Man's First Flight Over Everest

The Rt Hon. Lord Selkirk of Douglas, QC.

The story began in 1932 in the Smoking Room of the House of Commons. The MP for the Scottish Universities, the author John Buchan, was talking to my father who was then the second youngest MP. My father had been the Scottish Middleweight Boxing Champion and was Commanding Officer of 602 (City of Glasgow) Squadron.

They were talking about Mount Everest, and the contrast between the comfort of the Smoking Room and the desolate scene of biting winds tearing around the summit seemed immense.

Everest lay in the heart of the Himalayas. By 1932 it had already claimed the lives of 13 men seeking to climb it, and it was the last stronghold of nature unseen by man.

In 1924 greater heights than ever were reached by Mallory and Irvine – Mallory the brilliant climber with iron physique and great powers of endurance, and Irvine the athlete with tremendous strength. On 8 June 1924 Odell saw them within a few hundred feet of the summit and then the mist came down and from that moment no one ever saw Mallory and Irvine alive again. When Mallory was asked why he had wished to climb Mount Everest he had replied, "Because it is there".

There had already been attempts to fly over Mount Everest. The Atlantic had been flown in 1919 by Alock and Brown, and Admiral Byrd had flown over the North and South Poles. Only Everest remained. The idea to fly over it had been that of Colonel Steward Blacker, a forceful, dynamic and courageous man. His close relative Colonel Valentine Blacker, the First Surveyor-General of India, had been involved in mapping Hindustan. However, he had taken part in a duel in which both he and his opponent had been killed. Now as a matter of honour Stewart Blacker wished to complete the task.

In March 1932 Colonel Blacker had proposed to the Royal Geographic Society that there should be an expedition with the aims of: first, to map by air photographic survey Mount Everest; secondly, to film an area never before seen; thirdly, to carry out these feats with British personnel. The Royal Geographic Society gave its blessing to the proposed expedition as did the Government and the Air Council, and plans were put in place by the British Flight to the Mount Everest Committee for experimental British aircraft supported by British equipment.

But the only difficulty was funding, so my father who was then the Marquis of Douglas Clydesdale, MP for East Renfrewshire, was sent to see Lady Houston, a Boadicea-like figure, who was rich beyond the dreams of avarice. When my father saw her, she replied that she did not wish to send young men to their deaths. My father replied that it was no worse than crossing Hampstead Heath at night-time.

Eventually she relented and gave her backing. This was at the time when there was a coalition under Prime Minister Ramsay Macdonald, and although Clydesdale was an MP, his Association resolved to commend him for his courage, and to give him leave of absence. Accordingly, arrangements were made for Clydesdale and his Flight Commander, David McIntyre, to act as pilots, with Colonel Blacker and Bonnet performing as observers, under the leadership of Air Commodore Fellowes.

They knew that to fly to Everest there would be problems with lack of oxygen and excessive wind speeds. Therefore, they had to be certain that they had expertly designed aircraft with adapted cameras, special heated oxygen apparatus and heated clothing. Clearly the aircraft would have to be constructed to confront the dangers and it was considered that the Bristol Pegasus One S3 engine was the best in the world.

Everest was 160 miles from Purnea in Bihar, India, where they would have their base camp, and if there was engine failure the aircraft might glide up to 70 miles. To save weight they decided to take no parachutes, which meant that if they were to survive there could be no scope for any kind of engine failure near Everest. For this reason, the Bristol Aircraft Company and the Burmah Shell Company took great trouble to provide specially concocted fuel which would not freeze at great heights.

The aircraft had one propeller, its speed at low levels being 77 mph, rising to 135 mph in level flight at operational level. It was expected that climbing time would be six minutes to 10,000 feet and 25 minutes to 35,000 feet.

The pilots had experimented in the oxygen chamber at Farnborough. They had been told that if oxygen failed at 30,000 feet, unconsciousness would follow in about 30 seconds. The experiment taught them that in the event of oxygen failure some seconds would elapse before unconsciousness, and if the emergency supply was switched on, a few deep breaths would lead to recovery.

They enlisted the Director of Meteorology in India as to wind levels, who set up balloon stations to calculate wind speed. This was essential because they knew that there were fierce eddies including mighty blasts and currents of air rising and falling in the vicinity of Everest.

In Britain the Nottingham Guardian said, "To some these venturous expeditions, such as flying over Everest, or climbing it, or discovering the North and South Poles, seem to involve more danger than the results are worth… The real justification for these daring adventures lies in the magnificent examples of courage they set. We are all potentially braver for Scott's dash to the South Pole and for the glorious assault of Mallory and Irvine on Everest."

In February 1933 the aircraft were loaded into large crates and on the SS Dalgona for the voyage to Karachi. As for the pilots, they gathered at Heston Aerodrome for the journey to India with well-wishers and Mr Shepherd of the Times. As they left, there was a mood of boundless enthusiasm. They would later write: - "A new calling has come into being, which is really the spirit of the old pioneers, aflame in a new form, transport by air, the uninterrupted navigable ocean that comes to the threshold of every man's door."

They set off with the blessing of King George V, the Viceroy of India, the Government and the Air Ministry. After many adventures they arrived in Karachi, saw their aircraft assembled and then flew to Delhi and then on to Purnea. Lalbalu lay 150 miles from Everest and Mr Gupta and the Calcutta Meteorological Office supported by releasing balloons. Eventually on 3 April they learnt as a result that wind levels were 67 mph at 28,000 feet and 58 mph at 30,000 feet. They were handed up mail which would be posted after flying over Everest, which included letters to the King and the Prime Minister.

For some days the weather had been against them, and their attention had turned to the possibility of crocodiles in the nearby pool where they swam and to the presence of a cobra in the bungalow. But on 3 April, the aircraft had roared down the runway strip and started to climb steadily up through the clouds, and they found themselves within a semicircle of the most gigantic mountains in the world.

As they later wrote, "The panorama presented itself to us in its startling white beauty… The dust haze, completely obscuring the foothills, rose well above the snowline with the result that this arc of great mountains appeared detached from the

earth and suggested an eerie land floating in a drab sea somewhere between earth and sky."

At 31,000 feet Clydesdale suddenly got cramp. He turned on the emergency oxygen supply and immediately recovered. The wind was from the west and the aircraft were blown of course. Suddenly as they approached Mount Everest, they were hit by a terrific downdraught which took the aircraft down 2,000 feet; both aircraft hurtling towards the East ridge of Everest.

Colonel Blacker wrote that "The scene was superb and beyond description… Suddenly with the door of the floor half open, I became aware of a sensation of dropping through space… The altimeter needle almost swung down through a couple of thousand feet. In this great downdraught of the winds, it seemed as though we should never clear the crags of the South Peak on the way to Everest now towering above us."

As the aircraft hurtled down towards the ridge, Clydesdale's only sensation was one of gladness and relief that whatever might happen only one aircraft was behind him, and not his whole squadron. As it happened, he scraped over the South peak closer than he would ever admit, by a few feet.

He circled again and again to gain height. McIntyre was in a worse position. He had been 1,000 feet above the ridge and he was now below it. As he recorded, "A turn to the left meant going back into the down current and the peaks below; a down-turn to the right would have taken us almost instantly into Makalu at 200 mph. There was nothing we could do but climb straight ahead and hope to clear the lowest part of the barrier range. A fortunate up-current just short of the ridge carried us up by a few feet and we scraped over."

In what he described as "a mad risk", he had to circle three times, crabbing over the ridge to gain sufficient height to make the attempt to fly over the summit. Then Bonnett had his accident. Filling his camera with fi, he trod on his oxygen pipe, fracturing it. Feeling weak, he subsided to the floor and tied a handkerchief around the broken pipe. Maybe this saved his life. He then tried to rise and was overcome.

McIntyre was concerned that Bonnett might be dead and resolved to fly over the summit once and then lose height to allow Bonnett to recover. Then he saw Clydesdale's aircraft above and ahead of him, flying straight for the summit.

After getting over the South Peak, Clydesdale's aircraft found itself in an upward draught and he was swept up into the sky. At 10.05 his aircraft surged over the summit of Everest/ Colonel Blacker watched through the floor and he later wrote, "The crest came up to meet me as I crouched and I almost wondered whether the tailskid would strike the summit." They then flew into the plume over Everest and the ice rattled off the aircraft. He circled and flew over the summit a second time. By this time the oxygen gauge was moving down. The fifteen minutes spent near or over the summit had incorporated a lifetime of amazing experiences and yet it was all too short.

Flying back, McIntyre was having trouble with his oxygen. He tried to look at Bonnett, but he had to hold his aircraft on its course. At 8,000 feet he saw Bonnett struggling up from the floor, looking green but he was alive and that was enough for the moment.

Three hours after take off, both aircraft made a perfect landing. Clydesdale, Blacker, McIntyre and Bonnett wrenched off their clothing and they made for the swimming pool. The threat of flesh-eating crocodiles seemed as nothing in comparison to the stupendous challenge of flying over the world's highest mountains.

The Everest mail was posted. One letter was addressed to the Prime Minister, Ramsay MacDonald. Inside Clydesdale had written, "Dear Prime Minister. This letter is of no consequence but the cancellation stamp may be of value one day." The Prime Minister wrote on it in pencil, "Give it to my daughter Sheila."

Meanwhile the world press reported the flight with great admiration, The Central European Times wrote: - "The British flight over Mount Everest is a feat which will stand by itself in the History of Aviation. In point of careful and scientific preparation it is compared to Admiral Byrd's flight over the South Pole. In point if flying and navigation skills, it is equalled by Lindbergh's crossing of the Atlantic Ocean. The battle against winds of a force of which plain-talking mortals have no conception, against treacherous up and won currents, against cold and lack of oxygen, is one which can only tempt men for whom the difficulty of the obstacles is but a call for further effort to overcome it."

It is easy to place the Everest flight in its historical perspective. Thirty years earlier, the Wright Brothers flew from Kitty Hawk field, and within 30 years of the flight, commercial flying would become a popular means of transport, flying at much higher altitudes. As a result, sea travel would become much reduced in scope.

The Everest flight came at the end of the first stage of heavier than air flying. It was the last significant pioneer event of the period. The design and equipment had not changed much from the days of the First World War. Cockpits were open and the undercarriage could not be retracted.

There was no radio equipment to receive or transmit, no brakes, no flaps on the wings, and the oxygen supply and blend of flying instruments and navigation equipment were of primitive design. The flight was the first time that such a task had been carried out and it was a very fundamental test of the design and equipment of the time. And it is appropriate for us to remember that what would later become an easy flight by jet had at the time been a desperately dangerous mission to fly over the mightiest mountains of the world when it was only just possible. Likewise, the first man on the moon, Neil Armstrong, could describe his feat as, "A small step for man, but a giant leap for mankind." But the Everest flight for Clydesdale, McIntyre and Ellison, the reserve pilot, led to the fulfilment of a dream.

Before leaving for India, Clydesdale had stated that he wished to further the interests of aviation in Britain, and he looked forward to the creation of a Scottish Aviation Industry. At that time, it had appeared in the press as a throw-away line, but he had in fact meant it. In August 1935, Clydesdale, McIntyre, Cydesdale's brother Geordie

and the Directors of the De Havilland aircraft company, formed the Scottish College of Aviation Limited, which with a year became Scottish Aviation Limited. Prestwick was chosen as the company's location largely because it enjoyed fog-free conditions. Clydesdale became the chairman with David McIntyre as Managing Director and Dick Ellison as Chief Instructor.

At first the aerodrome consisted of 157 acres and then a further 191 acres were bought to accommodate a hangar, offices and a control tower. This was only the beginning, for McIntyre had been heard to remark that within 10 years Prestwick would have an international airport and an aviation industry, a prophecy which turned out to be correct.

When was broke out in 1939, McIntyre was the Station Commander. He closed the road across the airport, doubling its size overnight. By the end of 1940, Prestwick had been selected as the best aerodrome in Britain for aircraft crossing the Atlantic. Soon there would be 1000 transatlantic crossings in and out of Prestwick each month and the Scottish Aviation factory, which had appeared so modestly before the war, began to expand by leaps and bounds.

The Palace of Engineering at Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, had been moved to Prestwick. This had been a terrific effort, and within the new building of Scottish Aviation Limited, it would be possible to repair Spitfires, Hurricanes, Liberators, Hudsons, Skuas, Rocs and Lysanders. After a number of mergers, Scottish Aviation became the Scottish Division of British Aerospace, employing in the region of 2000 persons.

When Hamilton and McIntyre flew over Mount Everest, they had come within a hair's breadth of disaster, and had come through by courage, discipline and judgement. They had only succeeded because they had been prepared for the difficulties they would have to surmount. It would not always be so. Shortly after their flight, a young Englishman called Maurice Wilson set off for India. He planned to excel the aviators and climbers by landing an aircraft high up near Everest, climbing the remainder of the distance with oxygen. On 9 July 1934 Eric Shipton, leading an Everest climbing expedition, came across his frozen body on the East Rongbuk Glacier, at least 8,000 feet from the summit. He had died from cold and exhaustion.

Hamilton and McIntyre had not attempted to emulate the mountaineers but they were only too well aware that advances in aviation often took place at the cost of human life. In 1957, Hamilton received the tragic news that McIntyre, flying a Prestwick Twin Pioneer in North Africa, had been killed. The aircraft developed metal fatigue, a wing broke off and it plunged into the ground. Also, two of his younger brothers, all of whom joined the Royal Air Force, died in air crashes. His brother David died on operational duties in 1944 and his brother Malcolm disappeared in a huge storm around Mount Cameroon in 1964 with his son Neil, after flying across the Atlantic to Africa. Like Mallory's ice axe found by Hugh Ruttledge's expedition in 1933, the wreckage of the aircraft was not discovered until years later.

In 1973 he went to Prestwick and unveiled a plaque to commemorate the terminal building, which had been the home of Prestwick's beginnings and had performed an

important role in the Second World War. He and McIntyre might so easily not have survived their flight over Everest but each of them with the other members of the expedition had a powerful subconscious motive, that Britain had a role to play in aviation, not only to benefit their own countrymen, but also the rest of the world. Britain was their home and Mount Everest provided them with this opportunity.

An aviation industry in Scotland was the legacy which they left their country. Even if they had not done that, they would still be remembered. For Britain has not lost its ardour for adventure and there will always be young men of courage who are willing to risk their lives to face the perils of the unknown.

It is appropriate to end with the words written by both of them in the Pilots' Book of Everest (1936): - "Our Expedition was concerned particularly with the science of flight, of geography and exploration. No man can come close to great peaks without acknowledging a sense of awe and understanding something of the fascination they hold. We saw the mountain on both occasions in high sunshine when there were few shadows to shroud her mystery. In softer light one might expect to feel something of the romance of these enormous masses of rocks and ice.

Something of the mystery had been overcome and something of the unknown has been revealed; yet the Mistress of the World remains remote, immense and magnificent. The best that we could bring back was but a faint impression of her dignity and beauty."