

Pass It On®...

The Bond of Friendship is What Takes us to the Top.

Sir Edward Hillary and Tenzing Norgay summited Everest together. For over 50 years, neither would say who stepped atop first, preferring to share the credit.

Edmund Hillary, a humble and witty beekeeper from New Zealand, was also one of the most accomplished mountaineers in the world.

It was 1953, and Sir John Hunt brought military discipline to an expedition in competition with the Swiss. He handpicked Hillary and organized a conquering party of 350 porters, 20 Sherpas and tons of supplies to support a vanguard of only 10 climbers. Previous attempts had been made on the mountain. Ten teams had failed, as had two solo climbers with unfeasible plans. Two British climbers had vanished on the mountain's northeast ridge in 1924.

Undaunted, the expedition pressed on with the tactic of breaking into teams and evaluating performance during the ascent. The best team for the summit would become evident.

After 12 days on the mountain, fighting bad weather, finicky equipment and diminishing energy, the first lead team of Bourdillon and Evans had climbed to 28,700 feet, just over 300 feet shy of the summit. But they were exhausted. Struggling to acclimate to the altitude and running out of oxygen, the pair turned back.

Hillary was up next. He chose the Sherpa Tenzing Norgay as his teammate. At first, it seemed an unusual choice. But Tenzing had been there before, on six previous attempts. And team members had observed a growing bond between the two during the ascent. The combination made Tenzing the logical choice, but also the loyal choice.

The pair got an earlier start than Bourdillon and Evans and climbed their way to the south summit by 9:30 a.m. The most difficult stretch lay in front of them. A rocky spur rises sharply at the top, a mocking obstacle for those who come so close to victory, only to be turned back. Adjacent to the rock pillar is an ice ridge. By wedging himself between

the two, Hillary chimneyed his way up 40 feet, scraping at the snow with his ax and raising himself one painful step at a time. Tenzing joined him, following suit. At 11:30 a.m. on May 29, 1953, Hillary and Tenzing made it to the top, together.

"To a mountaineer, it's of no great consequence who actually sets foot first," Hillary recalled later. "Often the one who puts more into the climb steps back and lets his partner stand on top first."

Eventually, Hillary revealed the answer — he had made the summit first. But more importantly, for over 50 years, the secret remained between the two men who shared a bond so strong that it didn't matter who got the credit. Ultimately, their friendship and camaraderie were far more important than any accolade.

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