

from *View From the Summit*

By Sir Edmund Hillary

The setting sun bathed the giant peaks of Makalu and Lhotseⁱ in warm red light. They seemed almost close enough to touch. Far below fleecy clouds floated above gloomy valley's I joined Tenzing in the tent where he was cooking chicken noodle soup. Astonishingly for this height, we were really hungry. Out came all our delicacies, with the tinned apricots being a special treat. We also drank ample liquid. It was very cramped inside, particularly when we tied to crawl into our sleeping bags. I have such big feet that I decided to remove my boots for the night. Tenzing left his footwear on, while I used mine to prop the toe of my sleeping bag off the ice. Tenzing lay on the bottom ledge, almost overhanging the slope, while I stretched out on the top ledge with my legs across Tenzing in the bottom corner of the tent. We started getting the odd fierce gust of wind and I had some concern as to whether the tent would remain in place, but when I started our oxygen flowing we quickly warmed up and dropped off peacefully on and off for four hours and then wakened feeling cold and miserable.

At 4 a.m. I looked out the tent doors and could already see signs of the early morning light. Tenzing peered over my shoulder and then pointed and said, "Tengboche," and there, sure enough, was Tengboche Monasteryⁱⁱ, 15,000 feet below us. The temperature was -27°C , chilly enough in our flimsy tent. We made our slow preparations for departure, eating well and consuming plenty of vital fluid. My books were frozen solid and I cooked them over the primus stove until they were soft enough for me to pull on. We were wearing every piece of clothing we possessed and I checked my camera for the last time, setting it at a standard aperture and then placing it carefully inside my clothes and zipping up my windproofs. At 6:30 am we crawled out of our ten and were ready to go.

Above our camp was a great steep bulge of snow and, as my feet were still cold, I waved Tenzing on to take the lead. Surging on with impressive strength, he ploughed a knee-deep track upward and I was happy to follow behind. We reached the top of the bulge at 28,000 feet and, as my feet were now warmer, I took over the lead. Towering over our heads was the South Summit and running along from it to the right were the great menacing cornices overhanging the Kangshung Face. Ahead of me was a sharp narrow ridge, icy on the right and looking more manageable on the left. So it was to the left I went, at first making easy progress, but then experiencing one of the most unpleasant mountaineering conditions—breakable crust. The surface would hold my weight for a few second, shatter beneath me, and then I lurched forward knee-deep in powder snow. For half an hour I persisted and was encouraged at how well I was

moving in these difficult conditions. I crossed over a little bump and saw before me a small hollow on the ridge and in that hollow were two oxygen bottles left by Evans and Bourdillon.ⁱⁱⁱ I wiped the snow off the dials and saw that the bottles were less than a third full of oxygen, but they could give us another hour of endurance on our return. That could be very useful later.

We had made considerable height, but here was much more ahead. A 400-foot-long snow slope rose steeply up toward South Summit. Alternating the lead, we made our way forward, but it was an extremely uncomfortable experience. A thin skin of ice covered deep soft snow. On one occasion there was a dull breaking noise and a six-foot-wide piece of ice around me shattered and slid away down the mountainside. I slipped backward three or four steps and fortunately stopped, but the ice carried on with increasing speed far out of sight. It was rather frightening, but we had no alternative, we must keep going. With a considerable feeling of tension, we forced our way upward, the snow condition improved and we emerged with great relief onto the South Summit. We were now as high as anyone had ever been before. It was impossible not to dwell for a moment on the remarkable support we had received from our colleagues—John Hunt and Da Namgyal's lift to the depot on the South-East Ridge; George Lowe, Alf Gregory and Ang Nyima with their superb support to Camp IX; and the pioneer effort by Charles Evans and Tony Bourdillon to the South Summit. Their contribution had enabled us to make such good progress. But now the next move was up to us.

I looked carefully along the final summit ridge. It was impressive all right, but not impossible, despite what Charles Evans had said. We'd certainly give it a good try. We had a drink out of Tenzing's water bottle and I checked our oxygen supplies. Each of us had a bottle that was almost empty so, to save weight, we removed these and I attached our other full bottles firmly into place. It meant we had a total endurance of just under four hours. If we kept moving quickly it should be enough.

With a growing feeling of excitement, I moved down from the South Summit to the small saddle at the start of the summit ridge, cutting steps in the left-hand side below the great cornices and keeping just above the rock face sweeping into the Western Cwm. We moved cautiously, one at a time. I hacked a line of steps for forty feet, thrust my ice axe into the firm snow as a sound belay, and then brought Tenzing along to join me. After I had covered several rope-lengths, noticed to my surprise that Tenzing was moving rather slowly and seemed in some distress. When he came up to me I examined his oxygen equipment. The pressure seemed satisfactory but then I noticed that his face mask was choked up with ice. I squeezed the mask to dislodge the ice and was relieved to see Tenzing breathing freely again. I checked my own equipment—it, too, held some ice, but not enough to cause me concern, and I quickly cleared it away. I moved on again, cutting line after line of steps.

Ahead of me loomed the great rock stop which we had observed from far below and which we knew might prove to be a major problem. I gazed up at the forty feet of rock with some new concern. To climb it directly at nearly 29,000 feet would indeed be a considerable challenge. I looked to the right, there seemed a chance there. Clinging to the rock was a great ice cornice hanging over the mighty Kangshung Face. Under the effects of gravity, the ice had broken away from the rock and a narrow crack ran upward. Nervously, I wondered if the cornice might collapse under my pressure. There was only one way to find out!

Although it would be relatively useless, I got Tenzing to establish a belay then I eased my way into the crack, facing the rock. I jammed my crampons into the ice behind me and then wriggled my way upward using every little handhold I could find. Puffing for breath, I made steady height—the ice was holding—and forty feet up I pulled myself out of the crack onto the top of the rock face. I had made it! For the first time on the whole expedition, I had a feeling of confidence that we were going to get to the top. I waved to Tenzing and brought in the rope as he, too, made his way laboriously up the crack and dragged himself out beside me, panting for breath.

We didn't waste any time. I started cutting steps again, seeking now rather anxiously for signs of the summit. We seemed to go on forever, tired now and moving rather slowly. In the distance I could see the barren plateau of Tibet. I looked to the right and there was a round snowy dome. It must be the summit! We drew closer together as Tenzing brought in the slack on the rope. I continued cutting a line of steps upward. Next moment I had moved onto a flattish exposed area of snow with nothing but space in every direction. Tenzing quickly joined me and we looked around in wonder. To our immense satisfaction, we realized we had reached the top of the world!

It was 11:30 a.m. on 29th May 1953. In typical Anglo-Saxon fashion, I stretched out my arm for a handshake, but this was not enough for Tenzing who threw his arms around my shoulders in a mighty hug and I hugged him back in return. With a feeling of mild surprise I realized that Tenzing was perhaps more excited at our success than I was.

But time was short! I turned off my oxygen and removed my mask. Immediately my face was prickled sharply with ice splinters carried in the brisk wind. I removed my camera from the protection of my down jacket, stepped a little down the slope and photographed Tenzing on the summit with his ice axe upraised and the flags flapping in the breeze—the United Nations flag, the Indian flag, the Nepalese flag and the Union Jack. Tenzing didn't have camera and, to tell the truth, the thought didn't enter my mind to try to organize a picture of myself on top of the mountain. I felt a more urgent need to have photographic evidence that we had reached the summit, so quickly took shots down every major ridge. The view was most

spectacular to the east, for here the giants Makalu and Kangchenjunga dominated the horizon and gave some idea of the vast scale of the Himalayas. Only a few miles away, Makalu, with its soaring rock ridges, was a remarkable sight. I could see all the northern slopes of the mountain and was immediately struck by the possibility of a feasible route to its summit. With a growing feeling of excitement, I took another photograph to study on returning to civilization—I was under no delusions that reaching the top of Everest would destroy my enthusiasm for further adventures.

The view to the north was a complete contrast—hundreds of miles of arid Tibetan plateau. One scene was of particular interest. Almost under our feet it seemed, was the famous North Col and the east Rongbuk Glacier, where so many epic feats of courage and endurance were performed by the earlier British Everest expeditions. Part of the ridge up which they had established their high camps was visible, but the last thousand feet, which had proved such a formidable barrier, was concealed from our view as its rock slopes dropped away with frightening abruptness from the summit snow pyramid. It was a sobering thought to remember how often these men had reached 28,000 feet without the benefits of our modern equipment and reasonably efficient oxygen sets. Inevitably, my thought turned to Mallory and Irvine who has lost their lives on the mountain thirty years before. With little hope I looked around for some sign that they had reached the summit, but could see nothing.

ⁱ Makalu and Lhotse are mountains in the Himalayas in Nepal

ⁱⁱ Tengboche Monastery is a Buddhist monastery in Nepal that lies on the main route to the base camp of Mount Everest.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Evan and Tom Bourdillon were the first assault pair in the Everest expedition of 1953. They climbed to within 300 feet of the summit.