

HIGHTECH communication on Mount Everest

EVEREST — “Hello, Mum!” came the breathless exclamation from Cathy O’Dowd, on the summit of Mount Everest on 26 May.

Cathy was talking to her mother, after being patched through the South African Everest Base Camp, via the Indian Ocean satellite and London to South Africa.

Her link across continents and altitudes symbolised the incredible modern communications capabilities used by the climbers.

Some of the world’s most advanced technology was used to transmit the Everest Expedition team’s thoughts and feelings from the Everest Base Camp via satellite to South Africa.

Cathy recalls her arrival on the summit and the phone being thrust into her hands. “Then I got to them, (Ian Woodall and Pemba Sherpa); four steps, rest; four steps, rest; slipped to my knees and hugged both of them. Then Ian gave me a phone and I spoke to South Africa and to Mum. After that, it’s a complete blur!”

Ian Woodall, the Everest expedition leader, also talked to his mother in Johannesburg from the top. “Suddenly my mother turned up on the radio — you can’t even get to 8848m without your mother chasing off behind you,” he jokes.

Communications between the climbers and Base Camp were implemented with VHF radios, and the climbers carried portable receivers with the base station located at Base Camp.

One of the most poignant moments for the climbers was the death of highly experienced mountaineer, Bruce Herrod, who, using a walkie-talkie earlier, had spoken to his partner, Sue Thompson, in London, after being patched through his Base Camp site and satellite link.

Similarly, famous mountaineer, Rob Hall, who used a walkie-talkie to talk to his wife in New Zealand, reported that he was severely frost-bitten, lacked the strength to make the descent, and died shortly afterwards.

But it wasn’t all fantastic high-tech technology on the trip or on the climb. On the long trek up to the Base Camp, the team, journalists and I had to resort to the ancient art of journalism via “cleft stick”. The high-end technology wasn’t connected until the team reached the Base Camp.

We had to resort to this technique to get copy and pictures off the mountain for the initial three weeks.

We knew civilisation had ended when we e-mailed our last pix out of Kathmandu from one of the many fax bureau which proliferate throughout this sprawling city of dust, temples and rickshaws.

The minute we hit the trekking trail, which stretches 170 kms north and UP,



Satellite dishes provide education and entertainment to the different generations at Jiri in Nepal. The older men in the shop gaze at an international soccer match, while the young teenagers steal a peek from outside. All pictures by Montgomery Cooper.

there was no electronic communication. We did try and e-mail via a phone line further up the mountain trail, but the connections proved too intermittent and we gave up.

So we resorted to runners making the four-day trip down to Namche Bazar, the main trading village, where the crumpled envelope was passed up onto a helicopter, flown out to Kathmandu and expressed back to South Africa. Even with this streamlined “cleft stick”, the news took nearly a week and a half to reach Johannesburg.

Once at Base Camp, the expedition technician, Phillip Woodall, coped with the logistical nightmare and manned the communications network at the Everest Base Camp. He used 800 hours of bought satellite time on the Inmarsat (Indian Ocean satellite) system to broadcast the progress of the expedition.

The Inmarsat ground station was at Base Camp, with a line of sight directional receiver at Kala Pattar, above the Base Camp.

Woodall’s powerbook computer was attached to a portable and collapsible satellite dish at the Base Camp and the messages beamed to the Internet Solution server in Johannesburg.

The satellite transmitter was a miracle of miniaturisation — 30kg of high-tech equipment packed in a suitcase. It is able to handle electronic mail, modem data and a fax machine — and transmit pix — all at the same time.

The Everest team was not able, as was planned, to respond to the hundreds of e-mail messages sent to them via the World Wide Web page manned initially by the *Sunday Times* group.

The reason wasn’t high-tech failure, but the fact that the team didn’t have enough power to transmit — they were using two car batteries eventually.

In addition, the team used up their 800 hours of satellite time and were relying on Radio 702 and me to transmit information a lot of the time.

The original World Wide Web site was manned by the newspaper group initially and later by the Internet Solution company. The URL for their pages is: <http://www.web.co.za/everest/>.

In the first few weeks of the site being opened and the climbers walking up the foothills, with me following, there were nearly 10 000 “hits” — people accessing the page and reading it, or downloading the information.

I have accessed the page many times, downloading the frequently scurrilous discussion groups about the teams and their personal clashes; the information from other sources on the climbing in general and finally, downloading the pictures — some of which are mine.

There is now also another Web site on the expedition, done by the Department of Journalism and Media Studies’ experts, Brett Lock and Vincent Maher. It is my own account (with audio as well as photos) of the Everest expedition, the

blizzards and the triumphs. The URL is <http://www.ru.ac.za/photojourn/everest/>.

Throughout the main climb over the Khumbu Ice-fall and onto Camp One through Camp Five, the team used Apple and Kodak digital DC40 and DC50 cameras, and the images downloaded regularly onto the Web site.

The climbers are believed to be amongst the first climbers to have carried digital cameras above the notorious Ice Fall.

A Kodak digital camera, the DCS5, was used by the *Sunday Times* photographer, Richard Shorey and by expedition photographer, Herrod during the long walk-in and climb.

The camera has no film and the images are stored on a PCMCIA card. The card is then plugged into a laptop where the images are viewed and readied for transmission.

In our case, the images were transmitted from the Base Camp via satellite via London to South Africa.

A moving indication of the dedication of photojournalists is that Herrod is believed to have been slowed down considerably by working with the digital cameras. He “summitted” late and died on his way down.

The climbers also carried point-and-shoot cameras up the long and exhausting trek in and climb to the top. As Cathy says: “Ian took summit pictures — lots of them, both of me and Pemba Sherpa.”

► continued on page 47

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The team had planned to transmit live video and two way radio from the summit to South Africa. Only the link to Radio 702 was transmitted, not the video.

I spoke twice daily to Phillip, Deshun Deysel and Cathy at the Everest Base Camp and at Camp Two. At a heart-stopping 42 rand a minute for the satellite calls and faxes, it was even more frightening as the pause between call and response was, at times, nearly half a minute.

At the beginning of the expedition, Philip was a solitary figure struggling in the Kathmandu hotel courtyard with the computer setups from Apple Computers and the digital video links.

He was working on the satellite transmission system, which failed to connect with Inmarsat and the Eastern Satellite system.

As he said in his first fax to me from the courtyard, "I'm sending this via the Inmarsat, hopefully." He used

the satellite link-up from the middle of the courtyard, independently of the hotel fax/phone setup and it succeeded. He continued this amazing technological feat far up the trail, at the Everest Base Camp, all of five kilometres up.

Nearly 200 kilograms of computer software, hardware, cameras and satellite add-ons were hauled up the long trek path to the Base Camp by over a hundred yaks.

The power of e-mail journalism was really brought home to me recently in Grahamstown when I interviewed the team via international telephone link-up in Kathmandu on their return.

I then wrote the copy for two newspapers, in Johannesburg and in Cape Town, and sent it via email, page by page to the Cape Town office. The first copy was on the stone within thirty minutes. The copy was then transmitted almost instantaneously via e-mail

attachment to Johannesburg. At the end of it all, though, this dazzling technology provides a faster vehicle for journalists, but can never really be a substitute for great copy and great pictures.

Montgomery Cooper, Rhodes Photojournalism lecturer, accompanied the South African Everest Expedition from Kathmandu to Pheriche. On his return, he covered the team's progress for the Independent newspaper group and followed them through daily phone satellite calls up the Ice Fall, through blizzards and tragic deaths of other international team members to the team's triumphant, if bitter-sweet, conquest of Everest, more than five kilometres high.



The higher you climb the further you fall *continued from page 5*



"The media missed the boat. The splits were part of the story, but they missed the story of the climb. They misjudged it completely."

CATHY O'DOWD

"It was reported that Bruce Herrod had been asking for directions on his radio, shortly before he died. In fact he was on a knife-edge ridge with an 8000 foot drop on either side. He did not have a lot of options. Anyone who had studied the maps would have known this. We have the log of the radio calls, and Bruce never asked anyone for directions."

Another example of poor media research that O'Dowd cites is the confusion by journalists over mountaineers climbing with and without oxygen.

"With oxygen, it is like being at sea-level - you are perfectly capable. By confusing the issue, it was easy for journalists to say our decisions were bad because we had no oxygen. We did have oxygen."

O'Dowd's assessment is that the news media often did not know enough about what they were talking.

Is there some kind of mountaineering code journalists needed to know in order to evaluate how the climbers related to each other? "There is no code, only your basic standard ethics," says O'Dowd. "If someone is in danger, you do something to help. We didn't think Bruce Herrod was in danger in our judgement. (Herrod who was still ascending met O'Dowd, Woodall and sherpas who were descending)."

"When you say a member of the team is dead because of the leaders, that has massive implications. The basic underlying assumption by some journalists was that Bruce was in danger and we abandoned him. He was not in especial danger - except inasmuch as being on Everest is dangerous."

The Everest story as carried in the media typically seemed to be one of human conflict, rather than one of humans clambering across crevices and conquering the world's best-known mountain.

O'Dowd agrees: "The media missed the boat. The splits were part of the story, but they missed the story of the climb. They misjudged it completely. *Radio 702* simply reported on our progress, and this had people in Gauteng glued to their radios."

She is bitter that the media "missed the story" about the *Sunday Times'* involvement in the expedition. "To some extent they protected their own; they were not prepared to take on the *Sunday Times*." No one asked, she argues, why the paper gave Woodall \$70 000 in the beginning, or why it was nearly a year later that they got around to investigating his CV.

Similarly, she says, no journalist asked why *Sunday Times* reporter Ken Vernon had not been at base camp much of the time, and why he apparently preferred to report at a distance from Kathmandu.

Aside from the controversies in the coverage, what does O'Dowd make of the way journalists conveyed the experience of Everest? After all, *Carte Blanche's* Derek Watts, interviewing O'Dowd on the mountain, confessed to the camera that he could not find the right words to describe what it was like.

Her answer suggests a sense of media having met its match in the Mountain. "It is difficult to report on Everest, especially for an audience not schooled in mountains. It is not easy to convey how big it all is, or the conditions and difficulties you face. To get it 100 percent right is probably impossible."

She considers, though, that *702's* Patrick Conroy did convey a lot of dramatic sense by painting pictures with words. "But I am not sure that journalism can ever do the experience justice," she concludes.

Burnt by her brush with the press, O'Dowd does not see herself working on a newspaper in the future. But the journalist within her is still there. She's commencing work on a book.

That much press coverage went wrong is a huge loss, muses O'Dowd. She does not hold out much hope of a belated correction. "There are other ways for us to tell what happened, and in the long-term, the public will hear and decide."

Her book is one of these ways. It is a means for her to reconcile the experiences of reporting and being reported on. The journalistic issues entailed in such a work are somewhat different to those she experienced on Everest. They are no less complex and challenging. No doubt, the journalists she now criticises will be among those who read the work - and respond in their pages with an assessment of O'Dowd's own journalism.