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LEO DICKINSON

## Everest Unmasked

Messner, the Unions, and Humphrey the Dog

Recently, someone suggested to me that it must have been great making films in the 1970s because I was always surrounded by a strong support team.

Well, yes and no. This was after all the era of the all-powerful unions.

Take *Everest Unmasked* as an example. On Boxing Day 1976, my canoeing film *Dudh Kosi: Relentless River of Everest* garnered an audience on ITV of 18.5 million, a number unimaginably large in these days of myriad channels and pretty damned good for 1976. So I had the ear of the ITV network. Obviously.

But my suggestion we make yet another film on Everest went down like a lead balloon. The BBC and Thames TV had made several Everest films between them, including *Everest the Hard Way* and *Surrender to Everest*. None did very well in the ratings so my suggestion was not well received.

'But this is without oxygen,' I argued.

It was clearly going to be an uphill struggle, so to speak, and my first role on *Everest Unmasked* was as salesman. I had to sell the idea to the ITV network. Only Aled Vaughan, executive producer of Harlech Television (HTV), helped me. I was asked to make the case to the ITV network committee comprising Granada, Thames, Associated Television and Yorkshire Television. (The 'smaller' regions like Southern, Scottish, Grampian, West Country, Ulster and even HTV did not get to vote on my proposals.) The committee met every three months. Daunting. There was a lot riding on my persuasiveness and my belief in Reinhold.

Charles Denton, CEO of ATV, which later became Central Television, was a fan of my work, so I had his backing. (Charles later poached me from HTV. Ironically, my second film for him was *Eiger Solo*, featuring the Welshman Eric Jones. It was made with no outside interference from executives. Exactly how I liked it.)

Despite Charles's backing the committee had reservations.

*Why would we want to make a film about an Italian we have never heard of, doing something [climbing without oxygen] in which we have no interest on a mountain we have already climbed, and for the first time, and one that we even named?*

Reinhold Messner was flown over from Italy to try and add weight to the pitch and the head of the HTV PR machine weighed in by putting out



Reinhold Messner talks with Eric Jones at 9,000m above the summit of Everest in 1977, aboard a Pilatus Porter piloted by the legendary Emil Wick. (Leo Dickinson)

a press release: 'Everest as we all know is in Switzerland.' This demonstrated how seriously they were all taking it.

When I pointed out the Switzerland gaffe to Aled he said, 'don't worry Leo. He only went to Cambridge.' Reinhold couldn't help laughing.

To assess the project's viability, I decided to fly over the summit of Everest with Reinhold and not allow him to breath any bottled oxygen. Eric Jones came too because he always looked after me in interesting situations. At the controls was the famous Emil Wick, pilot extraordinaire who, despite crash-landing one of their aircraft on Dhaulagiri in 1960, was in 1977 a sales agent for the Pilatus Porter we were flying in. I swear he was smoking through his oxygen mask.

At 9,000m Reinhold was definitely not behaving normally. He struggled to reload his Rolliflex camera, tricky at sea level, and asked me to do it but on the other hand he couldn't stop talking. This I took to be a good sign. He might have been speaking gobbledygook but at least he was *compos mentis*.

The flight cost \$9,500, which I paid, not ITV, thus giving me another role: producer. They did reimburse me later, but I took the gamble to convince myself we weren't all mad.

Realising the enormity of the task ahead, I went to Canon's European headquarters in Amsterdam and asked their engineers if they would make me seven Super 8mm cameras that would run at 25 frames per second rather than 18, the normal speed for this format. To my surprise they took the problem to head office in Tokyo and manufactured exactly what I wanted. Canon never realised how their contribution changed the history of labour relations.



Expedition doctor Oswald 'Bulle' Oelz being interviewed at base camp by Leo Dickinson for the documentary *Everest Unmasked*. (Leo Dickinson)

The use of the Super 8mm presented me with yet another role: union negotiator. The Association of Cinematograph, Television and Allied Technicians (ACTT) announced they couldn't regard 'amateur formats' as acceptable to their members in case they undermined their professional operating standards. This was, of course, nothing to do with technical standards. They simply didn't want non-union amateurs being permitted to send in film to ITV stations. (I wonder how mobile phones would have gone down.)

To smooth things over, I attended various ACTT meetings and presented my case. It was, as you might have guessed, incredibly boring since most of what was said was bullshit, but it became clear that because 'amateurs' could not operate an Arriflex, since the camera was hugely expensive and no climber in their right mind would consider carrying this eight-kilo monster, the Super 8mm format would be acceptable. But believe it or not, ITV still had to pay the unions to allow me to give Reinhold a Canon camera to shoot footage on the summit. The main thing was the interests of the proletariat were satisfied.

We needed more money though, since I would now have to teach Reinhold how to use the new camera. (Film tutor: another hat I wore. I thought it best not to tell the union that three of these Super 8mm cameras also recorded sound, since that was two people's jobs.) Persuading Reinhold to bother at all carrying this very lightweight camera when he went to the top was the real challenge. But eventually he was persuaded and to his great credit said in a recent film that, 'without Leo's film camera, proving we reached the summit, we would not have been believed. The stills were not proof enough.' Even Tenzing Norgay wanted an enquiry and didn't believe



Peter Habeler, Messner's partner on the first ascent of Everest without bottled oxygen. (*Leo Dickinson*)

Messner and Habeler until he saw Reinhold's footage.

So far I'd been program originator, salesman, union negotiator and teacher as well as fulfilling my original roll as cameraman.

Then, horror of horrors, I discovered that I would have to take a union crew with me on the expedition, albeit a 'cut-down one'. The union convenor told me it would be inappropriate to take a woman and since all personal assistants were female (welcome to the 1970s) the lack of toilet facilities would be a problem. Having a union crew involved me finding things for them to do such as filming an interview at base camp. This was almost useful despite HTV's most senior cameraman framing Everest without its summit on several shots. He did let me use his heavy wooden tripod to hold my 1,200mm Canon Super Telephoto lens.

Another of my roles on the film was 'researcher'. I contacted Capt John Noel to negotiate a fee for his material from the 1924 expedition. For some reason this slipped through the union's net as it was classed as archive material. As long as we didn't use more than four per cent in the final film it was acceptable. Let's just say no one ever timed this section.

Where I did come unstuck was 'researching' Prof Noel Odell, someone at Cambridge who as a geologist actually did know Everest wasn't in Switzerland, at least not yet. I took the Everest crew along: cameraman, an assistant cameraman, a sound recordist, an assistant sound recordist (to change the tape), an electrical lighting engineer, his assistant and *The Times* journalist Ronnie Faux to help with the questions. Ron was in the National Union of Journalists and therefore acceptable to the ACTT Union with which there was they had reciprocal agreements.



'We were redeemed and liberated, freed at last from the inhuman compulsion to climb on.' Peter Habeler photographs Reinhold Messner on the summit.

You may have spotted that the one person I hadn't brought was a PA to write down what everyone was doing. Yet there were, it seems, no shortage of toilet facilities in Cambridge and because of my omission the interview I did with Odell, the last man to see Mallory and Irvine alive was not allowed to be included in my film. Having been 'blacked', I had to explain the situation to the 86-year-old professor, who in his day spent longer than any other person above 26,000ft. It was the very last detailed interview he ever gave and when I remade the film four years ago I included this interview.

Terry Elgar was my editor at HTV and I worked with him almost every day for 12 weeks, shaping my narrative of how the Everest story unfolded, culminating with Reinhold's ascent. This does sound like a direc-

tor's role but I wasn't allowed to have that title because it meant I would get two union jobs: cameraman and director. Once we had a picture that ran okay, I brought in my favourite commentator: Ian McNaught-Davis.

We had already collaborated on several projects, including the Dudh Kosi film, which was nominated for an Emmy. Our modus operandi was well established. We had found an expensive French restaurant in Cardiff and would park ourselves there. I would tell Mac the story and any amusing anecdotes over a bottle of wine or two, and we'd reconvene in the editing suite next morning.

Here we would play the film to him, minus all the effects, and make suggestions. Mac would make suggestions. On a project about the Matterhorn we had archive photos of Whymper and his team in the wrong order for Mac's narrative so we undid the Sellotape holding the film together and switched the Steenbeck editing machine back on. After a couple of days of this, Mac would go back to London in his Jag, write his version of the script based around my picture story, come back and record it. I would oversee the recording of the narration and suggest a different emphasis at certain points and sign it off. Job done.

At that point we'd retire to the boardroom to meet up with Aled and Wynford Vaughan-Thomas, one of the founders of Harlech and a former BBC journalist who had flown over Berlin during a bombing raid and covered the Anzio beach landings. (His experiences in the war had taught him the value of 'pointless optimism'.) We'd then open a bottle of whisky. I once brought Humphrey, our six-month Old English sheepdog, to one of these post-production parties. He peed on the carpet. 'Ooh, look at that,' announced Wynford in his muscial Welsh voice. 'Humphrey has weed on the boardroom carpet.'

And that's how 'Team Leo' made films.

After *Everest Unmasked* aired in April 1979, Clive James wrote a review for *The Observer*, focussing on Reinhold's motivation:

*'It is inneresting to try zis climb whizzout oxychen ... what is important to explore is myself.' Reinhold forgot to add that exploring Reinhold's self was important mainly to Reinhold. For the rest of us exploring Reinhold's self was bound to rank fairly low on any conceivable scale of priorities...*

*Reinhold made it to the top. But the peril was not over. There was still the danger of brain damage – or, in Reinhold's case, further brain damage. The chances are that this would first manifest itself in the form of blood bursting blood-vessels in the eyeball, loss of memory, impaired speech functions and the sudden, irrational urge to participate in stupid television programs.*

*Most of these symptoms duly appeared. Nevertheless, Reinhold's achievement could not be gainsaid. He and his friends had proved that it is not enough to risk your neck. It is in the nature of man to risk his brains as well.*

Reinhold loved every word.