base Camp. Vasundhara Tal was still frozen over. We were met with heavy snowfall and one day 11 climbers got stuck in a snowstorm at Camp II. Chaitanya was in charge and despite my warning not to venture out of camp in a snowstorm, they tried to come back to Camp I. We were fortunately in radio contact throughout. They spent the night under a rock. Luckily, no one was frostbitten. A

cold bivouac though, I am sure, taught them some valuable lessons. The heavy snowfall that followed delayed us by another week. There was much more in store for us on Kamet. The rock bank was fixed, the route to Mead's Col opened and all five camps stocked by early May. On 11 May, Tripathi, Rawat, Kutty and Narinder attempted summit from Mead's Col. They set off at 3 in the morning. Despite the cold and windy night they made good progress. At about 6 in the morning, Tripathi gave me a call on the radio saying that they were making good progress and were at 7300 m. Almost immediately he called again saying that Rawat was not well. What had been an enjoyable climb suddenly became a very dangerous situation. Chaitanya and Ramakant rushed up from Mead's Col while I sent a HAP from Camp III with oxygen. Rawat, it seems, was not wearing all the prescribed layers to reduce weight and the cold northerly wind that blows almost incessantly had taken its toll. He was hypothermic and delirious. It was remarkable that they managed to revive Rawat after giving him warm fluids, but the rescue took a heavy toll. Kutty, Narinder and Tripathi were frostbitten. Kutty had become snow-blind after Rawat threw away his goggles in a delirious fit. The focus now shifted to rescue. I had expected 18 members who reached Mead's Col (7000 m) to summit, but eight got involved in the rescue. Leaving just six of us to attempt summit and form a back-up team. The helicopter rescue of Kutty, Narinder and Rawat from Camp IV became a historic feat as the highest helicopter rescue in the world from 6400 m.

The next day I went up with Saini, Panda, Chaudhary, Jassi and Suraj to join Chaitanya who was already there. I decided to send Saini and Chaitanya to the summit. Suraj and Jassi were not too well. I sent them down and stayed back at Mead's Col with Panda and Chaudhary as a back-up team. That's how, on 13 May the IAF flag flew on Kamet. IAF finally found success on the mountain on the third attempt.

In January 2004, I took over as Director, Air Force Adventure, and leading expeditions while trying to do justice to my job was more than I had bargained for. I was by now confident that we

now had a team for Everest. But to round it off nicely, I thought it would be wise to try out something in the early winter before we went to Everest. So in November I sent the team off to Kabru Dome (6545 m). I decided not to go, just to see how they would perform without me. After they set off, I came to know that climbing on Kabru had been banned. It was too late however, so I passed a message that they were not to go to the summit but hoist the flag a few metres below. The team passed the test with flying colours, with seven members reaching the summit (or just a few metres below). Now I knew that we were well and truly ready to take on the challenge of Everest. The Chief of Air Staff, Air Chief Marshal S.P. Tyagi gave us the green signal to climb in spring 2005.

Army climbed Everest, not too long back, for the first time in 2001 from the South. Navy climbed from the North in 2004. In 2005, Army was sending a women's expedition again from the South. This should be interesting, I thought the Army and Air Force meeting at the summit after climbing from the North and South. As luck would have it, insurgency in Nepal prevented the idea from developing further and both our teams went from the North. This was providential in many ways, as would be seen, later on. Right from the beginning of the expedition, Major Shekhawat and I decided that we must work together, and we did in what turned out to be a fine example of jointmanship.

We arrived at Lhasa on 31 March. We had to spend three nights at Lhasa to acclimatize at 12,000 feet, as also to pick up a few things like cooking pots and pans, nets, gas cylinders etc. Of course we also saw the very interesting Potala Palace and the Jokhang temple. The Jokhang temple reminded me of a Nat Geo programme that had been done on a pilgrim who measured the distance from his village in Tibet to Lhasa in a straight line in body lengths (*sashtang pranam*). It took him two years, with his mother and wife coming along on the normal route, waiting for him a reasonable distance. The pilgrim would mark his day's effort with a pile of stones, rest for the night with his mother and wife and continue his journey the next day. The process was repeated until he reached Lhasa, bruised, in rags and penniless but spiri-

tually cleansed and extremely satisfied. Lhasa is now a modern, thriving city with wide roads, public transport, malls etc. The airport terminal is well laid out, modern complete with aerobridges, and efficient passenger and cargo handling facilities, much of what we miss at Indian airports.

The drive to Base Camp through Shigatse (the second biggest city in Tibet) and Shegar was uneventful, except that we were very impressed with the roads and efficient services available everywhere. Our Tibetan guide wanted us to see all the monasteries en-route, but we were more interested in conserving as much energy as possible, thereby acclimatize properly. We reached BC on 7th.

Base Camp was like a small village. The Rombuk monastery short of BC is being rebuilt and looks quite deserted. The entrance of BC is lined with tea shops. The Tibetan Mountaineering Association has its office atop a small hillock. It is mandatory for the leader to report and present all the permits etc. There is always a scramble for good camping space. Our Sherpa Sirdar was waiting for us and had already occupied some space next to a hillock on which stands the small memorial to Mallory and Irving. At 5400 metres we had to be very careful to rest on the first two days. The view of the mountain from BC left us speechless and spellbound. The rest days were utilized in looking at Everest at various times of the day, trying to figure out at what time the famous plume of Everest started and comparing with photos and literature as to where the many routes to the mountain were. Winds were very strong at BC and our tents had to be literally tied down with ropes.

As soon as Doctor Hemant declared us fit, we started preparing for the move further up the mountain. Two days were spent in "height gain", the age-old adage which says 'climb high and sleep low' for proper acclimatization. A party of 11 reached Advance Base Camp on 13 April gaining almost 4000 ft. Space is also at a premium at ABC. We had of course sent a couple of Sherpas to occupy a good camping ground. A second party reached on 17th. Meanwhile three members who were bringing some of the gear

which had been supplied late also reached BC from Delhi. They had to go through the acclimatization phase and reached ABC on the 20th along with the oxygen fetched from Kathmandu.

A team of ten members and nine Sherpas went up for a ferry to North Col (23,000 ft). This process continued for the next few days, after which all the climbers earmarked for the summit attempt went up to spend two nights at North Col (Camp I) and touch 7700 m before they all got back to Base Camp on 28 April to recuperate for the final climb. The weather here throughout was good, very sunny and calm.

The Army women's team meanwhile had gone up to North Col once and gone back to BC on 17 April because they experienced high winds at ABC. The leader wanted to bring the team up again in a few days, touch 7700 metres and go back to BC once again. We, on the other hand, managed to get over with the first phase of acclimatization and went back to Base Camp by 28 April. Weather turned really nasty for a couple of days and the weather reports were not too encouraging. It was looking like a long wait for the window. Everyone at Base Camp was of the opinion that a weather window would come around by 17 May. Here is an extract from my diary:

"11 May 2005

Weather information has been the priority for the last few days, besides socializing with the various teams that have retreated from the mountain during this period of rest. An amazing collection of nationalities is to be found in this village called Base Camp. Armenians, Americans, British, Canadians, Chinese, Danish, French, Germans, Indians, Italians, Japanese, Russians, Norwegians, Serbians etc. are all here. Everyone is friendly and eager to help each other. The doctors are particularly cooperative, meeting often and offering advice on each other's patients. Our doctor has been particularly popular, as he speaks Russian fluently. There is a constant flow of people coming to him for advice. The weather reports seem to suggest that we may have a small window on 16/17/18 May. Russell Brice, the commercial expedition leader with the biggest team and most expensive clients, is trying to

dissuade everyone from using this window. I wonder why? The Norwegians are sure of the window and are going ahead and trying to summit on their National Day. We also hear that a Finnish team is also trying to use the same summit window. Today the winds on the mountain were high. One of our Sherpas (Dawa), doing a ferry to Camp II lost his gloves and has mildly frostbitten hands. Fortunately, our doctor says, he will recover soon. But astonishingly, Dawa reports that the winds at Camp II and above were too strong for anyone to go up to Camp III. So it seems that Sherpas from Russell Brice's team who had gone up to fix rope above Camp III to the 'Second Step' have not been able to do so. I hope the winds on 15th and 16th are going to be as predicted by the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts (ECMRWF) and the Indian National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecasting (NCMRWF).

We moved up to ABC on 13 May and started our second round of load ferries. The weather window didn't arrive as expected, and Major Shekhawat decided to move back to Base Camp and wait. However, we got a window for a summit on 21 May. We would have to set up the ropes above Camp III ourselves as Russell Brice, who had taken the responsibility of setting up the ropes till Second Step, had decided to wait for a later window. The Norwegians, Chinese, Swedish, Serbians, Russians and us got together and decided to go ahead with the rope fixing and summit attempt together. We contributed one Sherpa and some oxygen cylinders to the effort. The ropes were up and the Chinese managed to put 12 climbers on top. They also put up a GPS transmitter/receiver to help in determining the exact height of Everest.

Our team was dogged with problems from the time they left ABC. At Camp I (North Col), Ramakant developed high fever and throat problems and had to stay back. The 'Summit' oxygen system also started malfunctioning. This British system had been recently developed. We had tried it in Kamet and because of the tremendous advantages in terms of weight, we had decided to try it out on Everest, just like several other expeditions. It worked very well till 7500 metres. But after that there were all sorts of problems; the nasal cannula would slide out of the nose, the

system would auto-pulsate, the -O-ring would burst or the regulator would just not fit. We had a contingency plan, wherein 'Poisk' oxygen was also available. But this could be used only above 8300 m. The malfunctioning of the 'Summit' oxygen however had weakened the climbers and they could not climb beyond 8550 metres. We had launched our first attempt on 18th with Dahiya leading. They were doing well, but then near Second Step, he gave me a call saying that he had practically no strength to climb any higher. The others had given up much before.

We got another opportunity for a summit attempt on 30 May. The assault was to be led by Ramesh Chandra Tripathi, recipient of the National Adventure Award in 2001 for aero sports. An excellent team man, very popular, energetic and resourceful S.S. Chaitanya was one of the team members. He has been a member of Mt. Everest team, which was preparing for Mt. Everest since October 2003. Chaitanya had completed both basic and advance mountaineering courses in which he had been adjudged the best trainee. During the AF expeditions in which he took part, he had summited each and every peak. On every expedition he had been performing well and keeping in mind his performance and exceptional qualities, I had selected him in second assault team and not the first. This was a deliberate decision so that I had the best climber available in the event of the first team failing to summit.

For the unfamiliar reader, I will briefly cover the climbing methodology. The climbing methodology on Everest is very different from all other mountains. In the first phase lasting about 30 days all the potential climbers are made to acclimatize to an altitude of 7700 m. After this they return to Base Camp where they recoup for about 10-12 days. In the meantime, the weather is closely monitored and when a suitable weather window is available, an attempt is made to summit. There are six camps in all. Base Camp is at 5400 m, Intermediate Camp at 6000 m, Advance Base Camp (ABC) at 6400 m, Camp I (North Col) at 7050 m, Camp II at 7700 and Camp III at 8300 m. The assault phase begins from ABC. From here, the climbers spend one night each at Camp I and Camp II. Thereafter, they spend a short time

at Camp III to rest and start the climb at night. Climbing through the night, climbers usually summit the peak on an average at around nine in the morning. While climbing from Camp III, they climb a steep but wide ridge called the North Ridge which is mainly made up of rubble, ice and rock to reach the junction of the North Ridge and the North-East Ridge. Thereafter they follow the very narrow and sharp North-East Ridge to reach a steep rise in the ridge called 'First Step', approximately 8500 m. After this there are two more steep climbs called the 'Second Step' and the 'Third Step'. The Second Step is the most difficult.

Following this methodology, on 27 May the assault team started from ABC. Each member and Sherpa has one walkie-talkie set each. I could communicate with each and every member and Sherpa on two-hrs basis from my post at ABC. The team reached Camp I (7000 m) the same day and Camp II (7700 m) on 28th. The next day, they reached Camp III. After resting at the camp, they started out for the summit attempt at a quarter past ten. Tripathi called to say that they had started out for summit and that all the members were well-equipped and in high spirits. He said that the weather was excellent and the winds were calm. When I got a call from Tripathi at 2:45 a.m. saying that he was on Second Step, there was jubilation in the camp. The generators were on, courtesy the Sherpa Sirdar and everyone was awake. When Tripathi reached the summit at 5:15 a.m., we heard his excited voice on the radio. All the hard work had finally borne fruit. I informed Air HQ about the excellent news. Nikku Chaudhury reached the summit at 6:30 and Sherpa Jamling Bhote was on the radio at 10:50 telling me he and Chaitanya were on the summit at 10:50.

While speaking to them and congratulating Jamling and Chaitanya on their achievement, I also told them that they should not spend much time on summit and they should start back immediately and that they should give me a call while departing from summit. The weather on the summit was perceptibly bad. It worried me when I had no further communication with Chaitanya until approximately 5:30 p.m. when his Sherpa gave a call saying that they have crossed the difficult part and they would

be reaching the camp within two hours. The Sherpa also confirmed our worries and reported that it was snowing heavily and wind was very strong but they had no problem. This was a last communication from Chaitanya. When Tripathi reported to me from Summit Camp that the Sherpa had come back at approximately 2030 hrs without Chaitanya, I asked him whether it was possible to go up a short distance and look for Chaitanya. Shortly afterward I heard a melancholy cry on the radio, "Sir, I am very cold, can't move". After this there was static. I was sure this was Chaitanya, so I transmitted blindly throughout the night telling Chaitanya to stay on the rope, take two tablets of dexamethazone from his first aid kit, to keep moving and not to sit down. Later, I learnt that it was in fact Tripathi who had called to tell me that he had gone out in the severe blizzard to look for Chaitanya, had become miserably cold and exhausted from the effort of rewarming himself and reviving Jamling. By morning the climber had not returned. It was not possible to launch a search team on 31st because of bad weather. Other teams also did not attempt summit because of the weather. We had now little hope of finding him.

Nevertheless, the next day, we sent a search party which went a little beyond First Step. They found one of the Chaitanya's crampons short of First Step. The search party also looked as far as possible in the east and north side to see if they could spot the missing climber at any place. The fall is approximately 3000 feet on both sides of the ridge and as such it is very difficult to spot anything down below. On 2 June 2005 I sent another search party. They searched the entire area above Camp III, towards the left and the right side for any possibility of Chaitanya having taken shelter either under a rock or at one of the tents set up by other expedition towards the higher side of Camp III.

This search team also could not find any sign of the climber at these places. But as it turned out they helped save some lives of our sister team. While the search party was approaching Camp III, we intercepted a desperate call. Earlier we had given a few of our walkie-talkie sets to the Army team. They were on the summit attempt that day and we could hear all their calls. Some-

one was saying that they had run out of oxygen. Unfortunately, the other members of the Army team at summit camp could not hear the desperate calls because they had different walkie-talkies. I immediately diverted our search party to the Army camp. Shekhawat was there having returned after climbing Everest for the third time. I informed him of his climbers' situation. He quickly converted his second summit party into a rescue and they rushed up to Second Step. Luck was on their side and aided by calm weather, they returned around midnight with the absolutely exhausted climbers who had spent almost 26 hours on their feet.

Next day I met all the climbers of other expeditions who went to the summit on 2 June and I asked them about having seen our member. Chaitanya was very popular amongst all the members of other teams, they knew him very well and were very concerned about him but they reported in the negative. Our conclusions were unanimous; during his decent, badly affected by exhaustion and very strong blizzard Chaitanya had become disoriented. Thereafter in the poor visibility he got separated from his Sherpa. Somewhere near First Step he slipped off from the North-East Ridge and fell to his death on the North Face. There are several old ropes on the route, most of them are in a bad condition. In his exhausted stage and with the poor visibility it is also possible that he had clipped a wrong rope, which has not been able to hold his fall. It is also possible that he may have forgotten to clip on being as such at the limit of his physical and mental faculties.

This being the situation and having had the entire route searched, I had no doubt that Chaitanya had been killed by a fall. Even if he hadn't, I knew that there was no chance of his survival in the extreme altitude and cold, without oxygen for an extended period. Further searches were futile. I decided to call off search and rescue attempts. In any case all our resources such as oxygen and butane gas had been exhausted during the search operations and all our members and Sherpas were totally exhausted by the long stay at altitude.

I had requested Russell Brice, the leader of an international

expedition to look for any signs of our member from North Col. He had told me that he would be carrying a high power telescope with him to North Col where he would be for two three days while his members were attempting summit. As I came to know from him later, Russell's Sherpa Sirdar, Pemba had seen Chaitanya's body from Second Step while descending from the summit on 3 June. He also said in his letter that he observed the same body on 5 June through his telescope and the colour of the clothing was consistent with that worn by our members. Having spent many years climbing Mt. Everest from the North, he is certain that this is a new body on the mountain. The body lies close to George Mallory's body at 8150 metres. Mallory's body was discovered in a search in 1999. The book on this search operation, namely 'Ghosts of Everest' (Macmillan, 1999), describes the searchers stumbling on a collection of bodies of climbers who had all fallen off from the North-East Ridge.

Our expedition ended on a very sad note, losing one of our best climbers and someone who had so much of climbing to do. Resting in eternal peace in the lap of the mountains he so loved, Chaitanya will always be in our hearts. Despite the tragedy, the achievement of the team was lauded by one and all and the team came back to a thundering reception. I think everyone in the team realized how true it were that "after the battle on Everest, there are no victors, only survivors".



HAT TRICK BY THE ITB POLICE

2006

Harbhajan Singh

Climbing Mount Everest is always the dream of mountaineers. There is a constant desire to get new experience on every climb. The mountains are surely sensational but more sensational is scaling their invincible heights. I had the honour of leading a team of 28 members of the Indo-Tibetan Border Police to attempt Everest from the North Col route during the summer of 2006. Although the ITBP had climbed Everest both from the SE ridge and the North, I had the privilege of attempting the Hat Trick.

After Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay successfully scaled Everest on 29th May 1953, it has been climbed by many expeditions. Being the highest mountain of the world Everest is still challenging, posing different kinds of problems for new climbers. Early impressions that Everest will perhaps not enjoy the same attraction after the first ascent in 1953, has been proved wrong as there is an ever growing urge among mountaineers to reach the top of the world from different directions.

After a colourful flagging off ceremony at New Delhi on 25th March, all stores and equipment were packed and loaded in three vehicles going up to Indo-Nepal Border at Sanoli. The Deputy Leader and some members left for Kathmandu on 26th March reaching Bareilly the next evening. On 27th they left for Gorakhpur and spent the night there. The following day they reached Kathmandu.

After completing all formalities at Kathmandu the party left for Base Camp on 1st April. I reached Kathmandu by air on the 30th March with the main party. The entire team went to pay obeisance at the famous 'Pashupati' temple dedicated to Lord Shiva and also visited other religious places in Kathmandu. After procuring fresh vegetables and eggs, the advance party with Prem Singh left for Kodari where the Chinese custom authorities rechecked the stores and gave clearance. Then the party left for Nyalam (12,400 ft), the next staging camp. As our convoy of three trucks negotiated the rough and steep road with water gushing out, we were forced to go awfully slow, reaching Nyalam late in the evening.

The following day the party left for Xegar (13,800 ft). The road between Nyalam and Xegar is a gravel one and the party crossed Tung La pass from where one can see the "Shisha Pangma", the 14th highest peak in the world. Crossing Thang La pass and the Lub Lung pass, nearly 60 km from Nyalam, the party reached Tingri in the evening and had a night halt at old Tingri. On the early morning of 4th April, in good weather, the party started its onward move to Base Camp, arriving there at 1700 hrs. Dy Leader, with the help of two members and local Sherpas, unloaded the stores and selected the Base Camp site at Rongbuk.

I reached Lhasa on 1st April with the main party. On the 3rd we started from Lhasa at 1330 hrs and reached Xagtse in the evening. After night halt at Xagtse we started early in the morning for New Tingri. On 5th April we reached Base Camp (Rongbuk) and joined the Advance Party. After brief acclimatization we started our onward move to establish Camp I at a height of 18,500 ft.

After establishing Camp I, we moved up to select a site for

Camp II. After crossing small nullahs, moraine and big boulders, we reached Camp II near the snout of the Rongbuk glacier. Further progress was held up due to continuous rain and hostile weather conditions. We were delayed by three days in reaching Advance Base Camp. After improvement in weather conditions I sent 11 members to open route up to the Advance Base Camp. ABC was established on 16th April. Here the route from Camp II to Advance Base Camp is glaciated.

The Advance Base Camp is the hub of all expeditions attempting Everest from the north. After a day's rest I carried out full review of our plans for the summit. A party consisting of three members and four Sherpas was sent to select a suitable site for Camp IV (23,100 ft.). It was a total technical climbing with criss-cross crevasses, ice falls and ice walls. Five members with four Sherpas occupied Camp IV on 24th April. On 25th April when the team members were in the process of acclimatisation, Vishal Anand, DC, had a cerebral odema attack. The entire team diverted their energies to save him. Immediate treatment given by Dr. Tarry from USA played a prime role and Vishal recovered.

From Camp IV the party started its onward move to open route to Camp V on 25th April. The route between Camp IV and Camp V was very risky. One had to move on an exposed ridge prone to strong winds. It involved serious technical climbing. We also needed the highest degree of physical endurance to negotiate the most formidable ridge badly ravaged by the elements. It is a challenge to all climbers.

I was in constant touch with the Science and Technology Department of the Govt. of India for our weather bulletins. Based on these forecasts a plan was chalked out to climb the peak on 14th & 17th May. We were now required to establish Camp VI and position all required stores and oxygen cylinders there. I had to check the capabilities of the team to select members for the final climb. Those members who had already gone to extreme heights were given preference. They were allowed to climb as high as possible and stay at Camp VI without oxygen. The new climbers were given proper acclimatization, and allowed to sleep at higher

camps. From Camp V (25,750 ft), after checking the potential of all climbers, I asked them to go to Base Camp for recuperation and rest. The Sherpas were given a chance to establish Camp VI (27,300 ft) which they successfully accomplished on 6th May.

The route between Camp V and Camp VI is very tough. One has to move on an open rocky ground of shattered shale. The gradient increases gently until Camp VI. We waited for good weather to attempt the summit. We were now in the Death Zone where climbers deteriorate very fast. Our plan was now to move fast and carry out our mission in good weather.

The selection of the first team at this stage is the most critical decision that contributes to the success. The first party should be strong and a combination of old and new climbers. On the basis of performance shown by members at various higher camps, the first summit party consisting of seven members with two support Sherpas was selected to attempt the peak on 14th May. The first summit party, headed by Prem Singh, Dy. Leader, moved to North Col on 12th May and after a night stay, moved up at 0600 hrs and occupied Camp VI at 1600 hrs. Weather started deteriorating at 1630 hrs. Though there was no wind the snowfall was a matter of worry for further progress. At 2200 hrs the Dy. Leader contacted me on walkie-talkie and intimated that weather had improved a lot and they would go ahead with the attempt. The first party was allowed to attempt the peak and they left for summit at 2240 hrs. At 0600 hrs, the Dy. Leader came on the air and said that they had reached Step II. Move from Camp VI to the summit is very arduous. Fixed ropes, however, help mountaineers to find their way through this challenging terrain. After reaching the skyline, which is one hour's walk from the last camp, you are on an open ridge. The only thing between you and the top is a steep ascent of over 1300 feet, three Steps and a kilometre of distance. One can see the awesome Kangshung face falling off to your left and a mind boggling drop on the Tibet side. The route is punctuated by the perilous I, II and III Steps. Hardest is the second Step which has a ladder and a fixed rope to allow climb which would be virtually impossible otherwise. After crossing the three Steps one lands up at the final summit snowfield which is

visible from a long distance and it welcomes you to the top of the world.

The first summit party crossed Step II at 0630 hrs, at snails speed. Finally, with the blessings of the almighty and best wishes of the entire ITBP family, the team reached the summit at 0930 hrs. Dy. Leader came on the air and intimated that they have climbed the peak safely. Through his satellite phone, Prem announced the happy news to the Director General ITB Police in New Delhi. The summit team consisted of Prem Singh, Wangchuck Sherpa, Jot Singh, Pasang Tenzing, Nawang Dorje, Vishal Mani, Gyalzen Sherpa and Sri Kishan who was the solitary CRPF person with us. Happiness swept over all the ITBP units. The summit party hoisted the national and ITBP flags on the summit. After performing puja and taking photographs, the summit party started to descend and reached Camp VI at 1530 hrs. Unfortunately, while descending Sri Kishan slipped near Camp VI and presumably fell in a crevasse and died. He became the first mountaineer of CRPF to climb Mt. Everest.

The second attempt, as per plan, was made on 17th May. Three more members with two Sherpas reached the peak without any mishap. They were Hira Ram, Mohd Ali, Pradeep Kumar, Sange Phuri and Ngima Dorje Sherpa. The ITB Police had already climbed more than 150 peaks, including more than 50 virgin peaks. I felt humbled at the successful hat trick on Everest. The ITBP is truly the most formidable mountaineering organisation in the world today.



MAIDEN BSF ASCENT

2006

S.C. Negi

In the first week of Feb 2006, I went to Nepal along with Insp. Loveraj Singh, who had climbed Everest before, to liaise with the officials of the Indian Embassy at Kathmandu, Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation and to obtain quotations from various travel agencies. Advance liaison was also made with medical chief of Royal Nepal Army, who had promised to extend all medical facilities in Kathmandu including heli-evacuation in case of any eventuality.

The trained mountaineers must grow into a cohesive team. It is basically the strong team spirit, which turns the expedition from failure to success even in the difficult situations. Candidates must put their personal ambitions and jealousies aside to focus on a common objective. Once the men have been shortlisted, they are observed to see how they function as a team on the ground, especially under adverse weather conditions such as snowfall and high winds, with repeated exposure over a period of time. Out of the 36 volunteers, 24 were shortlisted on the basis of their age, mountaineering background and medical fitness. The selected

candidates were sent on an expedition to Mt. Satopanth (23,360 ft), a difficult peak in the Garhwal Himalaya. N.S. Satish Chander, AC, led the expedition. Twenty-one climbers reached the top.

We left Kathmandu by Sit Airlines at 0845 hrs on 3rd April 06 and reached Lukla airport at 0945 hrs. We were received at the airport and were escorted to a restaurant for a cup of tea. The restaurant is being run by Da Phuti, daughter of Late Phu Dorje who accompanied the 1965 Indian Everest expedition led by Captain M.S. Kohli. We had a cup of tea offered with warm hospitality. At the end, we were presented silk robes as a token of respect and regard and given a traditional send-off.

Our rucksacks weighed about 18 to 20 kg each, which included personnel clothing, high altitude special clothing, sleeping bags, mattresses and some of the technical equipment which were imported from various countries through Indian Mountaineering Foundation. We also carried with us some survival rations and medical kits. The trek from Lukla to Phakding was a gradual descent. It took us three and a half hours along the river Dudh-koshi, originating from the Khumbu glacier, to reach Phakding, which is located by the riverside. The trek from Phakding to Namche Bazaar took about 6 hrs. Our stay was arranged in the Namche Bazaar Guest House run by the widow of Phu Dorje who was the Head Sherpa with the Indian Army Everest Expedition 1985 in which five of their ace climbers lost their lives.

Namche Bazaar being the last market on the axis of our expedition route, we went to the market for making last minute purchases. Our destination for the day was Khumjung, the native village of Ang Tsering Sherpa, the owner of the travel agency we had hired. We started from Namche Bazaar after lunch at about 1500 hrs on 5th April. After negotiating a steep gradient, we first reached Seyangboche where we saw another airstrip under construction. Though smaller aircrafts do not land here the MI 17 or MI 18 helicopters regularly undertake routine sorties from Lukla, Kathmandu and the Base Camp.

Almost all expeditions going to Everest offer prayers at the Thyangboche monastery, which is dedicated to Guru Padam

Sambhava who translated the teachings of Lord Buddha from Pali to Tibetan language. In Buddhism, Guru Padam Sambhava is considered to be the teacher of tantrism. We went to the Thyangboche monastery in the morning at about 0900 hrs. The Head Lama of the Thyangboche monastery agreed to spend some time with us. We requested him to pray for our success and safe return. The Head Lama assured us that he would be regularly offering prayers on our behalf. He also advised us to offer prayers and chant guru Padam Sambhava's mantras i.e. '*Om Aah Huum Vajra Guru Padma Siddhi Huum*'.

- Aah* : associated with speech.
Huum : associated with mind.
Vajra : means thunderbolt and represents the energy of the enlightened mind.
Guru : means a master or teacher.
Padam : means lotus, calling to mind the loving and compassionate nature of enlightenment.
Siddhi : means accomplishment or supernatural powers.
Huum : associated with mind.

After receiving the blessings from the Head Lama of Thyangboche, we were given a warm send-off by the lady owner of the Himalayan View Restaurant at Thyangboche. Enroute we also offered prayers at Deboche monastery. The Head Nun of the monastery gave us her blessings and also assured us that she would be regularly offering prayers on our behalf for the success in our mission and safe return. The trek from Thyangboche to Deboche monastery was a gradual descent till we reached the wire bridge followed by a gradual climb, near Imja Khola village. It was a two hours' steep climb till we reached the 1500-year-old Pangboche monastery. A rare piece of yeti skull and the skeleton of the portion of yeti's hand were kept in this monastery for public display. These rare assets have now unfortunately been stolen. However, after having a light lunch at a small restaurant we were taken to Pangboche monastery where we offered prayers. Thereafter we trekked further to Dingboche, which was a gradual climb till we reached a junction from where the two treks originated, one

to Pheriche and another to Dingboche. The weather started packing up and the valley got covered with low clouds making the visibility poor. Well before darkness could set in, we all reached Dingboche at 1730 hrs on 7th April. We were put up at Hotel Sonam at Dingboche (14,464 ft). Most of the rooms in the hotel were nothing but an enclosure made out of plywood.

It was our height-gaining day. We went up to a height of 16,540 ft, negotiating a steep climb following a ridgeline. The name of the peak is Nanj Kharja which overlooks Dingboche. By lunch time we were back in our hotel. We spent the night at Dingboche.

To ensure that climbers do not suffer high altitude sickness at the Base Camp (17,800 ft) of Mt. Everest, they are taken to Kala Pathar (18,700 ft), a vantage point from where one can view the mighty Everest during clear weather and do photography. Their systems are thus exposed to higher altitude. With this aim our team reached the top of Kala Pathar at 1105 hrs on 13th April. The climb was tedious with the wind velocity on the top between 70 and 80 kmph. High wind-speed increased the adverse effect of wind-chill. We were very curious to have a close view of Mt. Everest, but the higher reaches being covered with thick clouds, we could not view the peak. By 1300 hrs we were back in our hotel at Gorek Shep.

The next morning, on 14th April, we knew that we could reach the Base Camp in three to four hours. Hence we left Gorak Shep for the Base Camp at 0845 hrs, after taking heavy breakfast. After 15 to 20 minutes trek we came across the memorial of the Indian Army Expedition team members who had laid down their lives during their 1985 Everest expedition. We paid our homage to those great climbers and thereafter resumed our trek to Base Camp. Enroute we crossed two streams and trekked all along the right lateral moraine of the great Khumbu glacier. The view of Pumori, Lola pass and the West Shoulder of Everest attracted our attention throughout the trek. It is said that once upon a time the level of the Khumbu glacier was so high that it was touching the Lola pass and the Sherpas used to carry yaks across this pass to Tibet for trade. The global warming over the years and frequent

movement of trekkers and climbers has led to fast melting of the glacier with the result that the level of Khumbu glacier has now come down by at least 600 to 700 feet. We reached the Base Camp at 1300 hrs.

To make sure that the members do not come under avalanches which normally trigger from both sides of the Khumbu glacier, we decided to complete our climbs in early part of the day. Our first party, consisting of eight members and 12 Sherpas and accompanied by me, left the Base Camp for Camp I at 0620 hrs. While we were negotiating wide crevasses on the Khumbu Icefall, we received a message on our walkie-talkie that an accident had taken place in which three Sherpas of a travel agency, Adventure Consultant, were buried under the debris of ice blocks. As a result of which the route was blocked and further movement was not advisable. We returned to the Base Camp perforce.

The following day, the route through the Khumbu Icefall had not yet opened. This day was fruitfully utilized for repairing the helipad which was in bad shape and so far none of the helicopters had landed during the current season. By the end of the day we were satisfied that because of our hard work the helipad was rebuilt and made functional.

April 23 was fortunately a clear day after so many days of bad weather. Seven members left for Camp III (19,900 ft) at 0630 hrs under the leadership of Inspr Loveraj Singh with loads. While crossing the Khumbu glacier the party had to cross 14 wide crevasses with the help of ladder bridges made by joining two to three aluminium ladders, each measuring 8 to 10 feet. Technical difficulties were encountered enroute as per the report given to us. This being their first climb to Camp I (19,900 ft), they took about six hours to reach the Camp. After dropping loads they returned to the Base Camp.

The Sherpas ferried loads to the higher camps on 24th and 25th April and the members utilized this time for replenishing their loss of energy and preparations for the next move. On 26th April, I moved up to Camp I with eight members. We took six to seven hours to reach Camp I. We were carrying loads of about 20 kg

each which included tents, ropes, utensils, other special clothing and equipment. After establishing the camp we cooked food ourselves and halted there for the night. It was a chilly night, winds blowing at 60 to 70 kmph. Continuous rattling of flaps of the tents and snowfall during the night did not allow us to have a sound sleep.

The inner lining of our tent was covered with a thick layer of frost accumulated from the moisture produced by us while exhaling. All members returned to the Base Camp after spending one night at Camp I. This was a process, which we underwent every time we occupied a new camp for the first time. The 28th and 29th April were utilized for conditioning, preparation for the next move and for personal hygiene. April 30 was a cloudy day but there was no snowfall. Loveraj took five members to Camp I carrying loads.

On May 1, I accompanied HC Kamlesh Kumar, Ct Kedar Singh and Ct Bhagat Singh to Camp I. We took five hours to reach. Simultaneously, Loveraj's group left Camp I at 0600 and reached Camp II (21,000 ft) at 1100 hrs. Enroute they crossed several crevasses with the help of bridges made from aluminium ladders joined together. Both the ropes left for Camp III (24,000 ft) at 0730 hrs on the 3rd May but had to return to Camp II due to jet winds prevailing at the bottom of Lohtse face. Next day dawned bright and clear and we moved up to Camp III (24,000 ft). We negotiated the steep Lohtse Face, and took five hrs to reach Camp III. We returned to Camp II at 1410 hrs.

All members of both the ropes left Camp II for the Base Camp at 0700 hrs and reached there at 1430 hrs. Our oxygen cylinders, regulators and weather trackers had arrived at the Base Camp from Kathmandu, ending our eager wait. We practised the use of oxygen cylinders, regulators and weather trackers for further use at higher camps. We witnessed snowfall during the period from 7th to 9th May. D.B. Negi reached Base Camp from Kathmandu after 10 days of trek from Lukla. Weather being clear, all eight members left for Camp II (21,000 ft) at 0630 hrs on 10th May bypassing Camp I. The following day was utilized for acclimatization at

Camp II. On 11th May, two climbers from the Czech Republic were attempting Mt. Lohtse. While descending, one of the climbers slipped down from the Lohtse face and died.

On 12th May 06, at 0730 hrs, Kamlesh Kumar, Praveen Singh, Bhagat Singh and Manoj Dahal left for Camp III (24,000 ft) and reached there at 1245 hrs. After a night halt at Camp III they returned to Camp II. I alongwith Loveraj, Munde Sangram and Kedar Singh left for Camp III at 0700 hrs on 13th May. But when we reached the Camp at 1330 hrs, weather became bad and strong winds were blowing. This did not permit us a night halt at Camp III and we had to return to Camp II.

We were in constant touch with National Centre for Medium Range Weather Forecast Department, Noida. Dr. Akhilesh Gupta and the team of scientists of this Department were provided by us the data regarding climatic condition of the Everest region and thereafter they used to prepare their forecast for the next few days. Dr. Gupta gave us green signal for favourable weather on 18th, 19th and 20th May. We immediately planned to attempt the peak during this period.

On 18th May, I took an eight-member team, consisting of Loveraj Singh, Kamlesh Kumar, Parveen Singh, Kedar Singh, Munde Sangram, Bhagat Singh and Manoj Dahal, to Camp II. The first summit party consisting of Kamlesh Kumar, Parveen Singh, Kedar Singh, Bhagat Singh and Manoj Dahal left for Camp III (24,000 ft) from Camp II under Loveraj Singh and reached there after a tedious climb of five and a half hours. All six members left the next day for Camp IV at 0915 hrs. After negotiating the steep Yellow Band and Geneva Spur they reached Camp IV (South Col—26,000 ft) at 1500 hrs.

The same day, at 2100 hrs, the summit party moved up and reached the Balcony at 0130 hrs after negotiating steep slope covered with hard and packed snow. They reached South Summit at 0500 hrs. The party had to give their best to negotiate the 70 to 80 degree steep South-East Ridge. The summiters took one hour to clear the sharp razor edge summit-ridge from south summit to the main summit before they finally reached the

summit at 0600 hrs. The famous Hillary Step located between south summit and main summit tested their rock climbing skills. In the history of BSF, for the first time, six bordermen successfully reached the top of the world. After spending 25 minutes on the top they returned to Camp IV at 1300 hrs safely for a well deserved night nest. The following day, the summit party returned to Camp II at 1200 hrs. Next day, alongwith Sherpa Nawang, I left Camp II and reached Camp III by noon after negotiating the Lohtse face.

On 23rd May, alongwith Nawang Sherpa, I left Camp III at 0600 hrs, and reached Camp IV (South Col) at 1200 hrs. through the Yellow Band and the Geneva Spur. By evening two more Sherpas, Rita Sherpa and Phemba Sherpa, joined us at the South Col.

Altitude above 24,000 feet is regarded as the "Death Zone" for which no acclimatization is possible. The degree of adverse effect in this zone on human beings increases as one goes higher and higher. Therefore, I was apprehensive that climbing Everest at this old age of 56 may be detrimental to my health, particularly at the elevation of 26,000 feet and above. But fortunately everything went well because I was mentally and physically prepared for the challenge.

At 2000 hrs, on 23rd May, accompanied by the three Sherpas, I left for the summit. After an hour's climb, Nawang Sherpa complained that he was not comfortable with his oxygen mask and would prefer to climb without oxygen. I advised him that for climbing Everest without oxygen one has to undergo a rigorous process of acclimatization which he had not done. Therefore, I told him to carry on his climb with oxygen and in case he faced more difficulty then he should go back. He immediately acted on my advice and went back to the summit camp. I reached South Summit at 0445 hrs, changed my oxygen cylinder and resumed my climb which involved negotiating a sharp-razor ridge covered with cornices, steep rock and the famous Hillary Step. Finally, along with Rita Sherpa and Phemba Sherpa, I reached the summit at 0545 hrs. With this climb, I could establish one international

and one national record; I was now the highest-ranking officer of the armed forces and the oldest Indian to have ever climbed Mt. Everest at the age of 56 years and 75 days. I dedicate these achievements and BSF's maiden success on Everest to those brave BSF mountaineers who have shown indomitable courage to face the mighty nature and sacrificed their lives on Mt. Saser Kangri I (24,872 ft) in 1995.



SEVEN SUMMITS BY MALLI MASTAN BABU

2006

M.S. Kohli

About a year ago one young climber from Andhra, Malli Mastan Babu, came to see me. The 31-year old Malli, an alumni of IIM Calcutta and IIT Kharagpur, leaving a lucrative career in the corporate world, had set his eyes on the tallest peaks in the seven continents—Mt. Everest (Asia), Aconcagua (South America), Denali (North America), Kilimanjaro (Africa), Elbrus (Europe), Kosciuszko (Australia) and Mount Vinson (Antarctica).

He was full of zeal and enthusiasm. He told me that the fastest climber to accomplish this peak so far was Verne Tejas. He had completed this challenging task in 187 days. Malli was determined to break his record. I was much impressed with him and assured him of my full support. Although he had climbed the highest peaks in the continents of South America and Africa, he had to climb these once again for the sake of establishing a new record of completing all the seven climbs in the shortest time.

As destiny defined Malli graduated in Electrical Engineering

from NIT Jamshedpur, M.Tech in Electronics from IIT Kharagpur and PGDM from IIM Calcutta. His childhood dream grew with him as fervently as his academic endeavour. He kept equipping himself with the basic skills of adventure sports as opportunities arose during his academic years. He always enjoyed the fun and thrill of adventure sports and sought various means to express himself. He hardly knew about the surprise that future was holding for him. He started Adventure Club at IIM Kolkata in 2003 and organized treks in western Himalaya, skiing, rock climbing, rafting and Vipasana meditation courses. He won the applause of students as well as professors at IIM Kolkata for his initiatives. *He graduated from IIM Kolkata in 2004 opting for Everest Summit against campus placements. This one decision dictated his destiny for the next two years and thus a chapter was created in the Indian adventure annals.*

Envisioning the Goal: First Indian and Fastest Seven Summitter

He undertook the arduous Everest Base Camp trek all by himself in April, attended a Basic Mountaineering Course in Manali and trained himself alone in the Gangotri glacier and Sikkim Himalaya. By the end of 2004, he was planning to become the First Indian to accomplish seven summits and not just an Everest summit. In 2005, he summited Kilimanjaro (19,340 ft) on Jan. 20, from a challenging route (Umbwe route) on the mountain in just 3½ days including the descent. On 8th February, he summited Mt. Aconcagua (22,841 ft) unguided. This is the tallest peak of Western Hemisphere as well as South America continent. He achieved this in just 10 days having only a transit visa of 15 days to Argentina. It is the enthusiastic support and sacrifices of his friends that made him envision seven summits mission. These international climbs gave him more confidence and insights to further stretch his seven summits target. *He now started planning towards being the fastest individual in the world to accomplish seven summits, far ahead from his dream of being the First Indian seven summitter.* To him it mattered to be the fastest because it is only through this he can carve a proud place

for India in the annals of seven summits achievers. This is an exhibition of the contemporary Indian youth's uncompromising attitude towards making global impact and in spirit with the philosophy of President Dr. A.P.J. Abdul Kalam— "*Thinking Big and Acting Big!*"

Seven Summits Challenges

Information garnering was the first step and then it was training and possessing focus, drive and passion for the total duration of the mission. He also had to endure the stress and strain of the uncertainty involved. He identified strengthening the limbs, lungs and mind as the critical success factors and designed his training schedule accordingly. Strength in limbs (hands and legs) is what is required to climb the mountain. He achieved this by skipping, running long distances (15-20 miles) and undertaking solo arduous high altitude Himalayan treks. Climbing these high altitude peaks demands extreme training for the lungs. He has designed his own *Pranayama* technique to improve his lung capacity. A strong determination developed from extreme mental strength which is required to accomplish this mission. He accredits his mental strength and determination to *vipasana* meditation. Besides equipping with these skills, experience is what makes you reach the summits, says Malli. Obtaining visas was the toughest challenge en-route his seven summits quest. I was happy to help him towards getting visas. Garnering financial support was the crux of this endeavour. He didn't receive any institutional support from either the government or the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. He started discussing options with the alumni of his alma mater.

Seven Summits Team: People Who made it Happen

He was exhausted and almost gave up on seven summits and was planning to go for only Everest by taking loans. At this juncture, in the last week of September 2005, he heard about the financial support from his Sainik School Korukonda Alumni

Association (Saikoriana). Mr. Satyam Bheemarasetti coordinated the fund-raising in India, and in U.S. it was coordinated by Varma Nadimpalli and Venkat Devarapalli. Without the support of the Saikoriana, Malli would not have embarked on the fastest seven summits endeavour. He was also supported by Lanco Group of Companies, Sierra Atlantic and Sir Rama Chit Funds towards these expeditions. Most of his equipment was sponsored by K.S. Subba Rao, Souvik Kar and his friends living in San Francisco. Malli's hopes soared not only for summiting Everest but also accomplishing the first Indian seven summits as well as fastest seven summits. His mother braving herself let her youngest son embark on this seven summits mission, consoling that it is an achievement beyond individual and family. It will be his family that has to face the stark destitution in case of danger to him, yet they ate their apprehensions and bid him a brave adieu with smiles on their faces.

Antarctica to Alaska via Everest: Adventure Unleashed!

He arranged to collect the Indian flag, his school flag of Sainik School Korukonda, the photograph of his dearest friend, Lt. M.U.B. Rao, and the IIM Kolkata logo. It gave him immense pride to stand on the tallest points of the continents with these fond mementoes. His seven summits endeavour is a tribute to his seniors and a gift to the nation. His friends C.K. Mohan and Sidhu bid adieu at Mumbai airport each time he left the nation to summit the tallest peak in each of these continents.

He embarked on the fastest seven summits mission on 25th Dec. 2005 from India to Antarctica. Mt. Vinson Massif expedition took off on 12th January 2006 from Punta Arenas, Chile. To protect one-self from the fatal cold conditions of minus 40 degrees is the most challenging part, reminisces Malli. It is also difficult to adopt to the 24 hrs day-light conditions of Antarctica because of its proximity to the South Pole. This significantly disturbed the eating and sleeping hours of the climbers. Besides these, there were some steep sections on the mountain which required to be climbed with fixed ropes. He reached the summit on 19th Jan.

2006 and became the first Indian to summit Mt. Vinson Massif, the tallest in the continent of Antarctica.

Immediately after flying out of Antarctica and arriving in Chile, Malli started planning and preparing for his Aconcagua climb. Unfortunately, he was again embroiled in visa problems arising out of ignorance of immigration officers in Buenos Aires while transiting into Santiago from India. Indian Embassy in Santiago, Chile came to his help in overcoming the visa issues and was instrumental in issuing a fresh tourist visa for 30 days. Malli flew to Argentina on 6th February and completed the formalities of permits and headed for the mountain on 8th February. He attempted Aconcagua in alpine style with bare essentials.

The following excerpt from his e-mail to me throws some light on the Aconcagua ascent, "I was stuck in a snow storm just short of 500 m to the summit, at the entrance of *Canaleta*. I waited for more than an hour to try my luck hoping for better weather and to take advantage of long days of southern continent summers. On my third attempt, I packed my backpack with sleeping bag, cooking gear and rations with an intention to sleep on the mountain in case of exhaustion due to long hours or bad weather and to cook food whenever conditions favoured or I felt hungry. I started from *Nido Condores Camp* 5200 m at 8:30 p.m. seeing the clear clouds and not sure of the future. I arrived at *Berlin Camp* in 2 hours and decided to take rest and squeezed beside the snow lumps, inside a very small wooden shelter at *Berlin Camp*. I started for the summit at 2 a.m. When I reached *White Rocks* I was feeling very exhausted, cold, hungry and sleepy. I was successful in lighting the stove after several attempts and made some tea. Then I slept inside the sleeping bag under a big rock. I left *White Rocks* and headed for the summit at 6 a.m. After a brave endeavour I reached the summit on 17th February and descended to the *Berlin Camp* and slept at 5800 m."

Malli flew out of Argentina on 28th February and arranged for travel to Tanzania to attempt Kilimanjaro. He summited Kilimanjaro on 15th March via the *Macheme* route. He allowed himself to acclimatize well and ascended in 6 days. After Kilimanjaro, it

was Kosciuszko (7310 ft) in Australia. It is only a walk in the park and all it required were the efforts in arranging visa and travel. He left for Sydney in the last week of March. He summited on 1st April. By now, his idea to summit each of the seven summits on different days of the week had become very firm and he wanted to try hard. He started planning his Everest ascent accordingly.

He was able to get registered for Everest climb with "Summit Climb", a guided expedition team by taking loans from his school alumni. He arrived in Mumbai from Australia on 6th April. His Everest expedition had left from Kathmandu towards Everest base camp on 4th April. He learnt that Kathmandu was in the middle of political turmoil and was very unsafe. He flew from Delhi on 8th April and was greeted with a curfew in Kathmandu. He managed to put himself up in a hotel near the international airport. Kathmandu was completely paralyzed, with communications cut off and strict curfew conditions: On 11th April, he flew from Kathmandu to Lukla by the 9:30 a.m. flight. He savoured the view of the majestic Himalayan range during the flight; little was he aware of the shocking surprise awaiting him at Lukla.

He got out of the plane and let the fresh breath of Khumbu touch his face and feel the smell of history that lured many intrepid men into its lap. As time passed and the crowd started moving away with their luggage he started to look out for his baggage and was filled with inexplicable premonition of poignant feeling. Slowly the unrest had increased and it was no sooner, before he was completely enveloped by the shock of veracity of missing his quintessential climbing gear. His climbing gear, with which he had been climbing and had developed ease and fondness on the mountains, was now missing. The following words explain his feelings then— "I gazed at the mammoth mountains staring at me and throwing the challenge, if you want to climb Everest then it is not your way but our way!" He drew strength from a shloka in Bhagavadgita "*Hatova pranyashashi swrg; jitvava bhokshya se mahim. Thasmadushtidh yudhaaye kritha nischay!*" (Die, you will win heaven; Conquer, you win the sovereignty of the Earth. Therefore stand up, Arjuna determined to fight!) (Chapter 2.37).

Undeterred Malli flew to Kathmandu the next day and purchased whatever he could in between the curfew-free hours and arranged to fly again to Lukla on 13th April. The same day he resumed the trek towards Everest Base Camp. On 15th April at 11:30 a.m. he joined his team at Base Camp. On 17th April Malli crossed the formidable Khumbu Icefall. On 21st the Base Camp was enveloped in gloom with the news of three Sherpas missing in the icefall. Everyone understands that, on these big mountains "missing" is only a euphemism for "death". Malli had to plan the whole acclimatization programme and schedule for himself. He was his own leader as well as climber. He slept alone at several camps. On 10th May, he slept alone at 24,000 ft in Camp 3 on *Lhotse Face* very well aware that one of his team-mate was affected with frost bite here and had to be evacuated by the rescue helicopter from the Base Camp. After this final acclimatization he was ready for the summit assault.

Malli used to visit this Indian expedition, and during meals time one of the BSF member's hilarious discussions with the Sherpa cook led to a misunderstanding and resulted in a very unfortunate situation. On 14th May, just before leaving for summit push, he was attacked by a mad group of Sherpas belonging to BSF (Border Security Force) Expedition leaving him hurt in his leg. He was left to defend himself alone. It was hard for him to recover from this shocking experience.

He started from Base Camp and reached Camp 2 on 17th May. He spent one rest day at Camp 2 (22,000 ft). On 19th May he slept at Camp 3 (24,000 ft) and then on 20th headed to the *death zone*, the South Col at 26,000 ft. He arrived at 4 p.m. and tried to sleep but the excitement of the summit and the gravity of the place hardly allowed him any. It was here that his childhood school alumnus along with five other army officers had perished due to bad weather. This made him more poignant and yet he became more determined to attempt the summit. Malli chose to summit on 21st May, fully aware that it was not a favourable summit day as weather reports suggested bad weather. He chose this day so as to accomplish seven summits on seven different

days of the week. He and the Mountain Trip Expedition team from US were the only people who attempted summit on 21st May.

“We kept drinking liquids and ate chocolates and noodles trying to store as much energy as possible for the summit push. We kept checking our oxygen system: the valve and the oxygen flow rate, our protective clothing system, and filled our water bottles. I had taken Bhagavadgita and a string of beads that I got from Rishikesh. We offered our prayers to protect and give us the strength to achieve our goal. We left for the summit at 10:30 p.m. that night.”

Malli arrived at the Balcony in 4 hours and then switched the oxygen cylinders with new one, drank water and ate chocolates. After resting for nearly half an hour, he took steps towards the summit. Climbing the steep high exposed ridge sent tremors but he regained his composure with grit and kept inching towards the summit. Soon he was walking the history that he had been reading since childhood. The pictures that he had seen in the books were a reality now and he was part of it. He climbed the South Summit, 28,750 ft and the formidable Hillary Step and was soon on the final cornice ridge undulating to the top of the world. Malli experienced the frostbite signals, his fingers were swollen, his vision became severely blurred due to snow-blindness and the extreme exposure and exhaustion demanded Herculean effort and will-power to place the next foot ahead of the other. He reached the summit at 7:03 hrs when the sun was trying to penetrate through the dense clouds and the unrestricted view of the infinite stretch of beauty was beyond articulation of words.

Reaching the summit is only a job half done and descent is more dangerous on Everest and has claimed many lives. He made to the summit camp in four hours. He arrived in Base Camp on 23rd May and that's when he allowed himself to congratulate on summiting the tallest peak of the world. It was his pilgrimage and tribute to his alma mater alumnus. His vision didn't improve for another 10 days after he reached Kathmandu. Soon He was engrossed in the preparation for the Elbrus ascent. Only obtaining

visas proved challenging. His friends (Madhusudhan and Anupam—IIM C 40 & 41st batches) made all visa as well as travel arrangements. He summited Elbrus in two days starting from Terskol. It was very windy and he was lifted off the mountain a few times, quotes Malli. He summited Elbrus on 13th June, Tuesday.

He had only Denali left and Monday to ascend. It was already July and the climbing season on Denali was over. After requesting several expedition companies, Alaska Mountaineering School agreed to lead the expedition. His was the last team to register for the permits on Denali for that season. There were very few people on the mountain. He flew from Talkeetna on 4th July and resumed the climb from Kalhitna glacier at 2 a.m. on 5th July. Colby Coombs, Malli and Johsua reached the summit on 10th July, Monday. It is a remarkable day in the annals of Indian mountaineering history. It is sweet present from Malli to mother India. This is the culmination of Malli's audacious adventurous odyssey. They descended to Base Camp and flew for Talkeetna on 12th June.

Malli climbed the seven summits on different days of the week, Everest on Sunday, Denali on Monday, Elbrus on Tuesday, Kili-manjaro on Wednesday, Vinson Massif on Thursday, Aconcagua on Friday and Kosciuszko on Saturday. He is today the fastest seven summitter in the world (172 days) and the only person in the world to reach the seven highest summits in seven week days and consecutive calendar months. After accomplishing the Kosciuszko version of seven summits, he is now planning to attempt Mt. Carstensz in Indonesia to become the fastest summitter for Carstensz version of seven summits.

The glorious achievement of Ajit Bajaj in being the first Indian to ski to the North Pole this year followed by this highly creditable feat of Malli Mastan Babu are in accordance with the vision of late Rajiv Gandhi who wanted Indians to take up adventure missions of world class.

EPILOGUE

The phenomenal growth of mountaineering and adventure in the post-Independence India, much influenced by our Everest achievements, has been one of the most welcome developments, for it has played, though indirectly, a significant role in the life of our nation. It started with the maiden ascent of Everest by Tenzing Norgay which electrified the entire nation. Those days, I remember, many of us from my college gatecrashed into the civic reception accorded to Tenzing, Hillary, John Hunt and other members of the 1953 team in Delhi. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and West Bengal Chief Minister, Dr. B.C. Roy, realising the need to introduce the spirit of adventure in India, decided to set up the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute in Darjeeling with Tenzing as Director of Field Training.

In the history of adventure and mountaineering in India, the first ascent of Everest by an Indian and establishment of the HMI in Darjeeling will always remain as the two most important landmark events. Subsequent growth of mountaineering and adventure in India, establishment of the mountaineering institutes at Manali, Uttarkashi and Pahalgam, birth of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and establishment of hundreds of mountaineering and adventure clubs all over the country were undoubtedly due to these two major events.

Six years after the establishment of HMI, encouraged by several Indian achievements during the next five years which included the climbs of Kamet, Cho-Oyu, Nanda Kot and Nanda Devi, India took up the challenge of Mount Everest. The 1960 expedition, led by Brigadier Gyan Singh, failed when the three gallant climbers

were forced to retreat when 630 feet below the summit. On their return, Prime Minister Nehru had remarked, "The spirit and lure of the Himalayas is spreading now all over India among our young people, and that is a sign and symbol of the new life and the new spirit that is coursing through India's veins."

Another major event in the field of adventure was the spectacular record-breaking ascent of Everest by nine climbers in 1965. Indira Gandhi chose to bracket the achievement of our mountaineers with the advancing India's universally-acclaimed achievements in the scientific and other fields thus:

"The successful Indian Everest climb in 1965, the military victory in 1971, the peaceful nuclear experiment at Pokhran, the achievement of self-sufficiency in food, the launching of Aryabhata, Bhaskara and Rohini, and the last with our own rocket—each one of these has added to our prestige as a nation and to the self-confidence of our people."

Later in her Foreword to *'Nine Atop Everest'* she wrote:

"The record of Commander Kohli's expedition will find special mention in history. It was a masterpiece of planning, organisation, teamwork, individual effort and leadership."

On return, the Everest team visited various state capitals at the invitation of the chief ministers. Welcome receptions were held in many parts of the country. The spirit of mountaineering and adventure had grown enormously. As compared to two or three expeditions every year, the year 1966 witnessed a record number of 15 Indian expeditions to the Himalayas. The number kept on growing in the subsequent years.

Although the cost of an average Everest expedition is 10 times more than an expedition to a medium height peak, its impact on the youth is much more. I have always supported various Indian endeavours to climb the highest peak in the world. The gallant Indian teams to Everest has raised the morale of our officers and men in the Army, Navy, Air Force, para-military forces as well as among the youth in general. Even the Lal Bahadur Shastri Administrative Academy in Mussoorie has been regularly sending expeditions of IAS probationers to Himalayan peaks. Today, there

are over 100 Indian expeditions to the Himalaya every year, spreading the spirit of adventure regarded crucial for character-building.

Today, the National Cadet Corps, the Bharat Scouts and Guides, the Boy Scouts Association, the Nehru Yuvak Kendras and several schools and colleges promote trekking or climbing as part of their character-building activities. Most of the public schools place a lot of emphasis on mountaineering training for all round development of their students. Much useful work has been done by the Youth Hostels Association of India (YHAI) in popularising Himalayas amongst the youth of India. It was in the early seventies that I helped YHAI in introducing the National Himalayan Trekking Programme. Under this scheme YHA sets up tented camps at each stage of the trek, stock them with necessary food, fuel and blankets and also provide a competent guide.

The Himalayas are no more considered impregnable, as was the case a few years ago. This has added an almost new dimension to the requirement of mountaineering training for the military and the para-military organisations deployed on our northern borders. Mountaineering involvement and accomplishment of these bodies, particularly of the Indian Army and the Indo-Tibetan Border Police, are of a great magnitude.

Women have also not been lagging behind. In the development of mountaineering in India, Gujarat women had initially taken the lead. It was amazing that women from a state which was least known for any outdoor or military activity, gave a lead to the women of India in a sport demanding extreme physical endurance and involving objective hazards. The Bengali women soon overtook the Gujaratis. Surprisingly, these days, women from all parts of India are participating in various adventure activities.

We look back at the five decades of Indian mountaineering with great contentment and satisfaction. The last decade has witnessed new trends in the field of adventure. Of these, the trekking explosion in the Himalayas is the most significant. In 1971, there were just a dozen mountaineering expeditions and

less than a hundred trekkers visiting the Himalayas annually. Now there are over 1000 mountaineering expeditions and over five lakh trekkers. The number of Himalayan pilgrims run into millions.

There are other highlands, the deserts and areas of wilderness where, too, our youth can find new opportunities for adventure. As one goes across the length and breadth of the country, resorting to different modes of transport and travel, one meets varying cultures, linguistic patterns, civilizations past and present, each one of these aspects presenting varying degrees of adventure.

The vast expanse of the Thar Desert in Rajasthan, stretching from Bikaner-Jaisalmer in the north to the marshy lands of the Rann of Kutch on the shores of the Arabian Sea, provides some of the most fascinating opportunities for wild safaris. Teeming with wild bore, chinkaras, neelgai, the great Indian bastard, giant sandgrouses and the flamingo, it is a veritable paradise for lovers of wildlife.

So, besides the Himalayas, there are plenty of opportunities for adventure and outdoor excursions in several parts of our country. There is the varied and vast coastline, there are scores of rivers providing opportunities for river-running which is lately gaining popularity and has much more potential to offer. Apart from several Himalayan rivers, we have many others—Godavari, Narmada, Tapti and Krishna which promise adventure and exploration.

Looking beyond Everest, it is important to realise that there is no better way for character-building of our youth than infusing adventure. In fact, adventure should be made the way of life which should spread not only to cities and towns, but to the villages and to remote areas of our country where young boys and girls are still living without being affected by the modern society. Once this takes place, as well as other sports and adventures, the strength of the nation is ensured.

Not many are aware that late Rajiv Gandhi was full of passion to spread adventure in all parts of India. On August 7, 1980, when I met him for the first time, he expressed his three wishes to me, *"Indians venturing to North or South Pole, sailing around*

the world, and Indian women scaling Everest on their own." As Vice President and later President of Indian Mountaineering Foundation, I worked hard and fulfilled all his three ambitions. During the end of April 1991 I met Rajiv Gandhi at a function in Rashtrapati Bhavan. At the end of the function he took me aside for a brief chat on adventure. We decided to launch a mass movement of adventure in all parts of India. He was then proceeding to Bhubaneshwar and Chennai. Before we parted he said, "Let me return from the election tour and we should meet again to discuss the matter at length." Little did I know then that this would be our last meeting.

The last few days of Rajiv were the greatest adventure of his life. After being kept away from the crowds for several years by his security staff, he threw himself into the hands of the people he loved. He had started enjoying their warmth and this new adventure. Millions of hands were extended to him all over the country. Many held his hands assuring him of their love and support. But alas, one cruel hand snatched him away from all of us.

During the past 15 years, inspired by his passion, I tried several plans. I felt that students, besides excellence in education, should develop physical and mental fitness, proficiency in a hobby, practice yoga and meditation, and imbibe qualities of leadership, teamwork and self-confidence through adventure. Subsequently, adopting the movement to Indian conditions, SUMERU and Vivekananda International Students Award Scheme (VISTAS) were launched. After detailed discussions with L.K. Advani, then the Deputy Prime Minister, and Jagmohan, Minister of Tourism, the VISTAS was launched in London on 26 March 2004.

Since the basic aim was to spread the movement on a mass scale, non-availability of large number of adventure organisations for outdoor leadership training, unaffordable high cost, and limitations of spare time available to students came in the way. Finally, it was realised that the only practical solution was to bring adventure to the very doorstep of our students by setting up Adventure and Leadership Parks (ALPS) in every district of India.

At the outset the project sounded close to an *Alice in Wonderland* kind of fantasy but persistence and enthusiastic support from all quarters made this fantasy possible. ALPS, once accomplished and fully harnessed, should change the face of India and trigger a mass movement to spread the spirit of adventure all over in the country. These Parks will provide opportunities to students in every district (especially the poor sections) to imbibe the qualities of leadership, teamwork and self-confidence. This innovative concept of 'Adventure and Leadership Parks' translates into action Swami Vivekananda's teachings and Rajiv Gandhi's dream.

Looking back, I can see that adventure and mountaineering in India started with the maiden ascent of Everest by Tenzing Norgay and continued to grow with the subsequent climbs of Everest by the Indian teams.

India should now look beyond Everest and in the interest of the youth of India march ahead to set up the Adventure and Leadership Parks throughout India. The historic remark of Swami Vivekananda, "*First of all young men must be strong, religion will come afterwards. You will be nearer to heaven through football than through the study of Gita. You will understand Gita better with your biceps, your muscles, a little stronger. What we want is vigour in the blood, strength in nerves, iron in muscles and nerves of steel*", made yesterday, is even more relevant today. It should remain the guiding force of our youth in the years to come.

APPENDIX

INDIAN ASCENTS OF EVEREST

(1953 TO MID-2006)

<i>Expedition, year & route</i>	<i>Indian summiters</i>	<i>Date of ascent</i>
<u>Foreign Expeditions</u>		
British Expedition 1953 from SE <i>Leader: Col. John Hunt</i>	Tenzing Norgay	29.05.1953
American Expedition 1963 from SE <i>Leader: Norman G. Dyhrenfurth</i>	Nawang Gombu	20.05.1963
Aus-Indian Expedition 1993 from SE <i>Leader: Tashi Tenzing</i>	Lobsang Tshering Bhutia	10.05.1993
American Expedition 1996 from SE <i>Leader: David Breashears</i>	Jamling Tenzing Norgay	23.05.1996
New Zealand Expedition 1997 from SE <i>Leader: Guy Cotter</i>	Tashi Tenzing	23.05.1997

<i>Expedition, year & route</i>	<i>Indian summiters</i>	<i>Date of ascent</i>
International Expedition 1998 <i>Leader: Dave Walsh</i>	Kusang Dorje	28.05.1998

Indian Expeditions

Indian Expedition 1965 from SE <i>Leader: Capt. M.S. Kohli</i>	Capt. A.S. Cheema Nawang Gombu Sonam Gyatso Sonam Wangyal C.P. Vohra Ang Kami Capt. H.P.S. Ahluwalia H.C.S. Rawat	20.05.1965 20.05.1965 22.05.1965 22.05.1965 24.05.1965 24.05.1965 29.05.1965 29.05.1965
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Indian Expedition 1984 from SE <i>Leader: Colonel D.K. Khullar</i>	Phu Dorjee II Bachendri Pal Dorjee Lhatoo Sonam Palzor	09.05.1984 23.05.1984 23.05.1984 23.05.1984
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ITBP Expedition 1992 from SE <i>Leader: Hukum Singh</i>	Prem Singh Sunil Dutt Sharma Kanhaya Lal Lobsang Santosh Yadav Mohan Singh Sange Sherpa Wangchuk	10.05.1992 10.05.1992 10.05.1992 12.05.1992 12.05.1992 12.05.1992 12.05.1992 12.05.1992
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Indian Expedition 1993 from SE <i>Leader: Bachendri Pal</i>	Dicky Dolma Santosh Yadav Kunga Bhutia Baldev Kunwar Kusang Dorje Radha Devi Rajiv Sharma Deepu Sharma Savita Martolia	10.05.1993 10.05.1993 10.05.1993 10.05.1993 10.05.1993 16.05.1993 16.05.1993 16.05.1993 16.05.1993
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<i>Expedition, year & route</i>	<i>Indian summiters</i>	<i>Date of ascent</i>
	Nima Norbu	16.05.1993
	Suman Kutiyal	16.05.1993
ITBP Expedition 1996 from North Col <i>Leader: Mohinder Singh</i>	T. Smanla	10.05.1996
	Tsewang Paljor	10.05.1996
	Dorje Morup	10.05.1996
	Sange Sherpa	17.05.1996
	Hira Ram	17.05.1996
	Tashi Ram	17.05.1996
	Nadre Ram	17.05.1996
	Kusang Dorje	17.05.1996
Indian Expedition 1998 from SE <i>Leader: Hrishikesh Yadav</i>	Surendra Chavan	18.05.1998
	Loveraj Dharamashaktu	19.05.1998
Indian Expedition 1999 from East Face <i>Leader: Santosh Yadav</i>	Amar Prakash	28.05.1999
	Kusang Dorje	28.05.1999
	Sange Sherpa	28.05.1999
Indian Expedition 2001 from SE <i>Leader: Col. K. Kumar</i>	Capt. S.S. Shekhawat	23.05.2001
	Amar Prakash	23.05.2001
	Mohinder Singh	23.05.2001
	Neel Chand	23.05.2001
	Palden Giaccho	23.05.2001
	Chanchal Singh	23.05.2001
	C.N. Bodh	24.05.2001
	Bhag Chain	24.05.2001
	Jigmey Namgyal	24.05.2001
Indian Expedition 2003 from North Col <i>Leader: Col. Vijay Singh</i>	Kusang Sherpa	21.05.2003
	Nadre Sherpa	21.05.2003
Army Everest Massif Expedition 2003 from SE <i>Leader: Col. A. Abbey</i>	C. Angchok	22.05.2003
	Jagat Singh	22.05.2003
	Major S.S. Shekhawat	22.05.2003
	Major Abhijeet Singh	26.05.2003

<i>Expedition, year & route</i>	<i>Indian summiters</i>	<i>Date of ascent</i>
	Lalit Negi	26.05.2003
	Lal Singh	26.05.2003
	Tashi Giapo	26.05.2003
	Rajendra Singh	26.05.2003
	Kunwar Singh	26.05.2003
Indian Expedition 2004 from SE	Viking Bhanoo	18.05.2004
<i>Leader: Cdr. Satyabrata Dam</i>	Rakesh Kumar	18.05.2004
	Vikah Kumar	18.05.2004
	Lt. Cdr. Abhishek	19.05.2004
	Cdr. Satyabrata Dam	19.05.2004
Indian Air Force Expedition 2005 from North Col	Wing Cdr. Ramesh Tripathy	30.05.2005
<i>Leader: Wing Cdr. Amit Chowdhury</i>	Nikku Ram Chaudhury	30.05.2005
	Sqd. Ldr. S.S. Chaitanya	30.05.2005
Indian Army Expedition 2005 from North Col	Capt. Sipra Majumdar	02.06.2005
<i>Leader: Major S.S. Shekhawat</i>	Capt. Ashwini Pawar	02.06.2005
	Tshring Ladol	02.06.2005
	Major S.S. Shekhawat	02.06.2005
	Surjeet Singh	02.06.2005
	Jagat Singh	02.06.2005
	Topgey Bhutia	02.06.2005
	Kaman Singh	02.06.2005
Indo-Tibetan Border Police 2006 from North Col	Prem Singh	14.05.2006
<i>Leader: ADIG Harbhajan Singh</i>	Wangchuck Sherpa	14.05.2006
	Jot Singh	14.05.2006
	Pasang Tenzing	14.05.2006
	Nawang Dorje	14.05.2006
	Vishal Mani	14.05.2006
	Gyalzen Sherpa	14.05.2006
	Sri Kishan	14.05.2006
	Hira Ram	17.05.2006
	Mohd Ali	17.05.2006
	Pradeep Kumar	17.05.2006

<i>Expedition, year & route</i>	<i>Indian summiters</i>	<i>Date of ascent</i>
	Sange Phuri	17.05.2006
	Ngima Dorje Sherpa	17.05.2006
Border Security Force 2006 from SE <i>Leader: ADIG S.C. Negi</i>	Loveraj Singh	20.05.2006
	Kamlesh Kumar	20.05.2006
	Parveen Singh	20.05.2006
	Kedar Singh	20.05.2006
	Bhagat Singh	20.05.2006
	Manoj Dahal	20.05.2006
	S.C. Negi	24.05.2006
Indian Solo Attempt 2006	Malli Mastan Babu	21.05.2006
	Total 107	

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