

# EVEREST, 1953

## (4) THE LAST LAP

BY SIR EDMUND HILLARY

[*This account starts at about 2.30 p.m. on 28th May, 1953, when the support party for the second assault dumped their loads at the site for Camp IX at about 27,900 ft. Our thanks are due to Dr. M. P. Ward for editing the article after the author had left this country.—EDITOR.*]

GREGORY, Lowe and Ang Nyima left almost immediately after they had put down their loads. We took off our oxygen and started clearing a platform, on the sloping ground, on which to put our tent for the night. We had to hack away stones from the ice, and when we had finished the platform was in two layers—one about 6 inches above the other. We found that it was difficult to anchor the tent and had to fix our guys to the oxygen bottles, as there were no convenient rocks to which to tie them. We spent a cold and uncomfortable night—myself sitting on the upper shelf and Tenzing half lying on the lower. We had enough oxygen for two periods of an hour each and during this time we dozed fitfully.

At about 4 A.M. I looked out of the tent door and saw that it was obviously going to be a fine day. Just before we finally started, I looked at the thermometer and saw that it registered  $-27^{\circ}$  C. We brewed up some tea, ate a few biscuits and left at about 6.30 A.M. after putting on our oxygen apparatus.

Soon we were on the ridge ; we kicked our way up the slopes beyond, and at first it was not very steep but it was narrow and demanded every care. We moved continuously and came eventually to the long 400 ft. snow slope leading to the South Summit. This was a very steep section and dangerous, and whilst we were on it I thought that it might avalanche at any moment. I made the steps, carefully packing the snow at each step. About half way up I turned to Tenzing and said : ' What do you think of it, Tenzing ? ' He replied that it was very difficult and dangerous. I asked him again ' Shall we go on ? ' and he replied—he is a very polite fellow—' Just as you wish.' I decided to continue. Soon, to our great relief, we reached the South Summit. We were now at about 28,700 ft. and were at the point reached by Bourdillon and Evans two days before. We sat down, had a drink from our water bottle, and I calculated that we had sufficient oxygen to continue. We then looked in the direction in which we had to go.

The summit ridge certainly looked difficult. The first portion of it was a gradually rising snow ridge with large cornices overhanging the Kangshung face on the right. To the left, the South-west face of

Everest fell steeply to the Western Cwm. Beyond this initial section I could see the steep rock step which we had thought all along would be the crux of the climb. I started cutting steps along the ridge between the rocks on the left and the snow on the right. The snow was firm, and two or three blows of the ice-axe made a satisfactory step. We moved one at a time, myself cutting all the steps.

Suddenly I noticed that Tenzing was lagging and that he was gasping for breath. I examined his oxygen set and found that his outlet tube was blocked with ice. However, I was able to free this and give him immediate relief. Soon we reached the foot of the big black rock step. It looked very formidable and perhaps impossible to climb at this height. Then I noticed a long vertical crack between the rock and the ice of the cornices on the right. This crack was about 40 ft. high and large enough to take the human body. I crawled into it and started forcing and jamming my way up it; my crampons on the ice behind me and my face towards the rock. It was very hard work, but finally I dragged myself out on to a little ledge at the top and lay there gasping like a fish for several minutes. When I had recovered sufficiently I signalled Tenzing to start. He entered the crack and forced his way laboriously up and finally landed, as I had done, gasping for breath on the ledge. After a short rest we continued slowly on.

We were now both feeling very tired, but felt that it would take a lot to stop us. I cut steps round the back of one steep snow hump after another. They seemed to continue endlessly. Then I noticed suddenly that the ridge dropped away steeply in front of me and in the distance I could see the barren plateau of Tibet. I looked up to my right and 40 ft. above me was a rounded snow cone. A few blows of the ice-axe, a few weary steps, and I was on the top. My first reaction was that of relief. I then took off my oxygen apparatus and photographed Tenzing as he stood on the top. He had the flags of the United Nations, Great Britain, Nepal and India unfurled from his ice-axe, and these fluttered in the fresh breeze that was blowing. I then took photos looking down all the main ridges of the mountain and in several directions.

To the east Makalu stood out prominently. I automatically looked to see if there was a route up it; the visibility was very good. About eighty miles away, beyond Makalu, was Kangchenjunga, standing up clearly. Over to the west I could see Cho Oyu, our adversary of 1952, and in the distance was Gosainthan. Looking down the north side I could see the North Col, the North Peak and the East Rongbuk Glacier clearly.

I had now had my oxygen mask off for nearly eight minutes and was becoming rather clumsy-fingered. In the meantime Tenzing had buried some lollies and biscuits as an offering to his gods and I left a crucifix given to me by John Hunt. We put on our oxygen masks and set off from the top down the way we had come.

We moved quickly but cautiously along to the top of the rock step, slid down the difficult chimney and then made our way back to the

South Summit. We then descended the steep snow slope which was so dangerous on the way up, and our old fears returned as we felt it was going to avalanche. The hour we spent on this slope was one of the worst that I have ever experienced. It was a great relief when we reached the ridge again and moved down it, very weary, and at last reached Camp IX.

Here we stopped for a little and brewed up some tea and lemonade, and then started off down the remaining ridge to the top of the couloir. We were extremely tired, and when we reached the couloir I saw with dismay that we would have to cut steps down it, as all our tracks of the day before had been removed by the wind. However, there was nothing for it but to start. I slowly but carefully cut steps down for one or two rope lengths and then Tenzing took over the lead and found some deep snow in which he could kick steps, and by this means we came down the remaining part of the couloir. As we descended slowly, we could see tiny figures come out from the South Col camp. We finally got to the Col itself and walked over its glistening and slippery surface to be met by George Lowe who had brought out some hot drinks. We told him our news.

He helped us back to the tents, and there we saw Wilfrid Noyce who was looking very fresh and strong. For the next hour or so we told them about our climb and answered their questions. Then darkness fell, and we spent a most miserable and uncomfortable night. We were cold and exhausted, and the continuous flapping of the tents in the tearing wind made sleep nearly impossible.

At last dawn came, and we staggered out of our sleeping bags, ate a most distasteful meal and packed up our things. We left the tents on the South Col, and as we walked up the 200 ft. snow slope to the top of the Eperon we could see the wind tugging hungrily at the guys, as though impatient to sweep away the last traces of our expedition from the Col. It was a weary grind up those 200 feet, but at last we could start going down and we went slowly but reasonably safely across the great traverse to the top of the Lhotse Face and Camp VII. We were moving extremely slowly, as Tenzing and I were very tired. However, after a few hours we got to Camp VII and there Charles Wylie was waiting for us with more food and hot drinks. We decided, after a short rest there, to move on down to Camp IV and this we did, going slowly but steadily. The way down the Lhotse Face seemed to take an age. Nevertheless, soon we were past the site of Camp VI, and as we reached the bottom of the Lhotse Face and were approaching Camp V, Tom Stobart and some Sherpas were there to meet us.

After another short rest at Camp V we pushed on down to Camp IV, and as we neared Camp IV we could see the other members of the party coming out to meet us. They started to run towards us, and finally George Lowe put them out of their suspense and gave a thumbs up sign. Soon we were shaking hands and talking, and when we got to the tents there was James Morris to take down the story immediately and get it off to London. It was a great moment for us all.