It is the mythic peak that has fascinated climbers
for 150 years and lured many to their deaths.
With courage, ego, adventurism and obsession,
he was the first to conquer the roof of the world.
Now, 50 years later, SIR EDMUND HILLARY
looks back on his heroic feat in this
exclusive interview with DAVID LESER.

Sir Edmund Hillary

Hero of Everest

GETTY IMAGES; EVERETT COLLECTION; HEADPRESS.

Sir Edmund Hillary was a modest New Zealand beekeeper driven by a passion to prove himself, when, aged 33, he defied death and nature's fury to become the first man to conquer Everest.

To the outsider, it looks like sheer madness, an act beyond the reach of rational debate. Human beings are not meant to try to exist 6000m above sea level, let alone two vertical kilometres beyond this point. And certainly not when the temperature is minus 50°C and there's a hurricane sweeping the mountain. That's why mountain climbers call this region around 8000m the Death Zone – because up there in the frigid peaks and ridges of the world's highest mountains, you're living on borrowed time.

So thin is the air, so horrendous the conditions, that the human body simply begins to collapse. Muscle tissue withers, red blood cells multiply, stamina all but disappears. Even if you can avoid frostbite, hypothermia, dehydration and snow blindness, you are still at risk of pulmonary (lungs) or cerebral (brain) oedemas.

With a cerebral oedema, such is the altitude-induced pressure building inside your cranium that, within a few hours, it's possible to lose all motor and mental skills. Unless you're evacuated quickly, death is almost certain.

The slopes of Mt Everest are littered with the corpses of those who have been deaf to the entreaties of their loved ones, or the cautioning sounds of their own inner voices. For them, the magnetic pull of the world's tallest and most hallowed mountain has been – and remains – too strong.

On May 10, 1996, eight climbers died on what was the single worst day in Everest history. Caught in a murderous blizzard near the summit and confounded by a series of small but highly significant mistakes, 24 climbers from five expedition parties found themselves stranded and fighting for their lives.

One of them was Rob Hall, the acclaimed New Zealand climber who had first reached the summit six years earlier with Peter Hillary, son of the legendary Sir Edmund Hillary. Four years later, Rob Hall had again proved his mountaineering credentials by climbing, in the space of two months, Everest, K2 and Lhotse, the world's highest, second highest and fourth highest peaks. He was as good a climber as you'd hope to find, and yet here, now, after trying to rescue one of his American clients, Doug Hansen, from the notorious Hillary Step just below the summit, he'd become trapped.

Having ignored calls to abandon Hansen and save himself – Hansen had eventually fallen 1828m to his death – Hall was caught on a "balcony" 8747m up in the air, without oxygen or shelter, gale force winds swirling around him and a wind chill factor of 100 degrees below zero, literally freezing him to death.

In a special satellite phone hook-up with his wife, Jan Arnold, then seven months pregnant with their first child, he tried to conceal his appalling predicament.

Their conversation was recounted in Jon Krakauer's best-seller, *Into Thin Air*.

"I haven't taken me boots off to check, but I think I may have a bit of frostbite ..." he said.

"I'm looking forward to making you completely better when you come home," Arnold said. "I just know you're going to be rescued. Don't feel that you're alone. I'm sending all my positive energy your way."

"I love you," Hall said. "Sleep well my sweetheart. Please don't worry too much." Twelve days later, Hall's body was found in a shallow ice hollow buried beneath a snow drift. It remains there to this day.

TIBETANS CALL HER JOMOLUNGMA. Nepalese use the Sanskrit, Sagarmatha. They mean, respectively, Goddess Mother of the World, and Head of the Sky.

At 29,028ft or 8848m, Mt Everest – as she is better known to Westerners – towers above the Tibetan-Nepalese border like a gleaming watchtower of ice and rock. Screaming and howling with all the elemental furies in her possession, she is the highest place on earth and, to a special breed of adventurer, one of the most coveted.

Between 1852 and 1952, 15 exploration parties tried and failed to reach the summit with varying degrees of success. Twenty-four people died in the process, one of them being the dashing figure of Sir George Mallory, leader of three British expeditions who, when asked once to explain his obsession with the mountain, famously replied: "Because it's there."

In early June 1924, Mallory and his companion, Andrew Irvine, had attempted to conquer Everest from the north face after their companions, Major Edward Norton and Dr T. Howard Somervell, were forced back at 8572m by gale-force winds.

Norton went snow blind and Somervell was wracked by such violent coughing that he ruptured the membranes in his throat, causing him to nearly choke on his own blood. Still, the two men managed, without supplementary oxygen, to get higher than anyone in history.

A week later, Mallory and Irvine made their bid for the peak and were last seen scaling a ridge 300m from the top. Did they make it all the way after becoming enveloped in mist?

No one knows for sure. Only that in 1999, 75 years after the attempt, George Mallory's body was found at 8100m, almost perfectly preserved in his tweed jacket and hobnailed boots.

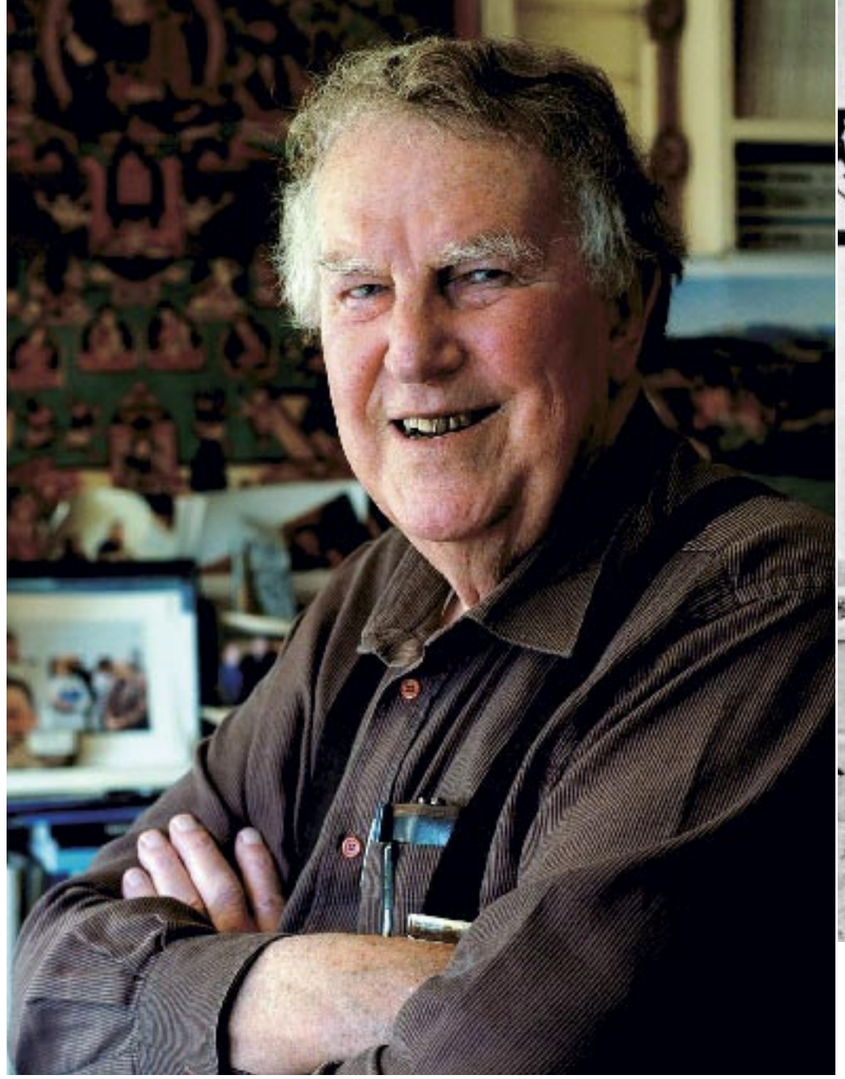
His injuries and the broken rope around his waist suggest a fall from a considerable distance. There was also a letter in his breast pocket from his devoted wife, Ruth, but no photograph. Mallory had promised to leave her picture at the summit. Was this an indication he might have actually made it? Again, no one knows for sure.

"I've had 45 years of being seen as the first person to get to the top," Sir Edmund Hillary said at the time, just after Mallory's body had been found. "I don't think it would worry me too much if it was discovered that [he] had been there before me. Of course, he didn't get down again, so he didn't quite complete the job. Getting to the top is half the battle, but getting to the bottom is an important part, too."

THE 83-YEAR-OLD MAN SITTING before me knows only too well the importance of getting down from the top of Mt Everest. Fifty years ago, at the age of 33, Sir Edmund Hillary, together with Tenzing Norgay, stunned the world by becoming the first men to successfully scale the world's tallest mountain.

For both of them life was never to be the same again, and not because of what they saw at the top, magnificent though it was. Rather it was because of how they came to be treated once they'd stepped back into civilisation's rapturous embrace.

Edmund Hillary, the socially awkward bee farmer from Auckland, found himself suddenly the toast of the Commonwealth, knighted by a newly crowned Queen ▶



From far left: Sir Edmund Hillary, now 83, is celebrating 50 years since climbing the world's highest mountain in 1953; Hillary and Tenzing Norgay after their triumph; Sir Edmund marries Louise Rose on September 3, 1953.

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FIFTY YEARS AGO, AT THE AGE OF 33, SIR EDMUND HILLARY, TOGETHER with Tenzing Norgay, stunned the world by becoming the first men to successfully scale the world's tallest mountain. FOR BOTH OF THEM LIFE WAS NEVER TO BE THE SAME AGAIN.

Elizabeth, feted by kings, presidents and prime ministers. Women wrote to him – complete strangers – asking him to marry them; huge crowds gathered wherever he went; his face appeared on stamps, coins, five-dollar bills. He turned into the most famous New Zealander of all time and, like his hero Sir Ernest Shackleton, the great Antarctic explorer, possibly one of the most famous men in history.

And yet Hillary, perhaps to his great credit, was never to feel like a hero. Not even after his momentous Everest climb, when he went on to become a member of the first expeditionary party to travel by vehicle to the South Pole. Not when he travelled to the North Pole with Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon. Not when he became the first man to climb Antarctica's Mt Herschel, and not even when millions of Indians and Nepalese poured onto the banks of the Ganges River to witness and honour his team's pioneering voyage to their sacred river's source.

"I feel that I know myself a good deal better than all these people who built me up as being a heroic character," he says now. "I had the very strong view, which basically in my heart I still have, that I was a very plain, uninteresting sort of person.

"I suppose when I climbed Everest I realised, 'Well, I wasn't too bad. Done a pretty good job on Everest'. Then, I travelled around the world talking to vast numbers of people ... and I came to the view that although I didn't think myself as good as they thought I was, I couldn't be too bad."

Recently, in Australia as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of his Everest ascent, one is struck by two things about Sir Edmund Hillary. Firstly, at 83, he is still a powerful and lucid man with a handshake that can crush wood and a mind that can navigate widely and freely. Secondly, that despite the enormity of his achievements, he has never quite overcome his childhood sense of himself.

"I was a somewhat lonely child with almost no friends," he said. "I gained my release by reading voraciously of adventure stories and dreaming of adventure as I walked for mile after mile around the lonely countryside. But that was all in my dreams. I did nothing physically exciting.

"I went to Auckland Grammar School more than 70 years ago. I was very much a skinny country boy and only 11 years old. I don't think in the first week I talked to anyone. At lunch time, I'd go to a little scruffy area at the back of the school and eat my sandwiches. There were quite a lot of ants and I used to watch the ants moving steadily around ... so by the end of the first week I was much more friendly with the ants than I was with my fellow students.

"My confidence received another blow when in the first week the muscle-bound gymnastic instructor cast a jaundiced eye over my scrawny physique. He rolled his eyes to the heavens and muttered: 'Whatever will they send me next?' He then told me my ribs flared out in a most unnatural fashion, my back needed straightening and my shoulders were unpleasantly rounded. He placed me in the misfits' class with the other physical freaks. And I never got over this sense of physical inferiority."

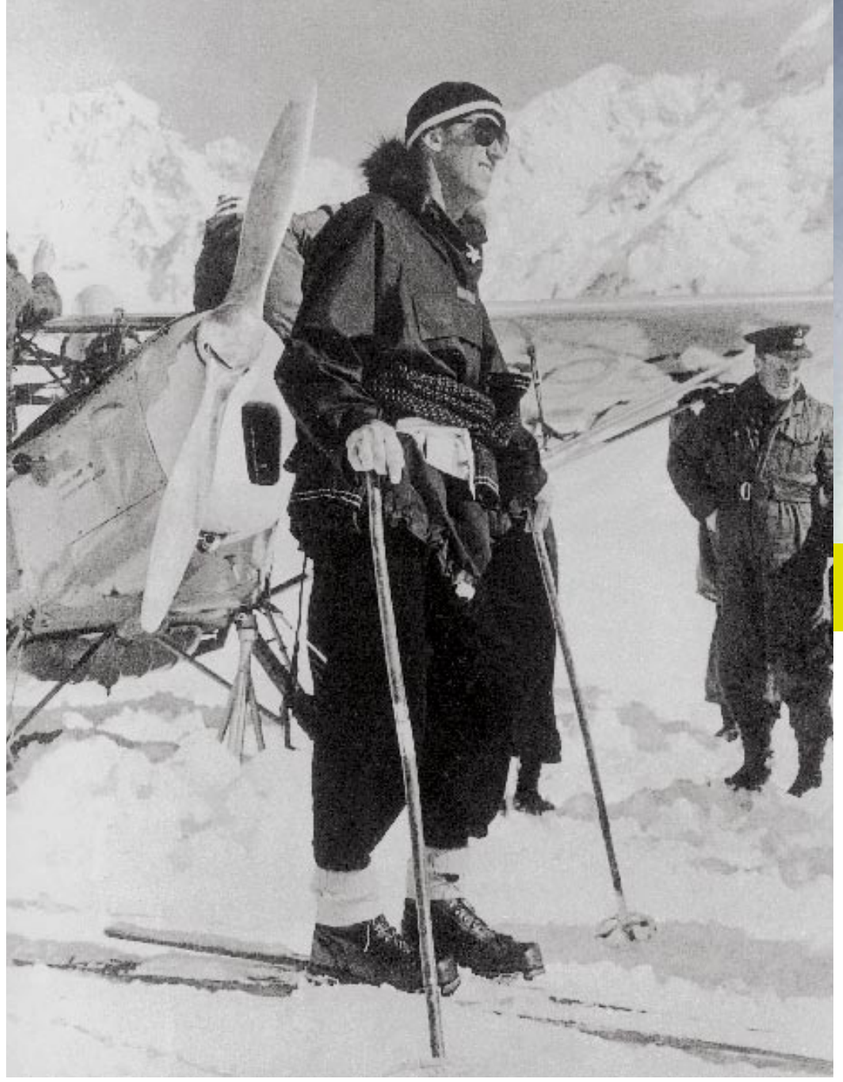
This inferiority complex was matched by a quality he saw in his father: a fierce, almost ruthless, determination.

A small newspaper publisher-turned-bee farmer, Hillary's father was shot through the nose at Gallipoli and laid low by dysentery before being sent home in 1916. He was a deeply conservative man who responded at times violently to challenges from his elder son. "When he felt I had done something wrong," Hillary offers now, "he would conduct me over to the woodshed and he had a chunk of wood there and he would give me a substantial thrashing.

"What he was really wanting, I realised later, was for me to admit that I had done these wrong things, but I never would. I just refused, whether I was right or wrong. I was as determined as he. And bloody minded."

The only way Hillary knew how to overcome his own sense of mediocrity was to become a "mountaineering enthusiast". "[I wanted to] do things in the mountains which were challenging, and frequently frightened me to death," he says.

And so having built himself up through his younger days by running with huge loads of honey on his back, he then took to the mountains with an almost frightening zeal. He camped on ice shelves high up in the clouds; he taught himself how to cut steps in the ice with a pick axe; he climbed on in agony when his feet were nearly frostbitten; he learnt how to hunker down and survive blizzards.



After climbing Mt Everest, Sir Edmund (left), joined expeditions to both Poles; his son Peter (above) scaled Everest in 1990.

GETTY IMAGES; RDA HEADPRESS.

He became the first man to scale the south ridge of New Zealand's highest mountain, Mt Cook; he was a member of the first all-New Zealand team to tackle the Himalayas, and, of course, the first man, along with Tenzing Norgay, to reach the top of the world. He was a man who loved being first, in fact, needed desperately to be first.

"I WAS A SOMEWHAT LONELY CHILD WITH ALMOST NO FRIENDS ... I gained my release by reading voraciously of adventure stories and dreaming of adventure as I walked for mile after mile around the lonely countryside ... I DID NOTHING PHYSICALLY EXCITING."

"The desire to overcome something that hasn't been overcome before is a driving factor in mountaineering," he says. "In fact, I believe that to actually succeed in doing something physically which has never been done before is probably the most satisfying thing you can do."

SOMETIMES, NO MATTER WHAT THE powers of endurance and strength, faith even, it all comes down to luck. The day dawns crisp and still or the weather turns, sending heavy clouds scudding in to swallow up the mountain.

In 1952, Tenzing Norgay and his Swiss partner, Raymond Lambert, would have almost certainly climbed into the history books had they not been confronted by a wild storm. Tenzing had forged a route over the terrifying Khumbu Icefall; negotiated a wide, bottomless crevasse with the daring Swiss climber Jean-Jacques Asper; had shouldered double loads up sheer spurs and ridges; pitched tents, checked supplies and even served up hot chocolate in minus 50 degree temperatures for his incredulous team members. He was, said Lambert, a man "with three lungs".

Yet after spending the night at 8382m and then making their way to within 238m of the summit, the two of them found they could go no further. They'd climbed higher than anyone in history, but could not prevail against bone-snapping cold and an accursed, roaring wind.

Such was Tenzing's reputation with the Swiss that the following year he was invited to join John Hunt's British military-style expedition to Everest, although not as part of the first assault team. That honour was to go to Charles Evans and Tom Bourdillon, who set out on May 26 and appeared to be heading for the South Summit when their closed-circuit oxygen equipment failed and the weather turned.

Although utterly exhausted, Bourdillon wanted to press on despite the risks. Evans knew better. "If you do that Tom," he said, "you will never see [your wife] Jennifer again." On the way down, the men slipped and fell towards the hanging glaciers and avalanche gullies of the Kangshung Face. Only soft snow stopped them plummeting part or all of the way to Tibet.

Three days later, on May 29, 1953, it was Hillary and Tenzing's turn, and the Goddess Mother of the World beckoned them onwards and upwards.

As Hillary was to recall: "I had been cutting steps continuously for two hours and Tenzing, too, was moving very slowly. As I chipped steps around still another corner, I wondered rather dully just how long we could keep it up. Our original zest had now quite gone and it was turning more into a grim struggle.

"I then realised that the ridge ahead, instead of still monotonously rising, now dropped sharply away, and far below I could see the North Col and the Rongbuk Glacier. I looked upwards to see a narrow snow ridge running up to a snowy summit. A few more whacks of the ice-axe in the firm snow and we stood on top.

"My initial feelings were of relief – relief that there were no more steps to cut, no more ridges to traverse and no more humps to tantalise us with hopes of success. I looked at Tenzing and, in spite of the balaclava, goggles and oxygen mask all encrusted with long icicles that concealed his face, there was no disguising his infectious grin of pure delight as he looked all around him.

"We shook hands and then Tenzing threw his arm around my shoulders and we thumped each other on the back until we were almost breathless. It was 11.30am. The ridge had taken us two-and-a-half hours, but it seemed like a lifetime. I turned off the oxygen and removed my set. I had carried my camera, loaded with colour film, inside my shirt to keep it warm, so I now produced it and got Tenzing to pose on top for me, waving his axe on which was a string of flags – United Nations, British, Nepalese and Indian. Then I turned my attention to the great stretch of country lying below us in every direction."

Before they descended, Tenzing made a hole in the snow and placed some small offerings to the Goddess of the Mountain: a bar of chocolate, a packet of biscuits and a handful of lollies. Hillary buried a crucifix which expedition leader John Hunt had given him. Then the two men emptied their bladders.

As writer Jan Morris wrote, "it was the last innocent adventure" in history.

IN THE HALF CENTURY SINCE THE beekeeper and the Sherpa made it to the roof of the world, Mt Everest has become a kind of prized trophy for the brave, the fit, the rich and the foolhardy. A certain kind of mad adventurer confronts his demons up there; nations compete for glory on her slopes; and alpine companies vie for a lucrative piece of the action, charging up to $150,000 for an expedition. In the process, something is taken from the mountain, some sense that perhaps she is less formidable than she really is. Scores of people have died making this mistake.

And while Hillary and Tenzing were the ones who broke the spell, there were others, extraordinarily courageous individuals all of them, who conquered Everest as well. Many were Sherpas simply trying to make a living by helping Westerners fulfil their dreams – people like Apa Sherpa, who got to the top 11 times. Or Babu Sherpa, who did it in a record 16 hours and 56 minutes.

In 1978, Reinhold Messner, the Italian mountaineer, together with Austrian Peter Habeler, achieved what scientists had said was impossible – they summited without using supplemental oxygen. Two years later, Messner did it again – completely on his own. He described the last few minutes: "I can scarcely go on. No despair, no ▶

Sir Edmund in Sydney in June 2002 with his second wife June – they wed in 1989.

happiness, anxiety. I have lost the mastery of my feelings. I consist only of will."

In 1984, Tim McCartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer became the first Australians to get to the highest place on earth, and did so by charting a new route, without bottled oxygen and carrying their own equipment. It was a world-class feat of endurance.

As was the effort of Mike Groom, the first Queenslander to get to the top in 1993. Having had 30 per cent of his frostbitten feet amputated six years earlier, Groom not only learned to walk again but, over the next decade, willed himself to scale the world's five highest mountains.

In 1993, he reached the summit of Everest with Lobsang Bhutia, the 40-year-old nephew of Tenzing Norgay. Lobsang later slipped and fell from somewhere near the South Summit. His body was found at the bottom of a gully 200m above Camp IV. Groom helped carry the body to the bottom, where it was then given a traditional Buddhist cremation.

The leader of that 1993 expedition was Tashi Tenzing, not only Lobsang's nephew, but the grandson of the great Tenzing Norgay. Tashi had sold his house in Sydney to pay for this historic expedition, so desperate was he to emulate his famous grandfather. But he would have to wait three more years to fulfil his dream. Just 400m short of the summit, he went snowblind and he realised that, even though he could get to the top, he wouldn't be able to get down again. He turned back.

"Would I let it end here, so close to my goal?" he was to later write in his book *Tenzing and the Sherpas of Everest*. "But what was the goal if I lost my life? I had a wife and a son at home. I had a family to whom I was far more important than Everest. I thought of my mother. What would she tell me to do? Descend, descend, descend."

JUDY TENZING, TASHI'S WIFE AND co-author, believes that to be a mountain climber you have to be an egomaniac, and she includes her own "dear husband" in this category. "They are so focused on what they want to do," she explains, "that they don't think about anything else. They don't think about family or future, just about where they are going to put their foot next; at least until it all goes wrong."

Even Sir Edmund Hillary, as self-effacing a man as you could hope to meet, was determined to get to the summit before Tenzing, despite asserting for years that it never mattered. He and Tenzing were a team, he continually claimed, and these sorts of questions were irrelevent to mountain climbers. Besides, the two men had made a pact after their climb never to publicly discuss the subject and it was only a journalist's persistent questioning in 1993 that had finally prompted Hillary to blurt out the truth – that he had actually got there first.

Now, however, he elaborates on the subject and, in so doing, offers a revealing insight into the kind of burning passion he had for being first.

"Once we got to the South Summit," he says, "and I looked along that long, narrow summit ridge, I never for a moment thought of asking Tenzing to lead. I felt 'this is my sort of country, this is alpine country'."

Even though it was actually Tenzing's country? "[Yes], even though it *was* his country," Hillary says with a chortle. "But it was *my sort* of country."

THROUGHOUT INDIA AND NEPAL, millions of people continue to believe that Tenzing Norgay got to the top first. They or their parents and grandparents remember the banners held aloft in 1953 showing the triumphant Sherpa marching towards the summit with an apparently unconscious Hillary dragging along behind him. It was a falsehood, and one which Tenzing's family readily acknowledges today.

Tenzing Norgay died in 1986, a sad and broken man. He died believing that – unlike Hillary – he had not done enough with his extraordinary fame for his own people, many of whom were poor and illiterate.

Hillary was by now a close friend of Tenzing's and he reassured him that not only was he a superb mountaineer, he was a wonderful husband and father, too; that his life had been a considerable one.

The same and more can, of course, be said about the beekeeper. In 1953, the Goddess of the Mountain gave to Sir Edmund Hillary more than he could have ever dreamt of in terms of international fame and glory. Then, in 1975, she took from him in the most tragic of ways.

His beloved wife, Louise, had always hated flying in small planes, but Hillary had encouraged her and their youngest daughter, Belinda, 16, to join him in the Himalayan town of Phaplu, where he was building a hospital. Shortly after take-off from Katmandu, the plane crashed in a wheat field, killing all those aboard. Hillary has never forgiven himself.

Four years after this, his best friend, Peter Mulgrew, was killed in the now infamous Mt Erebus plane crash in the Antarctic. Hillary went on to marry Mulgrew's widow, June, in 1989, after just having completed his stint as New Zealand High Commissioner to India and Nepal.

"After the death of my wife and my youngest daughter, who was really my pride and joy," he says now, "there didn't seem much purpose to life. Then, I realised that to carry on at all I had to keep doing the things we'd been doing together."

And of course this had nothing to do with being first to the top of anything any more. It had to do with being of service to people, in this case the Sherpas of the Himalayas. "What can I do for you?" he had asked a group of them in 1961.

"Our children have eyes," replied their spokesman, "but they cannot see. They must have education."

The Goddess of the Mountain gave to Sir Edmund Hillary more than he could have ever dreamt of ... THEN, IN 1975, SHE TOOK FROM HIM IN THE MOST TRAGIC OF WAYS.

And so in the years since his triumph, Sir Edmund has ensured just that. Through his Himalayan Trust, he has built 27 schools, two hospitals and a dozen medical centres for these strong, proud people of the mountains. He has also constructed several airfields and rebuilt monasteries and cultural centres in their honour.

"I have little doubt that the most worthwhile things I have done have not been standing on the summits of mountains, or the North and South Pole, great experiences though they were," he says. "My most important projects have been the building and maintaining of schools and medical clinics for my good friends in the Himalayas. These, indeed, are the things I will always remember."

As we will surely always remember him. W

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