

VIII

When John Hunt stared into the South Col two days later, he had the strange feeling that he was heading into a trap. The Swiss climber Rene Dittert had memorably described it as having “the smell of death” and John Hunt could now see why. The wind was like nothing he had ever experienced before. In the middle of the icy plateau, there was a fresh pile of oxygen cylinders, fuel canisters and food supplies carried up by the Sherpas but Hunt’s eyes were immediately drawn to the tattered Swiss tents, their torn canvases flapping uncontrollably.

The journey up had reminded everyone just how dependant they were on their oxygen sets working properly. Charles Evans had experienced a very awkward moment on the second day when he had changed the soda-lime canister on his closed circuit set. Almost immediately ice had formed on the delicate valves that controlled the flow of oxygen leaving him desperately breathless and unable to move. Fortunately Tom Bourdillon had been close by and had quickly found and resolved the problem but it was a nasty scare. On the following day, it was John Hunt’s turn to suffer an oxygen crisis. As he was climbing up a difficult ice slope he suddenly felt totally spent, and unable to continue.

Hunt was out in front on his own and it took a lot of effort to get him into a safe position. When Tom Bourdillon examined Hunt’s open circuit set, he found that a vital tube had developed a kink, and cut off the supply of oxygen. It was no wonder that John Hunt felt terrible – all morning he had been shouldering a 50 lb load while wearing a mask, which only served to reduce the amount of ambient air and delivered no artificial oxygen whatsoever.

Now at 4.00p.m. they wearily descended on to the South Col, knowing that there was only a few hours to pitch their tents before the sun went down and it became punishingly cold. The wind made it virtually impossible, tearing the canvas out of their hands and resisting all their efforts to attach guy ropes. John Hunt’s oxygen ran out almost immediately and Charles took off his set, thinking that it would make it easier to get things done. It was a fatal mistake as John Hunt later wrote in his diary:

This was a fantastic struggle with each of us falling about with lack of oxygen and unable to work for more than a few moments at a time. And all the time that fiendish wind –deadly cold- was tearing the tent

over our hands and blowing away anything we chanced to lay down on this desert stony waste.

At one stage John Hunt fell over and simply lay face down in the snow, unable to move for several minutes. When Tom Bourdillon's oxygen ran out, he too collapsed from oxygen starvation. It was like the decompression chamber at Farnborough where they had trained five months earlier but this time there was no gentle doctor from the RAF to chivvy them awake with fresh oxygen, just the relentless wind and a voice in the back of their heads telling them that if they didn't get up soon they might never do so.

Finally Tom Bourdillon managed to attach a climbing rope to the top of the tent and the other end to a large boulder. Their two Sherpas stumbled down onto the South Col and the heaviest one, Ang Tensing nicknamed 'Balu', fortuitously collapsed inside the half-erect tent and acted as impromptu ballast. It took them a full hour to erect the pyramid tent and further 30 minutes to put up a smaller tent next to it. Then they turned on their stoves, melted some ice and started drinking. Soup, lemon juice, tea, coffee – anything to warm them up and relieve their terrible thirst. It was obvious that there was no way they could make their attempt on the following day as per the schedule, so they decided to wait for a day even if it meant using up another day's food and supplies.

On the following morning the weather was tantalisingly good, with barely a breath of wind and clear blue skies. There was a lot to do but none of it could be done quickly. Tom Bourdillon later told Mike Ward that it took them roughly three times as long to perform a task on the South Col as it did at lower altitude. Charles Evans kept the stove going for virtually the whole day while Tom repaired and prepared their oxygen sets.

John Hunt was happy to potter around, tidying up the camp and unpacking some special photographic plates given to him by a scientist in Zurich to measure cosmic rays. He was amazed to be able to walk from one end of the South Col to the other in his down socks with a couple of woollen pairs underneath. At one point he stood on the edge waving down in the faint hope that someone might be looking up. No one reciprocated. When he found a Swiss tin of tuna fish, he hid himself away in the small 'blister' tent they had put up that morning and scoffed the lot. High altitude was not good for even the morals of a selfless leader.

That evening, however, John Hunt couldn't help but give a short but stirring speech to Charles and Tom about the great day ahead. They took it in good grace. From the next day onwards John Hunt would stop working with Bourdillon and Evans and become entirely focussed on the second

summit team. Along with Ang Nyima and Balu he would attempt to carry up the first few loads to Hillary and Tenzing's final camp. If everything went perfectly of course, there might not even have to be a second attempt.

If everything went perfectly.

Dawn was bitterly cold on 26th May. The wind had returned with a vengeance. Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans woke up at 5.00 a.m. when the first rays of sun hit the edge of their tent. Tom had slept in his clothes in order to get going quickly, and both men had shared their sleeping bags with their oxygen cylinders and soda lime canisters, to prevent them from freezing. During the night, the temperature had plunged to -20° Centigrade causing Charles Evans to lose all feeling his toes. For once he was glad to put on his huge high altitude boots, with their soft leather outer layer, which made his feet look positively elephantine. Though they both longed for a hot drink, neither even attempted to light their Primus stove. Instead they made do with a couple of flasks of lukewarm lemon juice, brewed the previous night.

Boots, gloves, a handful of boiled sweets, crampons, a few more glugs of lemon, snow goggles, camera...by 6.00 a.m., they were finally ready. Charles poked his head out of the tent into the biting wind and Tom passed him his oxygen set but as soon as he put it on, it froze up. He crawled back in and Tom lit a candle to begin the careful work of thawing out the valves that controlled the flow of oxygen. It was not an auspicious start, but neither man was surprised or too worried, yet. Throughout the expedition, there had been minor problems like this and Tom had always managed to sort things out. Within a few minutes, Charles was back on the Col, lifting the heavy frame onto his back and preparing to move off.

As soon as inhaled, Charles Evans felt an indescribably awful, choking sensation. He ripped off his mask and gasped hoarsely, but in the thin air of the South Col, it took minutes to get his breath back. Finally he croaked to Tom that it had felt as if he were about to die. 'I expect you were,' Tom replied coolly. He wasn't going to let a technical problem dent his enthusiasm, even if this was their second false start of the day. Charles though was clearly rattled. He took his set off again and the two men huddled around it to discover the problem. This time, rather than going back into their tent, they stayed outside and braved the wind. John Hunt came over from his tent to mutter a few words of encouragement, but he didn't stay long. He had problems enough of his own.

That morning, he was due to follow Tom and Charles up the South East Ridge, with 90 lbs of tents, supplies and equipment but one of his

Sherpas Balu was refusing to start. Lower down, Balu had been happy to throw his weight around, but ever since as he had arrived on the South Col, he had been a nervous wreck. Instead of playing his part this morning, Balu would stay in his sleeping bag and keep the stove running, forcing Hunt and Da Nymgal, to carry even heavier loads.

The minutes ticked by.

Tom Bourdillon and Charles Evans had wanted to leave at 6.00 a.m., but it was now an hour later and they still had not discovered the fault. Charles went over to John Hunt, but though sympathetic, his leader was unmoved. Today he was in battle mode: if the first assault was turning out to be a damp squib, his priority, as expedition leader, was to prepare for the second. Just after 7.00 a.m., Hunt and Da Nymgal, pushed off with an oxygen set and 45 lbs of gear each. They didn't look back.

Shortly afterwards, Tom Bourdillon discovered what the problem was. In his final report, months after the expedition, he wrote that someone had inadvertently damaged the oxygen set's main supply valve, in a 'mistaken, but well-meant attempt' to improve its efficiency. That 'someone' was his partner Charles Evans, but at 7.15 a.m. on the morning of their summit attempt, he did not want to hold a full inquest. With blood covering his frozen fingers, Tom replaced the valve, and a few minutes later they were on their way.

In front of them lay the South East Ridge, 3,000 ft of uncertain snow and steep rock. Tom and Charles' earlier excitement had gone but to their surprise, they began moving rather well. Ahead of them, they could see Hunt and Da Nymgal, making their way up a narrow gully, at the foot of the ridge. Before long, they had overtaken them. Up they went with a steady rhythm, ignoring the wind and the snow flurries that eddied around them. They kicked and chopped steps into the hard snow, until the slope grew too steep. Then they moved on to the rocks. Like all good climbers, Tom and Charles enjoyed both the intellectual challenge of finding the best route, and the physical challenge of overcoming difficult terrain. Charles had marginally more Himalayan experience than his younger partner, but Tom was very self-assured and, as everyone said, amazingly agile for a man of his size.

Then suddenly, as they came up over a crest in the rocks, they were greeted with an eerie sight. On a small platform hacked into the ice, there were the skeletal remains of yet another tent: a few wispy poles topped with torn strips of cloth, which thrummed in the wind like ancient prayer flags. It was here that a year earlier, Tenzing and Raymond Lambert had

spent an awful night without sleeping bags or anything to eat or drink. Tom and Charles paused briefly to look down; like everyone who followed they were amazed to see how steep the Lhotse Face looked and how precarious their camps seemed. They didn't stay for long.

Tom and Charles' confidence was returning. At the very least, they would reach the South Summit, the prominent peak in the ridge, just 300 ft below the true summit. As they made their way upwards weaving between the rocks, they were constantly trying to calculate how much oxygen they had left and how much further it would get them. Yes, they had started late but now they were moving at a phenomenal pace, making 1 000 ft an hour. Keep it up and the summit would soon be within their grasp.

The slopes, however, were becoming much steeper and the rock increasingly uneven so they had to use their hands most of the time. Their short-pointed crampons did not grip well into the patches of hard polished ice, and the thick covering of powder snow elsewhere made the going even slower. At about 11.00 a.m., they found a sheltered spot, a snowy hollow roughly half way between the Swiss tent and the South Summit. Charles stopped and made the very sensible, but fateful, suggestion that they should change their oxygen cylinders and soda-lime canisters.

He knew that this would be a tricky operation but after all the problems that morning and his experience on the Lhotse Face two days earlier, Charles Evans didn't want to risk running out of oxygen and having to make the change in the middle of a dangerous slope. Tom was not so sure though: their canisters were not empty yet and to replace them now meant throwing away precious oxygen and soda-lime, a decision that might come back to haunt them. Charles Evans was adamant; after the change, they would still have five hours of oxygen left and by his calculation, if they kept going at this rate, they would reach the summit in an hour and have enough to get back safely. In spite of his misgivings, Tom agreed to go ahead; there had been enough delays this morning, and his overriding priority was to keep their momentum going.

They took off their masks and unscrewed their oxygen bottles before removing the soda-lime canisters. Then they dug into their rucksacks and took out the spares. These were tense moments but ultimately the switchover went smoothly and they carried on up, 20 lbs the lighter. Tom was back on track with every rock pitch leading him closer to his goal. Charles, however, soon regretted making the change.

At first he did not mention it, but after ten minutes, he could not deny that he felt light headed and breathless; it was not the sudden choking

sensation that he had experienced earlier that morning, but rather the strange feeling that no matter how deeply he inhaled, he was not getting enough oxygen. The sensation intensified until eventually he could not go on. Once again, Tom stopped to become a repairman.

Valves: fine. Tubes: fine. Oxygen cylinder: full. Re-breathing bag: soft and malleable. He could not find anything wrong, so he started again. Valves, tubes, oxygen, mask....There was only one thing left: the new soda-lime canister. Tom and Charles had taken so much care, but now, for the first time on the expedition, they had mounted a defective canister. It was a bitter blow: the oxygen cylinder was fine, but carbon dioxide was accumulating in the re-breathing bag whenever Charles exhaled. Worst of all, there was nothing that Tom could do about it.

Incredibly, Charles Evans kept going, though he could not keep up with Tom's pace. The two men grew further and further apart, until sometimes there was a whole rope length between them. Tom was in a desperate hurry; he knew that after changing so early, the rest of the day had become be a race against time. It was a dangerous game though: if Tom slipped, Charles would not be able to hold on to him.

To add to their problems, the route was becoming increasingly uneven and the conditions much worse: sometimes they had to wade through thick snow, sometimes they had to scale slippery slabs of rock. In spite of the difficulties, they didn't think of turning back or even pausing. Instead, they pressed on, oblivious to their audience below.

'There!' George Lowe was pointing vigorously. 'They are going to make it!'

2,500 ft below, Lowe and the other members of the second assault team had paused on their way up to the South Col and were now staring intently at two tiny dots, which were moving slowly but steadily up the South East Ridge toward the South Summit. George had spotted them first and then shouted to the others, giving Ed Hillary what he later called 'the greatest thrill' of his life. Alfred Gregory, the second member of Hillary and Tenzing's support team, was equally excited. He had first met Tom and Charles on the previous year's expedition to Cho Oyu, and he felt immensely proud at the idea of two British climbers reaching the summit.

Tenzing remained silent; he wanted Tom and Charles to succeed but he too wanted a crack at Everest. Having ignored his family's pleas and signed up for the British expedition would he ever reach the summit now? Then, lower down the South East Ridge, Tenzing glimpsed another two tiny

figures, moving more hesitantly. It was John Hunt and Da Nymgal, carrying supplies up to *his* final camp. Perhaps the second assault would go ahead after all, he thought, even if Tom and Charles reached the top. Perhaps he and Hillary would still get their chance.

John Hunt and Da Nymgal were totally unaware of all the excitement; they had been passed by Tom and Charles an hour earlier and had no means of communicating with them. Even when he glimpsed them through the mist, he did not feel any elation. In his diary, John Hunt later wrote that the climb up the South East Ridge was the hardest thing that he had ever done. It was such a physical strain that he wet himself.

Gasping and moaning for breath was an experienced I'll never, never forget: a real fight for life. Bodily self-control vanished as I struggled to get back into my lungs that vital element of oxygen. Never have I been put to such physical strain.

At around 10.30 a.m., shortly before Tom and Charles changed their oxygen and soda lime canisters, Hunt and Da Nymgal reached the remains of the Swiss Tent. They were in such bad shape that they had to rest for a full half hour. Then they continued for another 100 ft, until Da Nymgal could go no further. Hunt spotted a ledge 50 ft higher up and cajoled his weary Sherpa into one final effort. In fact it was barely wide enough for the two men to stand on, never mind pitch a tent, but they dumped their stuff and built a flimsy cairn to identify the spot.

Hunt and Da Namgyal's descent was just as difficult. They crawled down the gully to the foot of the ridge, a few yards at a time, stopping constantly to belay each other. When they reached the 'easy ground' of the South Col things only became worse. John Hunt felt his strength disappearing like water. He would take a few steps, collapse, get up, stumble on for a few more feet, sink to his knees, and then repeat the whole process. Da Nymgal was in no better shape.

Then, suddenly, Hunt looked up and was astonished to see Hillary and Tenzing coming to wards him.

It was no hallucination. They had only just arrived on the South Col, but on seeing Hunt staggering down the South East Ridge, Hillary and Tenzing had rushed out to help them. Instinctively, Ed Hillary put John Hunt's arm over his shoulder and his own arm around his waist, but even with the big New Zealander to help him, John Hunt was too weak to walk. Ed plied him with lemon juice from Tenzing's flask but it was no good; Hunt collapsed again, in tears. It was shocking to see the expedition leader in

such a state. Sensing that there must be something seriously wrong with his oxygen equipment. Ed returned to camp to find a replacement for John Hunt's set. Hurrying wasn't easy at 26,000 ft and it was some minutes before Hillary returned; he strapped a new oxygen set on Hunt and adjusted the valve to peak flow.

Fortunately, the medicine had some effect, and ten minutes later, Hunt and Da Namgyal tottered into the tents. Hillary took off Hunt's oxygen mask, but he left the cylinder open flooding the tent with oxygen. Tenzing brought in a hot drink and listened as Hunt hoarsely recounted the story of their morning on the South East Ridge. Then, after a commotion outside, George Lowe poked his head through the tent flaps.

'They're up! Tom and Charles have made it!' he exclaimed.

Barely a few minutes earlier, while George Lowe and Alfred Gregory were making a final traverse onto the South Col, the clouds had parted to reveal two tiny figures climbing steadily up and over the South Summit. Gregory and Lowe were so excited, that in spite of the altitude, they had run all the way down to camp 8.

Inside the tent Hunt was instantly revived by the news. Gregory, came in positively "jubilant", as Hunt underlined a letter to his wife Joy, and the Sherpas soon caught the mood. Ang Nyima, who had come up with Hillary and Tenzing, turned to Hunt and exclaimed in slang Hindi, "Everest has had it!" Apart from Tenzing, most of the Sherpas had found getting up to the South Col very hard; even the so called 'Tigers', hand-picked men who had been kept back for the final stage, had struggled with the altitude. Now they were celebrating what they thought was the end of the expedition; they didn't realise that Tom and Charles had only reached the South Summit, and that there was another 300 ft to go. Hillary went outside to take a closer look, but as swiftly and decisively as they had parted, the clouds closed in, obscuring the South Summit and the two men who had just reached it.

Blue skies above and rolling banks of cloud below. A thin layer of snow covering everything, crunchy underfoot. Higher up, the wind whipping the enormous cornices on the ridge, sending a plume of snow soaring into the air. No sound except the relentless roar of the wind, and the gentle hiss of their oxygen sets.

Tom and Charles gazed around in exhausted awe. For a moment they forgot about all the hard work of getting to the South Summit, and simply revelled in the wild beauty in front of them. They were the highest men in

the world: 2,200 ft higher than Herzog at the summit of Annapurna in 1950, 500 ft higher than Tenzing and Lambert in 1952.

For a few minutes they rested and simply took in the view. Then Charles removed his oxygen mask to suck some boiled sweets and Tom brought out his camera. He took a photograph of Charles, sitting on the snow looking into the distance, and then asked him to pose for a more formal shot, kneeling on one knee, with his arm resting on the other. In front of him, his ice axe was plunged into the snow, with his rope coiled around it for safety. Charles had taken off his mitten, revealing a watch, poking out from under his glove. It was 1.20 p.m.

In front of them lay the final 300 ft ridge to the true summit. For Tom, it was a beautiful, exhilarating sight, "a wilder and more fantastic ridge than either of us had seen before in the Himalayas or the Alps". Charles took a photograph of Tom, staring upwards, his back to the camera. Could they go on or should they head back? Stick or twist? They probably had about 6 more hours of day light, just enough maybe to get the summit and back, but did they have the oxygen, and equally importantly the will power?

Tom and Charles were not the only men considering what they should do next.

Down on the South Col, the initial excitement of seeing them so high, had given way to more sober reflection. Should Tom and Charles carry on? A few days earlier, the two assault teams had discussed this very situation. When Hillary asked Tom and Charles what they would do if they reached the South Summit late in the day, Tom had assured him that they were 'both sensible chaps with a desire to go on living' but Ed had not been entirely convinced.

He trusted Charles Evans absolutely but though he rated Tom Bourdillon highly as a climber, he worried that his fierce determination might override his better judgement. Ed hoped that the first assault would succeed but more importantly, they had to return safely, for their own sake and for the sake of the expedition. No one wanted a repeat of Mallory and Irvine's disappearance in 1924, no-one, and above all Hillary and Tenzing, wanted the second assault to turn into a rescue mission.

Ed Hillary's assessment of Tom and Charles was not far off the mark. Though the two men had been partnered for much of the expedition, they were really quite different. Tom was a brilliant rock climber who had made

his name in the Alps, climbing the kind of difficult routes the previous generation of British climbers had avoided.

Charles was five years older and bitter experience had taught him to be cautious in the mountains. Just a few years previously, he had survived a tragic accident on Mont Blanc, which had killed his friend Richard Hull. Like Eric Shipton, his great joy came in exploring blanks on the map and new uncharted regions, not bagging peaks or scaling impossible cliffs. He was also a natural leader, and though Hunt never stated it publicly, it was clear that he had deliberately partnered him with Tom Bourdillon, so that the two men might balance each other out. Tom would push Charles to his limit, but Charles, he hoped, would always be strong enough to know when to say no.

Now as Charles Evans looked at the ridge in front of them he calculated that it would take them three hours to reach to the top. If they succeeded, they would run out of oxygen on the summit itself and would then have to make the whole return journey without gas. Tom and Charles didn't have the luxury of Hillary and Tenzing's extra camp, so they would have to get all the way down to South Col, by the end of the day. To Charles, this was clearly impossible.

Tom disagreed; they had come this far, how could they not go on? He regretted following Charles' suggestion, to change their oxygen and soda lime canisters so early in the day; it had meant throwing away at least an hour of vital oxygen and had considerably reduced their margin of error. But they still had a slender chance to seize the greatest prize in mountaineering, and what climber would turn back now?

In fact, from the very first thing that morning, the two men had behaved very differently. At 7.00 a.m. on the South Col, Tom had taken his gloves off and risked frost-bite to repair Charles' oxygen set, but even as he desperately tried to fix it, Charles had walked over to John Hunt and offered to abandon their attempt and help him carry equipment up to Hillary and Tenzing's camp. Hunt had declined, not because he so wanted the first assault to succeed, but because he didn't want Charles to accompany him, without a fully-functioning oxygen set.

The truth was that Charles had never been entirely convinced by the closed circuit system and nothing that morning had given Charles any more grounds for confidence. All oxygen sets were unpredictable but the closed-circuit variety seemed to be particularly capricious, and simply too fragile to use on this kind of expedition. When Charles later wrote about them it was always with distrust; he described them as 'heavy and vulnerable' and

'covered in sharp edges' which invariably snagged on everything in their path. The bulky design and, in particular, the tight mask was utterly alien to a climber like Charles Evans, who loved the companionship of mountaineering and the sense of communion with the environment.

Charles' underlying philosophy of mountaineering was also very different. He did not believe that getting to the summit was the be all and end all of mountaineering. In a revealing letter to a friend and fellow doctor, Anne McCandless, sent in February 1953 just before he left for Everest, he had written:

As to success – putting someone on the top – I don't think it is so important – though it would not do to broadcast that opinion.

It would be possible, wouldn't it, for a man to stand on top and yet to have failed.

Tom Bourdillon was no obsessive peak bagger but he would certainly have disagreed about oxygen. He was a rock climber and he too loved to be as free as possible, but oxygen sets were a means to an end, and in this case, the end made all the problems worthwhile. As for the peculiarities of the closed-circuit system, of course he felt utterly different. After all, he had developed and hand built the sets with his father.

For months, the two Bourdillons had worked away in laboratories trying to perfect their system. Even after Tom had left for Everest, his father, Robert, a research scientist at Stoke Mandeville hospital, had continued to work on the design and send over reports about the tests that he was undertaking. The simple fact was that whereas Charles had experienced constant problems, Tom's own set had worked more or less perfectly. If they got to the summit today, it would be a vindication of all the work that he had put in. Tom would be crowned as both a brilliant climber and a groundbreaking engineer.

So what should he do about Charles Evans? Tom accepted that his partner was not in a fit state to continue but could he go on alone? Ironically it was the same question that Tenzing had fielded in Kathmandu, when he had been cornered by Ralph Izzard of *The Daily Mail* all those weeks ago. Tenzing had refused to speculate, but for Tom Bourdillon, there was nothing hypothetical about the current situation and there were precedents on Everest.

In 1924, Edward Norton had left his sick partner Howard Somervell, high up on the Northern slopes and carried on alone for another hour, until exhaustion and double-vision had persuaded him to turn back. Nine years

later in 1933 Frank Smythe, had left the young Eric Shipton, prostrate on the rocks below the famous First Step, to make another attempt on Everest from the North. Frank Smythe wrote that at the time, it did not strike him as 'strange' to be making a solitary attempt. "There was nothing brave or bold about it," he had said. "We had come to Everest to climb it, and, if possible, it had to be climbed." Frank Smythe had continued for another thousand feet before turning back; meanwhile Eric Shipton, had made his own way back to camp.

There were two major differences though between Tom's current dilemma and that of his predecessors. First of all he and Charles Evans were already far higher than any of the pre-war teams, and crucially, they were using oxygen. Smythe and Norton had both eschewed what their detractors called 'artificial aids' but the 1953 team had committed themselves to a very different path. If Tom abandoned Charles to his fate, not only would his partner have to descend 2,700 ft of difficult ground without any one to belay him, but, if the problems continued with his set, Charles would have to conduct the running repairs that Tom had carried out so far this morning.

Charles Evans wasn't just worried about himself, though; he was thinking about Tom and the expedition as a whole. If Tom wanted to continue by himself, Charles believed that his partner just wasn't thinking straight. He remembered John Hunt's instructions: *only go on if you are sure that it is safe and have enough time and enough oxygen. Otherwise come back down and brief Hillary and Tenzing on what you have seen and what lies ahead.* As John Hunt consistently maintained, this expedition was a team effort, not a chance for individual glory.

Charles was proud of what they had achieved in reaching South Summit; after all they had already established a new world altitude record. But now, their priority had to be getting down safely, and it was his job to persuade Tom to face facts. So Charles spoke up, with dramatic effect.

'If you carry on going, you will never see Jennifer again.'

Jennifer, dark-haired beautiful Jennifer; the young wife that Tom was so in love with. He thought about her every day and felt very guilty about being away. On the top line of the diary, that he had maintained assiduously for the last two months, he was counting down the days to their next meeting.

10th March 1953, Bhadgaon-Banepa, 147:

'It is 147 days to go now, and then I shall be able to hold you again.'

18th March 1953, Those-Chyangma, 139:

'I was not very nice last year. I feel so sad and so guilty and there is nothing I can do now. Please remember that I love you and love you and that you are all that matters to me and that I don't mean to behave like that.'

9th April, 1953 117:

" I WILL NEVER COME OUT AGAIN WITHOUT YOU".

And now:

26th March 1953, 1.20 p.m., the South Summit of Everest, 66 days left:

'If you carry on going, you will never see Jennifer again.'

It wasn't just a question of how he treated his climbing, partner, or his own willingness to face danger, Charles Evan's stark warning reminded Tom of the one thing in his life that was more important to him than mountaineering. But Tom was a scientist by training, a rationalist, and he knew that this was essentially a question of litres and flow-rates, not sentiment. So he went back to his calculations. Did he really have enough oxygen to get back? He had often talked about the risks of mountaineering with his wife Jennifer. They both accepted that danger was part of sport, but there was a big difference between taking a calculated risk and being reckless. Even if he had enough oxygen to get to the top, could he get back safely? It was all about the numbers, but 28,700 ft was not an easy place to be doing complicated mathematical computations.

Tom walked along the ridge to take a last glance upwards, and then at 1.30 p.m., Tom Bourdillon turned his back on Everest. The first assault was over, but as Tom wrote a few days later, the 'nightmare' was only beginning.

Charles Evans' oxygen set was still malfunctioning, so Tom attempted to bypass the soda-lime canister and convert it into an open circuit set. It was a good idea, but it did not work. So Charles had to carry on breathing a noxious mixture of carbon dioxide and oxygen. On the steep rocks below, he slipped several times. Tom did his best to hold onto him until soon he too started to tire. When they finally reached the site where two hours earlier they had changed oxygen cylinders, they stopped for more sweets and glucose tablets. It never occurred to them, to try changing back to the soda lime canister that Charles had discarded.

After a few minutes, they set off again with Charles Evans in the lead and Tom Bourdillon as anchor-man but then, without warning, Tom lost his

footing and slid straight into Charles's back. The two men hurtled down the mountain uncontrollably. Charles desperately tried to arrest their fall by plunging his ice-axe into the snow, but it was no use. In their exhausted state, there was nothing they could do but carry on tumbling, until at last the slope eased off. They lay on the snow, panting for several minutes. Charles later wrote ruefully, that whenever one of them caused an accident, he would apologise 'punctiliously' to the other; even on Everest, manners were manners. Then Tom, hauled himself up wearily, and climbed thirty feet back up the slope, to the ledge where his ice-axe had fallen.

At the Swiss camp-site, they made a 'solemn pact' to take the dangerous final snow gully, very carefully. Rope length by rope length, they eased themselves down, taking turns to lead, and driving their axe handles deep into the snow to belay each other. Then suddenly, when Tom was leading, they had their second major slip. Charles fell and within a few seconds was sliding past his partner on the hard packed snow. He waited for the clinch of the rope that would indicate that Tom had held him, but all he felt was a slight tug around his waist. Tom Bourdillon had come off too! Below them lay the South Col, to their left was the Lhotse face and a sheer drop of 8,000 ft.

At Camp 8, George Lowe had watched the events unfold with utter amazement. The clouds were playing their usual tricks. First he saw Tom and Charles at the top of the gully and breathed a huge sigh of relief; then the mist rolled in, totally obscuring them. When it cleared, ten minutes later, the two men were at the bottom. At first George couldn't quite believe it: how on earth could they have got there so quickly? In fact, as Tom and Charles both well knew, they were very lucky to have survived the descent. They later joked that they had 'yo-yoed' their way down the slope, a technique most definitely not included in reputable climbing manuals.

By now, as they stumbled across the South Col, Tom and Charles had an audience. Alfred Gregory took out his Koodak Retina and George Lowe cranked up his movie camera; first a wide shot of two tiny figures, and then a closer shot of utterly weary men. It was just after 3.30 p.m., Bourdillon and Evans were safely back. Could they have possibly made it to the top? It was unlikely, but no one knew for certain. Should they be celebrating or commiserating?

George Lowe and Ed Hillary went out to meet them. The returning men looked like 'creatures from another planet', according to Ed. Their down jackets and cotton wind suits, were puffed up with air and they were covered from head to toe with tiny icicles. Charles was in the lead, Tom close behind him, the two men walking very slowly. Ed Hillary was

suddenly overcome with emotion; he threw his arms around them and 'muttered some familiar abuse'. Eventually they reached a large rock and slumped down; Tom and Charles were just a few yards from the tents, but they were so tired that they could not go on. Alf Gregory continued to photograph them and George Lowe took a few more shots, before abandoning his camera to greet the men in unprintable slang. 'We should have gone on, we should have gone on,' Tom kept on muttering. Tenzing came out with some hot drinks; Charles and Tom kept on looking back up.

More juice, more questions, more photographs, more weary steps, until they were back in the main tent, peeling off their outer clothing and telling the story of their day. As Hillary admitted later, he and Tenzing were quietly relieved: there would neither be a rescue mission, nor a wake. They had not been beaten to the top, tomorrow they would have their day. A few hours later, with what he called a "regrettable feeling of satisfaction", Hillary and Tenzing retired to their tent. SAME TENT??

For Tom and Charles, the ordeal continued. They crammed into the small Meade tent with John Hunt, in order to give the second assault team as much space as possible. It was barely big enough for two men, never mind three. The wind that night was remorseless, pummeling the canvas and making it impossible to rest. Nearby, Hilary and Tenzing were sleeping on oxygen, but Tom and Charles had no such luxury. They'd had their day, now it was time to take second place.

Charles was relieved to be have made it back alive and cheered by the warm welcome of the others but Tom spent the night, churning over the events of the day. If only he had prepared the oxygen sets better, if only he had ignored Charles' suggestion to change cylinders, if only he'd had the strength of mind to go on alone. A sleepless night on the South Col was the last thing he needed.

On the following morning, the wind was so ferocious that Hunt was forced to postpone Hillary and Tenzing's move up to their high camp. It left him with a big problem though: Tom and Charles. They just had to go down; up here on the South Col they were a drain on the others, using up precious food and fuel. Tom, however, was not sure if he was fit to move; he was exhausted by yesterday's exertions and, perhaps more importantly, emotionally shattered.

When Hillary struggled over to their tent, he found Tom in what he later described as a "a vague state of mental depression from which he would emerge every now and then with a new set of figures and times to prove that he could have done it." Hillary quizzed them again about the

final stretch of the South East Ridge, but neither had any good news. When Hillary was out of earshot, Charles told George Lowe that in fact it looked impossible.

By noon, the wind had abated so Tom and Charles prepared to descend. Their first problem though was getting off the South Col itself. In order to get back onto the Lhotse Face, a climber first had to climb *up the* 300 ft slope to tip of the Geneva spur before beginning their descent proper. Normally, this was not a problem; the Sherpas in particular, were usually so glad to be leaving the South Col that they would scurry up, as if it was flat. For Tom Bourdillon that morning, it was a slope too far. He roped up to Charles and Ang Temba, another of the Sherpas who had fallen ill, and slowly moved off. In order not to use up any more oxygen, they had decided to climb down under their own steam. They had only been going for a few minutes, when Tom lurched forward and collapsed, face flat in the snow. For a few moments he didn't move.

Then he picked himself up and staggered forward, before collapsing again.

Ed Hillary was getting more and more worried. As he hurried over to them, he had visions of a full-scale mountain rescue. Could they possibly carry Tom Bourdillon down the Lhotse Face? Ed and Charles Evans left him with Ang Temba, and then headed back to camp. John Hunt was in the pyramid tent with George Lowe when they burst in. They told him that Tom was in a critical state, 'possibly dying'. Charles Evans assembled an oxygen-set and hurried off, leaving the others to work out what to do next.

Even if the oxygen revived him, it was clear that Tom would not be able to get down without someone to support him. But who would it be? They could not rely on any of the Sherpas apart from Tenzing, and he obviously could not be spared. It had to be Alfred Gregory or George Lowe. Both men though were clearly excited to be on the South Col, and they were both needed to help Hillary and Tenzing set up their final camp on the following day. Alfred Gregory was outside or in one of the other tents – as Hillary noted wryly, 'Greg' had the happy knack of always being absent when difficult decisions were being made- so John Hunt chose George Lowe. But instead of meekly following orders, George Lowe had the temerity to say no.

He pointed out that Hunt was visibly exhausted and would not be able to play a role in establishing Hillary and Tenzing's top camp. Better to have a fit climber like himself, who had been on the South Col for one day, than a weakened leader who had shot his bolt.

John Hunt stood firm and George Lowe reluctantly began packing his gear. In spite of all his own doubts about his fitness and age, Hunt was as passionate as anyone else about climbing Everest. As far as he was concerned, he had sacrificed his own ambition to be on one of the summit attempts, for the good of the team. The second assault was about to begin, there was work to be done and there were decisions to be made, and, at the very least, he wanted was to be up here on the South Col at the heart of the action. What happened next was a small, but crucial moment in the expedition, which showed just how good a leader John Hunt was.

In the official expedition book, *The Ascent of Everest*, he made light of it:

My post was here on the Col, to see the big assault safely launched, and decide, if need be, on a further postponement or, possibly a withdrawal. Yet I was supporting the first assault, and by sending either Greg or George would only weaken the second assault's chances. I decided I must go.

But in a letter to his wife, Joy, written a week later, he was more honest about the emotions involved:

I turned to Greg and George, it must be one of them. Then in their chagrin, I saw my mistake. I was finished, they were fresh.....I must go down but it was a bitter decision to take.

A full twenty five years later in his autobiography, *Life is Meeting*, John Hunt admitted that this was in fact the 'worst moment' of the whole expedition for him. He so wanted to stay, but he realised that he just had to go down. To Ed Hillary though, this was John Hunt at his finest, showing real leadership and a real commitment to the good of the expedition, whatever his personal ambitions. Ed Hillary was humbled:

Never at any other moment did I admire John Hunt more.

As he began to assemble his gear, John Hunt had a final word with Ed. He told him to put safety above everything but to try his damndest to get to the top; thousands of people around the world, he said, were backing this expedition and had put their hopes in a British success. John Hunt was a very spiritual man and at this point in his life, a committed Christian. He later wrote that on Everest he felt "as though guided along a pre-destined track, a curious sensation of confidence answering to Faith". All of a sudden, he remembered something: deep in his rucksack, there was a small crucifix that a Benedictine monk had given him a week before he left Britain, with a request that he should plant it on the summit. Hunt pressed

it into Ed Hillary's hand before wearily plodding out of the tent to join Charles and Tom.

Hillary followed, offering to carry Hunt's pack. It was not an encouraging sight: John Hunt was weaving drunkenly from one side to the other, unaware of his own enfeebled state. As soon as he joined the others, he tried to take charge, announcing that he would go to the back to shepherd them down. Tom was still in a bad way; in spite of being given oxygen, he had collapsed for a third time and still had not recovered. Charles Evans, by contrast, seemed to have magically recovered. It was further proof of the psychological dimension of expedition climbing. Arguably the previous day had been physically harder for Charles because of all the problems with his oxygen set, but he had not made the same emotional investment in the success of their assault, so he had not been so devastated when they failed. Charles gently but firmly steered Hunt into the middle position on the rope with Tom in front and Ang Temba behind. Then with a final wave, the four men were off.

As they watched them stagger up the slope, Hillary and Lowe felt terrible: how could they have let these weak men leave by themselves? If anything went wrong, Hillary warned Lowe that it would be his fault, but Ed too spent the rest of the day feeling guilty and anxious.

Fortunately for their conscience, the first assault team managed to climb down the Lhotse Face, with no major mishap other than a dropped glove. Then just above Camp 7, as they were crossing a snow bridge that spanned a huge crevasse, there was one more final moment of drama when Ang Temba slipped and fell in, head first. The nearest man, Charles Evans held on tight but he just wasn't strong enough to pull Ang Temba out. John Hunt was so weak that all he could do was stand and watch.

Finally, to everyone's great relief, they saw Wilfred Noyce coming up toward them. He and Dr. Mike Ward were at Camp 7, fortuitously conducting breathing experiments. Wilfred was able to remove Ang Temba's pack and haul the poor Sherpa out.

Smiles, kind words, cups of tea, questions, more questions, and overwhelming weariness. After an hour Charles Evans pressed on, down to Advance Base Camp with Mike Ward, but Tom Bourdillon and John Hunt were just too tired. They followed a day later.

The first attempt had failed but though Tom and Charles had not reached the summit, they had made an amazing effort and lived to tell the tale. They had ascended 2,700 ft in one day, and managed to get back

safely. The descriptions they were able to give of their route up the South East Ridge were not all that helpful, but the two bottles of oxygen that they had discarded on the way up most definitely were.

In the days and weeks to come, Tom would continue to regret everything that had gone wrong but most of his thoughts were on getting back home to Jennifer. Charles recovered quickly and was already looking forward to another five more glorious months in the Himalayas, unencumbered by all the expectations and all the paraphernalia of a 'national' expedition.

The first assault on Everest was over, the second assault was about to begin.

Edmund Hillary had not been frightened by Charles Evans' descriptions of the South East Ridge or his comments to George Lowe about the feasibility of climbing it, but seeing Tom Bourdillon prostrate on the snow had given him a powerful warning about the dangers of high altitude. He took out his tool kit and spent hours checking and re-checking the two oxygen sets that he and Tenzing would be using, making sure that they worked perfectly.

If the weather held, they would climb up to their high camp on tomorrow and then make their attempt on the following day. Two years ago in 1951, he had climbed Pumori with Eric Shipton to get his first glimpse of the summit of Everest; in two days time, he could become the first man to reach it- if his luck held. If.

