INTRODUCTION

I am honoured to be asked to give this talk to the Hypoxia Symposium. I have been fortunate to have attended all but one of the 15 symposia up to now including the first one in 1979. I feel inadequate to follow the illustrious names of Houston, Rahn, Pugh, Grover, Hultgren, Reeves, Severinghaus and West. I decided I should, like last time’s Honoree, talk about my own experience of research in high altitude medicine and physiology. There will be some overlap with John West’s talk of last time since we have been on two major expeditions together but that is a consequence of choosing us one after the other!

HOW DID I GET STARTED?

In November 1959 I read in the newspaper that Sir Edmund Hillary and Dr. Griffith Pugh were going to lead a scientific and mountaineering expedition the following year to the Everest region of Nepal to study the long term effects of high altitude. I wrote to Griff, having never met him, asking if there happened to be a place for me on his team. I was at the time a resident in Respiratory Medicine in Southampton and had done some climbing and skiing but had no expedition experience. He replied that the team was actually made up but if I was in London I should come and see him. Well I immediately asked for a day off and “happened to be in London” the next day! Someone dropped out and I was invited to join what subsequently became known as “The Silver Hut Expedition”. Thus I found myself on my first major expedition and at the start of what became my professional hobby of Mountain Medicine and Physiology. Although my job, throughout my career, has been that of a general physician with a special interest in respiratory medicine, I have been fortunate to have been able to take time off to go on many expeditions to the great ranges, through the kind understanding of colleagues and family.
THE SILVER HUT EXPEDITION, 1960-61

The 1960-61 Himalayan and Scientific Expedition, to give it its official title, was a unique enterprise. It was dreamed up by Sir Edmund Hillary and Dr Griffith Pugh when they were together in the Antarctic. Griff Pugh had been with Ed on Cho Oyu in 1952, Everest in 1953 and in Antarctica in 1956/7. The idea for this long Himalayan expedition was based on the pattern, common in Antarctica, of leaving a party of scientists on the ice to “winter over”. The idea was to study the long term effect of really high altitude on human lowland subjects. So the plan was to go out from Kathmandu after one monsoon, spend the whole winter at high altitude and in the spring to attempt an 8,000m peak, returning just before the next monsoon. Some members came only for the autumn, others for the spring part and some, including myself, were able to spend the whole nine months in the field. Our winter station was a pre-fabricated wooden hut, painted silver, which we set up at 5800m on the Mingbo Glacier in the Everest region of Nepal. This became known as the Silver Hut.

Figure 1. Sherpas carrying panels of the “Silver Hut” across a stream in the Khumbu,

Figure 2. The Silver Hut in place on the Mingbo Glacier at 5800 m with the fluted walls of the Mingbo Col behind. This was our home for the winter of 1960-61.