The Boys of Everest

Chris Bonington and the Tragedy of Climbing's Greatest Generation

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5797 Boys of Everest(fin).indd 3 7/19/06 2:16:39 PM

1

The climbers went to bed early and rose in the dark to stuff ropes and pitons, stove and sleeping bags, tea and scraps of food into their tattered rucksacks. They struggled into boots and crampons and emerged from the relative warmth of the alpine hut to cross the glacier under a sky pocked with stars. The mountains looked to young Chris Bonington like black velvet cutouts against the starlit sky.

Chris and his companion, Hamish MacInnes, shivered as they walked with their burdens. They were silent for the most part. They saw the route—the Southeast Spur of the Pointe de Lépiney, a series of overhangs; it looked impossible to Chris.

He reminded himself that he was becoming a seasoned alpinist; at twenty-three, he'd been climbing for seven years. This season, the summer of 1958, was his second in the French Alps. He was a superb natural climber, and he was ambitious. He didn't look it, though; he looked young, even soft. He was a gangly, brown-haired boy. He had a long face with high cheekbones, full lips and smallish blue eyes. He had a baby's complexion. He was a graduate of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst; he commanded a British tank troop stationed in Germany—still, those overhangs looked hideous.

Hamish was older; he was twenty-seven, just back from his second Himalayan expedition. He didn't seem worried about

the overhangs—but then that was the problem with Hamish: he never worried about anything. He was a lean-faced fellow with hollow cheeks and deep-set eyes, an eccentric who insisted on eating brown bread and who slept on the floor for his health. He had an interest in mountain rescue, but he was himself horribly accident-prone. He'd fractured his skull falling from a climb the previous summer; that same evening he'd gotten drunk and tried to climb a church; he'd fallen again, breaking a leg.

The two climbers roped up and moved across the easy terrain at the bottom of their route. There was something spectacular about these first moments of a day in the mountains. You began walking with a sour stomach, your body cold and stiff. Soon you would start to sweat and wake up. The difficulties lay well ahead and now you were keenly alert to the beauty of this place, of your surroundings; you pitied the people who slept in the valley. Chris was afraid of what might happen, and yet pleased with how things had turned out—he felt as though his story had come to its happy conclusion. And all the while he knew that the range of the day's possible outcomes included his own death, a death that he understood vaguely as a merging with the inky shapes of mountains, discernable in this earliest morning only because their forms blotted out the stars.

They entered a gully next to the face; it let them bypass the worst overhangs. Chris thought they should simply follow the gully to the summit. Hamish brushed this notion aside and led back out onto smooth rock slabs, which required slow and painstaking work.

They climbed until it was nearly dark and spent the night on a ledge under an overhang. Chris tucked himself into a nook in the rock. He had brought a sleeping bag and he wrapped it in plastic sheeting, but he was too cold to sleep.

He was eager to move in the morning, and he led the first pitch.

5797 Boys of Everest(fin).indd 2 7/19/06 2:17:48 PM

He tied one end of the rope to his waist and began to climb. As he moved higher, he looked for cracks in the rock or other spots where he could place protection, mostly metal pitons or wooden wedges. He hung a sling from each new piece of gear, and clipped a carabiner—a gated metal oval—to the sling; that done, he clipped his trailing rope to the carabiner.

The rope now ran from Chris down through each protection point, all the way to Hamish at the start of the pitch. Hamish had passed the rope around his waist. He fed out slack as Chris moved higher; he would hold the rope if Chris fell. The length of the fall would depend upon how far Chris had climbed past his most recent protection; assuming his gear held, he would fall roughly twice that distance.

The climbing here was difficult. Chris was forced to resort to artificial techniques; he tied long slings to wedges and stood on the slings to gain height. That's what he was doing when one of the wedges came out.

He hurtled through sky, utterly disoriented, and then stopped. He was intensely relieved—his lower wedge had held—but dimly aware of a mindless, a physical, disappointment, as if his body had wished to keep falling. He dangled upside down over the glacier. The rope had twisted itself around an ankle and his foot went numb for a moment.

He wrangled himself back onto the rock and climbed again to his high point. He continued past an overhang to finish the pitch, but the next overhang looked harder still. Worse, the weather was turning. The clouds moving toward the climbers looked threatening enough to deter even Hamish, who suggested that it was time to go down.

They moved left and descended easy rock for a time. It brought them to the top of a steep gully. They prepared a rappel, placing a piton for an anchor and feeding their rope through the eye of

5797 Boys of Everest(fin).indd 3 7/19/06 2:17:48 PM

the piton until they reached the rope's midpoint. Hamish tossed the ends of the rope into the gully. Chris straddled the doubled rope and reached back with his right hand to bring the rope up across his chest and over his left shoulder so that it ran down his back. He took the rope in his right hand—his brake hand—and backed down into the gully's invisible depths.

Once in the gully, they couldn't climb out. The walls were too steep. They could not climb down, either; they could only rappel. This meant they must find sites for rappel anchors every 80 feet or so. Otherwise they would be stuck, and they would freeze to death. Dying wouldn't take long; as the day progressed, the gully was turning into a sort of vertical riverbed for a torrent of melted snow.

Hamish rappelled one rope-length to a tiny stance, where he placed a single piton as an anchor. Chris followed him. Both men were wet to the skin. They moved quickly, both reaching to pull on one end of the doubled rope to bring it down for the next rappel. The rope wouldn't budge; it was stuck somewhere over their heads.

A stuck rappel rope is a mountaineer's nightmare. A stuck rappel rope in an alpine waterfall is worse. Hamish tried to climb a slab in the torrent to retrieve the rope, and failed; it was too slippery—a fall here would be fatal. Chris tried, and sheer desperation got him up the slab and out of the main flow of meltwater. He still couldn't free the rope, but now he could think. He stood shaking with cold and anxiety, and realized that he'd have to climb the rope itself.

He wrapped two bits of cord around the doubled rope, using prusik knots. The prusik when weighted will grip a rope, but otherwise will slide easily up it. Chris clipped himself to both knots and then—shifting his weight from one prusik to the other, each time sliding the unweighted knot a bit higher—climbed the

rope to the point where it was wedged. He quickly freed it, and carefully climbed back down to Hamish.

The climbers set up one last rappel, past a bulge of rock. The doubled rope didn't reach the ground; it dangled over the jaws of an enormous bergschrund—a yawning crevasse between the base of the route and the snowfield that lay below. They would have to cross the crevasse somehow. They considered the problem for a moment and concluded that they would have to use the rope to swing across—a sort of Tarzan maneuver—and hope to clear the gap.

Chris balked. He imagined letting go of the rope at the wrong instant, and falling forever into the black, frigid depths of the glacier. Hamish went first, and managed to land on the crumbling edge of the snowfield and maintain his balance. Chris was now even more afraid but he rummaged and came up with what felt like the ghost of a memory—it might have been an old dream—of himself pursued, in flight. He gathered himself and leaped.

He landed well clear of the gap and fell forward into the snow, skidding downhill, scattering chips of half-melted ice so that bits of it got into his eyes. He picked himself up. Hamish was already moving and Chris followed as quickly as he could, feeling suddenly light, almost weightless; he wondered for a moment if he had somehow left his rucksack on the other side of the bergschrund. The bedraggled pair walked downhill for what seemed a long time and at last came to the hut where they had spent the previous night. The caretaker was a young woman; she had made much of the two young climbers—in particular, Hamish.

They were too ashamed to face her. They carried on past the shelter as daylight faded, picking their soaking-wet way down to the empty shepherd's hut they'd occupied for the season; the hut was at Montenvers, still 3,000 feet above Chamonix. They shivered as they walked; the mouths of crevasses loomed beneath them in the shadowed glacier. Chris's weariness now rose in him

like night itself, a deep and inexorable tide so that moving even downhill was like trying to run in deep snow. He walked stiffly, almost staggering; once his knees gave way under the weight of his rucksack, and he collapsed in a momentary heap. He noted from time to time that he was horribly thirsty.

He didn't mind any of it—the shame, the weariness, the thirst. He could barely make them out. He was listening, enthralled, to the high-pitched buzzing of his happiness, to the joy that fairly sang in his bones.

THE TWO YOUNG climbers had met almost six years earlier, when Chris hitchhiked up from London for a taste of Scotland's famous winter climbing. He'd come across Hamish and several of the Scotsman's mates at a climbers' hut. Chris was eighteen. He had quit school after failing an examination, and was awaiting his call-up papers from the Air Force.

Hamish was a different story; at twenty-two, he already cut a figure in British mountaineering circles. Like other young climbers of the day—in particular Scottish ones—he was a troublemaker. He'd done his national service in Austria, climbing in the Alps and learning to use pitons for aid: hammering pegs into the rock and clipping slings to them; standing in the slings to reach up and hammer another peg in. He had brought the technique home to Scotland, where he pegged his way up difficult climbs over the objections of traditionalists, who thought such devices were a form of cheating. Their complaints—they dubbed the young man Hamish MacPiton—served mainly to encourage him.

He often plucked his partners from the ranks of newcomers to the climbing scene. Such innocents didn't yet know better than to accept his invitations, which typically involved them in some absurdly ambitious and perilous venture. Hamish would adopt a wistful manner; he would gaze stoically into the middle distance

5797 Boys of Everest(fin).indd 6 7/19/06 2:17:49 PM

and speak as if to himself, describing some soul-destroying route as *a plum, a real beauty; it's nothing too hard, really, barely worth the bother, but still . . .*

Hamish saw the young Chris Bonington as a potential recruit. The other Scots drinking tea in the climbing hut that day in the winter of 1952 regarded the English boy in quite another light—as an object of mild contempt. They were part of climbing's emerging elite, a club-centered culture composed largely of working class lads who were terrible snobs; they despised any climber with a new pair of boots, let alone an expensive education. They certainly weren't inclined to befriend this young Englishman with his rosy cheeks and his upper-class accent; as one climber remarked, the poor lad looked like he'd been raised in a fucking doll's house.

In fact, he'd grown up in boarding schools, and with women. His father had left when Chris was an infant. His mother and his maternal grandmother fought over the boy after that; between schools, he lived with one or the other, depending upon his mother's mental state. He'd emerged from those difficulties as the sort of earnest and self-absorbed young person, slightly fussy, who sometimes gets himself disliked.

He seemed vulnerable—even a bit fearful—but he was a bold climber. He was self-conscious and ambitious; he carried in his head a picture of himself and he wished to live up to it. He wanted to be accomplished and he wanted to behave well. He wanted his way, and he wanted to be liked—admired—by men he respected. The complexity of his agenda set him apart and made him hard to understand.

He had discovered climbing almost by accident. He was already sixteen when he traveled to Ireland to visit his paternal grandfather near Dublin for two weeks. The old man had run off to sea as a boy and had seen the world, finishing his career working with

Aborigines as a member of the British forestry service. Chris's journey to Ireland offered the teenager a glimpse of the mountains that lined the Welsh coast. He stopped on his way home to visit an aunt who happened to own a book of mountain photographs, and the pictures of Great Britain's various ranges impressed the boy deeply. He returned to school that fall and talked a friend into hitchhiking to Wales that Christmas. The two of them floundered around in the snow on Snowdon, eventually triggering an avalanche that might easily have carried them both off a cliff.

Chris found it all enthralling—the danger, the weather, the mountains themselves. He convinced a family friend to take him rock climbing near London. Chris loved that as well. Something—an interior buoyance as mysterious as gravity itself—rose up in him when he climbed.

He was soon seeking out more serious partners for harder climbs. He was still a teenager, and he had a talent for playing the protégé, finding and enlisting mentors who could teach him what he needed to know. Chris by the time he met Hamish MacInnes was a climber of sorts, one well-suited to the Scotsman's purposes: eager and talented, surprisingly bold but still willing to let the more experienced man take the lead.

The two young men roped up together for the first time a week or so after their initial meeting. The climb was a terrifying experience for Chris—the first of many he was to endure under his new mentor. Hamish had a frightening enthusiasm for new and difficult routes, and he often climbed long distances without placing protection. He had impressive powers of endurance, and seemed impervious to cold. Chris on one occasion that winter followed his new friend up a gully, emerging soaked from a torrent of melting snow. Hamish, holding the rope, stood in the snow in his socks; he'd taken his boots off to climb a difficult bit of

iced-over rock. Chris, through chattering teeth, asked Hamish if his feet weren't cold.

No, replied Hamish. *I can't feel them.*

They made several climbs that first winter in Scotland. Chris left to report for his military service with the Air Force. He spent roughly a year with the RAF, including a stint at the Royal Air Force College, Cranwell, during the autumn of 1953. His Air Force experience ended in disappointment when he washed out of pilot training the following spring. He had terrible trouble trying to land the plane; strangely enough, he couldn't tell how far away the ground was.

He transferred to the army. The transition period left him free to spend the summer in Wales, where he climbed a series of increasingly difficult rock routes. He entered the Royal Military College, Sandhurst in the fall of 1954. He had always had an interest in military games and history, and he liked Sandhurst. He polished his accent and bought a bowler hat and umbrella for trips to London. He also became a leading figure in the Sandhurst Mountaineering Club. He put up new routes in the Avon Gorge in Bristol—a 200-mile round trip from school—and made more trips to Wales. He was becoming a fluent climber; he would take his time to sort out a route, and then climb it with a minimum of fuss. He wasn't what you'd call a rock athlete, but he was very smooth.

He finished the eighteen-month Sandhurst course in early 1956, and the army sent him to Germany to take command of a troop of tanks. He made his first foray to the Alps in the summer of 1957. The idea—Hamish's, of course—was to climb the North Face of the Eiger, a 6,000-foot wall of crumbling black rock, punctuated by huge, steep fields of ice and snow; by most accounts, it was the most dangerous climb in Europe.

Chris was vastly relieved when the weather turned bad low

on the route, forcing Hamish to admit defeat. Hamish had other wild ideas, though. For starters, he wanted Chris to join him on the almost equally daunting Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses. Bad weather again came to the rescue; the Walker remained plastered with fresh snow. The two friends waited three days at their campsite before snatching the first ascent of a minor route, a rock buttress some 1,500 feet high. The descent, unroped, frightened Chris; still, he had completed his first route in the Alps. He returned to his tank troop the next day, glad to have escaped his first alpine adventure with his life.

And now, a year later, he was back for his second alpine season. He'd met Hamish in Chamonix in early July. The two of them had immediately moved up to occupy their rickety but rent-free shepherd's hut at Montenvers. Chris was growing tired of army life after another winter of training and military routine. Hamish was lean and tan; he'd spent part of the winter searching for the Yeti in India's Valley of the Gods.

The two climbers were utterly broke, living mainly on stolen tank rations and figs—and once again, Chris was in fear of his life. The failure on the Pointe de Lépiney—with its hideous overhangs and near-fatal waterfall gully—had been only the start of their season. Their horrifying epic had been a warm-up, a mere exercise.

Hamish had big plans.

5797 Boys of Everest(fin).indd 10 7/19/06 2:17:51 PM