Sir Edmund Percival Hillary, KG, ONZ, KBE (20 July 1919 – 11 January 2008), was a New Zealand mountaineer, explorer and philanthropist. On 29 May 1953 at the age of 33, he and Sherpa mountaineer Tenzing Norgay became the first climbers known to have reached the summit of Mount Everest – see Timeline of climbing Mount Everest. They were part of the ninth British expedition to Everest, led by John Hunt. He was named by Time magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century. Hillary became interested in mountaineering while in secondary school, making his first major climb in 1939, reaching the summit of Mount Ollivier. He served in the RNZAF as a navigator during World War II. Before the successful expedition in 1953 to Everest, he had been part of a reconnaissance expedition to the mountain in 1951 and an unsuccessful attempt to climb Cho Oyu in 1952. As part of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition he reached the South Pole overland in 1958. He would later also travel to the North Pole.

Following his ascent of Everest he devoted much of his life to helping the Sherpa people of Nepal through the Himalayan Trust, which he founded. Through his efforts many schools and hospitals were built in this remote region of Nepal.

Youth

Hillary was born to Percival Augustus Hillary and Gertrude Hillary, née Clark, in Auckland, New Zealand, on 20 July 1919.[1] His family moved to Tuakau (south of Auckland) in 1920, after his father (who served at Gallipoli) was allocated land there.[2] His grandparents were early settlers in northern Wairoa in the mid-19th century after emigrating from Yorkshire, England.[3]

Hillary was educated at Tuakau Primary School and then Auckland Grammar School.[2] He finished primary school two years early, but struggled at high school, achieving only average marks.[4] He was initially smaller than his peers there and very shy so he took refuge in his books and daydreams of a life filled with adventure. His daily train journey to and from high school was over two hours each way, during which he regularly used the time to read. He gained confidence after he learned to box. At 16 his interest in climbing was sparked during a school trip to Mount Ruapehu. Though gangly at 6 ft 5 in (195 cm) and uncoordinated, he found that he was physically strong and had greater endurance than many of his tramping
companions. He studied mathematics and science at the University of Auckland, and in 1939 completed his first major climb, reaching the summit of Mount Ollivier, near Aoraki/Mount Cook in the Southern Alps.[2] With his brother Rex, Hillary became a beekeeper,[1][6] a summer occupation that allowed him to pursue climbing in the winter. His interest in beekeeping later led Hillary to commission Michael Ayrton to cast a golden sculpture in the shape of honeycomb in imitation of Daedalus's lost-wax process. This was placed in his New Zealand garden, where his bees took it over as a hive and "filled it with honey and their young".

World War II

Upon the outbreak of World War II Hillary applied to join the air force, but withdrew the application before it was considered because he was "harassed by religious conscience". Following the introduction of conscription on the outbreak of war in the Pacific, in 1943 Hillary joined the RNZAF as a navigator and served on Catalina flying boats. In 1945 he was sent to Fiji and to the Solomon Islands where he was badly burnt in a boat accident, after which he was repatriated to New Zealand.

Expeditions

Harry Ayres, along with Mick Sullivan led Hillary and Ruth Adams up the south ridge of Aoraki/Mount Cook, New Zealand’s highest peak, on 30 January 1948.

Hillary was part of a British reconnaissance expedition to Everest in 1951 led by Eric Shipton before joining the successful British attempt of 1953.

In 1952 Hillary and George Lowe were part of the British team led by Eric Shipton that attempted Cho Oyu. After that attempt failed due to the lack of route from the Nepal side, Hillary and Lowe crossed the Nup La into Tibet and reached the old Camp II, on the northern side, where all the pre-war expeditions camped.

The route to Everest was closed by Chinese-controlled Tibet, and Nepal only allowed one expedition per year. A Swiss expedition (in which Tenzing took part) had attempted to reach the
summit in 1952 but was turned back by bad weather 800 feet (240 m) from the summit. During a 1952 trip in the Alps Hillary discovered he and his friend George Lowe had been invited by the Joint Himalayan Committee for the approved British 1953 attempt and immediately accepted.

Shipton was named as leader but was replaced by Hunt. Hillary considered pulling out, but both Hunt and Shipton talked him into remaining. Hillary was intending to climb with Lowe but Hunt named two teams for the assault: Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans; and Hillary and Tenzing. Hillary therefore made a concerted effort to forge a working friendship with Tenzing.

The Hunt expedition totalled over 400 people, including 362 porters, twenty Sherpa guides and 10,000 lbs of baggage, and like many such expeditions, was a team effort. Lowe supervised the preparation of the Lhotse Face, a huge and steep ice face, for climbing. Hillary forged a route through the treacherous Khumbu Icefall.

The expedition set up base camp in March 1953. Working slowly it set up its final camp at the South Col at 25,900 feet (7,890 m). On 26 May Bourdillon and Evans attempted the climb but turned back when Evans’ oxygen system failed. The pair had reached the South Summit, coming within 300 vertical feet (91 m) of the summit.[14][15] Hunt then directed Hillary and Tenzing to go for the summit.

Snow and wind held the pair up at the South Col for two days. They set out on 28 May with a support trio of Lowe, Alfred Gregory and Ang Nyima. The two pitched a tent at 27,900 feet (8,500 m) on 28 May while their support group returned down the mountain. On the following morning Hillary discovered that his boots had frozen solid outside the tent. He spent two hours warming them before he and Tenzing attempted the final ascent wearing 30-pound (14 kg) packs.[12] The crucial move of the last part of the ascent was the 40-foot (12 m) rock face later named the "Hillary Step". Hillary saw a means to wedge his way up a crack in the face between the rock wall and the ice and Tenzing followed.[16] From there the following effort was relatively simple. Tenzing Norgay stated in his narration "The Dream Comes True" that Hillary had indeed took the first step atop Mount Everest, despite Hillary quoting that both had reached the summit at the same time. They reached Everest's 29,028 ft (8,848 m) summit, the highest point on earth, at 11:30 am.[1][17] As Hillary put it, "A few more whacks of the ice axe in the firm snow, and we stood on top."

They spent only about 15 minutes at the summit. Hillary took the famous photo of Tenzing posing with his ice-axe, but since Tenzing had never used a camera, Hillary's ascent went
unrecorded. Tenzing left chocolates in the snow as an offering and Hillary left a cross that he had been given.[12] Additional photos were taken looking down the mountain in order to re-assure that they had made it to the top and that the ascent was not faked.

The two had to take care on the descent after discovering that drifting snow had covered their tracks, complicating the task of retracing their steps. The first person they met was Lowe, who had climbed up to meet them with hot soup.

"Well, George, we knocked the bastard off."—Hillary's first words to lifelong friend George Lowe on returning from Everest's summit.

News of the expedition reached Britain on the day of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, and the press called the successful ascent a coronation gift. In turn, the 37 members of the party received the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal with MOUNT EVEREST EXPEDITION engraved on the rim. The group was surprised by the international acclaim that they received upon arriving in Kathmandu. Hillary and Hunt were knighted by the young queen, while Tenzing received either the British Empire Medal, or the George Medal from the British Government for his efforts with the expedition. It has been suggested that Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru refused permission for Tenzing to be knighted.

After Everest

Hillary climbed ten other peaks in the Himalayas on further visits in 1956, 1960–1961, and 1963–1965. He also reached the South Pole as part of the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition, for which he led the New Zealand section, on 4 January 1958. His party was the first to reach the Pole overland since Amundsen in 1911 and Scott in 1912, and the first ever to do so using motor vehicles.

Hillary narrowly missed becoming a victim in TWA Flight 266 from the American midwest in the 1960 New York air disaster, having been late for his flight.

In the summer of 1962, he was a guest on the television show, "What's My Line?" The panelists
were blindfolded for his appearance. He stumped the panel, Dorothy Kilgallen, guest panelist Merv Griffin, Arlene Francis and Bennett Cerf.

Mount Everest

Mount Everest, also known as Mount Chomolungma or Sagarmatha, is the world's highest mountain above the mean sea level at 8,848 metres (29,029 ft). It is located in the Himalayas on the Nepal (Sagarmatha Zone)-China (Tibet) border. In 1856, the Great Trigonometric Survey of British India established the first published height of Everest, then known as Peak XV, at 29,002 ft (8,840 m). In 1865, Everest was given its official English name by the Royal Geographical Society upon recommendation of Andrew Waugh, the British Surveyor General of India at the time, who named it after his predecessor in the post, and former chief, Sir George Everest. Chomolungma had been in common use by Tibetans for centuries, but Waugh was unable to propose an established local name because Nepal and Tibet were closed to foreigners.

The highest mountain in the world attracts many well-experienced mountaineers as well as novice climbers who are willing to pay substantial sums to professional mountain guides to complete a successful climb. The mountain, while not posing substantial technical climbing difficulty on the standard route (other eight-thousanders such as K2 or Nanga Parbat are much more difficult), still has many inherent dangers such as altitude sickness, weather, and wind.

By the end of the 2008 climbing season, there had been 4,102 ascents to the summit by about 2,700 individuals. Climbers are a significant source of tourist revenue for Nepal, whose government also requires all prospective climbers to obtain an expensive permit, costing up to US$25,000 per person. By the end of 2009 Everest had claimed 216 lives, including eight who perished during a 1996 storm high on the mountain. Conditions are so difficult in the death zone (altitudes higher than 8,000 m/26,246 ft) that most corpses have been left where they fell. Some of them are visible from standard climbing routes.