

FINAL REPORT!

Nick Spencer 70th Appeal

30th June 2009

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**Patrons: Field Marshal Sir John Chapple, GCB, CBE Sir William Purves, CBE, DSO
Mr. Prabhakar SJB Rana, OBE M.R. Sukhumbhand Paribatra**

The letter heading will I hope remind you of your generous support last year to my 70th Appeal and my promise to write to you in 2009 with the results of my climb and a final report on donations received. For those whose e-mail addresses I had with me, I e-mailed an update from Buenos Aires in early January following my summiting Mt. Aconcagua on New Year's Eve 2008 and I apologise to them for any repetition in what follows. I apologize too for the delay in getting this final report out, partly because I wanted to cross the **£200,000** figure for the net donations given to the two charities, partly because I wanted to give you an idea of how this money is being spent by the charities, and partly because the second part of what I had promised to do - the free-fall sky dive from 13,000 ft - I felt I could not put off any longer and did last month on the cusp of my 71st (a complete doddle as it turned out). I should also add that a prolonged attack of post climb languors has not helped, nor has the advent of two additional Labrador puppies, rather deviously smuggled into Daneway whilst my wife was away.....one can happily while away a great deal of time to no great end with them.

What YOU have Done:

Far surpassed in donations what I had thought a very ambitious Appeal Target of £125,000 with just over **£200,000** received to date (the Appeal remains open), *all* from individuals, *zilch* from corporates. Given that the world appeared to be in an economic meltdown as my Appeal went out, this is amazingly generous of all of you and means a tremendous amount to the two charities you have supported. (As a point of comparison to give some idea of the leveraged purchasing power in Nepal and Thailand of your donations, the daily wage of an unskilled labourer in Nepal is only 50p a day). Thank you all very much.

The Climb:

Mt. Aconcagua 6,962m/22,842ft is in Argentina, in the southern Andes and just east of the border with Chile, and is the highest mountain in the world outside of Asia. It was first climbed in 1897 by the British Fitzgerald Expedition following the Horcones route (the route we took). Since then a number of other routes have been pioneered including the very forbidding and highly technical 10,000ft vertical south face first climbed by the French in 1954.....and most definitely *not* for me.

In December 2008 we flew from Buenos Aires to Mendoza and then drove up the Santiago de Chile highway to the entrance of the Aconcagua National Park where we were to be for the next three weeks. The walk-in to the Plaza de Mulass base camp 4,365m/14,322ft is a gradual height acclimatization over 3 days, approaching the mountain from the south along the Quebrada de los Horcones (a rough high desert river valley which circles the western flanks of Aconcagua), the third day a long 9 hour walk gradually climbing 1000m/3,300ft blasted relentlessly by a very strong and dusty headwind. All supplies to base camp are carried in by mules along this trail - the 'arrieros' (muleteers) are brilliant horsemen and fascinating to watch. Thereafter from base camp it is a long, gradual process of altitude acclimatization, gaining altitude and then coming back to base camp to rest. Without this long acclimatization process the risks associated with high altitude sickness and in particular the mortality associated with high altitude

pulmonary edema (HAPE) and high altitude cerebral edema (HACE) would not be acceptable. Although other than the south face approach Aconcagua is not a technically difficult mountain, it is generally considered by Alpinists to be much more difficult than most Himalayan peaks of similar height because of its harsh environment, unpredictable weather and ferocious storms with gales over 100 mph (it is often said of the micro-climate of Aconcagua that the most predictable aspect of its weather is its total unpredictability), and the long distance (almost 9,000ft) from base camp to summit.

After eight days of up & down altitude acclimatization, including some advance load carrying to Camps 1 and 2, we loaded up at base camp for the actual push for the summit - a night at Camp 1 (Canada) 16,500ft, two nights at Camp 2 (Nido de Condores) 17,100ft, and then on to Camp 3 (Berlin) 19,468ft/5,933m. At the upper Camps 2 & 3 the bitter cold and the icy wind coming down the mountain at night drove all into their sleeping bags as soon as the sun set.

Summit Bid: We had allowed three days at Camp 3 for a weather window to make the summit bid but hanging around at this height does not give rest - the body is deteriorating in the thin air and reduced oxygen intake, sleep is difficult, and the weather can turn very quickly. As it happened, we were lucky in that the 4am wake-up (I don't think in fact any of us had actually slept) on the 31st December 2008 found conditions on for a summit bid - clear, very cold (-30C in the tent - which is where, struggling to get my bloody high altitude double layer boots on with my gloves off, I picked up a frost nip in the finger tips of one handno big deal, as it turned out, as full feeling returned 5/6 weeks later but a mild worry at the time), some wind but not enough to give serious wind chill factor worries - a major concern at this height when wind chill can cause a temperature drop of more than -20C which added to the air temperature can very easily lead to serious frost bite and exhaustion and be a killer.

New Year's Eve 2008 - no point in hanging around waiting for another year, and at 5 am under head torches and feeling somewhat like the Michelin Man under seven layers of clothing we started zig-zagging up the scree and snow slopes. As dawn broke we stopped to strap on our crampons and with our ice axes started trudging slowly upwards on a long and seemingly endless exposed traverse over frozen snow and ice to the foot of the rather fearsome La Canaletta, a steep and gut-wrenching gully of over 1,200ft leading to the summit ridge; a short traverse on the Fino del Guanaco, and then at 3.30 pm, and after ten and a



Mt. Aconcagua
22,842ft/6,962m



Summit of
Aconcagua 15.30
31st December
2008



Final steps to the
summit of
Aconcagua

half hours climbing, a scramble on to the summit plateau and the cross marking the highest point in the Western and Southern Hemispheres. It would be nice to wax lyrical at this point and describe the feelings of elation and the awe-inspiring views stretching west across Chile to the Pacific but neither would be true. The weather had begun to break and close in whilst we were on La Canaletta and the views from the summit were non-existent. I felt more seriously knackered (at 23,000ft oxygen is 60% less than at sea level - supplementary oxygen is not used on Aconcagua) rather than elated although buoyed by the momentary thought that at rather more than 70 years and seven months I was, briefly, the highest person standing on earth (the high Himalayan peaks are not summited in the middle of the northern hemisphere's winter). The seemingly endless training I had done over the Cotswold hills in the previous year had somehow got me to the top and although I had certainly given serious and frequent thought as I shuffled slowly to the summit to playing my age card and gracefully dropping out (the 'age card' was not easy to trump as the youngest of my group was 23 and the average age, excluding me, 34), I had not actually done so. *Sic transit gloria.*

The summit of Aconcagua is not a place to hang about and we were fairly rapidly on our way down, getting back to Camp 3, Berlin, again by 9 pm, sixteen hours since we had first set out that morning. Not a good night for any of us. I had started vomiting on the way down from altitude sickness, and this carried on through the night in the tent (not quite as gross as it sounds as it froze immediately - I chipped it out the following morning). No one was interested in eating and no one was interested in preparing anything. It is all too easy to dehydrate at altitude doing very strenuous exertion in the thin air and as a result I did not have the happiest of nights with agonising cramps in cheerful conjunction with vomiting and a racking high altitude cough, all to the accompaniment of a howling gale shaking the tent and bitter cold. But 24 hours later and over 5,000ft lower at base camp, I was once again firing on all cylinders, 6-7kgs lighter than at the start but in good shape, and the next day I thoroughly enjoyed the long and beautiful 10 hour fast walkout to the road head, dropping a further 5,000ft, with the wind behind us and the fixation on the damn summit removed.

A Wry Postscript: The day following our successful summiting, New Year's Day 2009, I called my wife on the satellite phone from base camp, rather pumped up to give her the good news. The satellite phone set-up was in a small tent crowded with climbers, a palpable sense of testosterone hanging in the air, and both sides of any conversation fully audible to all. What did I get? So much for any mini ego trip. A thorough bollocking for my thinking to do it in the first place! An earlier call before the summit attempt when I wasn't feeling that great produced a demand from my wife to speak to my leader. You can't - I hissed *sotto voce*, horribly conscious that whilst all in the tent were doing their best to appear deaf, they could not help but hear our every word - my leader is thirty and I am seventy and you as sure as hell are *not* going to speak with him! Wives!

Aftermath: On a sombre note, Aconcagua bit back in the week following our ascent when five climbers died in four unrelated incidents (unrelated other than appalling weather conditions which had started to come in the late afternoon of the 31st December when we were descending), all *after* successfully reaching the summit. A German climber fell/slid 5,000ft to his death; an English climber had a heart attack on the summit; an American climber died from falling rock hitting him; and, in an incident which got some international press coverage, of a party of Italian climbers caught out in a storm 600ft below the summit, two were successfully rescued two days later but in a bad state, one died of hypothermia on the mountain, and their highly experienced Argentine climbing guide died later in hospital. Thankfully we were never close to such drama but it does bring home the element of luck when on something like Aconcagua.

The Sky-Dive:

I had deferred doing this until after Aconcagua largely because one of my donors, a leading orthopaedic surgeon,

had dropped me a sharpish note to say that in his experience whatever charity monies might have been raised by novice sky-divers had more than been obviated by the resulting costs to the National Health Service.....all very encouraging. I eventually did it last month and have to say that if you think you might benefit from a fairly idiot-proof adrenalin rush (and I suspect most of my contemporaries would), then I would strongly recommend it. It is very exhilarating, albeit a little buttock-clenching for the first few moments as you leave the aircraft at 13,000ft with the ground all too visible below and then drop free fall for around 40 seconds to 5,000ft at 120 mph terminal velocity (*it seemed fast*) which is when the chute opens and you gently swing down. The actual landing is akin to stepping off an escalator.



Controlled Panic!

Where Your Donations Have Gone

The CAIRN Trust - Child Aid in Rural Nepal -will be:

- building three schools educating up to 800 children as community projects with drinking water facilities & playgrounds
- funding 200 children for 5 years' schooling including uniforms, school bags, & all stationary & books, with quarterly monitoring of all children & families through trained social workers
- building & stocking the first CAIRN library for an existing school, & providing a 3 year training programme & support for a librarian
- continuing to support for 5 years a family group of children who have been taken from an orphanage & placed with caring foster parents
- supporting rural families whose children are receiving CAIRN awards but who require assistance through Income Generation Programmes.



Nepalese children at a CAIRN school (the uniforms are the old ones of Thomas's Schools, London)

The Karen Hilltribes Trust Working in Thailand will be:

- improving education through providing funding for 10 Karen university students over 3 years
- improving education through providing school transport over 3 years for 450 Karen students in 8 villages (currently only 1 in 4 Karen children go on to secondary school because it is too far to travel every day and they lack funds for accommodation, books, & transport)
- improving health through installing 100 latrines & 4 clean water systems in remote villages giving 1,200 individuals access to latrines & 400 individuals access to clean water. Latrines & clean water significantly reduce the incidence of water-borne diseases such as typhoid
- helping generate sustainable income for 300 people by building 3 irrigation systems that will regenerate land increasing crop production & rotation & providing a surplus for sale

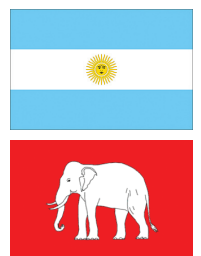


Karen Hilltribes Trust school bus in Northern Thailand.

Further details of the above can be found on the charities' websites: www.cairntrust.org & www.karenhilltribes.com

Thank You

My very sincere thanks to HRH The Prince of Wales for all his support (and his cheerful post-climb card showing a water colour of his of Beinn a' Bhuird - "a somewhat nicer, shorter, friendlier Scottish mountain than that 'bitch' you insisted on climbing!") and to my four patrons for all their support in a number of different ways. But above all, my thanks to *you - the donors* - for making all the above projects possible and directly helping so many in need.



Nick Spencer
Daneway House