

## **Adventurer has continued his famous dad's legacy with 40 treks of his own**

**P**eter Hillary was destined to be an adventurer.

When he was seven, his New Zealander father introduced him to mountain climbing. That was just the beginning of a life steeped in the pursuit of exploration, discovery and exhilaration.

Peter Hillary's father, of course, was Sir Edmund Hillary, who with his Sherpa guide and climbing partner Tenzing Norgay, became the first to ascend the 29,035-foot peak of Mt. Everest, the world's highest mountain. Sir Edmund conquered Everest in 1953, 18 months before Peter was born.

Recently, Peter Hillary reflected on his life as a mountain climber, adventure travel operator, speaker, author and philanthropist during a just-released episode of the "Life's Tough, Explorers are Tougher!" podcast, hosted by Richard Wiese, president of the Explorers Club.

Hillary's career as an adventurer has spanned more than 40 expeditions. He has traveled across the Himalayas by foot, and twice climbed Everest, in 1990 and 2002. The first time, which was his fourth attempt, marked the only time that a father and son were successful in reaching

the summit on Everest. To mark the occasion, Peter, then 35, spoke to Sir Edmund by satellite phone from the mountain's peak.

The thrill of climbing often mixes with calamity. During Hillary's first try at Everest, in 1984, two of his friends who were climbing with him fell from the mountain as they tried to reverse direction because of bad weather. In his second attempt, Hillary passed by two men who were coming down. Not long after, the two men were killed when they fell. And, it was a short time later, when six other climbers got caught in an avalanche. Five of them died.

In addition to scaling Everest, Peter Hillary has gone to the North Pole and South Pole. Sir Edmund was the first person to go to these "three poles." On one occasion, in 1985, Peter, Sir Edmund and astronaut Neil Armstrong flew a twin-engine ski plane over the Arctic and landed at the North Pole. (Armstrong, in 1969, was the first person to walk on the moon.)

### **India trip with Sir Edmund**

One of Peter Hillary's greatest adventures with his father occurred in India when he was 21. The pair went by jet boat up the Ganges River, from the Bay of Bengal to the Garwhal Himalaya. They then made the first-ever ascents of two Himalayan peaks. Massive crowds of Indian onlookers, according to one account,

cheered them on with chants of "Long live Hillary!" The Indians consider the "Ocean to the Sky" journey to be a spiritual pilgrimage.

### **'Seven Summits'**

In June 2008, Peter completed the "Seven Summits" challenge by reaching the 20,320-foot summit of Denali (formerly called Mt. McKinley) in Alaska. He had climbed the highest mountain on each of the world's seven continents.

### **Vulnerability of climbers**

It has not always been cheers and good times for Peter Hillary. In May 1996, a few weeks after a high-altitude storm killed a group of eight mountaineers on Everest, including one of his good friends, Hillary wrote a piece in *The New York Times* about the inherent vulnerability of those who climb mountains.

The incident on Everest brought him back to his own life-threatening experience the year before on K2 in Pakistan, the world's second-highest mountain. Hillary was the only surviving member of an eight-person expedition that was closer to arriving at K2's summit.

Hillary became increasingly concerned about threatening weather and decided independently to descend even though the others continued upward.

"As I leaned out over the great void of the eastern flank of K2, which was engulfed in

a cloud, the storm struck," he recalled, "and I was blown about on the line like a cork on a string. I knew I had entered a new phase of terrifying uncertainty."

The jet-stream winds, he wrote, likely blasted the other seven climbers off the summit. Years later, he attributed their deaths to "summit fever," an all-out push among the group members to reach the top.

"Surviving K2," Hillary has said, was "probably my greatest mountaineering achievement."

### **Haunting memoir**

Hillary's books include a recounting of a disastrous three-month trek across the Antarctic to the South Pole during the summer of 1998-1999. Each man had to pull a 440-pound sled as they attempted to ski 900 miles across the vast, foreboding landscape.

Titled "In the Ghost Country: A Lifetime Spent on the Edge," the memoir reveals the disintegration of the relationships between Hillary and his two companions, and Hillary's subsequent sensory deprivation that led to hallucinations. He began to see the ghosts of people he had known throughout his life, including those who had died during expeditions with him. He also had ongoing visions of his mother, who, along with his younger sister, had perished in a plane accident that occurred during take-off at Katmandu Airport. Peter

Hillary was 20 then and traveling by train through India.

### **Doing good for others**

One of Sir Edmund Hillary's passions involved philanthropy. He invested himself in operating schools, hospitals, clinics and forestry programs in the Himalayas. It was a way of giving back to the people of the Himalayas for their support of all Everest climbing expeditions.

Peter Hillary and his family have continued this commitment through the promotion of Himalayan Foundations in six countries. He is a board member, fundraiser and a frequent visitor to Nepal. And, he has taken more than 1,000 teenagers from New Zealand and Australia to Nepal to work on projects that benefit the Sherpa people.

He and his wife Yvonne Oomen have four children.

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**Story by Gerald H. Levin**

*Life's Tough, Explorers Edition*