

THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN INDISCREET REMARK

"WOULDN'T IT BE NICE to give something back to this country, from which so much has been taken?" The result of this chance remark made while trekking in Nepal in 1991 saw Peter Earl and myself in possession of a permit to climb Everest in 1993. Not quite the twist in life that Peter, an oarsman and marathon runner, and me, a man in the grip of the mid life crisis, could have expected in our wildest dreams, the more so as both of us admit to dizziness when standing on step ladders.

"What should we do?" I said.

"Find some climbers" said Peter, always the man with an answer.

"GPO Yellow Pages doesn't list climbers under 'C', I volunteered. "I knew somebody at school who climbed Snowdon once."

"Probably needs a little more experience than that" came back the measured response.

Then I remembered an old friend, John Barry, with whom I went as a doctor to Nepal in 1988 and Zaskar in 1989. As ex-Commander of the Arctic Warfare Section of the Royal Marines and one of the few who walked away from K2 in 1986 when thirteen members of various expeditions were killed, he appeared to have enough qualifications to make up for our shortages and deficiencies.

In 1987 I first saw J.B. on TV talking about a forthcoming expedition he was organising and I was

impressed. I rang the studio and after his interview had finished, spoke to him.

"Do you need a doctor for your trip?"

"Not a bad idea."

"Would you consider me for the position?"

"Yes, alright, you be the doctor!"

End of conversation, end of interview, beginning of Himalayan climbing career.

Five days before we left on the trip he contacted me with three pieces of information. The first that he was not coming, the second that I was therefore leading and the third, as a throw-away, that the expedition, some fifty strong, had no plane ticket beyond Delhi.

"How will I find it?" I said, referring to our goal.

"Oh! up the valley, turn right and the big one at the end with the snow on top is your one!"

We all returned alive from that one.

I rang him.

"J.B. would you like to lead an expedition to climb Everest?"

"Yes."

"We go in 1993."

"OK."

End of conversation.

(p.t.o.)

A few months later with an organisation under way and the team now assembled, we met.

"Need a training climb to shake down and sort the men from the boys?" said J.B.

"Where?" we asked.

"I thought Mt. McKinley in Alaska."

"Why there?"

"Bloody cold, bloody hard, (nearly died there once), bloody good fun, you'll enjoy it."

We did. The worst weather for twenty years, -40°C, 150 mph gales, stuck in a snow hole for eight days, snow blind for two days, but the mountain was climbed. Bloody good fun — all shook down, some more than others. That was June, 1992.

Nine months later, hundreds of lists and thousands of phone calls later we had sponsors, kit and a brilliant team. We were to be the first expedition to climb Everest for charity and, hopefully, would be able to "give something back" at the end of it.

With the advance guard two weeks ahead smoothing the way, we arrived at Kathmandu to banners of welcome and 'lei' around the neck.

"Seems easy so far" said one wag.

With expedition members, trekking wives or lovers and ten Duke of Edinburgh Award winners, we moved slowly towards our goal.

"Which one is it?" said one.

"Up the valley, turn right, the big

one at the end with snow on it" I said with confidence.

"Piece of cake!"

"Yeh!"

"Base camp is an awful place" wrote a predecessor of mine. Quite true, but even a sewer becomes bearable when you get used to it.

The expedition nearly foundered at this point when Peter found that his satellite phone had not arrived.

"Oh dear" he said, "what has happened to my phone?" Well, he didn't really say that, but I have never seen a man so angry at the loss of a toy! It was like me without alcohol in the evening. Fur flew and excrement hit the fan.

"It's lost" said a brave soul.

"How can you lose something weighing 47kg with a satellite disk attached?" came back the terse retort.

It wasn't lost though, it was stolen in transit and now probably adorns some Iraqi missile base, keeping Saddam one jump ahead of the UN.

A replacement was swiftly flown out and delivered by helicopter. The cat got his cream and with his dummy substitute nestling into his neck, peace descended once again and the assault began.

Six weeks later, after much toil, sweat and not a little fear, camps were in place and stocked and we were ready for the attempt. Everyone had lost at least a stone in weight, some nearly two.

Details of the climb are now history. Harry Taylor, now a new resident in Milton, successfully summited without oxygen, staying out playing too long at -35°C, went blind, fell down the mountain, but lived to tell the tale.

Rebecca defied dire storm warnings from Bracknell and bravely went where no British woman had gone before and came back. Nobody in our team lost their lives or was even seriously injured. We all remain good friends.

I have an invitation to go to K2 next year.....

The DHL 40th Anniversary Everest Expedition aimed to raise money for Sir Edmund Hillary's Himalayan Trust. The Trust has, over thirty years, built and now sustains twenty-two schools, three hospitals and many scholarships for secondary education for those in the Khumbu, the Everest region of Nepal.

In January 1994 the majority of the climbing team, including Rebecca Stevens, are to return to Nepal to run in the Kathmandu Marathon in further support of the trust.

Once again, I will be approaching the community for support in this project.

Sponsorship forms will be available in the late autumn.

Also, for anyone who is still interested and who hasn't heard the full story, an open meeting will be held in Milton Village Hall on November 26th.

All are welcome, entrance will be free but a collection will be made for the Trust at the end.

Sandy Scott.

Peter
enjoying a rest

