

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Wylie

This article was found online at www.Telegraph.co.uk.

Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Wylie, who has died aged 86, was the organising secretary of the British expedition which conquered Mount Everest in June 1953.

A Nepali-speaking Gurkha officer, Wylie had had hopes of making the third assault if Edmund Hillary and the sherpa Tensing Norgay had failed in their attempt. But he also had the satisfaction of being closely involved in the planning by its meticulous leader, Colonel John Hunt, from the start.

He accompanied Hunt to Switzerland to test the strength and warmth of their specially designed "pudding" boots, of kid leather with insulating layers of kapok, in the blizzards of the Bernese Oberland, as well as trying out their oxygen in North Wales and in the Royal Aircraft Establishment's decompression chamber at Farnborough.

Wylie was in charge of the party of six which travelled by sea from Tilbury to Bombay with the bulk of the equipment. He went to Calcutta to ensure the expedition could receive weather reports via All India Radio and, on reaching the Nepal border, took responsibility for the 350 porters.

For 17 days they carried the 15 tons of stores to the Buddhist monastery of Thyangboche, south of Everest, where the porters were paid off and the party camped on a small greensward for two weeks' acclimatisation.

But although conditions were tough there were some welcome diversions. Wylie received a message that his wife had given birth to a son, together with a note from the commander of the Indian radio station: "I am transported with exultation at this wonderful note. May God grant you a similar blessing at least once each year. Please pay the bearer one rupee baksheesh."

He also wrote to the secretary of the Marlborough old boys' association reporting that three members of the expedition had held an OM dinner of lean pemmican soup à la Bovril and luncheon meat, but a blizzard meant there had been no speeches as they had had to eat in their separate tents.

Wylie's greatest achievement was "the great lift", when he led a small party of sherpas with stores up the Lhotse Face, on a trail broken by Hillary and Tensing, to establish a camp on the inhospitable South Col. At 26,000ft, this was the same height as Annapurna, then the highest unclimbed peak.

Wylie's impeccable manners and unflappability ensured that all went well until one man had to halt a couple of hundred feet short. Although his oxygen had run out Wylie then took on the load himself; in later years he reflected how grateful he was to have undergone the same experience as the young sherpas.

The son of a Gurkha officer, and the grandson of another who served as British Resident at Kathmandu for eight years during the 1890s, Charles Geoffrey Wylie was born on Christmas Eve 1919 in the Punjab hills, where he learned Nepali playing with the local boys.

On being sent home aged six he immediately forgot the language and lodged with an uncle who took him climbing in England, Scotland and the Alps. His interest was further whetted at Marlborough, where his housemaster was Edwin Kempson, who had been part of the 1935 reconnaissance expedition and of the assault expedition the next year.

On winning a scholarship to Sandhurst Wylie won a pentathlon, which would probably have secured him a place in the British Olympic team if war had not been declared, and passed out fifth of 180 cadets.

He was then sent out to India, where he was commissioned into the East Yorkshire regiment then posted to the 1st Gurkhas on the North West Frontier. With a bearer in barracks who had served his father and an orderly to look after him on operations, he soon learned to be on the lookout for Pathans who hid in the hills to attack convoys.

After six months the regiment was sent to Malaya, where it was driven back by the invading Japanese, who arrived with air support and tanks - though the Gurkhas attacked the latter with Molotov cocktails which sometimes did not work in the rain.

Exhausted and almost out of ammunition, Wylie and his men eventually arrived at an empty bungalow on a rubber plantation near the Slim river, where a Tamil arrived to say that it was his Christian duty to cook for them. Later they realised that the bungalow was

surrounded, and saw the Tamil being paid for his services.

They were holding up their hands as a Japanese soldier entered and advanced to drive his bayonet into Wylie; but he hesitated, and Wylie quietly put down his hands and pushed the long blade to one side before handing over his pistol. "And that was that," Wylie wrote in his book Peaks and Troughs, which is still to be published, adding that the Japanese soldiers were "funny little chaps".

Wylie said little of his experience on the Burma "death railway", beyond writing that hope had kept him going. He recalled his bemusement two days after the armistice when the prisoners laid out their clothes in red, white and blue to make a Union flag, which attracted an aircraft.

Instead of food it dropped leaflets advising them to boil the water, avoid over-ripe fruit and always to wear a hat - something none of them had possessed for years.

He returned to the 1st Gurkhas until it joined the Indian Army at Independence; he then transferred to the 10th, which remained with the British.

As Hillary came down from Everest, Wylie offered him his favourite drink of hot lemonade, which he refused, before the party went down the track to be met by thousands of locals coming to greet them; particularly Tensing, who found himself so mobbed that Wylie eventually had to rescue him.

Wylie was also part of Major JM Roberts's expedition which came within 150ft of the summit of the 22,000ft Macha Puchare, known as "Fishtail Peak", before deciding, on seeing the sheer ice to the summit, that discretion was wiser for men with heavy family responsibilities.

He returned to Malaya during the "Emergency", then was posted to Norway to draft exercises for Nato's northern atomic forces, before being spending three years as military attaché at Kathmandu. There he was given a Lhasa Apso puppy by Tensing, which became his constant companion before disappearing just before he took a new posting.

After retiring in 1970 Wylie became secretary of the Britain-Nepal Medical Trust, which supports health projects, chaired a successful appeal for the Gurkhas and was appointed OBE in 1984; he also worked for the National Canine Defence League.

He continued to walk in North Wales, where he attended the Everest reunions at the Pen-y-Gwryd hotel in Gwynedd, and to which he donated the paybook in which the sherpas used to press down their thumbs to acknowledge receipt.

While remaining full of admiration for John Hunt's leadership, he was saddened by the commercialisation of Everest, which he felt had become quite easy, despite the problems caused by its altitude.

Like all the expeditioners Wylie was sought after as a lecturer. But by 2003 he agreed only reluctantly to give a talk at his village hall in Surrey. The curtain went up to reveal him lying in a sleeping bag. "I'm now in a typical position that Everest climbers adopted," he began, then got up to deliver the rest of his speech.

Charles Wylie, who died on July 18, married, in 1947, Diana Lucas, with whom he had three sons and a daughter; after her death he married Sheila Green.