



Limitless

Words: Jamie Christian Desplaces

Beyond the Edge is a docudrama recounting Sir Edmund Hillary's and Tenzing Norgay's scaling of Mount Everest. The movie has been met with much critical acclaim at the Toronto International Film Festival and is due to hit our cinema screens later this month, 60 years since that historic climb.

"I've been quite closely involved with the film," says Peter Hillary, Sir Edmund's son. "I acted as consultant and provided them with additional information; put them in touch with guides for the re-enactments in the Mount Cook area. The logistics of working at high-elevation are incredible, you're just debilitated."

Peter has climbed the seven highest summits on each of the seven continents, including reaching Everest's peak twice. In 1990 he did so with Sir Edmund, the first father-and-son duo to do so, and again in 2002 alongside one of Tenzig Norgay's sons, Jamling. Peter has trekked to both Poles, including another father-and-son first when they established a new route across Antarctica. I ask Peter about the pressures of living up to his family name.

"There was a lot of expectation, there's a lot attached to the name," he tells me. "As a youngster that could be challenging at times, but, by and large, it was a good thing. It opened many doors."

Though Hillary's childhood was one of activity and adventure, Sir Edmund discouraged him from embarking upon a mountaineering career preferring that he took up a trade such as engineering instead. But Peter had already caught the adventuring bug. "When I turned 17, I drove with a friend down to South Island and climbed a few of the peaks," he says. "I've never looked back since."

How do you handle the fear?

"You manage it. As your confidence and experience grow, you don't feel as exposed. It's a progressive thing." Public speaking, he says, can be just as terrifying.

I meet with the adventurer at Aotea Square for the launch of Hillary Foods, a range of healthy spreads and cereals. Peter points to the Town Hall where his mother performed with the symphony orchestra as he sat and did his homework in the stalls. He plays the clarinet, though hasn't for a while. His musical release now comes through belting out a few hits in the shower. He talks of seeing Hillary's Honey in grocery stores in Remuera. Continuing his father's philanthropy, proceeds from the food range will head to the Ed Hillary Charitable Trust which works with organisations in New Zealand the Himalayas.

Peter tells me of one of his most memorable endeavours which has a list of names that would grace many a dream dinner party. "It wasn't a particularly heroic expedition, but it was a marvellous adventure with incredible company," he says. "The group was my father, Neil Armstrong and aviator Stephen Fossett. We flew a small plane to the geographic North Pole. To have shared ten days in the Arctic was unbelievable, especially as Armstrong was such a private man."

Were there similarities between him and your father?

"There was an underlying ambition, a commitment to succeeding in their fields.

It's something Neil talked about, the pleasure of witnessing someone who is good in a chosen area. He really enjoyed being part of that team."

There was outrage in some quarters when a recent article in a UK newspaper 'stole' Sir Edmund and labelled him a Brit. Peter, however, is rather philosophical about the mistake. "It was a British expedition," he says. "Back in 1953 our passports said New Zealand citizen and British subject. We were all part of the commonwealth. We were the Kiwi cousins all in it together. It wasn't as cut and dry back then as it is now. It was a British expedition, a British success, but it was also a marvellous success for New Zealand."

Perhaps the epitome of the legendary can-do Kiwi attitude. I ask Peter where that attitude comes from.

"It really comes out of hardship," he says, "from being at the wrong end of the world. If you didn't have something you'd have to be innovative to solve the problem. We're a nation that believes in 'having a go', in 'giving it your best'. It has evolved into what being a New Zealander is all about, and that's a truly great thing."