Sir Edmund Percival Hillary KG, ONZ, KBE – Timeline

1919 – Edmund Hillary was born on July 20th, Tuakau, South of Auckland, New Zealand. His parents were Gertrude (nee Clark) and Percival Augustus Hillary. He was the middle of three children with an older sister June b1917 and younger brother Wrexford Fleming Hillary (known as Rex) b1920.

1935 – His first exposure to the mountains came when he went on an Auckland Grammar school skiing trip to Mt Ruapehu in the Tongariro National Park.

1939 – Climbed his first non-technical peak – Mt Ollivier in the Sealy Range in the Mount Cook National Park.

1943-1945 – WWII RNZAF - Served as a navigator on Catalina Flying Boats in the Pacific, but was repatriated back to New Zealand after receiving serious burns. Click here for 5 Squadron Photo: http://www.5sqnassn.org.nz/gallery.html

He became an associate member of the New Zealand Alpine Club on January 1st, 1945 and made ascents of Kitchener, Sealy, De la Beche, Hamilton and Malte Brun in that year.

1946 – January 19th ascended the Minarets and De la Beche, January 20th Aguille Rouge, January 26th – Gray Peak and Haidinger. Made his first ascent of Mt Cook (High Peak) with guide, Harry Ayres on January 30th and then ascended Dixon on February 1st, followed by Silberhorn, Teichelmann and Clark Saddle February 4th

In June of 1946, Ed, who had already made two prior winter ascents of Tapuaenuku 9640ft, alongside brother Rex and A Robb set out on a traverse of the Kaikoura Range from Awatere over the summit of Tapuaenuku to the Dee and Clarence Rivers. A very cold and icy trip that resulted in some important lessons learned the hard way, in such wintry conditions. More info: “Inland Kaikouras” by E P Hillary NZAC Alpine Journal 1947

1947 – On the 16th of April, Ed became a full member of the New Zealand Alpine Club

1948 – Mt Cook Low Peak – the first ascent of the South Ridge was achieved on February 6th at 1:45pm. The climbing party was led by Harry Ayres and consisted of Ruth Adams, Ed Hillary and Mick Sullivan. More info: “South Ridge of Mt Cook” by E P Hillary NZAC Alpine Journal 1948

On February 9th, Hillary with Mick Sullivan, Ruth Adams and Harry Ayres were to ascend La Perouse, however Ruth fell and the resulting dramatic rescue operation was recounted by Hillary in his article “Rescue on La Perouse” also in the 1948 Journal.
Extract following reproduced by kind permission of Norman Hardie, from his Autobiography “On My Own Two Feet” published in 2006 by Canterbury University Press

“Two weeks later Ed Hillary arrived a Pukaki, requesting a job for a few months until there was a good fall of snow. Then he would leave for some skiing. Sometimes I had him with my survey group, and at others he was working at the main dam excavation area. Together we made some pleasant outings on local mountains. Ed and I both talked of Himalayan ambitions, but they seemed a long way away in 1948, and beyond our price range. We did have two days skis on the Ball Glacier, assisted by a towrope hauled by a Ford 10 motor. The skis had no edges and the bindings were near lethal if one had a bad fall.”

1949 – Winter ski-mountaineering with brother Rex, travelling with Bert Barley and Fred Edwards from Lake Tekapo in a “four-cylinder 1920 model with a van body constructed the previous afternoon out of Hermitage wallboard” on a 36-mile trip up the side of Lake Tekapo to Lilybank Station. The next morning setting out up the Godley with the aim of reaching the Sealy Pass. Later, crossing the Tasman, up the Classen Icefall, down into the Murchison and on towards the Tasman Saddle and Malte Brun Hut. After returning to Lilybank Rex returned home and the party went on to ascend Elie de Beaumont and Wilczek. This was followed by a trip up the Hooker to Harper Saddle. In September he was part of a weekend ski-mountaineering trip up to Malte Brun. More info: “Ski-mountaineering in Winter” by E P Hillary NZAC Alpine Journal 1950


Ascent of Pibrac with George Lowe.
Made the first crossings, with George Lowe, Ed Cotter, Bill Beaven and Earl Riddiford, of the Whymper and Callery Saddles in December.

1951 – January 3rd made the first ascent, by the Maximilian Range Ridge (from Burton Glacier), of Elie de Beaumont with George Lowe, Ed Cotter and Earl Riddiford.

Joined the first all NZ Expedition to the Garhwal Himalaya. A full account: “The Approach to Garhwal and Two Attempts on Nilkanta” an article by H E Riddiford can be found in the June 1952 NZAC Alpine Journal, followed by “A New Approach to Everest” written by Ed on the dual purpose of the expedition:
1. to see if a practicable route existed up the mountain from the southern, or Nepalese side and
2. to find out if the post-monsoon snow conditions were suitable for a major attack on the peak.

1952 – While the Swiss made an attempt on Everest, Eric Shipton led a party of ten that included Ed Hillary, on an unsuccessful attempt at Cho Oyu. The climb objective was not only to summit Cho Oyu, but to develop a pool of climbers who would prove themselves capable of functioning at altitudes of over 24 000 feet with a view to future Everest expeditions. It was also made to carry out experiments at high altitudes with the existing oxygen apparatus available at the time.
While unsuccessful on Cho Oyu, Ed along with George Lowe left some of the main returning party and carried on with their two Sherpas to ascend eight peaks to the north of the Kyetrak Glacier. On the summit of a 22 600 peak, Ed describes, “We were facing directly into a howling blizzard which had already completely obscured all our steps and crampon marks. Our faces and beards completely froze, glasses fogged up and we literally felt our way down on a tight rope. Fortunately our down clothing and wind proofs kept us warm in the body, but it was none too soon when we finally dropped down over the shoulder and commenced cramponing straight down the face in a flurry of wind and snow.” Taken from Ed Hillary’s article in the 1953 NZAC Alpine Journal.

After returning and a few days rest, Ed and George traversed the Nup La to attempt an ascent of Changtse. They followed this up with an Exploration of the Barun peaks. This adventure ending in the Sedua Village perched 4 000 feet above the Arun River. Upon leaving it was decided to make a raft of their air beds lashed together. Whirlpools and waves hindered their journey with Ed occasionally shouting out remarks such as, “How long can we last on a chocolate bar?” and “Obviously we can’t go on like this forever” when they were being swept around six times in an eddy. More info: “The Barun Exploration” by George Lowe NZAC Alpine Journal 1953

1953 – May 29th, Hillary and Sherpa, Tenzing Norgay successfully achieved the first ascent of Mt Everest. Full accounts of this amazing feat can be read in the NZAC Alpine Journals from 1954 on, including extracts from Hillary’s diary.

Following is an extract on the final stages of the ascent: “We commenced plugging up in foot-deep steps with a thin wind crust on top and precious little belay for the ice axe. It was altogether most unsatisfactory, but whenever I felt feelings of fear regarding it, I’d say to myself, “Forget it! This is Everest and you’ve got to take a few risks!”

They moved onto the summit at 11:30am. “Tenzing and I shook hands and then he threw his arms around my shoulders. It was quite a moment! I took off my oxygen and for ten minutes I photographed first Tenzing holding up the flags on his ice axe and then down the various ridges of the mountain. I left a little crucifix on top for John Hunt, and Tenzing left some food offerings in a hole in the snow. I was a little worried by the oxygen supply so after 15 minutes on top we turned back along the ridge.”

On their return: “We kicked steps down the lower portions and then cramponed very weakly down to meet George Lowe. The sight of his familiar countenance and the sound of his harsh New Zealand voice made me realise that we were down and safe, and relief flooded through me.”

Internationally, Sir Ed’s achievement was recognised by the Queen who made him a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire (KBE). She also consulted with the Nepalese Government to award the George Medal to Sherpa Tenzing, who could not be knighted as he was not a British subject.

President Eisenhower of the United Stages of America presented the National Geographical Society’s Hubbard Medal for distinguished exploration to Sir John Hunt and Sir Edmund Hillary who accepted it on behalf of the 1953 Everest Expedition.
Sir Ed returned to NZ and was made a Life Member of the NZAC for his outstanding achievement. He married Louise Rose (daughter of the then President of the NZAC, Jim Rose) on the 3rd September in the Chapel of the Diocesan School for Girls, Auckland. Together they had three children, Peter (1954), Sarah (1955) and Belinda (1959). Louise became an associate member of the NZAC in 1951, but tragically, she and Belinda were killed in a 1975 plane crash in Nepal.

1954 – Son Peter Hillary born

Sir Ed Hillary was chosen to lead the New Zealand Alpine Club Himalayan Expedition of 1954. This event was a first, not only for the New Zealand Alpine club, but also for Sir Ed at leading and Expedition. Preparations began upon his return to NZ in August of 1953. Two British climbers were invited to join the party, Charles Evans and Michael Ball (Expedition doctor). Apart from George Lowe the remainder were chosen from applications received from NZAC members. Those chosen were… Bill Beaven, Norman Hardie, Geoff Harrow, Jim McFarlane, Colin Todd and Brian Wilkins.

1955 – Daughter Sarah Hillary born

5th February, Harry Ayres guided a party consisting of Ed Hillary, Gillies and Herron, to a first ascent of Mt Magellan in the Balfour range via the ridge from Teichelmann, the summit of which was traversed both ways. The climb was from Haast Hut.


Sir Ed was a member of this Expedition, led by Sir Vivian Fuchs, which completed the first crossing, since Robert Falcon Scott, of the South Pole from the Weddell Sea to the Ross Sea. More info: NZAC Journals 1956 & 58

1959 – Daughter Belinda Hillary born

1960 – Led the Himalayan Scientific and Mountaineering Expedition of 1960-61. The purpose of the expedition was primarily scientific with the study of high altitude physiology and the hunt for the elusive Yeti, or Abominable Snowman, the focus. There were two main groups, the Yeti Party and the Hut Construction Party. The latter’s purpose was to construct two huts in the Mingbo Valley immediately south of Ama Dablam, one at 17 000ft and another at 20 000 ft. Hillary, as Leader of the Yeti Party searched high and low for signs of the elusive creature. However it was felt that most clues and previous reports could be explained by poor identification of known animals in the region. More info: “Himalayan Scientific and Mountaineering Expedition 1960-1961” by N D Hardie NZAC Alpine Journal 1961

1961 – Sir Ed made his second attempt on Mt Makalu, where seven years earlier he had become seriously ill at 22 000ft and had to be evacuated. Unfortunately, again the mountain was to be his undoing and on the 8th May it was reported that at Camp II, Hillary had suffered a mild stroke and would need immediate evacuation. Over the next few days he descended to 15 000ft under the care of Dr Milledge and the leadership of the expedition passed to Ward. The acclimatisation theories of the expedition had not worked out and the summit remained as elusive to Hillary as the Yeti had been. He went on to make a complete recovery and was actually on his way back up when he met up with the returning party members. More info: “Makalu” by J Harrison NZAC Alpine Journal 1961
Sir Ed built his first school in Khumjung, Nepal. The start of many projects in Nepal that would later become the Himalayan Trust.

1963 – The Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition was led by Sir Ed to expand his aid work that started in 1961 with the building of the first school in the Khumbu Region. The main objects were school building and the construction of a water supply for Khumjung village. More info: “The Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition 1963” by J G Wilson NZAC Alpine Journal 1963

1964 – The Second Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition of September-December visited the Solu-Khumbu region of Nepal. Led by Sir Ed, the principal objective was the erection of schools and three were completed at Junbesi in the Solu area, Chaunrikaraka in the Pharak area and at Namche Bazar the chief town of the Khumbu proper. Good Sherpa teachers were recruited and schoolwork was progressing well. The children learn to read and write in Nepali as their first language, with some of the brighter pupils already speaking English well. A standard curriculum was followed.

An airfield was built at Lukla, the expedition base camp, plus two bridges were completed at the southern approaches to Namche Bazar. More info: “Himalayan Schoolhouse Expedition” by Richard Stewart NZAC Alpine Journal 1965


1967 – NZ Antarctic Expedition 1967 – Ed Hillary-Leader; Norman Hardie-Deputy Leader and Surveyor; Larry Harrington-Senior Geologist; Graham Hancox-Geologist; Murray Ellis, Bruce Jenkinson, Mike White, Mike Gill and Peter Strang. Permission for this expedition was granted only after evidence was provided that they were willing to do a certain amount of scientific work alongside their mountaineering. The party completed a successful programme and a first ascent of Mt Herschel was a major achievement. More info: “Herschel from Hallett, NZ Antarctic Expedition 1967” by Norman Hardie, Bruce Jenkinson and Peter Strang, NZAC Alpine Journal 1968

At the conclusion of Sir Ed's term as President of the New Zealand Alpine Club in 1967, he wrote the following within his message of thanks to the Club’s members. ".....To retain its vitality the Club must actively encourage the spirit of adventure amongst its members-persuade them according to their capabilities to seek out new routes, new peaks, new places to explore; support them wholeheartedly in overseas expeditions; devote time and effort to improving their skills and their techniques. There are still many unclimbed peaks in the Himalayas, the Antarctic and South America waiting for the resourceful and the enthusiastic. Since the ascent of Everest in 1953 world-mountaineering has taken a giant leap forward. The same progress will probably happen in the next 15 years and the Club can help ensure that its members make as useful a contribution to world mountaineering in the future as they have done in the past." E P Hillary, President

Sir Ed flew to the North Pole with astronaut Neil Armstrong, becoming the first person to visit the northernmost, southernmost and highest points in the world.

Lady Louise Hillary (nee Rose) b 3 September 1930 Auckland and daughter Belinda Hillary b 1959, were killed in a plane crash on 31 March 1975. They were flying to Solu in Nepal onboard an RNAC Pilatus Porter aeroplane that crashed not long after take-off. Sir Ed, who was working on the Paphlu Hospital project at the time, had been waiting for their arrival on the air-strip when a helicopter landed, bringing him the tragic news. Obituary: NZAC Alpine Journal 1975

The building of the Paphlu Hospital, Nepal September 1975. More info: “Paphlu Hospital” by Lindsay Strang NZAC Alpine Journal 1976


Ed’s Indo-NZ Jet-boating Expedition up the Ganges from the Bay of Bengal to its source in the Himalayas Aug-Oct 1977. The party took water from the mouth of the Ganges in the hope of releasing it at the source to repeat its journey to the sea. The pilgrimage ended just short of its destination just below Nandaprayag where they met with a waterfall. That stage of the journey had taken 6 weeks.

The next part was to be an attempt at Nar Parbat and a first ever fully New Zealand Himalayan Expedition. The Ganges party met up with Peter Hillary and Murray Jones at high camp, 5,500m, who had gone up a week beforehand. Unfortunately, Ed became very ill and was diagnosed with altitude sickness. In need of immediate evacuation, the party managed to get Ed down to a safer level where his condition began to improve and he was able to be airlifted out by helicopter. The original party then separated with Peter Hillary, Murray Jones and Graeme Dingle opting to go back up and reach the intended summit. Their story “Up Nar Parbat Without a Pitch Helmet” by Murray Jones, follows the article on the Ganges Expedition “Ocean to Sky” by Jim Wilson in the NZAC Alpine Journal 1978

1979 - November 28 - Mount Erebus Plane Crash
Sir Ed was a regular commentator on Air New Zealand’s scenic Antarctica flights. This particular trip, however, his commitments in the United States prevented him and his place was taken by his long-time friend, and fellow adventurer Peter Mulgrew. The Air New Zealand DC10 on Flight TE901 crashed into Mount Erebus during whiteout conditions with the loss of all 257 passengers. An obituary for Peter can be found in the NZAC Alpine Journal 1980

1985-1989 - Based in New Delhi, Sir Ed served as New Zealand’s High Commissioner to India, Nepal and Bangladesh. During this time he also concentrated his efforts into educating the Nepalese on the need for conservation. Sir Ed was accompanied by his official companion June Mulgrew.

1986 – Death of Tenzing Norgay who made the first ascent of Everest with Sir Ed May 29th, 1953. Born Namgyal Wangdi and known as Sherpa Tenzing he passed away in Darjeeling, West Bengal, India aged 71. An obituary for him was written by Sir Ed and can be found the NZAC Alpine Journal of 1986.
1987 – The Order of New Zealand, newly created and limited to only twenty persons at one time, was awarded to Sir Ed.

Death of Harry Ayres famous New Zealand mountain guide who lead the party that included Sir Ed, on the successful first ascent of the Cook Low Peak – via the South Ridge in 1948. Obituaries written for him by Sir Ed and Elizabeth and Peter McCormack in the NZAC Alpine Journal of 1988

1989 – After returning to New Zealand, long-time friends Sir Ed and June Mulgrew were married on December 21st by Dame Cath Tizard.

1990 - The Reserve Bank opted to adopt Sir Ed’s picture on the New Zealand $5 note. This was a break from tradition, as only deceased persons had been represented on notes before. Sir Ed insisted on Mount Cook to be featured in the background, rather than Mount Everest. A Ferguson TE20 Tractor, such as he used in the Trans-Antarctic Expedition of 1956, was also represented.

Also in this year, Sir Ed’s son, Peter Hillary also an accomplished mountaineer, succeeded in summiting Mount Everest. He spoke with his father by phone from the peak, which was broadcast live on radio.

1995 – King Edward III founded the Most Noble Order of the Garter around 1348. An order of chivalry and knighthood limited to no more than 24 persons at any one time, Sir Edmund Hillary was presented with this most senior and highest British order, by Queen Elizabeth II on April 22. Taking the oath, new Knights are invested with the insignia of the order consisting of the Garter, Star, Riband, Collar and Mantle. The ceremony is traditionally held in the 12th Century Garter Throne Room, Windsor Castle followed later in the day by a service in St George’s Chapel.

After Sir Ed’s passing his Banner was lowered during a special Service of Thanksgiving held by the Queen at St George’s Chapel Windsor April 2, 2008.

2003 – Returned to Nepal and was awarded Honorary Citizenship during a Golden Jubilee Ceremony in Kathmandu, of the 50th Anniversary of his ascent of Mount Everest. Sir Ed was given this honour in recognition of all his work building schools and hospitals.

Around 230 people braved bitter winter conditions to attend the opening by Sir Ed, on July 5, of Mueller Hut (nicknamed “Ed’s Shed”). Sir Ed spoke saying: “What a great hut. There was nothing like this in my day. I’ve been in the old Mueller Hut many times in days gone by. I once spent a week up here by myself. There’s a great sense of peace and quiet here. It’s a great place to be”.

Following on from the opening, both he and Lady Hillary went on to unveil a bronze statue of Sir Ed at the Mount Cook Hermitage. The statue has been set in such a way as to be looking out towards the mountains where he climbed.

2004 November – The 25th Anniversary of the Mount Erebus Disaster is held in Antarctica. Sir Ed attended to give a secular reading at a memorial service for the victims. He unveiled a commemorative plaque to officially open the Hillary Field Centre.
2005 – The New Zealand Government set up the Sir Edmund Hillary Trust to help encourage and support groups that involve our young people outdoor activities. It was also formed to assist those working to protect and promote the New Zealand environment.

2007 – Sir Ed returned for the final time to Antarctica and asked to spend his last night there in a basic hut, enjoying a few whiskies and cooking his dinner on a Primus stove.

2008 January 11th – Sir Ed passed away in Auckland Hospital, New Zealand at 9am. His death was mourned by the entire nation.

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Information sourced from:
New Zealand Alpine Club Alpine Journals
Norman Hardie, Life Member, NZAC
John Bean, Archivist, King’s College New Zealand

Suggested Reading:
New Zealand Alpine Club Alpine Journals from the 1940’s on
Sir Edmund Hillary “An Extraordinary Life” by Alexa Johnston
On My Own Two Feet “The Life of a Mountaineer” by Norman Hardie
5 Squadron Association website http://www.5sqnassn.org.nz/gallery.html