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Those who have stood atop Everest make an exclusive club. Three recall their rite of initiation.

By ALEX WARD

In the 50 years since Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay first conquered Mount Everest, on May 29, 1953, more than 1,650 climbers have stood atop the world's highest peak. Eighty-nine people did it in one day alone, May 23, 2001. (The total for that year was 182.)

Nonetheless, surmounting Everest's 29,035 feet remains one of the great mythic achievements, an undisputable display of skill and courage against ice and rock, bottomless chasms, body-numbing temperatures and tent-shredding winds, all in an oxygen-deprived danger zone five and a half miles up in Nepal. Whatever the numbers, this is an elite group.

Here are three who belong to it.

DR. THOMAS F. HORNBEIN, professor emeritus at the University of Washington School of Medicine, Seattle. Reached the summit on May 22, 1963.

In 1963, Tom Hornbein was a 32-year-old Navy doctor stationed in San Diego when he was recruited for what would become the first American team to scale Everest. The Navy twice turned down his request for an unpaid leave of absence to make the trip, but Willi Unsoeld, a legendary climber who

was to be his partner, pulled strings. "Willi had just been named to head the Peace Corps in Nepal," Dr. Hornbein recalled recently. "So he spoke to his boss, a guy named Sargent Shriver."

Mr. Shriver, the director of the Peace Corps, spoke with the Navy's boss, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and shortly thereafter an admiral called Dr. Hornbein to say he could take an early discharge and go.

An accomplished mountaineer with Himalayan experience, Dr. Hornbein was also an anesthesiologist who had researched how humans function at high altitudes. He designed an oxygen mask for his team that was both more effective and easier to use than the standard pilot's mask most climbers wore at the time, and he got Maytag to produce it. He stipulated, however, that on this expedition he did not want to be the only physician; he wanted to be free to climb.

Tom Hornbein's wish was granted and the 20-man team ended up with three doctors. On May 21, he and Mr. Unsoeld, who had been proceeding up Everest's West Ridge until trapped by a windstorm, set out for the

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In the 50 years since it was first done, fewer than 1,700 people have climbed to the top of Mount Everest. Among them are from left, Glen Porzak, Phil and Susan Ershler, and Dr. Thomas F. Hornbein.

top from the tiny platform, called Camp 5W, that they had established at 27,300 feet, along the narrowest, steepest part of a crevice on the North Face that has since been named Hornbein Couloir. ("They should have called it 'Hornbein's avalanche trap,'" he said.)

The West Ridge route, which had never been attempted before, is a steep rockface, and their ascent was slow and perilous. At 6:15 on the evening of May 22, the pair became the fifth and sixth members of the team to reach the top.

About 20 minutes later, they started down the south side, where they were to link up with Barry Bishop, a National Geographic photographer, and Lute Jerstad, who had reached the top the day before via the south summit, the approach of Sir Edmund and Mr. Norgay. (Jim Whittaker, the first American, had made the summit on May 1, along with a Sherpa, Nawang Gombu.)

The descent was harrowing. "It was very dark and we were stumbling along, not seeing a thing," Dr. Hornbein recalled. "We just started yelling, and Barry and Lute, who had run out of gas too and started back down, heard us and guided us to them."

Their oxygen almost depleted, the four men spent the night without shelter on a

rock outcropping at 27,500 feet. Mr. Unsoeld eventually lost nine toes to frostbite; Mr. Bishop lost all of his, plus the tips of both little fingers.

Dr. Hornbein, the only one of the four still living, remains an active climber at 72. He recounted his adventure in a 1963 book, "Everest: The West Ridge" (The Mountaineers Books, \$17.95), but has never returned. "It was an incredible experience," he said, "but when I left, I made the decision not to go back. I was just starting my academic career. I needed to get on with my life."

In 1967, the climber and filmmaker David Breashears used his oxygen mask for an ascent, Dr. Hornbein said, "so my mask has been to the top twice."

GLENN PORZAK, lawyer, Denver. Reached the summit on May 10, 1990.

For Glenn Porzak, the third attempt on Everest was the charm. After ferocious winds kept him from the top in 1981 and 1989, Mr. Porzak organized eight of his friends into an expedition in 1990 with the dual goals of climbing Everest and Lotse, the 27,890-foot peak just to the south, which no American had yet conquered.

"We figured if we started with Everest, guys would lose interest, so we wanted to put two people on top of Lotse first," said

the 54-year-old Mr. Porzak, whose law specialty is Western water issues.

The plan was to set up a camp at 22,000 feet, from which the Lotse climbers would go first; when they returned, the others would start for the top of Everest, along the Southeast Ridge. But again, the weather refused to cooperate.

An early try in April was thwarted by winds that were so bad the group retreated all the way to the Everest base camp, at 17,600 feet. They kept trying, returning five times to the higher elevation, but were met by huge winds every time.

On the fifth try, the jetstream set in again, and winds reached 140 miles an hour, pinning everyone down at 26,500 feet.

On May 9, the storm suddenly cleared out, Mr. Porzak said, and the Everest climbers decided to go first, setting out at 11 p.m. "It was very cold, 30 below zero," he recalled, "but the wind was pretty calm, only about 10 miles an hour."

The climbers, five Americans and three Sherpas, proceeded through a clear night illuminated by an enormous electrical storm over the plains of India, hundreds of miles away.

"It was a sight I'll never forget," said Mr. Porzak, who has scaled the highest peak of all seven continents. "All that light was

flashing over my left shoulder, but it was so distant there wasn't a sound at all."

At sunrise, the group was 500 feet from their destination; they arrived at 7:15.

A sixth member of Mr. Porzak's team made it to the top the next day, May 11. On their way down, Mr. Porzak and his fellow climbers passed the remaining team members, heading toward the Lotse summit. They reached it on May 13.

SUSAN ERSHLER, sales director, Seattle. Reached the summit on May 16, 2002.

Sue Ershler's husband, Phil, is a professional mountain guide. But Ms. Ershler, a 47-year-old executive with Kinko's in Seattle, is not exactly a slouch herself. She got hooked on climbing in the early '90's, shortly after the two met (they married in 1996), and since then has, like Mr. Porzak, also become a Seven Summiteer.

Everest was the last of the seven, and as with the others, her husband was there, too, making them the first married couple in that club.

"Phil and I were together constantly," she said of the Everest ascent, "and it was a beautiful sunny day when we got to the top. To see that view with someone you really care about is almost indescribable."

Ms. Ershler speaks in upbeat tones, but like most people who reach the top of Ever-

est she worked hard to get there, spending years mastering the rock- and ice-climbing skills and equipment such an endeavor requires and putting in her time at extreme altitudes, over 24,000 feet. She's climbed to the top of more than 30 mountains of 14,000 feet or more, and in the year leading up to her triumph, she spent nearly every weekday running and lifting weights and every weekend hiking the highest nearby trails.

A year before their successful ascent, in fact, the Ershlers were also on Everest, and came very close to the top, 27,600 feet, when Mr. Ershler's eyes began to freeze, forcing them to turn back.

"Two members of our group did stand on top, so that was great," she said of the 2001 trip, "but it was tough from an individual point of view."

With all seven summits behind her, Ms. Ershler said, "Right now I'm just working." She still loves the thrill of climbing, she said, but does not miss the hardships, including the constant thin-air headaches that make sleeping difficult.

"Two and a half months is a long time to be uncomfortable," she said, referring to the time an assault on the world's highest mountain usually takes. "When I go up Mount Rainier, I know I'm going to be back home in a shower soon." ■