

WIRED

MAD, ILL-EQUIPPED AND ADMIRABLE: EVEREST 1962 | MAURICE ISSERMAN



Just over a half century ago, on May 8, 1962, four climbers stood atop a Himalayan icefall, watching the last of their Sherpa porters vanish amid the bright, thin air. For the next month, Woodrow Wilson Sayre, Norman Hansen, Roger Hart and Hans-Peter Duttler would be on their own.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, they'd set off from a high camp to attempt the first ascent of Gyachung Kang, a mountain on the Nepalese-Tibetan border—or so Sayre had told the Nepalese officials back in Kathmandu who granted him the permit. Had his American-Swiss party reached the summit of their announced objective, it would have been an impressive coup, considering that none of them had climbed in the Himalaya before, and only two had ever reached an elevation of more than 20,000 feet. At 26,089 feet (7952m), Gyachung Kang fell just below the arbitrary 8000-meter altitude distinguishing other peaks as the pinnacle of mountaineering ambitions.

But Gyachung Kang wouldn't be climbed until 1964. The 1962 expedition had another objective in mind, located about fifteen miles farther east as the *gorak* (the Himalayan crow) flies. Once the climbers were out of sight of their liaison officer, they headed instead for Mt. Everest. Their lack of a Nepalese permit for that peak was an irrelevant detail. Instead of climbing the Southeast Ridge, first ascended by Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953, they intended to try the Tibetan (aka Chinese Communist) North Face. In those dark days of Cold War hostility, it was, of course, completely out of the question for Americans to approach Everest from that side.

When the four men returned to tell their tale, they were denounced by prominent members of the American climbing establishment for threatening the future of Himalayan mountaineering, the strategic interests of the Free World and the possibility of world peace. At the time, many regarded Sayre's lightweight attempt as a travesty of climbing ethics, a harebrained stunt by inexperienced alpinists who deserved to be shunned by "genuine mountaineers."

They are mostly gone to their graves now, those reckless amateurs of 1962, although each one died from natural causes rather than from climbing accidents. Sayre, the oldest member, passed away in 2002, just after the fortieth anniversary of the climb, followed by Hansen in 2005, and Hart, the youngest, in 2011. The sole survivor is Hans-Peter Duttler. In the years after his Everest adventure, he worked as an educator among the Inuit in the Canadian Arctic, and then as a development expert in Bolivia, Peru, Nepal and Honduras. Today, he lives in retirement near Bern, Switzerland, where he remains an active climber and a member of the Swiss Alpine Club.



[Facing Page] Map of the 1962 team's approach to Mt. Everest (8848m). Jeremy Collins | [This Page] Woodrow "Woody" Wilson Sayre on the Nup La. "We made three basic decisions in planning for Everest. We were going without permission, we were going without Sherpas, and we were going without oxygen," Sayre wrote in *Four Against Everest*. Hans-Peter Duttler collection

Looking back from the perspective of fifty years, he is struck by how close their little, ill-prepared expedition came to realizing its improbable goal.

THE LEADER OF THIS RENEGADE BAND came from a distinguished American political family. Sayre was the grandson of the American president for whom he was named, and the son of a former US ambassador to the United Nations. An Army Air Force World War II veteran and a Harvard PhD, he'd taught philosophy at Tufts University since 1957. Despite his impeccable connections, he was a misfit in the stuffy academic world. On one occasion, he surprised his students by entering his third-floor classroom through the window, having scaled the building's stone exterior. Such exploits, combined with his inattention to the publish-or-perish mantra, didn't sit well with his staid colleagues, who in 1964 would vote to deny him tenure. But Sayre was also a Romantic idealist, very much in the New England tradition of Henry David Thoreau. "Society tends to make human relationships superficial; mountaineering deepens them," he proclaimed. "[S]ociety imposes tighter and tighter routines on us. Mountaineering relaxes them" (*Four Against Everest*, 1964).

Sayre hatched the Mt. Everest scheme in the early 1950s with his friend Hansen, a Boston attorney. During that era, very few Americans climbed mountains in their own country, never mind in still difficult-to-reach ranges like the Himalaya. Most of the nation's top alpinists were well known to each other, associated with one or another exclusive clubs,

which served as the gatekeepers of mountaineering craft, values and lore. Unlike today, potential members couldn't simply fill out a form and send in a year's dues to join the Appalachian Mountain Club (AMC) or the American Alpine Club (AAC). They had to be nominated by current members, submit a climbing resumé and win the approval of a membership committee (which often rejected applicants insufficiently proficient, credentialed or connected).

In 1954 Sayre and Hansen applied to go on a winter AMC outing to New Hampshire's 6,288-foot Mt. Washington, hoping to pick up the basics of rope, crampon and ice-axe use. They were turned down because they hadn't gone on a required rock-climbing trip. So Sayre and Hansen took themselves off to Alaska instead. There, they managed to climb Denali by its West Buttress, attaining the summit of North America's highest peak, more than 14,000 feet higher than that of Mt. Washington. It was a notable achievement for two novices, only three years after the route's first ascent. Although the success of their only major mountain expedition contributed to the partners' self-confidence, it added little to their stock of practical knowledge. "We had not slipped or fallen," Sayre admitted. "We thus had no occasion to learn the rope techniques for stopping oneself"—a skill, as it turned out, that would have come in handy later on.

By instinct a loner, Sayre still had no desire (let alone the resumé) to be nominated for a group like the AAC. And without such affiliation, or much of a climbing record, neither



he nor Hansen would ever have been chosen to join a major American undertaking, such as the 1963 Everest expedition, then being organized by Norman Dyhrenfurth (a Swiss-American mountaineer with extensive Himalayan experience). They'd have to go on their own, which meant by subterfuge, since neither Nepal nor Maoist China would give them a permit for Everest. Which didn't bother Sayre. As he explained, he had a lifelong aversion to "busybody rules and regulations," and an inclination "to nullify them whenever possible."

Seven years passed after their triumph on Denali. Hansen turned thirty-five and Sayre forty-two. "You know, Norm," Sayre told his friend in the autumn of 1961, "we're getting old. It's this year or never." That February, with Sayre footing the bill for all expenses (which came to about \$12,000 or \$87,000 in 2012 dollars), they left for Kathmandu, accompanied by twenty-one-year-old Roger Hart, a Tufts athlete who'd taken one of Sayre's philosophy classes. Along the way, they stopped by the Alps, where Hart recruited a fourth team member: the twenty-four-year-old Swiss schoolteacher Hans-Peter Duttle. Neither of the two younger men had any significant mountaineering experience. Shortly after they met on a ski slope near Zermatt, Hart and Duttle went for a hike up a local glacier, and Duttle promptly fell into a crevasse. "Still,"

Sayre noted, "he was free and he was healthy." Both Hart and Duttle expected they would serve chiefly as porters once they crossed into Tibet, leaving the high-altitude climbing to their elders.

To prepare, the climbers steeped themselves in the literature of previous Everest expeditions. "I knew the climbers' names and their exploits," Sayre wrote, "their successes and their failures. I studied their guesses about what ought to be done 'next time.'" In 1952, during an unsuccessful attempt on Cho Oyu, Edmund Hillary and George Lowe had slipped across the 19,400-foot Nup La into Tibet to pay a sentimental visit to the old campsites of the 1920s British Everest expeditions. No one had yet repeated their feat: the danger of apprehension by a Chinese Communist patrol was daunting, and the col itself presented a formidable obstacle. In his memoir, *High Adventure*, which Sayre almost certainly read, Hillary devoted more pages to the perilous crossing of the Nup La than he did to his summit day on Everest the following year. Sayre's team intended to make the second traverse of the Nup La and continue up the route pioneered by George Leigh Mallory and Sandy Irvine—this time, they hoped, all the way to the top.

The north side of Everest had attracted lone dreamers on unauthorized expeditions before: the Englishman Maurice Wilson in 1934, who died in the attempt, and the Canadian Earl Denman in 1947, who had the good sense to turn back. But all the serious climbs on the mountain had been large-scale sieges, involving hundreds of porters, bottled oxygen and ample supplies. The Chinese expedition that finally completed the North Ridge in 1960,

leaving a bust of Mao Zedong on the top, had relied on more than 200 support members for three summit climbers. (Their ascent was still disputed at the time.) Not all mountaineers approved of military-style operations. Both the 1953 American K2 expedition and the 1958 Gasherbrum I expedition had been relatively lightweight affairs, carried out by tight-knit groups of friends. But the notion of four men, carrying their own supplies, crossing a high pass and many miles of glacier to the base of the world's highest mountain, and then summiting it in alpine style, was a bold endeavor. In 1962 most knowledgeable mountaineers would have called it impossible.

BY FOOT, EVEREST lies twenty-five miles to the east of Gyachung Kang. Almost all of that terrain is above 18,000 feet. To get into position, Sayre's party first had to trek from Kathmandu to the village of Namche Bazar, a total of 160 miles—good training, Sayre hoped, for the challenges to come. They hiked north for another dozen miles to the foot of the Ngo Jumbo Glacier. Over several days, aided by porters, they hauled 480 pounds of supplies to a camp high on the icefall, still within the limits of their official government permit. On May 8, they bade their porters farewell, telling them they would be back at base camp in about thirty days.

Rather than heading north toward Gyachung Kang, the party turned east. They faced a difficult climb to reach the Nup La, but the descent proved surprisingly easy. As they entered Tibet, Sayre lifted "an imaginary strand of barbed wire," thrilled to think he might be the third human being to have crossed that section of the border. "[I] offered to have my baggage inspected," he wrote, "but no one appeared." On May 9, they reached the far edge of the West Rongbuk Glacier, explored by Mallory and Guy Bullock in 1921, and last visited by Hillary and Lowe in 1952. "I was entering forbidden territory," Hans-Peter Duttle recalled recently, "my Shangri-La, the land of my hopes and dreams. Would we ever come back? I didn't care: to be right here was the only goal and the reason of my existence."

Nineteen days later (out of the twenty-three that Sayre optimistically allotted for the entire trip to, up, and back from the mountain),

[This Page, Left] Norman Hansen on the icefall below the Nup La. Hansen, Sayre, Hans-Peter Duttle, Roger Hart and their porters shuttled 480 pounds of gear to a supposed high camp for Gyachung Kang (7952m). Instead, the four climbers trekked twenty-five miles

east to make a secret, lightweight Everest attempt. Despite the illegality, Sayre claimed: "Here was one chance to say loudly, 'See the United States isn't all bigness and wealth.'" [This Page, Right] Duttle at a Ngo Jumbo Glacier camp. Hans-Peter Duttle collection (both)

after relaying loads and caching supplies along the approach, they hauled themselves up the last of the East Rongbuk Glacier to the base of the North Col. Already, they were higher than Sayre and Hansen had been on Denali. As they made their way through deep snow, around seracs and glacial pools, everything took longer than planned. Sayre recalled, with amused exasperation, "I was surprised at the natural magnetism that seemed to exist between the crevasses and Hans-Peter." Fifty years later, Duttie feels guilty for slowing down his companions: "In many ways I hindered the advance of the group, due to fatigue, fear and reluctance." His self-judgment seems overly harsh. All the climbers were suffering from the usual accumulation of high-altitude ailments: lassitude, stomach problems, hacking coughs.

At least they were now moving across familiar, historic ground. Ahead, the North Face of Everest rose for nearly two vertical miles. Its dark, downward sloping rock was well known to them from Mallory's photos. Below, they could see the stupa of the famous Rongbuk Monastery, looking much as it had when the first Western visitors approached it (not yet ransacked, as it would be a few years later in the Cultural Revolution). They came upon the remains of old British camps from the 1920s and 1930s. In an abandoned Chinese site from 1960, the four men found tinned crabmeat and bean sprouts, a welcome variation from their own diet of condensed meat bars and heavily sugared tea.

Mallory, Bullock and Edward Oliver Wheeler had first climbed the 1,500 vertical feet to the flat saddle of the North Col in 1921. Sayre hoped his own party could surmount the steep terrain in one day, but a crevasse slowed their progress, and it took them three days to reach the crest. Finally, on May 31, as Sayre recorded, "I took a step that I had dreamt of taking for twenty years." They could have turned back at the top of the North Col, having reached more than 23,000 feet and pulled off a mountaineering exploit that few veteran climbers of the time would have believed feasible. But the apex of Everest, only 6,000 vertical feet above them, shone brilliantly in the afternoon sun. Sayre exulted in the feeling that "the miracle of the summit" was "a genuine possibility."

A half century later, Duttie agrees: "We were very well acclimatized, the weather was stable and warm, the whole face of Everest black and dry.... I think we could have done it,



[Photo] Sayre scouts a difficult passage on the approach to the North Col. The great British alpinist Eric Shipton, a proponent of small expeditions, later wrote a letter to Sayre: "To have got so far as you did by that long and arduous route and with the slender resources at your disposal was a magnificent achievement." Hans-Peter Duttie collection

had it not been for that stupid accident below the North Col." Before their summit bid, they needed to make one more trip halfway down the col to pick up a cache of supplies. Feeling energetic, euphoric and probably hypoxic, Sayre set off with Hart, even though evening shadows were fast descending. On their way back up, just fifty feet below the crest, Hart lost his footing. As he slipped helplessly down the slope, the rope pulled Sayre behind him. By the time he was no longer sliding, but falling through space, Sayre figured it was the

end. A second later, he plopped down into a snowbank, not two feet away from Hart. They were safe for the moment, but Sayre had cracked a rib, and his arm was badly bruised. Hart was disoriented and probably concussed. Their immediate problem was surviving the night in the open at over 22,000 feet. They crawled into a crevasse, wrapping their cold and aching bodies in a tent. After a long, uncomfortable ordeal, they dragged themselves to the saddle, still committed to push on up the mountain. Whatever else Sayre and his

companions lacked, it was not determination.

On June 2, Sayre and Hansen followed in Mallory's footsteps above the North Col, climbing the North Ridge diagonally across the North Face toward the Northeast Ridge. Hart promised to join them in a day or so. Duttie agreed to carry one load to their next camp. For two more days, Sayre and Hansen fought their way up the snowy, windswept ridgeline. Sayre hoped to gain 2,000 vertical feet a day; instead they struggled to make 600.

"At that rate," Sayre realized, "it would take another week to get to the top." They had neither the food nor the stamina to last that long. On June 5, Sayre made one last effort by himself, just to see how far he could go. Carrying little more than his movie camera, he climbed to a height he estimated at around 25,400 feet, about the same altitude as the penultimate British tent site in 1924. The monsoon was still holding off, and it might have proved a perfect summit day for Sayre and Hansen—if they were leaving from Mallory's Camp VI at 26,800 feet.

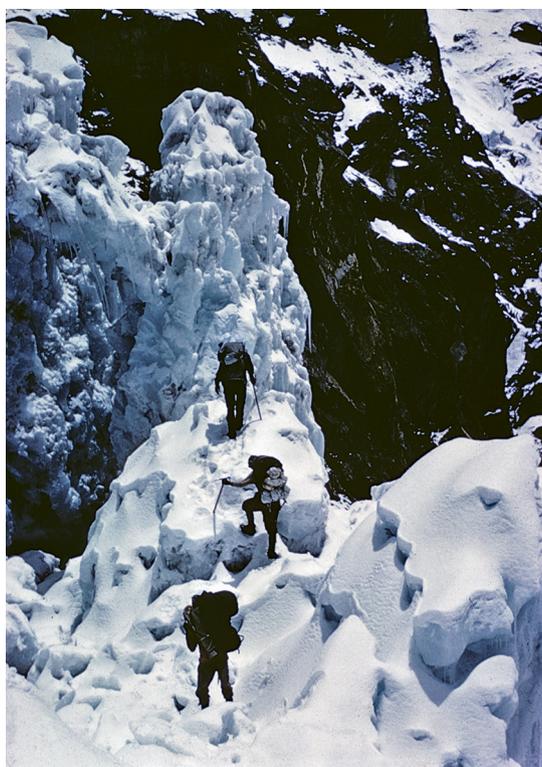
Energy waning, Sayre sensibly, if wistfully, turned his back on the summit, now just a little over 3,500 vertical feet above him. Once again, with hypoxia probably a factor, he made a critical judgment error: to glissade rather than walk down. He quickly spun out of control, sliding 600 feet, bashing against rocks along the way, until finally, a little below high camp, he came to a halt. Bleeding from head and arm, Sayre was helped back to the tent by Hansen.

After two near-fatal experiences in less than a week, Sayre had a definite feeling that he was pressing his luck. He was fortunate that his wounds mostly involved flesh, not bone. There was no expedition doctor, and his companions lacked the skills to pull off the complicated rescue it would take to evacuate a seriously injured man from the North Col, with its steep, exposed snowfields and huge crevasses. Even if they'd gotten him down to the East Rongbuk Glacier, still twenty-five miles from their base camp in Nepal, what could they do next? Ask the Chinese for assistance?

All four members were one misstep from death or crippling injury. As of 1962, seventeen people had died during Everest attempts, including seven Sherpas who were killed by an avalanche on the North Col in

1922, and Mallory and Irvine who disappeared on the upper mountain two years later. At his highpoint, Sayre was only 1,300 feet below the spot where Conrad Anker would discover Mallory's body in 1999. Everest might easily have claimed four more bodies in 1962—and then, very likely, no one would ever have known the fate of the Gyachung Kang expedition. At a thoughtful distance, Hart wrote:

There were a dozen occasions when we should have perished. We were inexperienced. We made horrible blunders and miscalculations. We were poorly equipped and cut off from support or rescue. We fell hundreds of feet.... We set a record



[Photo] The 1962 team on the icefall. To his critics, Sayre wrote, "I can't see why the public image of the...climber has any importance.... Surely no one climbs mountains to be popular." Hans-Peter Duttie collection

for disasters, and still survived (*The Phaselock Code*, 2003).

What followed was an epic retreat. They were exhausted, battered and hungry. They lost all but one ice axe in various mishaps. Marauding *goraks* broke into several of their food caches. The Sherpas and the Nepalese liaison officer had given them up for dead, abandoning base camp and taking all the supplies with them. On June 21, *The New York Times* reported Sayre and his companions as missing and presumed lost on Gyachung

Kang. Hart's academic adviser John Nichols, added the only optimistic note: "These people may be too busy getting themselves back to send out information at this time."

As indeed was the case. Two days before the story appeared, the famished climbers were welcomed into a herder's house below base camp, where they slaughtered a lamb and feasted on shish kebab. On June 23, after receiving news of their survival, the US embassy dispatched a helicopter to pick them up in Namche Bazar. On board the aircraft was Norman Dyhrenfurth, who happened to be in Kathmandu on business for the 1963 Everest expedition. Naturally concerned about fellow Americans in peril, Dyhrenfurth wanted to help. At that point, like everyone else, he thought that Sayre's team had simply gotten lost on an attempt to climb Gyachung Kang.

Like Sayre, Dyhrenfurth was a man driven by visions. Yet Dyhrenfurth was no Romantic. He pursued his dream of putting the first American atop Everest cautiously and methodically and through official channels. Over the past several years, he'd recruited more than twenty elite climbers. He intended to tackle the now-traditional Southeast Ridge, as well as, perhaps, a new route, from Nepal. He'd raised hundreds of thousands of dollars, and he'd secured both the official backing of the National Geographic Society and the unofficial backing of the Kennedy administration.

Not surprisingly, Dyhrenfurth was aghast when Sayre confided where his small team had actually spent the previous six weeks. If the Chinese authorities learned of Sayre's intrusion into Tibet, the Nepalese Foreign Ministry might feel obliged to cancel the official American Everest expedition to placate their powerful and belligerent northern neighbor.

To avoid difficulties with local authorities, Sayre maintained the fiction of the Gyachung Kang climb for the duration of his stay in Nepal. Once back in the United States, he made arrangements to recount the true story in *Life* magazine. Dyhrenfurth wrote cryptically to his fellow expedition members: "The less said about [Sayre's] 'exploits' the better, we are all hoping that it will never appear in print." Dyhrenfurth also sent a letter to the AAC president Carlton Fuller, hoping that the climbing community could prevail upon



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[Photo] Sayre on the East Rongbuk Glacier. He later wrote of “black rock and ultramarine shadows, pure white swell of snow, turquoise and amethyst crevasses, and the diamond glitter of sun on ice.... If a person will cross the ocean just to look at the beauty of a cathedral, why would he not do as much or more to see sights such as these?” To Sayre, “beauty” was one of the primary values of climbing. Hans-Peter Duttler collection

Sayre to keep silent. Fuller replied that there was little to be done, since “Sayre belongs to no mountaineering clubs and has few if any mountaineering friends.” Dyhrenfurth then tried to get the US State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, and even President Kennedy to block publication of Sayre’s account, fearing it might lead to the “curtailment, if not discontinuance, of all future Himalayan exploration,” and even “a possible takeover of Nepal by the Chinese Communists, who have been looking for some pretext for quite some time.” In retrospect, Dyhrenfurth’s fears may seem overblown. Yet in the context of the Cold War, they were understandable—and, indeed, Nepal would suspend foreign expeditions to the Himalaya in 1965 for a period of three years in an unrelated attempt to conciliate China.

While Dyhrenfurth’s team gathered in Kathmandu in March 1963, Sayre’s *Life* magazine article appeared under the provocative title “Commando Raid on Everest.” The Chinese took no official notice, and the American Everest expedition went on as scheduled. Jim Whittaker and Sherpa Nawang Gombu reached the top via the Southeast Ridge on May 1. Twenty-one days later, their teammates Tom Hornbein and Willi Unsoeld summited by the previously unclimbed West Ridge.

Sayre published the book version of his story, *Four Against Everest*, in 1964. Over the next several years, it sold 20,000 copies.

Along with James Ramsey Ullman’s account of the 1963 expedition, *Americans on Everest*, and Hornbein’s *Everest: The West Ridge*, Sayre’s writing helped popularize climbing among Americans. Although his book included no glorious summit photo, the 1962 attempt appealed to readers as both a great adventure story and an anti-authoritarian manifesto. During a decade when younger Americans increasingly revolted against the policies and values of their elders, *Four Against Everest* became a kind of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* for aspiring mountaineers. If Sayre and his partners had stuck to a rational calculus of risk and possibility, they would have never surmounted the North Col. Sanity, perhaps, wasn’t all it was cracked up to be. In January 1964, the headline of *The New York Times* book review read: “The Sayre Expedition on Mount Everest was Mad, Ill-Equipped and Admirable.”

The mountaineers associated with the AAC remained unimpressed. The 1965 *American Alpine Journal* dismissed Sayre’s book as the account of a “prankish exploit.” Sayre was a bit of a provocateur. He liked to refer to the 1963 American Everest expedition as the “second American Everest expedition,” probably relishing the reaction to his impudence. It was hard for most experienced alpinists of the era to take him seriously.

And yet, the four Everest climbers in 1962 were not just pranksters. There had always been a streak of maverick individualism in

American alpinism. In a sense, it was the official 1963 Everest expedition, costing more than \$300,000 (over \$2 million in 2012 dollars) that became the outlier in American mountaineering history. For all its considerable accomplishments, the Dyhrenfurth expedition proved one of the last such gargantuan efforts.

As the British mountaineer Doug Scott wrote in 1999, the four climbers of the Sayre expedition “made a significant contribution to style, although the event was ahead of its time” (Foreword to *Everest: The West Ridge*, Tom Hornbein, 1999). Groups of friends climbing without artificial

oxygen, fixed ropes or established camps came to define the highest ideal. Astounding as it would have seemed to the climbing establishment in 1963, the Sayre commandos rather than the Dyhrenfurth legions pointed the way to the future of Himalayan mountaineering, at least for the next few decades.

Large expeditions returned by the 1990s, but as mainly commercial enterprises, designed to get amateurs less self-starting than Sayre and his companions to the summit of Everest. Today, climbing has become a mass pursuit, and the old-line clubs have long since lost their gatekeeping role. In cutting-edge Himalayan mountaineering, small parties (often smaller than four) remain the standard. Modern alpinists still like to project an outlaw sensibility. Yet the widespread dependence of today’s adventurers on corporate sponsorship—and on the technical gadgetry of modern communications, multimedia packaging and route finding—bears scant resemblance to the self-reliant enthusiasm of the Sayre renegades. In the *Four Against Everest* expedition, four hardy souls, not quite knowing what they were doing, made their way through a vast isolated mountainscape at once beautiful and treacherous, in pursuit of a personal dream of accomplishment and transcendence. As Hans-Peter Duttler reflects, “In 1962 we simply wanted to go our own way, not asking anybody and not wanting to harm anybody.”

Words to live—and to climb—by. ■