

NINE ON THE SUMMIT OF EVEREST

By M. S. KOHLI

AFTER the discovery of Mount Everest, as the highest point on earth, by the Survey of India in 1852, there were as many as twenty-one attempts before ours of 1965 to scale it—fourteen full scale expeditions, four reconnaissance trips and three solo ventures. Three expeditions out of these—the British in 1953, the Swiss in 1956 and the Americans in 1963—had succeeded.¹ But the challenge of Everest has been continuing, and will continue as long as man and his inborn adventurous spirit survive. And each climb to the ‘top of the world’ will be as different as the weather and mountaineers can make it.

And so it was in 1965; despite two earlier attempts in 1960 and 1962—when our summit parties had fought their way up to reach 28,300 ft. and 28,600 ft. respectively, only to be beaten back by raging blizzards—the clean-washed and sparkling Sagarmatha (the Nepalese name for Everest) presented us with a new thrill, a fresh climb and an unchanged sense of adventure. We were fortunate in sending four successful ropes to the summit, and were lucky that each one of the nine climbers who got to the top returned safely.

Our long trek to the Base Camp started from Jaynagar, a town on the Indo-Nepalese border, on February 26. On the seventh day of our march, we reached the forested Jantardham, which rises abruptly above the Sun Kosi, and through an opening of the rhododendrons in blossom we had the first view of Everest and the mountains of the Solu Khumbu region—Gauri Sankar (23,440 ft.), Numbur (22,817 ft.), Karyolung (21,920 ft.), Taweche (21,463 ft.) and Kangtega (22,340 ft.).

Later we came to the Sherpa districts of Solu and Khumbu with prayer flags, *mane* walls, gompas and chortens; all proclaiming “Om Mane Padme Hum”, the Buddhist prayer. The fierce winter was on the way out and crisp yellow grass, flowing water and swaying bushes welcomed us into a new world.

Climbing up and down, and up again, rising higher after every descent and enjoying cursory glimpses of the high mountains, we reached the lamasery of Thyangboche, on the seventeenth day of our march. In an atmosphere vibrant with the chanting of prayers, tolling of bells and with the occasional blowing of a conch, we settled down in the colourful rest-house for a short period of reorganisation and acclimatisation.

¹ The author evidently does not accept the validity of the Chinese claim to have reached the summit in 1960.—EDITOR.

We chose the adjacent slopes for our training climbs. The going seemed tough in the beginning, but gradually we started getting used to it. Our lungs stretched out and expanded to suck in more and more air—the natural process of acclimatisation. After four days' rest in Thyangboche, our advance parties left for the Base Camp, reaching there on March 22. We were now in the great amphitheatre of Everest with Pumori (23,442 ft.), Lingtren (21,972 ft.), Khumbutse (21,785 ft.), Changtse (24,780 ft.) (inside Tibet), the West shoulder of Everest itself, and Nuptse rising into the sky in a magnificent semi-circle. We were on the Khumbu glacier with its icy blue lakes, its glistening smooth towers and its gurgling streams rushing under the ice. Its exciting course led us from Labuje to the rubble-covered patch under the shadow of Khumbutse and the Lho La where we set up our Base Camp.

A day's rest and we were up on the ice-fall. The glittering towers were a constant threat; huge, unshapely blocks rumbled and came shattering down at will. Frightening crevasses yawned, gulping tons of debris hungrily. It was a weird jungle of ice: the first, awesome taste of an entry to the sanctuary of Everest.

Although we had been twice before to Everest, the ever-changing ice-fall is always a new challenge and a new problem. Four days of hard work, and we were on top of the ice-fall; this was on March 27, the earliest date an expedition had ever entered the Western Cwm.

Beyond the bizarre labyrinth of the ice-fall, whose savage wilderness presents a constant danger to life, lie the gently rising, placid slopes of the Western Cwm, only disturbed by the peeling avalanches from the steep slopes of Lhotse. While the parties moved up the Western Cwm to establish the Advance Base at 21,300 ft. and Camp III (22,900 ft.) at the foot of Lhotse, the teams of members and Sherpas ferried loads to the top of the ice-fall. Although each trip to this tottering chaos meant a real hazard and its successful completion was always a great relief, dozens of members and Sherpas every day cheerfully carried loads and returned, with a warm glow of achievement, to the 'Crampon Point', where hot flasks of tea and warm-hearted companions awaited them. Soon ferrying loads up the ice-fall became a routine, and its hazards were forgotten. Sherpas and members carrying 50 lb. each on their backs were moving up and down enthusiastically, singing songs as they returned to the base in the afternoon.

After about a week of ferrying loads up the ice-fall, we moved up to the challenge of the 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 ice-fall, rises the steep face of Lhotse crowned with its 27,923 ft. rocky summit. On the right is the almost vertical Lhotse-Nuptse wall. To the left is the South-west

shoulder of Everest. The silence of the valley in between is often disturbed by the numerous avalanches peeling off from the adjoining faces. One cannot help but feel exhilarated on stepping into this fascinating new world.

Gombu and Cheema, Sonam Gyatso and Sonam Wangyal, working in pairs, spent three hectic days puffing oxygen at two litres per minute and succeeded in making a route to the South Col on April 12. They fixed hundreds of feet of rope across the tortuous reaches of Lhotse and across the couloir and the Yellow Band. They found about 300 ft. of rope abandoned by the 1963 American expedition and utilised it as a hand-rail across the Yellow Band.

The good weather held, and our first ferry reached the South Col on April 16. Two days later, another ferry of sixteen repeated this performance. As usual, the South Col ferries rummaged around 'the highest junk-yard in the world'; and the luckier ones returned with hundreds of feet of ciné film left by the Americans, as well as 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 currencies from the 1962 Indian expedition!

We were now poised for the crucial phase. The morning of April 20 dawned bright and clear and our first summit party, consisting of two pairs—Gombu and Cheema, Gyatso and Wangyal—supported by Gurdial and myself, moved up to the Advance Base. A team of fourteen 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 and, if all went well, the summit party might reach the top on April 27. The weather seemed fine and the Lhotse Face, usually wind-swept with frenzied gusts of driving snow, now looked serene and peaceful. There was no plume on Everest and our hopes were high.

The special weather bulletin broadcast by the All India Radio, however, indicated bad weather over Everest on April 25 owing to the movement of a low pressure area towards us. We considered it wise to wait till the forecast was more favourable. True to the weather forecast, the gusty winds swept the camp on the morning of April 25. The turmoil and furore engulfed the whole mountain. The stillness and calm, which we had hitherto enjoyed, was now a thing of the past.

Braving the weather on the morning of April 27, we moved up from the Advance Base to Camp IV (25,000 ft.), and on the following day to the South Col (26,200 ft.). As is usual at the South Col, the winds were blowing furiously. For Cheema and Wangyal, it was the first visit to this famous but most desolate spot on earth, and both of them were excited. We spent almost two hours pitching tents in the strong gale. The old empty oxygen bottles came in handy for anchoring the guide-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 right through us. We soon crawled inside our tent with a sigh of relief; Gurdial, Dawa Norbu and myself in one tent and the four members of the summit party in the other. The wind raged for the whole night and we hoped that the following day would be quiet.

We had carried a small walkie-talkie set with us and had a pleasant surprise when we were able to make contact with the Advance Base. No other expedition in the past had succeeded in establishing contact from the South Col. Except Gurdial Singh who preferred to do without it, the rest of us used one litre of oxygen for the night. We were now using the American oxygen masks which were simple and free of any of the freezing troubles which our previous masks had given us and which had handicapped our earlier Everest attempts. We could only doze off and on; sound sleep was not possible.

The wild flapping of tents went on unabated till the next morning. There seemed no chance of our moving up that day. Perforce, 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 junk-yard'. 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 summit party kept themselves busy by playing cards.

The second night also was spent in conditions of very strong wind. This continued till the morning, and any remaining desire and determination on our part to spend one more day at the South Col was finally extinguished 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. This was the third time that this had happened with the Indians, but this time we were determined and knew that we would be back soon.

The wind gathered speed every day after we left the South Col. Even at the Base Camp we could hear it whistling and shrieking as it moved across the mountain. The huge, swirling prayer flags at the Base Camp were incessantly a-flutter, and even the big well-anchored mess tent shook like a leaf when caught in stronger gusts.

The enforced rest continued for several days. As the winds kept howling, the members got restive. To give vent to their pent-up energies, they started exploring the Khumbu glacier and its surroundings. A number of beautiful and exciting caves were found. Long, slender icicles made wonderful curtains over their mouths and were a popular subject of photography. Some of us climbed the ridges in the vicinity of our Base Camp, while others lay on their backs and read books; and apart from such Himalayan scholarship, there were always the time-killing cards. We located the remains of an old Swiss camp site. A

bottle full of oxygen was the first haul from it. Soon everyone was searching it for mementos, a karabiner, an empty oxygen bottle, an old mug and the like. The Sherpas too were having a leisurely time at the Base Camp. Most of the camps were fairly stocked, and we had no need to send them up.

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

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

May 16 was chosen for our upward move. Summit parties had been announced the day before. Instantly, the camp, which 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, indeed the chances of even the fourth and fifth pairs would depend on how smoothly the first three parties succeeded in their mission.

The morning of the 16th dawned clear, and the ice-fall glittered in the bright sunshine. One last look behind, and Cheema and Gombu were off and went up the ice-fall. Next day, the Sonams moved up. Warm send-offs were going to be a regular ritual for those at the Base Camp. They knew that as soon as they finished seeing off the summit parties they would have to get ready to receive and welcome those who had already gone up. 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 well. Owing to the shortage of oxygen and because of the successful wireless contact of Advance Base with various camps, including the South Col, I dropped my original intention of going to the South Col in support and, instead, thought it better to stay at the Advance Base. Gombu and Cheema moved up from the

Advance Base to Camp IV, and from there to the South Col which they reached on the 18th, along with their supporting Sherpas led by Phu Dorji. The South Col was as inhospitable as usual, but the winds were less furious than they were 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 the sleeping bags for the night with oxygen on. The Sherpas used oxygen too.

Cheema lay awake for some time thinking of the unknown before him. Gombu was now an old hand at the game. He had been beyond the South Col and knew every inch of the way. He went all over the details of the summit ridge in his mind. Both men were in excellent spirits.

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 the South Col, and the summit party sank knee-deep. 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 ninety minutes of huffing and puffing, a red two-man tent was erected. At no less a height than 27,930 ft., this was the highest camp ever established on Everest. We received the news at the Advance Base with great relief and joy.

May 20, the 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 so far, although this was his first experience above 26,000 ft. He looked forward to the morning.

Cheema got up at 3.00 a.m. and bade Gombu good morning. Indeed, a good morning it was to be. Having had some hot coffee, and having put on all the necessary paraphernalia including crampons, the pair finally left at 5.00 a.m., armed with their gear and two oxygen bottles each. They had already spoken to us at the Advance Base on the wireless, before starting.

Excitement crept through the whole expedition, both at the Advance Base and at Base. None of us had really slept well. We were eagerly waiting for the morning, and as soon as dawn came we were outside our tents and focusing our binoculars on the summit ridge. The day was partially cloudy, and a strong wind was blowing. There was soft snow on the ridge and Gombu and Cheema moved together, 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 before

moving up again. At 8.10 a.m., they were at the South Summit, where they were seen from various observation points we had established. A party with Major Kumar had set up their O.P. on the Pumori ridge. The other O.P.'s were at Camp IV and at the Advance Base. The summit party were moving rapidly and, without difficulty, they 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 flag-pole pitched by James Whittaker and Nawang Gombu on May 1, 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 the top of the world at 9.30 a.m. on that May morning.

Both had a tremendous sense of relief on having got a job well done. Otherwise, there were no particular emotions. It is difficult to think or feel anything at 29,000 ft. when your oxygen mask is off. They stayed on the top for about thirty minutes. The view to the south and east was obscured by cloud. But to the north, the 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 Buddha sent by his famous uncle, Tenzing Norkay.

We, down below, had of course anticipated the success. Both had been sighted below the South Summit from Camp IV and were known to be going well. The confirmation of success could, naturally, come only from the summit pair themselves on the wireless on reaching Camp VI.

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 was reached 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 descent.

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 being so bad 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 us. It was 1.00 p.m. The news was passed on to us from Camp IV where Gurdial was based. All of us were thrilled beyond words. Everyone danced on air-mattresses, embraced each other 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 the South Col from Camp IV. Their ascent was uneventful. They could see Gombu and Cheema descending from Camp VI which they had left at 2.00 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 down 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 blown off his head. All of them came slowly back to the tents at the South Col, and the exhausted summit pair crept into their sleeping bags at 3.30 p.m. All had not gone so well as might appear. They had their share of troubles. Cheema's eyes were snow blind, the price he was paying for having had to remove his goggles. Gombu had developed a sore throat. They had some food and fruit juice 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 the Base Camp collapsed under the weight of the 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 fifteen to twenty minutes and shouting for someone to come out of their tents at Camp IV, they finally noticed moving figures on the Lhotse Face 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 the Advance Base.

Higher up, the drama of the two Sonams was in progress. 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 snow-fall had started, notwithstanding the prayers of Sonam Gyatso who is a very pious man.

Sonam writes in his diary: 'The wind speed is about 140 kilometres per hour. 500 feet above the South Col we are very badly shaken by a blizzard. Whenever we stop for rest, we huddle up together; and I try to cheer up my brave Sherpas—Da Norbu, Gunden and Ang Dawa. They promise to do their best.'

Having passed the American camp 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 snow-flakes from their eyes, they finally heard Da Norbu shouting: 'Here it is'. They had found the camp.

Ang Dawa had suffered frost-bite in three of his finger tips. Gunden was snow blind. Da Norbu was terribly exhausted. Sonam Gyatso himself had suffered what looked like an ultra-violet burn (later to be diagnosed as frost-bite) on the left side of his back. Of the two air-mattresses in Camp VI one was punctured and useless. Wangyal slept on it. Sonam tossed in his sleeping bag due to pain. Both did not sleep well that night.

Cheema and Gombu meanwhile stayed at Camp IV that day. Cheema's snow blindness had improved. Next day they went down to the Advance Base and on the following day to Base Camp.

The Base Camp was still 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 the active participation of Kumar and others, to the chant of 'Taka Naka Naka Dhin', and the saga of the first summit pair ended, physically, that is. But it would remain in mountaineering history, always—Gombu's 'double', and the shortest time to the summit from the last camp so far.

The Sonams, the second summit team, left Camp VI at 6.45 a.m. on May 22. Weather had improved considerably, but they were going slow on account 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 just stepping onto the summit by Kumar from the Pumori ridge. We thus knew of their success almost as they reached the top.

The Sonams performed the summit ritual. They hoisted flags. Sonam Gyatso placed a scarf, a statue 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 round.

At 1.15 p.m. they left the summit. By the time they reached the chimney, their oxygen had run out. Progress was naturally very slow, 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 they finally staggered into Camp VI at 6 p.m. ready to drop down with sheer fatigue and exhaustion.

Vohra and Ang Kami could not move up to the South Col from Camp IV due to fresh snow on that day. The Sonams had not been seen or heard of till as late as 3.00 p.m. We were naturally getting anxious. Vohra and 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, and at about 6.00 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'.

Things moved like clockwork after this. Vohra had a slight sore throat, otherwise both members of the third party were fit. Fried chicken, rice and fruit juice formed the party's diet. For them the night passed blissfully. Weather gods, who had been rough with the Sonams, had smiled on them and they started on their climb at 6 a.m. on a bright morning. Vohra mentions 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.' He wondered if anybody would ever climb Everest without oxygen.

The elixir of life was on again and they were on their upward move. To their joy and relief they saw both Sonams coming down the ridge. Both looked exhausted. They explained the final climb to Vohra and Kami, and went down to the South Col.

The third summit party reached Camp VI at 10.00 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 breath-taking. Two Sherpas dumped half-full oxygen bottles at Camp VI and went down to the South Col without oxygen.

The day passed without any incident. Sonam and Wangyal continued their downward journey to Camp IV from the South Col directly. A hurried consultation by Mulk Raj took place over the wireless with Lala and Chakravarty about Sonam's frost-bite, which was finally cleaned and dressed there with a torn vest. They continued down and reached the Advance Base in the evening. Another small blow fell hard on Gyatso. He was not allowed to join in the celebration drink.

Next day, May 24, was to be a glorious day. Both Vohra and Kami got up at 1.30 a.m. Both, however, decided it was too early yet and promptly dropped off to sleep. At 4.00 a.m. they were again up and heating juices and packing rucksacks. They left at 5.00 a.m. They had a fine day. Wind had died down, and they continued their journey up sometimes wading in soft snow, sometimes on rock. At 9.00 a.m. they were on top of the South Summit. They passed the rock chimney and were now on the summit ridge—Vohra's cherished dream on three Everest expeditions. Both duly climbed up to the summit and stood there at 10.45 a.m. Vohra had carried a movie, and he started to take shots, while Kami tied flags to the pole.

Everest was indeed having a variety of snacks. Previous parties had placed chocolates and sweets there. This party offered raisins. Ang Kami spotted the Thyangboche monastery and was thrilled.

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 at 28,000 ft. 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 the Base Camp that day.

The night was uncomfortable for Vohra and Ang Kami. They thumped their feet in vain to keep them warm. There was no more fruit juice in the tent, and both had a cup of warm water for breakfast. They waited for some time for the wind to die down, but in vain. Finally they decided to go down to the South Col in that strong wind, hoping that somebody would come up from the South Col with hot tea. Somebody did. They got hot tea from Mulk Raj and Lobsang as they neared the tents. They were back in civilisation again.

Vohra's feet were feeling bad and he complained of severe pain. He decided to stay at the South Col with Mulk Raj, while Ang Kami went on with Lobsang to the Advance Base. Thanks to Mulk Raj, who is undaunted in emergencies, Vohra was well looked after. It must have taken tremendous effort to look after Vohra so well at 26,200 ft., where to move without oxygen is a problem.

Pemba Sunder and Tashi had come from the Advance Base to escort Vohra down. Mulk Raj had passed the whole night without oxygen. On the morning of the 26th they went down the dangerous Lhotse Face. Vohra was now in a slightly better physical shape, though limping badly. Finally, however, they made the Advance Base where Dr. Chakravarty declared, after thorough examination, that Vohra's cold injury was not serious and that he would be able to walk on the return march.

Rawat and Bahuguna, B. P. Singh and Ahluwalia, forming the fourth and fifth summit parties respectively, moved up to the Advance Base on May 20. In view of the short climbing period now 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. Driven snow swept over the mountain making visibility poor. The third summit party, then at Camp IV, could not move up to the South Col, and accordingly the fourth party had to stay put at the Advance Base.

A special weather forecast that evening indicated adverse weather conditions on Everest from the afternoon of the 24th to the afternoon of the 27th. This necessitated further postponement. It was thus decided to send the party up now on the 26th for an attempt on the 29th.

A summit party of four needed at least twenty-five bottles of oxygen, and we had just about this number left. If only the first three parties returned without any accident and if no party spent an extra night at the 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 the Base Camp, one full oxygen bottle was retrieved. Of the four oxygen bottles kept at the Advance Base 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 May 25 a huge ice-avalanche from the Lhotse Face swept over the unoccupied Camp II, burying the tents and equipment 8 to 10 ft. deep, twelve precious oxygen bottles with them, and also 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 the late afternoon, they succeeded in digging out the twelve oxygen bottles. There was jubilation all round.

The third summit pair returned that day to the South Col, and reported the latest position regarding oxygen bottles at the Col. We now had about thirty bottles—sufficient for not only four but five persons to attempt the peak.

A previously dropped proposal to include Phu Dorji was now revived. In view of the excellent work done by the Sherpas, we thought it fit to include one of them in the summit party. Phu Dorji, who had led the support party carrying loads to the highest camp on Everest, deserved this honour more than anyone else. Phu Dorji was at that time at the Base Camp. He was asked to make the South Col in two days and join the summit party on the 27th.

On the morning of May 26, 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 stomach trouble, and finding it difficult to continue, he returned to the Advance Base. B. P. Singh is a strong climber; it was very unfortunate. The others carried on to Camp IV, and the next day to the South Col. Phu Dorji had, in the meanwhile, come up to Advance Base on the 26th and made the South Col on the following day.

True to weather forecast, the morning of May 28 dawned bright and clear. Ahluwalia and Phu Dorji 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 ciné photography en route. They moved fast and were soon at the Southeast ridge, the 1962 Indian camp, then the site of the American camp. They had a short rest and some coffee; and after Phu Dorji had bagged an extra bottle from the American camp, they were soon at the last camp. With the help of the Sherpas they levelled a platform for another tent. Walkie-talkie contact was established in the afternoon. They were

informed that weather was likely to deteriorate in the afternoon of May 29, and they were advised to leave early next morning.

Next morning was clear though not calm. They were all up around 3.00 a.m., melting snow and preparing liquids. At 5.30 a.m. they were on their way. Unfortunately, Bahuguna had developed an itch all over his body and had spent a miserable night. He now discovered that he was unable to go as fast as Rawat. Feeling that Rawat's chances might also be reduced, he detached himself from the rope and asked Rawat to carry on. Bahuguna descended to the 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 Dorji and Ahluwalia. They dropped one bottle each just below the South Summit, which they reached at 8.45 a.m. While going down the 30 ft. descent from the South Summit, they had a glimpse of the summit hump and the national 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 national flag was blowing, and they saw various other things left by the previous summit parties. Ahluwalia took some pictures. To their great disappointment, the heavy ciné 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 Dorji placed a silver locket containing the Dalai Lama's photograph.

The wind had gone down, and it was clear all round except for some clouds down below. They spent half an hour on the top and sipped some coffee. They left the flask there and started on the downward journey. At 3.30 p.m. they were at Camp VI, hale and hearty. After half an hour's rest, they started for the South Col, reaching there at 6.15 p.m.

Pemba Sunder received them at the South Col, and they spent a comfortable night. They were fairly tired and slept well. Ahluwalia collected all the available oxygen bottles, some containing oxygen hardly enough to last for fifteen minutes. He kept on changing from one bottle to another, and the next morning there was a heap of at least twenty bottles lying about the tent, all consumed during the night.

Next day they were down at the Advance Base and on the following day at the Base. On May 31, all of us were at last down at the Base. There were celebrations through the night, and on the following day we left contented and thankful to Providence for all the wonderful luck we had.

Nine of us had the fortune to set foot on the summit, but others, too,

may well be said to have climbed it—though not physically. It was, in fact, the team as a whole which had achieved the climb and the credit and honour are shared equally by all, including the members of the Sponsoring Committee some of whom worked even harder, behind the scenes.

We felt sorry for Bahuguna and B. P. Singh who were so near the goal when accidental sickness robbed them of final success. Gurdial, Mulk Raj and Joshi played an important support role with selflessness and devotion. The Deputy Leader, Kumar, despite his frost-bitten toes, climbed up to the Advance Base, looking after the high altitude ferries with meticulous care. Our doctors, Lala Telang and Chakravarty, not only looked after the medical aspects of the expedition but, being good climbers as well, helped in support and logistics. Lala spent about a month, at a stretch, at the Advance Base, and attended to all manner of problems, not only medical. Chakravarty had to join the expedition literally at twenty-four hours' notice, when Soares had been taken ill on the second day of our approach march. He twice climbed to 25,000 ft. without oxygen, in support of the summit parties—a truly magnificent feat for a recruit obtained at such short notice.

The two wireless operators, G. S. Bhangu and Balakrishnan, though fully occupied in their busy wireless schedules, voluntarily took additional heavy tasks on their shoulders. Lieutenant Bhagirath Narsing Rana, the Nepalese Liaison Officer, also played his part well and, although completely new to mountaineering, climbed to 25,000 ft.

The Sherpas beat all their own splendid records by putting up an unprecedented performance. Out of the forty-four high altitude Sherpas, one (Phu Dorji) reached the top, nineteen carried loads to the last camp and twenty-two others to the South Col. Many of them carried loads four times, one even five times. Whether a Sherpa or a member, each one had done his best. How honoured and privileged I feel to have led a team of such fine men.

As should be the case with any adventure, our expedition had never intended to compete with any records. We gained from the experience of our predecessors and climbed, as it were, on their shoulders. As usual with any expedition, we tried to put the maximum number of people on top with a reasonable margin of safety, and we were blessed with good luck, always so essential at Himalayan heights. The adventure is all over—materially ended, that is; the memories will endure.