LESSON UNIT 4. THE SUMMIT

May 29th at 4 a.m Hillary and Tenzing from South Col base camp 8 started up the cooker and drank large quantities of lemon juice and sugar with sardines on biscuits. Then they dragged oxygen sets into the tent, and cleaned the ice off them and tested them. Hillary had removed his boots which had become wet and frozen solid. So he cooked them over the fierce flame to soften them up.

Over their down clothing they wore wind-proofs and on their hands pulled three pairs of gloves- silk, woolen and wind proof.

At 6.30 a.m. they crawled out of the tent into the snow and hoisted 30lb of oxygen gear on to their backs and also connected up their masks and turned on the valves to bring life-giving oxygen into their lungs. Tenzing kicked steps in a long traverse back toward the ridge, and reached the crest where it forms a great snow bump at 28,000 feet. From here the ridge narrowed to a knife-edge. Hillary felt warmth in his feet and so he took over the lead.

The snow that made the route on the top of the ridge was soft often hence gave away suddenly. It was both difficult and dangerous. After several hundred feet , they came to a tiny hollow, found there two oxygen bottles left on the earlier attempt by Evans and Bourdillon. It still contained several hundred litres of oxygen. It was enough to get them to down to South Col if used sparingly.

Hillary continued for the last 400 feet to beat a trail up to the south summit. At 9 a.m. they cramponed on to the South Peak. The oxygen cylinder was lighter as it was partly exhausted.

The snow was crystalline and firm at this high altitude giving solid and comfortable belay. They moved one at a time. However, they shuffled past these difficult portions by scrambling on the rocks and cutting handholds on the snow. The progress was slow but steady. As Tenzing paid out the rope, I inched my way upwards. The ridge continued as it seemed never ending, but at one point instead of rising it dropped sharply. A few more whacks of the ice-axe in the firm snow and they stood on the top.

There was a relief as there was no more steps to cut , no more ridges to traverse. Hillary and Tenzing shook hands, and thumped each other on the back until they were almost breatheless. It was 11.30 am. The ridge had taken two and a half hours, but it seemed like lifetime.

To the east was our giant Makalu, far away was Kanchenjunga, and to the west, the great unexplored ranges of Nepal stretching off into the distance. The shot, down the North Ridge showing North Col and the old route of great climbers of 1920’s and 1930’s was the most important photograph.

Hillary replaced his oxygen set as he was becoming clumsy-fingered and slow- moving for want of oxygen. Meanwhile Tenzing made a little hole in the snow and in it placed various articles of food as a token of gift to the Gods of lofty summit. After fifteen minutes, they moved down off the summit descending the ridge to the South Col.