

A Sikh atop Mt. Everest

MAJ. HPS AHLUWALIA*

** Courtesy: The Hindustan Times, New Delhi.*

THE WORLD, LAST MAY CELEBRATED the 50th anniversary of the climb of Mount Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. During this period, Indian climbers have also had great achievements.

India launched its first Everest expedition in 1960 under the leadership of Brig. Gyan Singh. The second Everest expedition was launched in 1962 under Major John Dias. Both expeditions failed due to adverse weather. India launched its 3rd Everest expedition under Capt. M.S. Kohli, in 1965. I was fortunately a member of this expedition. It was successful, and brought glory to India.

It was 5 am on May 29, 1965 when our climb to the summit began. At 28,000 ft, the last camp, Phu Dorji and I were tied on one rope and started climbing, with Rawat and Bahuguna following on the second rope. Carrying approximately 70 pounds on our backs made our going extremely difficult.

The wind was blowing at tremendous speed and there was not much foothold on Razor's Edge. Lashed and buffeted by the wind, I found it difficult to keep my balance.

We dug our ice axes in. The cold penetrated to the very marrow of our bones. The going became tough and there were moments when I felt like giving up the struggle. Pressed against the loose, black slate we moved across like tiny flies against all that immensity. Below us was straight fall into Tibet.

The nightmare of the black rocks finally ended and we entered the Yellow Band where the going was comparatively easier. But now another problem cropped up. I discovered that my oxygen pipe was leaking. One of the spikes of my crampon had evidently punctured it. Binding it with a handkerchief did no good. We tore a piece of adhesive tape off one of our film cartons and glued it over the puncture. It stopped the oxygen escaping.

Greatly relieved, we would now have continued the ascent but Phu Dorji spotted a long figure which was trudging towards us up the rocky part of the path we had left behind. I thought of the Abominable Snowman but Dorji was more realistic. When the figure came nearer we discovered it was Rawat. Waving and panting, he reached us where we sat under the base of the South Summit. Rawat joined us as the middle-man on our rope and we moved on. The rope was meant for two and it was against accepted theory to use it for three.

The winds shrieked and flayed us mercilessly. We dug our ice axes in and kept cutting steps but the higher we went the fiercer the wind blew. A raging thirst tormented me but rope-mates had their heads well down and were marching doggedly. I could not suggest a halt. I kept plodding on mechanically while Inner Voice urged: "You can't quit, you must keep going, you must succeed."

Slowly and cautiously we negotiated the big boulders of the South Summit. We did not go over the top but took a traverse to the left about 70 ft below till we came across a narrow gully in the snow which we named India's Den. This gully is on the main traverse from the South Col to 'Hillary's Chimney'. We were quite relieved to

see it as this was the only place sheltered from the high winds and had a small spot where we three could stand and sip some fruit juice.

The foremost thought now in my mind was whether we would be able to climb 'Hillary's Chimney' and come back to this place safely after achieving our goal. Or would it prove an insurmountable obstacle? Descending vertically for about 35 feet we came to some rocks and a narrow path that let us to the Chimney - an almost vertical obstacle between rock and snow cornice, which I had dreaded ever since I was selected for the expedition.

Negotiating the Chimney proved a most hazardous affair. Since I was at the rear of the rope and quite far from Phu Dorji when he made his final attempt, I could not see the exact holds he took. Rawat, not being able to push forward from the same place, had moved slowly over a big boulder and thus ascended to the top of the Chimney. I could hardly see him moving up but tried to follow him. Not realising that I had gone too far left, I stepped on the boulder. It started rocking. Below was a fall of 8,000 ft.

We eventually found ourselves perched on an ice platform. From here the slope slackened gradually and there was rock to the left and snow to the right. We followed the path between the two. The climbing was not steep now. There were only humps of rock and snow and often a mixture of both. Breathing became even more difficult. We would take a deep breath but it would shorten into a hiccup. Each step now was a totally exhausting effort. Time and again I wondered if our quest was worth this terrible ordeal. But each time I found myself taking yet another step.

The humps undulated endlessly. Sometimes there would be only rock, sometimes a snowy rock or a shoulder of snow. I kept asking myself how much longer and how much farther. Maybe it was far off, maybe we would have to turn back without reaching it. On every climb one is assailed by these doubts, and there comes a time when the mind and body focus on the sheer bliss of going downhill again. I was in such a state. Yet, another part in me urged me to go on. It couldn't be more than a few feet now - perhaps 50 or even less. But the slope went on and on. Was there no end? And then, suddenly there were no more little humps, only a white little dome curving slightly above us. It was the summit of Everest. Linking arms, we climbed the last few feet together.

From this point, there was a sheer drop. It was freezing. We took a long look from the highest point in the world. There were Makalu and Lhotse, Nuptse and Kanchenjunga looming on the horizon, and many other peaks - all far from below us. We gazed north towards the Tibetan plateau, and south towards the plains of India. the roof of the Thyangboche monastery glistened in the distance.

Of all the emotions which surged through me as I stood on the summit of Everest, looking over miles of panorama below us, the dominant one I think was humility. The physical in me seemed to say, "Thank God, it's all over." However, instead of being jubilant, there was a tinge of sadness. Was it because I had already done the "ultimate" in climbing and there would be nothing higher to climb and all roads hereafter would lead down?

