On Thursday 29 May 2003, at 11.30am, fifty years ago to the hour, Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay clambered up the uncharted south-east ridge of Everest and onto the Roof of the World. In commemoration of this first ascent, celebrities and hoary old mountaineers were cracking open champagne at glitzy venues around the world. Everest’s golden jubilee had been a strange season. A record number of climbers had already reached the summit, including the youngest, the oldest and the fastest. But compared to the large number who had flocked to the mountain, the success rate was relatively low. And several climbers had paid a high price for chasing their dreams. Serious accidents had occurred regularly. Three climbers had perished and two more had died when a helicopter crashed at Base Camp.

I was climbing with an American expedition. Our initial party of 11 climbers was whittled down to nine. Along with another, small American team and a lone South African climber, we were all that remained on the mountain. All the other teams had gone home. Huddled in a cramped tent, a mere 900 vertical metres, but a hard, 12-hour climb below the summit, I wondered what kind of final chapter we would make for this season’s story.

Once defeated 900 metres from the summit, a climber returns to settle the score.
Writer Matthew Holt topping out on the Hillary Step
I crawled out of my tent at our camp on the South Col. The Col, at an altitude of 8,000m, is about the size of a cricket pitch. It’s strewn with debris from previous visitors. Shredded tents, empty oxygen bottles and uneaten provisions lie discarded among the rocks. It’s a forlorn place, a place where people arrive and leave in a hurry. From the western edge I could peer into Nepal and back down the route we had climbed. To the east lay Tibet, while behind us rose the jagged spires of Lhotse, the fourth highest mountain in the world. Meanwhile, a few hundred metres from our camp to the north, across a large ice-slab that lay like a tilted ice-rink, rose the summit pyramid of Everest. I could make out the faint imprint of the route, from the base of the pyramid, the trail followed a steep gully up to the right-hand shoulder, known as The Balcony, and then climbed the right-hand ridge to the South Summit. A mere 100m higher, but out of sight and separated by the perilous southeast ridge, lay the most prized summit of all.

I had been here before, surveying the same scene, one year previously. But after injuring my leg in a fall, had decided not to go higher. Every day since then, I had told myself it was the right decision. But, unfortunately, that wasn’t the issue.

I needed to know that I could do it. So I had come back. It had been a long, hard trip to get here – a war of attrition. We had spent six weeks slowly moving up and down the mountain to stock our camps and acclimatise before setting out on our push for the top. And the weather, which had been pernicious all season, refused to settle. Since arriving at the South Col two days before, high winds had kept us pent up in our tents, deterring any thoughts of a summit bid. That morning, however, there was barely a breath of wind, and only a few cotton-wool clouds drifted lazily in the clear sky. I sensed that we would leave for the summit that night.

The afternoon was spent lying restlessly in my tent and nervously checking my gear. I repeatedly unpacked and restowed my water bottles and mittens, aware that if I left anything behind, it could cost me my chance of the summit, or worse.

At 9pm I woke from a shallow drowse. My two tent mates were already stirring.

Getting ready in the cramped tent was a cumbersome process, as we jostled for elbow space to pull on our bulky down suits and climbing harnesses. Two hours later, I clambered out of the tent, where I donned my crampons and fitted my oxygen cylinders. It was cold, but perfectly calm. The summit pyramid was a sharp silhouette against a night sky bursting with stars. After weeks of ferocious winds, it appeared that we had finally been granted a perfect weather window. As we started out from camp, there was a buzz of nervous excitement. I didn’t know what lay ahead, but I did know that the next 24 hours would be a defining day in my life.

We had been climbing for six hours and had reached The Balcony when darkness gave way to a smudgy grey half-light.

I was stepping out of a window that could snap shut at any given moment. If the weather turned while I was out there, I was squarely in harm’s way.

The eastern horizon turned a bloodshot pink, heralding daybreak. The sun rose swiftly, bathing the peaks beneath us in light, their sharp flanks glittering like diamonds. It was beautiful; it was a sight to die for. The price paid by the human torso that I had found at our last rest stop, its bleached white bones poking carelessly out of a frayed down jacket.

By 10:30am we had reached the South Summit. Two of our team had turned back, exhausted. The rest of us huddled in a small nook, changing to fresh oxygen bottles, preparing for the final push. If all went well, from this point to the top would take less than two hours. The summit was within our grasp. But to get there, we would have to cross the exposed southeast ridge. One by one, we slowly got up and edged out onto the ridge. I knew that I was stepping out of a window that could snap shut at any moment. If the weather turned while I was out there, I was squarely in harm’s way.
More than a dozen, tangled ropes ran across the rocks. “Clip blue, clip blue,” I chanted to myself like a religious mantra, having been advised by the previous party that the blue rope was the most recent addition to the spaghetti of fixed lines. My crampons scraped and skated on the bare rocks, sending stones spinning into the void below. A mistake would send me plunging aoom, either down into Nepal on my left or Tibet on my right – although the geography of the matter was a secondary consideration. Halfway across, rudely blocking the way, is a series of tall boulders set like off-kilter obelisks. This is the famous Hillary Step, the final obstacle on the way to the top.

I hauled my way up the first rock and sat astride it, desperately sucking on my oxygen mask for more air. Then I slid down into the narrow gully behind, where I found the climber ahead of me hopelessly entangled in a spider’s web of old ropes strung between the rocks. I freed him, crawled up after him, and became enmeshed myself. My goggles misted up and my oxygen mask protruded like an ant eater’s snout as I struggled blindly, each movement only snaggling another rope on my rucksack or crampons. I had to suppress a surge of panic as I waited for the next climber to arrive and set me free. It was easy to see how lone climbers had been fatally trapped there. When I clambered onto the top of the Step, I was shaken and hyperventilating, but I knew it was not far to go.

My pace quickened in excitement as I followed the undulating ridge towards the summit, willing it into view. And suddenly there it was, only a few metres ahead. Before I knew it, I was taking those last triumphant strides that I had visualised for so long.

There was already a small crowd clustered on the summit dais, vying for space, taking turns to be photographed next to the summit pole brandishing flags, photos of loved ones and even a car registration plate. Meanwhile, our team leader was gallantly strumming a guitar that he had hauled to the top. I moved away from the crowd and found some space. Beneath me, stretching to the horizon in each direction were sharp, snow-capped spires. I could see deep into the dry, dun-coloured folds of Tibet, and the greener, more fertile valleys of Nepal. Tracing my way along the Khumbu Valley, I could make out the monastery at Thangboche, where we had stopped for a blessing on our way to Base Camp, a lifetime ago. It was breathtaking and at the same time surreal. I knew that I should be having profound thoughts, but my head was empty except for a voice telling me to hurry up and get down, for the skies were darkening.

By Sunday 1 June, at 11.30am, we were back at Base Camp. It had been a long descent. On the way down from the summit to High Camp, one of our team had collapsed and had to be lowered on ropes. And our team leader had been struck by a falling rock, only to be saved from serious injury by his guitar, which took the force of the blow. The next day, we had descended to Camp Two, and that morning we had negotiated the Khumbu Ice Fall for the last time. The Ice Fall is a beautiful but deadly place, one of the most dangerous sections of the route. It is a 1.5km passage of gaping blue crevasses and precariously balanced ice towers. We had endured another nervous crossing, the taut silence shattered when a couple of giant ice towers collapsed nearby.

As I removed my crampons and walked into Base Camp, a wave of relief swept through me. I had made it. For the first time in two months I felt safe. I knew I would be going home. Returning from the summit, Edmund Hillary had greeted his anxiously waiting colleague with the immortal phrase, “George, we knocked the bastard off.” As our Base Camp manager rushed towards me, I would have loved to have uttered those triumphant, many words. But it hadn’t been like that. Rather, I felt that I had crept up and stolen a few brief, precarious moments on the summit, before scuttling back down to the world where I belonged. And besides, our Base Camp manager was a woman. So, instead, I settled for, “Ellie, I’d love a beer.”

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FAR OUT NOVEMBER 2003 55