

Our Ultimate Interview –



MAKE no excuses for my efforts when we interviewed Sir Ed; it was my worst professional performance without a doubt. The reason is simple; it is impossible not to be overcome by the occasion. You can tell yourself to relax, and believe me, he and Lady Hillary treat you as a friend, not an imposition, but the simple fact is that he is the man. In our life time and I'm equally sure, not in my future grandchildren's lifetime, will we ever see a New Zealander as great. That makes it just about impossible to do anything other than accept that the all too short time spent in Sir Ed and Lady Hillary's company will be something you will savour for a lifetime. I sat on Sir Ed's floor with the two most important people in my life and was thoroughly enthralled...

What makes him great has nothing to do with conquering Everest; what endears him to us all is what he did with that success. He doesn't live in a huge building befitting someone of such enormous mana, instead the couple live in a very pleasant property in Remuera, overlooking the inner Gulf. It is a house with a sense of history; there are scattered pictures of Nepal, comfortable furniture that has clearly been collected during their travels, and books and documents holding some of our most important history. We had the feeling that arriving back from a trip away would truly be arriving home, not just getting back to the house.

How we came to be there was simple. Recently we sat around discussing who we would like to/should interview for the magazine. Both Barbara and I had the same person at the top of our wish list. Now to be honest, I had no idea whether Sir Edmund is or had been a fisherman. However, I figured someone with such a history in the outdoors had to have had an involvement, even if only fleeting. After all, there was that amazing jetboat trip up the length of the Ganges. Clearly he had an affinity with non-frozen water too.

Without telling the others, I decided to find his contact details and see what I could stitch together.

During the recent Auckland Boatshow, I was in our storeroom organising more magazines when Barbara handed me a phonecall. It was Lady Hillary and yes, Sir Ed would love to meet with us as he was off to Fiji, and would be fishing, later that month. It was fully a couple of minutes before I left the storeroom; I had to take in what had just happened. I arrived back on the stand complete with huge smile. If I thought I was excited that was nothing compared to Devon and Barbara's reaction... She hadn't realised who was on the phone and couldn't believe we were about to meet our hero.

It was near-impossible to keep the level of excitement under control over the intervening few days. Devon, at eight, already a thoroughly well-read kid, had his Sir Ed book out all ready to sign, and a list of questions written for his interview. For Barbara, it was an even more special meeting; as a kid she got to hear the Great Man speak and it was a life changing experience. That one speech showed her that there were dreams and opportunities for everyone, and set her on course for life. I'm sure there are many other people who have been inspired by his achievements.

we talk fishing with Sir Ed...

We arrived with morning tea to be greeted at the door by Lady Hillary. Every world famous explorer should have their own Lady Hillary, she is amazing! Thoroughly organised, totally on top of the game and with a long list of her own personal achievements, she is worthy of her own interview. Then she took us downstairs to the kitchen to meet her husband.

It would take someone far better with words than me to put on to paper what it feels like to shake Sir Edmund Hillary's hand in introduction and to present your own family to him. As a journalist, I think that moment may well be the most memorable of my career; I can think of no other living human being whose career and humanitarian works has touched our lives so deeply. He is getting old now, although I hope I get to age with the same grace and dignity he possesses. Though age apparently hasn't taken a thing away from the man we have grown up with and want to meet, there is deliberateness to his answers and a difficulty of hearing that slows the conversation.

While we went through to that welcoming lounge, Lady Hillary organised a cup of tea and the cream buns. Devon asked Sir Ed his list of questions. I think they were impressed "he's only eight? He wrote those questions himself?" Then we talked fishing. And yes, he does fish. In fact the first thing we did was make a date to fish out of Auckland a few weeks hence. As happens when the boys get together the questions were predictable; where do you fish? "Each year we go to Fiji. We always fish there, not always successfully. Sometimes it's good." So what's your biggest fish? "It was 27lb, what do you call them..." A wahoo? "That's it! Where's that photo June (Lady Hillary)?" What about here in New Zealand? "We had a family place on the west coast near White's Beach. I've fished on that coast a bit. It can get wild out there".

How about the trip up the Ganges; was there any opportunity to fish on that journey? "Well, fairly quickly in the piece we ran into dead bodies. Their tradition is to push them into the river you know. It has huge religious significance. It didn't seem right and with all those bodies floating past..." That left a very pregnant pause as we contemplated that scenario... So what about the rest of the family, do any of the grandkids fish? "One of them will be coming with us to Fiji. He loves it".

It was at about this point that I changed direction and got it wrong. It seems Sir Ed was really looking forward to talking fishing, however the two women were out in the garden and I thought it impolite not to engage the man on his subjects. Not Everest, that has been done to death, but other things. I've also read that he likes to be challenged, not surprising really, I'm sure he's had 50 years of the same questions about the big mountain.

So, climate change, is it a myth and part of the natural cycle of things, or is it of real concern? "There are so many of our glaciers melting and landscapes changing. Yes, it is a real problem". So

who are your heroes and influences? "Scott, Shackleton. A few others. These were true explorers. I wanted to be like them". There was one incident I remember reading in your book 'The World's Worst Journey'. You and Peter Mulgrew (former husband of Lady Hillary) were crossing the Windless Bight, described as one of the worse pieces of real estate in the world, trying to find Scott's camp. You were both in the tent realising you'd got it wrong. Suddenly both of you figured out where you thought the

camp should be, got your gear back on again and went out in separate directions. You found it. What's it like to experience a moment like that, to be part of and create history? "It was great to find it. The camp had all the test tubes and equipment Scott had set up and just as they left it. It's amazing to think they lived there". Come on Sir Ed, I can't imagine it was like that; I've read your accounts! Two kiwi boys

in a tent, ruthlessly competitive, absolute determination to be right and find the camp first. The challenge would have been too good to miss! You were both so sure you were right even though it wasn't where it was supposed to be and you both had completely opposite ideas. I can just picture it... That just elicited a smile from Sir Ed!

So tell me about Neil Armstrong. The two of you shared a journey to the North Pole. What sort of a man is he? "Yes, we flew to the North Pole. We also shared a night together at the pole. He spoke openly and freely. He is a very good person". Can you imagine what that must have been like? Two of the greatest explorers of the modern era sharing their stories together like two old friends. How great would it be to have such an experience...

Our time was drawing to a close. We talked some more about the political changes in Nepal and Barbara arranged the details of a school class exchange with Lady Hillary. The school building programme is still ongoing, mainly in maintaining the buildings and resources. We learnt that until only recently Lady Hillary had still been taking groups trekking each year across the lower slopes of Nepal, and that they both still visit the country once a year. She is an amazing lady. It's incredible to think that the disaster of two air tragedies (Sir Ed's first wife and a daughter died in a light plane crash in Nepal, while Peter Mulgrew was aboard the ill-fated Erebus flight) brought them together. They really are such a good partnership.

With the fishing trip pencilled in we said our good byes. They both came to the door to see us off. We felt like we'd just left a visit with old friends. Sir Ed and Lady Hillary totally exemplify the fantastic people who built this country and we revere as true heroes. They still work tirelessly for others. We left in a state of unreality; even a few days later it's hard to believe that we actually sat in the Hillary lounge and shared his adventures.

This was my ultimate interview. Sir Edmund Hillary is everything I wanted him to be and then some. I feel privileged to have met him.

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