

MOUNTAINEERING MAIL

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The other week I received a postcard, bearing a message written on the very summit of Mount Kenya. Now I have never seen this mountain, nor am I likely to ; nevertheless the thrill I received from that piece of printed card, bearing a Mt. Kenya stamp and a greetings message from the Nicosia Cyprus Mountain Rescue Section, is something that to the uninitiated is hard to realize. Yet everyone must admit it is grand to know that someone, treading a high summit after great endeavour, can find time to remember someone else in a far away land. Such messages are treasures of goodwill and historical interest, something to look at in bad times, to bring dreams, and to preserve.

I have many such messages, some sent direct to myself, others sent to friends who instead of eventually destroying them at spring cleaning time have passed them all to me for preservation in my collection. Just pieces of paper, travel worn and weary, from all parts of the globe where mountaineers have sweated, sworn, or frozen, but what stories some of these messages tell—plans, tragedies, successes, failures, ecstasy and despair ! It is all there, sometimes written, at others to be read between the lines.

There is the aerogramme from John Hunt for instance, written in his sleeping bag at Camp IV on Everest—a message to Alf Bridge thanking him for the oxygen organization, and also mapping out his plans for the summit. The brilliance of his leadership is borne out by this plan written at that 21,200 feet camp, for everything turned out just as he had written.

Charles Evans writes to Wilfred Noyce from the Kangchenjunga Base Camp, " We're all down and well ; sorry we couldn't keep it for you. We've been a very happy party, a well knit and congenial team with a natural sense of partnership and fun—in my experience an unusual state of affairs." Truly a happy message from a great and unselfish leader.

From Joe Brown on the Muztagh Tower came a message to Alf Bridge, a full account of that tough ascent to the summit. " On the North face we got on to the steepest rotten snow I've ever seen. We climbed this for 600 feet, most of the time without belays. I didn't like this one bit." It must have been bad for Joe to feel so uneasy, for despite his fantastic climbs there is no recklessness within him. He continues : " We arrived on the West Summit, which is 10 feet lower than the East Summit, at 5.30. We both felt too tired to go on, and as we had to bivouac, decided to go down 300 feet below the top. We cut a ledge and sat on it for the night. Very cold, but no ill effects."

It's not everyone who would like to bivouac at over 23,000 feet ! And not everyone who can get away with it, as for instance John Hartog who was in the second summit party and received such severe frostbite.

To Bob Pettigrew, Major Jeff Douglas, leader of the 1957-58 Kulu Yeti Expedition, wrote : " We feel pretty convinced from the evidence we have found, that the ' Yeti ' footprints are made by bears. We have found many bear prints looking just like Yeti ; looking just like Bipedes too. However, it will be difficult to convince the world. . . ."

David Thomas' message to Tony Moulam, from the 1958 British Caucasus Expedition, was short and full of meat. ". . . Very hot after a week of bad weather. Spent three nights camping at over 4,000 metres on Ushba Plateau waiting for traverse. Three feet of snow fell. Only evacuated camp with difficulty and considerable risk owing to avalanches down the ice fall, our only possible way of escape. Well so far, weight 14 stone 3 lb. . . ."

Those who listened to John Neil's lecture to the M.A.M. will remember his account of this adventure, of how the party bivouaced in an ice cave which they had to construct for shelter, and of the desperate fight for life which was theirs. Just to see this postcard bearing this terse message brings back to life the whole story.

Disappointment is of course as common as success. To me, Fritz Moravec, the leader of the Austrian 1959 Dhaulagiri Expedition, wrote from Camp I on June 9th : ". . . Unhappily the big success was denied us ; not only the tragedy on the mountain, but the fearfulness of Dhaulagiri and its terrible storms drove us back. The greatest height we reached was 7,700 metres. . . ."

The tragedy was of course the unfortunate death of Heinrich Roiss and two porters who perished in a crevasse. Moravec knew the taste of disappointment just as surely as he had tasted the ecstasy of success when leading the 1956 Gasberbrum II Expedition.

" I'll write you from the mountain after we've reached the top," said Mike Harris just before his departure on the 1959 Ama Dablam Expedition. Unfortunately he never returned from that final bid for the summit, so I never received my message ; however he did write to Frank Fitzgerald just after his first attempt had taken him to 18,500 feet. Written at the base camp at a height of 16,400 feet his message says : ". . . We've got 6,000 feet of really hard mountain above. We've been up 2,000 feet of it trying to set up Camp I, not easy since there is some very hard climbing just below. . . ."

Such a message from one who knew what hard climbing was brings a realization that the ascent in winter of Ama Dablam by

Mike Ward's party in March of this year must have been a bold enterprise, to say the least.

1959 also saw the launching of the French attempt on the 24,295 feet Mount Jannu. The first route they chose was wiped out by an enormous ice avalanche. On the alternative route they established a camp at 19,028 feet from which point it proved impossible to make any headway.

Lionel Terray's first message to his friend Geoffrey Sutton said : " Things are going slowly because of the bad weather, and the mountain itself, which is terribly difficult, and because, in my opinion, of methods too scientific and too careful. After trying the first route, on which the leader was almost carried away by a huge avalanche, we have begun to work on a new and safer route and have reached 5,900 metres, putting up the first two tents of Camp III. But there are some very great difficulties to reach the point which I have marked on the card at about 6,500 metres. I hope we shall be successful. The team is very strong, and personally I am in very good form."

However, it was not to be, and Terray's next postcard, written after evacuation of the base camp, was very much to the point and speaks volumes : " Once again we have got away with it (by the skin of our teeth). It is always so."

His card also referred to a professional engagement he had promised to undertake in the Alps with Gerald Cruikshank. This ended in disaster when they were involved in an avalanche on Mont Blanc. Terray in a desperate bid for life took a long chance and leapt into a crevasse where he was instantly buried. The next 5 hours were spent digging himself out to safety with the aid of a small pocket knife. Cruikshank was swept away and killed. Once again this incredible ' iron man ' escaped by the skin of his teeth..

The 1960 Anglo-American Karakoram Expedition led by Wilfred Noyce, had as its objective an attempt on Trivor (25,370 feet), a mountain which previously had not even been reconnoitred. All Noyce's Expeditions have a brilliance and efficiency second to none and the expedition, despite bad weather, went like clockwork. Only the mail running was out of joint, August floods upsetting mail arrangements by washing away both Jeep and pony tracks between Nagar-Hunza and Gilgit, so the aerogramme messages I received went on to Chalt, and there the mail runners handed over to the Mail Jeep which took them along to Gilgit.

These air-mail flimsies told their dramatic story of the great traverse along that 2-mile ridge at a level of around 22,000 feet until the final upsurge was reached, conquered, and the summit attained. But there were trying moments ; from Camp II, 20,000 feet, on

August 20th, during the descent, Noyce wrote : " It's a magnificent peak and has given a wonderful climb. Don Willans went like a bomb and it was his route all the way to Camp IV. By bitter chance, he got a touch of something (and the Doctor suspected Polio), so we had to hold him at Camp IV, after he had placed Camp V, and so robbed him of the summit he so richly deserved." Fortunately it was a false alarm, but what anxiety and bitter disappointment those few words on a flimsy piece of paper convey !

But I don't have to rely on the Himalaya for dramatic or interesting messages from mountaineers. Here's one from Antarctica written by Keith Allen, F.I.D.S., a member of the Peak Climbing Club. This message, written this year whilst encamped beneath a mountain on Joinville Island, Grahamland, tells something of the past year's mountain and sledging activities, and also of domestic matters at Hope Bay F.I.D.S. base.

" . . . Just before mid-winter we had a serious outbreak of fire, in our lavatory of all places. This happened at 2 a.m. We were blessed with one of the extremely few windless periods at Hope Bay and after much work and many anxious moments we put it out, being left with 2 or 3 gallons of water and no extinguishers. The big calamity however was the total loss of the year's supply of toilet paper." Fire is of course the greatest enemy of polar bases. One of the Russian Polar Depots suffered complete obliteration through fire this last season, and Hope Bay Base had been burnt out, with the loss of two lives in 1947. Had there been wind on this occasion it is doubtful if the Base could have been saved.

Keith Allen, before going on F.I.D.S. had served a term in the R.A.F. Mountain Rescue. His experience was of use at Hope Bay. ". . . A few weeks after mid-winter, one of our chaps broke through a crevasse with his sledge while descending a glacier near the Larsen Inlet about 150 miles from base. He fell 70 feet, partially scalped himself and dislocated an elbow, and was semi-conscious. His mates managed to get him out, stitched him up and radioed the S.O.S. After four days of rugged sledging, Neil Orr (the base leader and doctor), and I, with a sledge fitted out as a stretcher, reached them, and found the casualty recovering rapidly. . . ."

From the dramatic to the mundane, from the Antarctic to the Arctic, and George Lowe writing from the Staunings Alps during the 1960 Greenland Expedition : ". . . Have knocked off a few hills after some very unseasonal rainy weather. Mosquitoes very bad, but the country glorious. Climbed six peaks, the best Hjona Spitze, a hard V.S. rock peak done by MacNaught Davis and Slessor in 28 hours with lots of pitons. I'm off for a long 200 mile hike over the Southern Staunings to Syd Cap. . . ."

Then back again to Antarctica, to Cape Hallett in the Ross Dependency, and the Joint New Zealand-U.S.A. base sheltering underneath the magnificent Admiralty Range. The base leader, a New Zealand Mountaineer, Bob Thomson, wrote me : " From here the only major excursion we have made has been an ascent of Mt. Football (3,000 feet only). We intended to continue and try some higher peaks in that area ; however the temperature dropped to 56° F. that night when we *attempted* to sleep on the glacier, and an increasingly cold wind the following morning drove us the 13 miles back to Base. None of the higher peaks of the Admiralty Range have yet been climbed. Mount Sabine is 17,000 feet and Mount Herschel 14,000 feet."

These are but a few of the messages I have received or acquired, but whether such mail comes from a Himalayan Peak, or from the summit of a Spitsbergen mountain like those sent to me from the 1960 Midland Spitsbergen Expedition, or from such remote places as the South Patagonian Andes from which Derek Walker writes : " For five weeks we have beaten our heads in vain against the fantastic spires of the Cerro Paine Towers," each flimsy piece of paper tells its story.

In the future who can tell what may yet arrive—will Nuptse be climbed, or Kanjeroba ; and shall I receive a message, and if so, what story will it tell ?

Coupled to this and the future is the constant search of the past. Where are the expeditionary mail items of yesterday, those elusive pieces of paper and envelopes which told the personal stories of such past expeditions as pre-war Everest, Kangchenjunga, Kamet, and the like ? Have they disappeared into waste-paper baskets and fires, their stories never to be told and their postal travellings never to be unravelled, or are they still lurking in some drawer, tucked away and forgotten, some day to come to light and gladden the eye of someone like me ?