

TRANSPORT AND SHERPAS ON MOUNT EVEREST, 1963

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IT IS probably a little early, as I write this less than two months since we returned to Katmandu, to relate in full the somewhat complicated events of the American Mount Everest Expedition. Certainly the fog in my own mind has only just begun to disperse. Meanwhile some notes on the logistical and transport problems involved may be of interest and provide a background to the climbing story when this is later told.

Naturally an American attempt on Everest attracted publicity on both sides of the Atlantic and the press in Europe and in India ran stories on this 'mammoth' expedition, 'luxuriously' and 'lavishly' equipped with 'everything including the kitchen sink'. Reading between the lines one sensed that some of our well-wishers would really like us to fail, if only to prove that the summit of Everest could not be bought for dollars. For us this point was purely academic. We had not got the dollars.

With some twenty members supported by thirty-seven high altitude porters and a baggage train of over 900 loads, the A.M.E.E. 1963 was indeed a large expedition, but not all that much larger than some recent Everest expeditions. Inevitably a certain amount of unnecessary food and equipment was carried to base, but the strength of the expedition was in the event hardly able to cope with the ambitious climbing and scientific programme. Apart from a few curious omissions the expedition was extremely well equipped, but if there were any particularly novel 'luxuries', I did not notice them. Of food, that controversial subject, I shall not speak.

The first task was to deliver our 900-plus loads to Base Camp, and the problems were the recruitment of this large number of porters and the availability of food, track space and night accommodation for them on the trail to Everest. The first two of these problems were largely solved by the importation of 500 porters from Khumbu, Sherpas and Khampas. This left only 400 Tamangs to collect locally and I gave orders that the Khumbu men should each carry a load of food from their homes to be dumped at set places along the route to Katmandu, for later consumption. Despite much advice to the contrary I was determined we should march as one army and not in two or more

parties on successive days. In the event everyone seemed to be able to tuck themselves away for the night, even in drizzling rain and in the most unpromising staging sites, and the congestion along the trail, although considerable, caused no serious delay.

For control we divided the porter corps of 900 into nine legions of 100, each under a Naiki (headman), Sherpa or Tamang, assisted by one of our own Sherpas. The Naikis brought up the rear, while a Sherpa went ahead and checked the loads as they arrived in camp. In camp each porter party had its own separate dump and thus the stacking of loads in the evenings and distribution in the mornings was simplified. Each porter had a tag, numbered from 1 to 900, and the tag number was noted against the load number in a much thumbed book.

All this sounds quite simple and friends who came to see us off at Banepa on February 20 were kind enough to describe the departure as 'organised chaos'. Along the way complications inevitably arose. Sahibs and Sherpas consumed at least four loads of food a day, and every few days we discharged about fifteen Tamangs. Others returned sick or tired and there was a constant change over of loads. The book was soon a bit of a mess, and I just hoped that nothing important was missing. Fear of theft and pilfering was, of course, a constant anxiety in such a large party but, ironically, it was only when we entered 'The Land of the Sherpas' that bits and pieces began to disappear. Only one load was actually lost on the way to Base, the youth carrying it having succumbed to a surfeit of *chang* below Namche. Inevitably it had to contain a valuable scientific instrument, the only one of its kind with the expedition. However, Maynard Miller and Barry Bishop never agreed as to the ownership of this instrument and we seemed to get along all right without it.

Anxiety among the porters about these very shortages of food and accommodation at the end of the day caused a general speeding up on the march. Never have I known such early starts. At about 3 a.m. the sounds of the army bedding down would merge into the morning chorus. Flickering fires, coughing and spitting, talk, the weeping of children, wood smoke and the clash of cooking pots. After an hour or so of this racket the Sahibs could be heard grumbling in their tents, awaiting the first dread flashing of the butane lanterns and the note of Danu's shrill whistle, the summons to Weet-a-bix and fruit-juice, which was consumed standing up and shivering in the cold dawn light. On most mornings camp would be clear by 7 a.m., the first loads having left at least an hour earlier. Those of us that could do so would get ahead of the mob. Conditions along the way were often unpleasant with dust, coughing and spitting and stop-and-start progress. If caught in the crush it was usually best to sit and wait quietly for an hour or so and bring up the tail.

The Tamangs, who will normally carry as far as Thyangboche, returned from Namche and it was as well, as we now ran into heavy snow-falls and winter conditions. Under these circumstances the army soon dwindled in numbers and we had to resort to relaying loads the remaining stages to Base Camp.

The services rendered by our Sherpa porters on the mountain were quite outstanding and deserve fuller treatment than the short, largely statistical notes that space permits here. Norman Dyhrenfurth and I had corresponded on the subject of the composition of the Sherpa team for nearly two years before the expedition, and the result was a highly competent bunch of toughs. There were inevitably some weak links. Our Sirdar hailed from Namche Bazar, and was really a political choice as that metropolis can give large expeditions a rough passage if it wishes. He was a good shouter until he lost his voice, and he soon went sick on the mountain. We had no trouble from Namche, but I grudged him his large pay packet. The virtual Sirdar on the approach march was Angcherring (Khumjung), although it was difficult to convince some of the Americans that Gombu, with his knowledge of basic English, was not the power behind the transport scenes.

Despite pressure from prospective employees and Norman, who was always finding long-lost Sherpa buddies of his at the airport or in his hotel room, I closed the roll when it numbered thirty-two Sherpa names and kept five vacancies for younger men to be recruited in Khumbu. Young Sherpas often put up outstanding performances on their first expeditions, and although the two-day selection programme I planned had to be compressed into a wet half-hour at Thyangboche this young entry produced two out of the five Sherpas who did the great carry to Camp 5 W to over 27,000 ft. on May 21.

Work had begun on the ice-fall on March 22 and was only briefly halted by the accident the following day, in which Jake Breitenbach was killed and Ang Pema seriously injured. Jerstad and Pownall reached the South Col with Chotare and Nima Tensing (Thame) on April 16. There was then some delay until the first Sherpa carry of six loads got up to the Col on April 22 under Chotare, followed by Phudorje with ten loads on the 24th. Meanwhile work was continuing on the West Shoulder and by now the immediate climbing priorities had been settled. These were to attempt Everest from the South Col with one or more parties and possibly, as a by-product, Lhotse, followed by a switch of operations to the West Ridge. About thirty loads in all were required on the Col and this necessitated the concentration of our best men on that route for a time.

I hoped, however, to pull across a few of our known Tigers, Nawang Dorje, 'long haired' Angcherring and others, after only one trip to the Col, to help Unsoeld and Hornbein maintain momentum on their West

Ridge. But on April 26 a vital carry of seven loads got no further than the Yellow Band (in fact a great effort under very bad weather conditions) and consequently nearly all our remaining porter strength had to be thrown into the assault on the Col route which left Advanced Base (Camp 2, 21,500 ft.) on April 27. During the subsequent days nineteen Sherpas reached the Col, many for the second time, and of them ten went on to Camp 6 at 27,600 ft. On May 1 Gombu reached the summit with Jim Whittaker.

The summit of Everest was not reached again until three weeks later. Meanwhile work on the mountain continued on the lower part of the West Ridge route and in the ice-fall. For carries from Base at about 17,500 ft. to Camp 1 at the top of the ice-fall (20,000 ft.) and on up to Camp 2 we employed twelve porters locally, mostly fairly experienced men, who provided their own somewhat old and threadbare clothing and equipment for a fee additional to their pay. These did great work carrying up the ice-fall, which was in a particularly broken, difficult and dangerous condition this year, day after day in all weathers and unescorted. Indeed I do not think that our Sherpas were ever specifically escorted at any time during the expedition, although they often, of course, climbed in the company of Sahibs when a route was being opened for the first time or, later, as partners during the summit and support operations.

The plan now was to attempt to climb Everest by the West Ridge and at the same time, if possible on the same day, for Jerstad and Bishop to repeat the ascent from the Col. Dave Dingman and I would move up behind in support. Unsoeld and Hornbein left Base on May 6 to rejoin Emerson, Corbet and Auten and the few Sherpas left on the West Ridge. Bishop and Jerstad left on May 12, Dave on the 14th and I on the 15th with Nima Dorje. During this time I had had the task of redeploying the Sherpa strength and in particular of persuading the men who had carried once to Camp 6 from the Col that it would now be a good thing to start climbing the mountain a second time after a week's rest, this time by a new route. They responded nobly, but had already given of their best and it was left to younger men to carry the top camp on the West Ridge.

A howling gale on the night of May 16-17 practically destroyed Camp 4 W at over 25,000 ft. and nearly put paid to the West Ridge attempt. During the 17th ten Sherpas dribbled down into Camp 2 from out of the clouds. Most had had enough, but two, Ila Tsering and Tensing Gyaltsso, were persuaded to return up the ridge after a day's rest: Ang Dorje, Pasang Tendi and Tensing Nindra had remained at 3 W, and it was these five, three of them on their first expedition, that carried to 27,200 ft. on May 21 and set Willi Unsoeld and Tom Hornbein on the way to their great traverse of Everest.

At this stage our supporting resources were of the shoestring variety. Lute and Barry had three Sherpas with them, of whom two went up to Camp 6, and Dave only one, Girmi Dorje. I was now going badly and Dave very strongly, so I made over my Nima Dorje to him to give him a chance of a summit attempt with Girmi. They would without doubt have succeeded on May 23 had not they had to help the summit pairs of May 22, who had spent a night out at over 28,000 ft., down to Camp 6, and then to the Col.

We had ordered porters to take us back to Namche to arrive at Base on May 25, and the last ten loads came down the ice-fall that morning. What with this rush and celebrations among the Sherpas, the next few days were rather chaotic. Apart from my temper, we were I think lucky to lose only two items of equipment. A camera base belonging to Maynard Miller valued at several thousand dollars, unique of its kind, and a kit-bag belonging to Pownall. The camera base, which looked exactly like a dirty old Sherpa cooking stand, we later recovered from a hut in Pheriche. Dick's kit bag containing all his high altitude clothing was, alas, never found. This theft was partly his own fault, as he spent all his time in Namche bargaining with our cook for Tibetan rugs and failed to check up on his own belongings. As a result, too, we got nothing to eat.

Some of the Sherpa performances:

(a)

Individual

Chotare (Namche) South Col three times. Camp 6
 Phudorje (Khumjung) South Col twice. Camp 6
 Kanchha (Namche) South Col twice. Camp 6
 Kalden (Darjeeling) South Col three times.
 Nima Tensing (Pangboche) South Col three times. Camp 6
 Nima Tensing (Thame) South Col twice.
 Nima Dorje (Khumjung) South Col twice. Camp 6
 Pemba Tensing (Khumjung) South Col twice. Camp 6
 Dawa Tensing (Namche) South Col twice. Camp 6
 Girmi Dorje (Thame) South Col three times. Camp 6
 Lhakpa Sonam (Khumjung) South Col twice. Camp 6
 Nawang Dorje (Khumjung) South Col twice. Camp 6. 4 W
 Ang Nyima (Namche) South Col twice. Camp 6. 4 W
 Angcherring II (Khumjung) South Col twice. Camp 6. 4 W
 Tensing Nindra¹ (Khumjung) South Col twice. 5 W
 Ila Tsering (Namche) South Col. 5 W
 Pasang Tendi¹ (Khumjung) South Col. 5 W
 Tensing Gyaltsso¹ (Phorche) South Col. 5 W
 Ang Dorje (Namche) 5 W

¹ His first expedition.

(Tashi, Pasang Temba (Darjeeling), Urkien (Namche) also carried to the Col, and Gombu and Ang Dawa reached the Col and Camp 6 during the summit ascent of May 1.)

(b)

Collective

19 Sherpas carried to over 27,000 ft.

4 reached the S. Col three times

11 reached the S. Col twice

8 reached the S. Col once

(23 reached the S. Col in all)