SIR EDMUND HILLARY

1919 – 2008

The death of Sir Edmund Hillary is a time for sadness, reflection and gratitude. As the first man to reach the summit of Mount Everest 29 May 1953, Sir Edmund didn’t rest on his laurels but went on to achieve much more in mountaineering and exploration.

Subsequently, it was in his humanitarian work for the people of Nepal and the Sherpas in particular, that gave Sir Edmund lifelong satisfaction. As Burra Sahib to the Sherpas, he built schools, hospitals, bridges, air-strips and water systems.

For six weeks in 1973, I was in a small party of New Zealanders led by Sir Edmund the main objective of which was to build at Salleri the first secondary school in the programme. For me as a mountaineer and an amateur “chippie” this experience was a huge privilege.

We camped in tents, ate heartily, talked and laughed plenty and worked hard. The Sherpas were people with immense abilities and humour. We had nailing races when putting down the floor boards. As I had a beard at the time the Sherpas dubbed me Yeti sahib.

Sir Edmund was a natural leader and organiser who delegated easily and effectively. He was thoroughly “hands on” immersing himself in all the construction work. Beaming with his huge grin he was chuffed when I knocked up some saw horses. When Sir Edmund’s brother Rex arrived, a solar water heating system was installed at Khunde Hospital.

Sir Edmund packed a huge amount into his long life enduring many triumphs and tragedies. He was a man of considerable intelligence, fitness and focus. He was a deep thinker with a great empathy for people and the environment. He abhorred humbug especially in politicians and expressed much concern about crass materialism and the downside effects on contemporary society. His utterance that we live in a “poverty of affluence” is remarkably astute.

Most of all, Sir Edmund was a committed husband, father and family man. As a gentleman, he was an exemplar with high personal ethics and self discipline. I remember how in the hills of Nepal he would faithfully pen letters and write up his diary usually following breakfast each morning.

One of Sir Edmund’s enduring legacies will be his writings in his books. For a most busy man but as a most keen observer, he found time to write several books that give not only detailed accounts of his endeavours but also splendid insights into the contemplations of this most remarkable man.

Some examples from his autobiography “Nothing Venture, Nothing Win” (Hodder and Stoughton, 1975) are:
“I have had the world lie between my clumsy boots and seen the red sun slip over the horizon after the dark Antarctic winter. I have had more than my share of excitement, beauty, laughter and friendship.”

“Each of us has to discover his own path – of that I am sure. Some paths will be spectacular and others peaceful and quiet – who is to say which is the most important? For me the most rewarding moments have not always been the great moments – for what can surpass a tear on your departure, joy on your return, or a trusting hand in yours?”

“If my life finished tomorrow I would have little cause for complaint – I have gathered a few successes, a handful of honours and more love and laughter than I probably deserve.”

Robert A. Bruce

14 January 2008