
DAWSON STELFOX

Everest Calling

(Plates 2-4, 6-11)

I was on Croagh Patrick last week – Ireland's holiest mountain, climbed by thousands of pilgrims every July, many barefooted, many dragged up by will and faith after bodily powers fail. I followed the long ridge stretching westward to the Atlantic, the spectacular panorama of Clew Bay and Clare Island obscured by thick mist, but with the sun burning through from above. Voices came out of that mist, memories trapped by exhaustion were suddenly released and I was carried back to another mountain over a year ago when once again I was in thick mist on a long ridge, with sunshine above and a summit ahead – Everest or, more properly, Chomolungma. A mountain calling ... calling to me as much as Croagh Patrick calls to those barefooted pilgrims.

The muffled but insistent bleep of an electronic alarm stirred me from a restless stupor. It was 2am at 8300m. The torch flickered on, revealing frost caking the tent roof. I ventured a hand out and pulled the stove out of a sordid mess of half-cooked food and torn packages in the corner of the tent. Fingers seared to the freezing gas cylinder and jolted me awake, sending an icy shower of frost down my neck. I retreated into the depths of the bag and lay exhausted, shivering from cold and at what might be ahead. Outside, a lightning storm flashed over Nepal, thick cloud settled over Tibet. There was justification for staying in bed, for not going on. The weather was bad. We would have to go back.

I can honestly say that I know of nothing ... which is so utterly exhausting or which calls for more determination than this hateful duty of high-altitude cooking ... Perhaps the most hateful part of the process is that some of the resultant mess must be eaten, and this in itself is only achieved by will power: there is but little desire to eat – sometimes indeed a sense of nausea at the bare idea ...¹

Lt Col E F Norton, 1924

It was 27 May 1993, nearly two months since we had arrived at Rongbuk on the north side of Everest. It had been two months of hard load carrying, struggling with altitude and weathering storms, but also with clear and windless days, achievement and satisfaction. As Frank Nugent and I lay huddled together in a tiny frozen tent at Camp 3, we were very conscious that this was our last chance of the summit. The yaks to take us home were



2. The North Ridge of Everest: Dawson Stelfox traversing towards the Second Step before making the first British/Irish ascent from the north on 27 May 1993.
(*Frank Nugent*) (p15)

due in a few days. The monsoon was already rushing up through India. With Robbie, Tony and Mick snapping at our heels, one day behind, ready to pick up the pieces or launch off our efforts for the top, this was our last and only chance.

From the warmth and security of my sleeping-bag I reconsidered. There was no wind. The forecast was good. We felt tolerably able to think and move. We could always turn back later, and there were Dermot's reassuring words on the radio ...

... We will contribute any breath of strength behind your back that we can.

The stove was lit and the feeble flame gave new life to our preparations. Slowly, laboriously, moving one at a time in the tiny tent, we got ready to leave. Half a cup of tepid tea, a mouthful of cake and some Complian. We planned to leave at 4am, but the hour slipped past and it was after 5 before we finally got out of our bags, forced on our bulky boots and gaiters and crawled out of the tent to a bitterly cold but perfectly still night. In a blinkered daze, daring not to think about the discomfort and menace of the situation, we set off upwards into the black night.

Our pace was wretched. My ambition was to do twenty consecutive paces uphill without a pause to rest and pant, elbow on bent knee. Yet I never remember achieving it – thirteen was nearer the mark. Every five or ten minutes we had to sit down for a minute or two and we must have looked a sorry couple.²

Lt Col E F Norton, 1924

Deep soft snow, a maze of ramps, gullies and unexpectedly steep rock. Torch beams casting for clues – shreds of old ropes here and there. Darkness dissolved, sun touched the summit and as we shivered on the cold northern flank, new life swept us, entranced by the glowing crest above ...

The ground over which we started was easy but trying; scree, which slipped while we were trying to mount it, and rocks, which provided simple scrambling. It was intensely cold, but ahead of us we saw a patch of sunlight, and strained every nerve to reach this and get warm.³

T Howard Somervell, 1924

Radio conversation 8am:

... Dermot, we've reached the main ridge, just short of the First Step. Pretty hard going – up to our knees in soft snow, fairly tiring. We're carrying on anyway, but it looks like more of the same.

... Dawson, I've been climbing with you for years and I've never known you not to carry on and I know you will carry on and that Frank will carry on as well. Take plenty of rests and the day will change ... You've a long time ahead of you, so don't feel you have to make any decisions yet.



Left

3. The crest of the North Ridge of Everest between the First and Second Steps. (Dawson Stelfox) (p15)

Below

4. The final few metres to the Summit. (John Tinker) (p25)



Leaving the ridge we began to work out into the face. For the first few yards the going was sufficiently straightforward, but presently the general angle became much steeper, and our trials were accentuated by the fact that the stratification of the rocks was such that they shelved outward and downward, making the securing of adequate footholds difficult.⁴

George Finch, 1922

We teetered and slithered across those 'steeply sloping, evilly smooth slabs', now covered with a foot of powder snow obscuring any foothold. Easy ground became serious. The First Step loomed, towers of grey and brown rock. It all looked so complex; which way to go?

Radio conversation 10am:

... Hi Dermot ... The weather has picked up a bit – it's more pleasant up here now than it was earlier on.

... Dawson, we have sound, we have sight and some people think we even have colour. We can pick you out in the greatest of detail – we can see you moving, we can distinguish your limbs. We are extremely impressed by the speed you are going at ...

... Maybe you can tell us where we are then Dermot, 'cos we're not quite sure at the moment ...

We were traversing under the First Step, on 'slabs of rock like tiles on a roof' covered in soft snow, waiting for the trigger to send them sliding down the north face below.

I found myself stepping from tile to tile, as it were, each tile sloping smoothly and steeply downwards; I began to feel that I was too much dependent on the mere friction of a boot nail on the slabs. It was not exactly difficult going, but it was a dangerous place for a single, unroped climber, as one slip would have sent me in all probability to the bottom of the mountain.⁵

Lt Col E F Norton, at his high point 1924

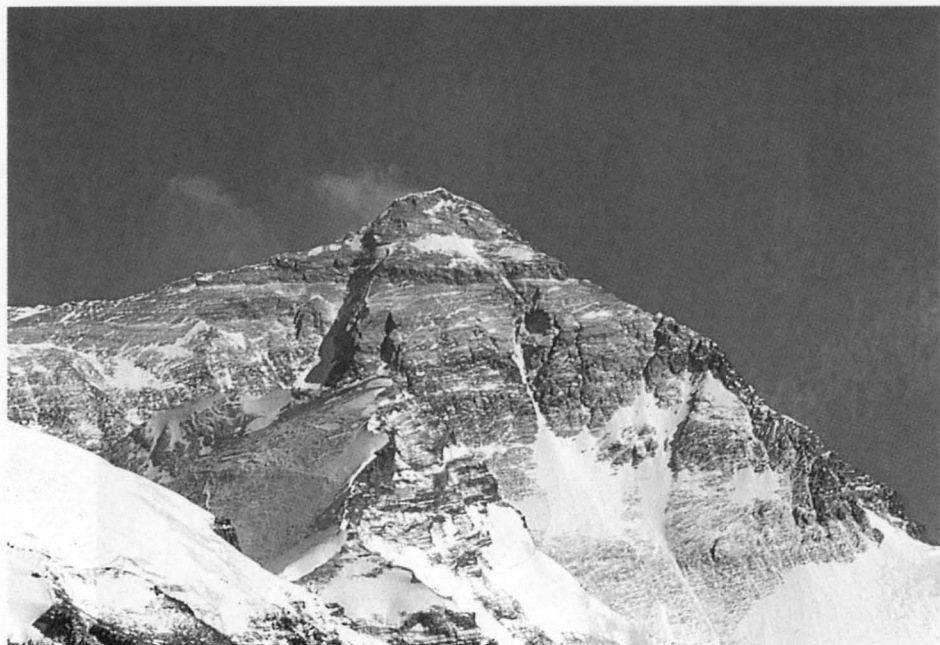
Radio conversation 12 noon:

... Dermot ... we are struggling, in very difficult conditions and the return journey is going to be very difficult as well – a lot of soft snow lying over slabs without any old fixed rope around ... we haven't made a decision on whether to press on ...

... Robbie here, Dawson, at the Chinese Camp 2 ... we'll be absolutely happy to do anything we can to help – if there's any possibility of us getting to and beyond Camp 3 it would be an absolute pleasure for us to help ...

Arrived under the second step, they saw at once that, not only was the second step itself impossible from this side, but they could not even reach the foot of it. Above them rose the dark-grey precipice, smooth and holdless.⁶

Hugh Ruttledge, 1933



6. Everest from Base Camp. The North Ridge is the left skyline.
(*Dawson Stelfox*) (p15)



7. The final slopes of the North Col, with the North Ridge behind.
(*Dawson Stelfox*) (p15)

Seriousness and exposure rose up and overwhelmed us as we cautiously inched our way across the flank of the ridge. We tied on to our 6mm Kevlar rope and I led up an awkward ramp to a curious rock mushroom, a broad platform at 8680m and the shreds of a tent.

Frank followed, struggling with his breathing and for the first time looking seriously under strain. On the steeper ground he was gasping for air that wasn't there, disturbing his balance and concentration. He was concerned that he was nearing the edge of safe control. It was already obvious that we wouldn't make it to the top and back down before running out of oxygen and probably daylight. As we moved on across a narrow slabby ramp that turned the next pinnacle, Frank could see his control slipping away. He decided to turn back while he could still look after himself, rather than continue a bit further and be a liability to me. Central to his decision was not to hold me up, not to spoil my chances. He stayed to photograph me as I edged on towards the foot of the Second Step and then turned to begin a slow, cautious descent, without the elation of the summit to counter the weariness of being alone on such a vast and complicated mountain.

Radio conversation 1pm:

... OK Dermot, some disappointing news, Frank has turned back about 10 or 15 minutes ago, over.

... Dawson, we accept that and sympathise with you for being on your own. We've had some conversation with Tony and Robbie and Mick a short while ago and they've put themselves in full support of your effort.

... Dermot, that's reassuring. Certainly I would like to go for the summit but I am going very slowly and I'll have to make a decision at some stage along the way, so anyway I'll carry on and I'll talk to you in a while.

... Dawson, do keep going for a while yet – conditions look good, you sound strong, we're terribly sorry you're on your own. Bear in mind the possibility of going down the south side.

... Dermot, that had crossed my mind but practicalities will ensue as always. I know you always accuse me of being too pragmatic, but there you go ...

... Dawson, take care, you're totally in control, your conversation is articulate, you're practically arguing with me and you've got a lot of movement in you yet.

The Second Step – the psychological as well as the physical barrier, the gateway to the summit. Did Mallory and Irvine climb it in 1924? Did the Chinese climb it in 1960?

Soon, all four of us reached the famous Second Step ... No wonder the British adventurers were stopped short here ... Near the top of the step a three metre high vertical rock slab suddenly stood in our way. Liu Lien-man blazed the trail but failed in all his four attempts to open up a way ... Now he was completely exhausted. This made Xu Yin-hua impatient. He took off his heavy cramponed boots and thick woollen socks. Gripping the crevice with his hands and stepping on the rock surface with his



8. The Chinese ladder on the Second Step. (*John Tinker*) (p25)

feet, he tried to climb up. But twice he failed and fell down. Then snow began to swirl in the air, which made the climbing all the more difficult. What was to be done? Turn back like the British climbers had done before? No! Certainly not!⁷

Wang Fu-Chou and Xu Yin-hua, 1960

They made the top, in the dark, but it was some years before the sceptical West believed them, and then only with the evidence of Xu Yin-hua's frost-bitten feet and harrowing story. The Chinese were back in 1975 and neatly avoided a repetition of this by carrying up and placing a 20ft long aluminium ladder on the last part of the Step.

It's still there, precariously fixed, swinging wildly on loose pitons, but even to reach the ladder is not easy. Strands of tattered rope lay down the vertical buttress but to their left I climbed a short, chock-stoned and snow-filled gully that led up to a series of ramps zigzagging up the crag to the foot of the ladder. First oxygen bottle nearly empty now, but turned up full, I gasped my way up, one rung at a time, body held flat against the rungs to stop the swinging, eyes avoiding the protruding and vibrating pegs.

End of the ladder. Still steep. I sweep away the choking powder snow and search for holds. A long step out right, a lunge forwards and I'm up, gasping from an empty bottle and on easy ground. Change bottles ... mind clears. Radio on and talk to Base Camp – Dermot, John, Richard, Lorna, Kathy and Leslie huddled around the base set, willing me on ...

Radio conversation 2pm:

... I'm just at the top of the Second Step – top of the ladder, which is fairly rickety, and across now to the bottom of the third step.

... Dawson, no man at 28,000ft has a right to sound as fit, as well, as healthy and as happy as that.

... Well I'm reasonably happy but I'm not too sure about fit and healthy, Dermot.

... Dawson, Richard here. That's tremendous – it sounds to me you're over a particular psychological watershed and its tremendous to hear you.

Easy ground now, a vast boulder-strewn plateau. The afternoon cloud closes in, a light breeze picks up and it begins to snow. Keeping well down from the ridge to avoid the cornices, I plod on, searching out hard snow patches, stumbling into drifted holes between the rocks. Down below, Robbie and Tony had the same problem as they fought their way up to Camp 3 ...

Radio conversation 3pm:

... Dermot here Robbie, come in.

... Dermot, it's snowing very heavily up here ... conditions here underfoot are terrible – it's going to be really hard work for anyone in this ... I'd say Dawson is getting the same snow as us, but there's no wind, so it is not prohibitive.

... The problem for Dawson is he has to return – he has only about 6 hours of daylight left to get to the summit and return ...

... Dawson here, Dermot. I'm in the middle of good Scottish winter conditions at the moment.

... Dawson, those are the conditions that suit you best ...

Across the top of the Great Couloir. Eyes straining through the cloud and snow for the route ahead up the summit tower. A steep rising traverse through rocks and onto the upper snowfield. Up a vertical windslab break line hoping the slope above is stable, out to the right onto more steep slabs. Wind rising, but not yet a serious problem.

And wind on Everest is subtly demoralising. An upward step is no longer something interesting and worth doing, but something useless, and the final pyramid of rock, with its writhing plume of wind blown snow, the summit of Everest; it is the epitome of weariness.⁸

Frank Smythe, 1933

Radio conversation 4pm:

... OK Dermot, I'm somewhere on the summit snowfield. I'm still quite low down on it but it's not too far I think.

... Dawson, you're there, you've got it done. It's only a question of pursuing it and fairly soon it will level out. Give us a word on what conditions are actually like ...

... Still in deep snow I'm afraid. The sun is breaking through the cloud, which makes it quite pleasant, but I can't really see very much ...

... Dawson it sounds as if you are very close and the conditions are not too miserable – you sound healthy and fit as well – watch out for cornices on the Kangshung side but I'm sure you're well able for that. You have it in the bag Dawson.

... It's not in the bag till I get down Dermot.

... We know that and we know that you always get down. Best of luck, we're behind you completely and the main thing is we have the utmost confidence in you.

... Thanks for that Dermot – hopefully next broadcast from the summit.

Steep slabs forced me to the right towards the West Ridge, looking for a break in the steep buttress above. I felt a bit duped – no one had mentioned difficulties on the last bit. Was I in the right place? Should I have stayed on the snow to the left after all? A broad ramp above looked promising and a shred of old rope hanging uselessly on a rock step confirmed the line. The ramp led back left onto the summit ridge. I climbed through the cloud, the sun came out, the wind dropped. The climbing was absorbing; I swarmed up the last few steps and out onto the summit ridge and ... there it was, Kangshung face, topped by an aluminium pole.

Somehow and for some reason I go on. I'm nowhere in particular. I'm just climbing automatically, instinctively. I don't expect it but suddenly it's there – the tripod, the blessing of proof, the curse of destruction on this perfect place of solitude.⁹

Reinhold Messner, 1980



9. The Second Step and Summit catch the morning sun.
(*John Tinker*) (p25)



10. The Summit of Everest looking SW, 27 May 1993. An oxygen bottle and prayer flags can be seen about 12ft from the surface on the NE side of the mountain. (*Dawson Stelfox*) (p15, p30)

I wandered up the last few yards to the top, the snow untracked and pristine on all sides, absorbing the beauty of the most extensive panorama on earth. The green jungles of Nepal to the south contrasting with the brown rolling barren hills of Tibet. Mountains from end to end – Kangchenjunga in the far east; the painful reminder of Manaslu marking the limit of visibility to the west. My eyes roamed the familiar peaks of Khumbu and finally, across the range and down to Rongbuk, down to Base Camp ... Everest calling Rongbuk ...

Radio conversation 5.10pm:

... Dermot, the altimeter is reading 8848m and I'm sitting on the summit of the world.

... Dawson listen to me – you're the tallest man in the world ... and you've just made the first Irish ascent of Mount Everest and the first British ascent of the North Ridge – absolutely magnificent achievement Dawson – we're surrounded here by people – Irish, Nepalese and Tibetan, everyone offering congratulations.

... Dermot, I'm not going to say very much, but just that it's an honour to be sitting up here, and an honour to be given that possibility by everyone else on the team – and I'd like to think that I represent all the other climbers, all the other members of the expedition – Irish, Nepalese, Chinese, Tibetan and everyone back home as well. It's an absolute honour to be here – you're down in the cloud at the moment, I'm up above it and I've got the most magnificent panorama of all the big peaks of the Himalaya.

... Dawson, we won't forget Frank at this stage – we received a message ten minutes ago that Robby and Tony saw him approaching Camp 3 – going strongly and looked safe.

... I'm really glad Frank is safe – I only wish that he could be up here with me ... it's as much his achievement as mine getting up here because there was a lot of teamwork in the early part of the day and I wouldn't have gone the whole day on my own.

... Dawson, we knew you would carry all our aspirations with you and would represent all of us and none would feel excluded when you stood on the summit and that's how we feel now.

... I'll just take a few photographs and I'll be on my way – I've got about 4 hours to dark and I think I'll just about make it, but I have a torch with me anyway so I might even make the last bit in the dark ... If I could just send a message home ... especially to Margaret, whose support has been an enormous help, but also to everyone back home who has helped in so many ways ... It is absolutely magnificent to feel that I am at the top of a pyramid of people from home and out here who have put me up on the top. I can't express it any more – I'm on my way down ...

I thought of them all individually, strung out over the mountain, yet bound together invisibly and inextricably – Tony and Robbie slowly making their way up to Camp 3 to support Frank and me and make their own attempt the next day. Mick and Mike, who gave up their own chances to support

mine. Dermot and Richard, now confined to illness but who played an instrumental role in the success by their early work and continued wisdom; to the support team – Nick, Rory and Stephen, now back home in Ireland but leaving a legacy of strong foundations behind; Kathy, John Bourke, Leslie and Lorna, all playing their part in forming and binding the strength of the team; Brian at Advanced Base Camp, and John Murray at the North Col, both hanging on grimly, stoically to capture the spirit of the expedition; our Nepali staff, the Tibetan yak herders and even the TMA officials; and Frank, now slowly making his way back to Camp 3, the driving force of undiminished commitment throughout.

But it was 5.30 and darkness would be on me by 9. I knew it would take me five or six hours to get back to camp, the last few inevitably without oxygen. Down the summit tower with two abseils over the rocksteps, carefully retrieving my precious 50m of 6mm rope. Across the broken spur to the snowfield. Slowly down the windslab break, then with more abandon, slithering down shallow gullies to the plateau. Cloud rolled in again and suddenly I was lost.

My tracks were filled with the afternoon snow. The featureless slope gave way to the vertical drop of the Second Step – only one way down – I had to find the top of the ladder. I dropped down lower – no, it couldn't be here ... laboriously back up again ... still couldn't find it ... back down again, lower this time ... getting steep ... hold on, this is serious ... feet sliding and scraping on thinly snow-covered slabs. Down below, Robbie saw me wandering around way off the line, but the radio was off and he could only watch.

STOP. Despair moving in with the fading light. Calm down ... think ... remember what it looked like when you pulled over the top of the Step ... much closer to the crest. Back up again, and there, barely discernible depressions in the fresh snow – my old tracks, leading to the ladder.

Abseil down past the ladder, back along the traverse to the old tent site and the rock mushroom. An awkward diagonal abseil down the full rope length. Oxygen gone now, darkness closing in. The radio an invaluable companion. I learnt that Frank was safely down to Camp 3, Tony and Robbie safely up there. Talking concentrated my mind, forcing me to think, avoiding automation. Down and round the First Step and in the last few minutes of daylight reached the top of the old ropes leading off the ridge, down the steep rockband above the tents.

Head torch on now in the gathering gloom, plunging down the morning's tracks, grateful now for the deep trench we had ploughed upwards. A light at the tent flashed; I flashed back. The tents seemed a long way down. An old rope lying slack in the snow pulled tight as I abseiled off, sending me slithering down a heart-stopping six feet ...

Off the ropes now, down through the deep snow and suddenly, there was Robbie, out to guide me in and envelope me in warmth, Frank and Tony



11. The Summit of Everest looking NE, 27 May 1993. In the foreground is a two-prism assembly left by Todd Burlison on 15 May 1992 at the request of Bradford Washburn. Behind it is some equipment left by an Italian survey team on 30 September 1992. (*Dawson Stelfox*) (p15, p30)

brewing up in the tents. The day was over, 18 hours after leaving. I was back in Camp 3.

I slept fitfully, barely able to think about the summit – more concerned about getting enough to drink and getting down. Robbie and Tony left on their own attempt by 4am, but despite my excitement and concern I fell asleep until 7 when they reached the main ridge. In worsening weather we discussed their options and it was with a certain relief that they made what later proved to be the right decision and came down.

In the elation of getting back to the camp it was easy to forget that we were still at 8300m, out of oxygen, out of food, out of gas and out of energy. Ahead of us was a demanding descent in worsening weather and only the urgent need to get down out of the thickening snow and the rising wind kept us moving. Control is so easily lost, the body so frail. The desire to rest, maybe never to rise again, is almost irresistible. The mind wanders ...

Layers of mystery and tragedy are interwoven with the snows of the North Ridge. The ghosts of Boardman and Tasker haunt the pinnacles off to our right; Marty Hoey can be traced on the face to our left; many, many others are all around. In the distance, but feeling close to me now, are friends lost on other mountains. Far above us, the spirit of Irvine, and Mallory ... in at the start, there to the end.

... the entire summit ridge and the final peak of Everest were unveiled. My eyes became fixed on one tiny black spot silhouetted on a small snow-crest beneath a rock-step in the ridge; the black spot moved. Another black spot became apparent and moved up the snow to join the other on the crest. The first then approached the great rock-step and shortly emerged at the top; the second did likewise. Then the whole fascinating vision vanished, enveloped in cloud once more.¹⁰

Noel Odell, 1924

Summary: On 27 May 1993 Dawson Stelfox reached the summit of Everest. Owing to his dual nationality, he had achieved both the first Irish ascent of the mountain and the first British ascent of the North Ridge.

Expedition members

Climbers: Dawson Stelfox, Frank Nugent, Dermot Somers, Mike Barry, Richard O'Neill Dean, Mick Murphy, Robbie Fenlon, Tony Burke.

Support: Leslie Lawrence, Nick Stevenson, John Bourke, Kathryn Fleming, Stephen Potts.

Media: Lorna Siggins, Rory McKee, John Murray, Brian Hayes.

Note: The full story of the expedition is told in Lorna Sigger's book *Everest Calling* (Mainstream 1993), including writing by Dermot Somers and Dawson Stelfox.

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