

Sir Edmund Hillary dies : Memories of Personal Encounter

By Barrister Harun ur Rashid

Former Bangladesh Ambassador to the UN, Geneva.

New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark announced on 10th January that Sir Edmund Hillary dies at the age of 88.

Hillary was the first with Nepalese Sherpa Tenzing Norgay who stood on May 29, 1953 on the world's highest peak, Mount Everest (Sagarmatha in Nepalese and Chomolungma in Tibet). Hillary was then only 34 years of age.

Hillary and Tenzing were part of a Royal Geographic Society-Alpine Club Expedition led by former commando Colonel Henry Cecil John Hunt, later Sir Hunt of Britain. The group included a dozen climbers, 35 Sherpa- guides, and 350 porters carrying 18 tons of food and equipment. Their route was the treacherous South Tor, facing Nepal.

Mount Everest:

Mount Everest was named in 1865 after Sir George Everest, the British Surveyor-General of India who found the highest peak in the world.

Records show that the mountain was formed 60 million years ago, located on the Nepal-Tibet border. Its elevation is 29, 035 (8850m)—found to be 6' higher in 1999 and geologists say that it is still growing. It is believed to be the young mountain ranges in the world.

Mount Everest became an enigma to human beings. An urge to climb on the peak of the mountain had been an eternal quest. An expert mountaineer, George Mallory led three British expeditions to Mount Everest in the 1920s.

On the third, in 1924, Mallory and climbing partner Andrew Irvine made an attempt at the summit but disappeared in heavy weather, never to return. It seemed certain they had perished on the mountain, but whether they reached the summit before they died was unknown.

A 1999 expedition found Mallory's frozen body 27,000 feet up Everest's north face. The body was remarkably well preserved, but offered no evidence that Mallory had made it to the summit before his death.

Who climbed first? Hillary or Tenzing?

It remained a mystery for a long time as to who climber first on the peak: Hillary or Tenzing because he refused to say.

Finally in his autobiographical book “View from the Summit” (2000), he made it clear and wrote: “ I continued cutting a line of steps upwards. Next moment I had moved to a

flattish exposed area of snow with nothing but space in every direction. Tenzing quickly joined me and we looked round in wonder. To our immense satisfaction we realized we had reached the top of the world.”

His ties with Nepal became very strong. He and his family in the early 60s began a long-term project building schools and hospitals for the Sherpas. Later he was to initiate the Himalayan Trust to continue similar works.

In April, 1975, an air crash killed his wife Louise and youngest daughter Belinda(16). He was naturally badly hit by the tragedy but by 1977 he was off adventuring again, this time with Ocean to Sky expedition, traveling in jet boats up the Ganges River to its source in the Himalayas.

Personal encounter:

While I was High Commissioner to Australia and New Zealand (1982-84), I visited New Zealand several times and during one of the visits, my wife and I had the opportunity to meet with Sir Edmund Hillary at his house in a suburb of Auckland.

The house had three split levels and at all levels, Nepalese artifacts were found on the floors and walls, giving an impression as if we were in Nepal. (Interestingly I was Ambassador to Nepal prior to my diplomatic posting in Australia).

We met with him at his lounge and he was a very tall and lanky man with a rugged face. He was amiable and spoke highly of Asian tradition and culture.

My second meeting with Sir Edmund Hillary took place in Dhaka in early 1987 when I was Additional Foreign Secretary. He came to see me at the Foreign Office in Dhaka as the New Zealand High Commissioner. We had very pleasant discussions, going back to his expeditions, besides bilateral relations with New Zealand.

Let his soul may rest in eternal peace.