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To the Limit

David Lim had taken
on Everest. Could he
now beat a life-
threatening illness?

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"It is the unknown in our hearts," David Lim wrote, "that drives us to the next peak. It is the need to know what our limits are." He had to find out

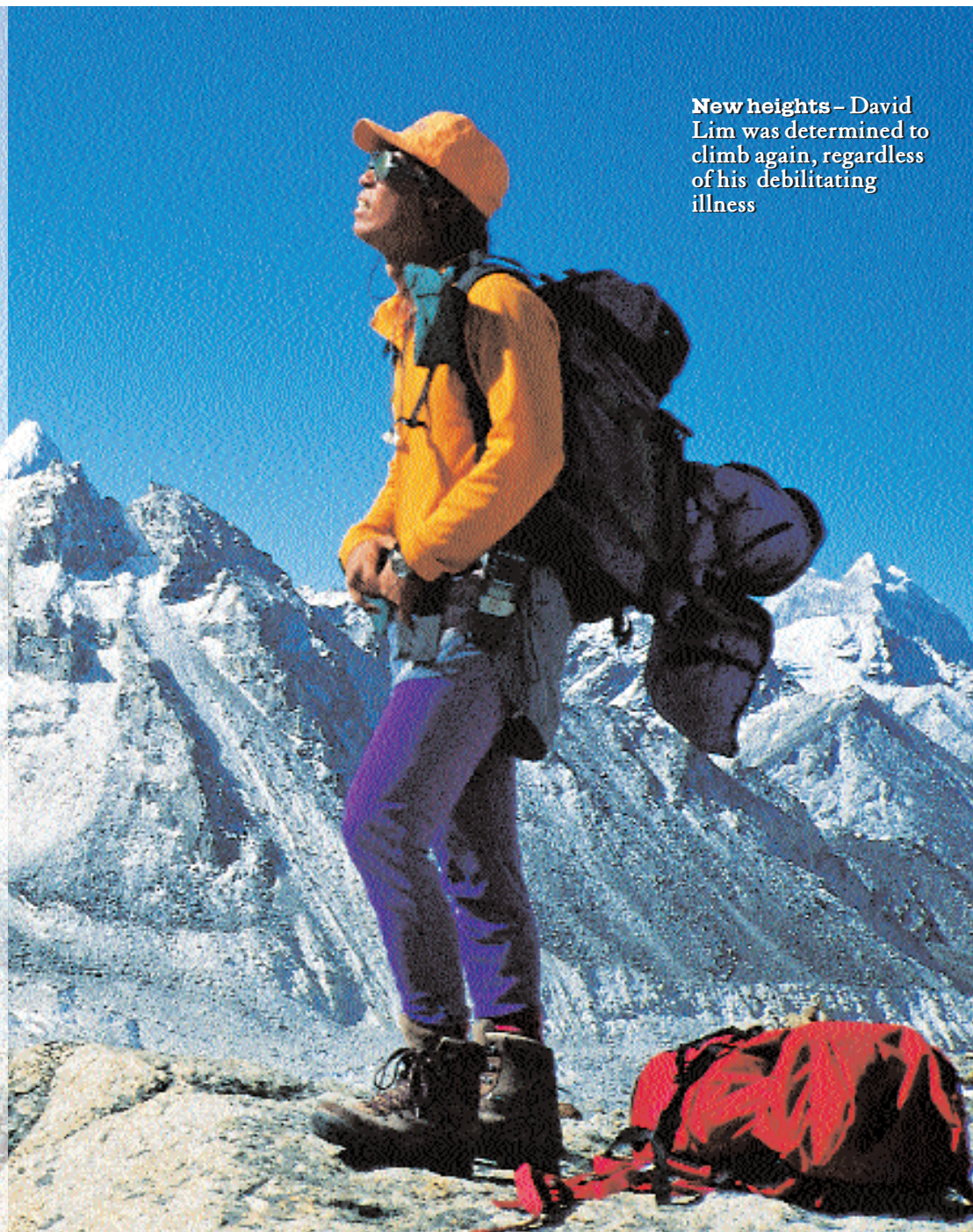
One More Mountain

By CHRISTOPHER MATTHEWS

When David Lim saw someone at the door of his Singapore flat, he hobbled across the room supported by a crutch – a tricky job for a man whose right ankle and left hand were almost paralysed.

Alan Silva had brought him a gift –

New heights – David Lim was determined to climb again, regardless of his debilitating illness



a rock the size of Lim's thumb. "I got it from the top of Everest," he said, "and I'm giving it to you on one condition. You have to put it back!"

David felt the jagged edges of the grey stone streaked with white quartz. He didn't want to hurt his friend's feelings. "I'll give it my best shot, mate," he said with a brave, lop-sided grin. But on that day in January 1999, the thought of Everest was ridiculous. Lim could barely climb a few steps.

LIM, a fine-featured 37-year-old, had fallen in love with climbing while working in a London law firm. He could not quite explain it – on a summit, where everything was pared to its bare essentials, he felt alive as nowhere else. His heart was still in the mountains when he returned home, to Singapore, and a newspaper job. But mountain climbing on this island nation was like "corporate ethics" or "military intelligence" – a contradiction in terms. Singapore's highest point, Bukit Timah, was a wooded hillock only 164 metres above sea level. The only routes to the top were a

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steep road and a series of staircases.

Undeterred, Lim joined a small band of weekend enthusiasts, the Mountaineering Society of Singapore, who went rock climbing in the old tin quarries near Bukit Timah. He also planned the First Singapore Mount Everest Expedition.

Some called Lim a dreamer. The way he saw it, a life without dreams was hardly worth living. And he had the ability to get others to dream with him. "It's because you never stop talking," his friends ribbed him. "After a while, people will do anything to shut you up."

It took four years of talking. But finally, at 6.30 a.m. on May 25, 1998, two members of the expedition, Edwin Siew and Khoo Swee Chiow, scaled Everest's 8848-metre summit.

David got the news over the radio at base camp. Disabled by a strained back, he had dropped out of the final push to the top. But as the camp exploded into cheering and banging pots and pans, he felt almost as happy as if he'd been there himself.

THE TEAM RETURNED to Singapore national heroes. For David, the moment was slightly marred by a stomach bug. A doctor prescribed some pills and tests, and his stomach improved.

Then, on the morning of June 13, his fruit juice tasted strange, and his left hand was so weak he had to use both hands to turn the key in his car's ignition. *I must have pulled a muscle*, he thought

The next morning his right arm

dangled from his shoulder and his right hip felt dead. He made for the nearest hospital, where he was admitted immediately.

Lim's body began to shut down: he lost control of his limbs and his jaw muscles froze. Next to go was swallowing. He started drowning on his own saliva and a suction tube was inserted into his mouth. Then he couldn't breathe and had to be connected to a respirator.

Lim was suffering from Guillain-Barré syndrome (GBS), a rare disorder in which the victim's auto-immune system mistakenly attacks the body's own myelin, or nerve sheaths.

He got pneumonia, and to prevent the secretions in his chest from suffocating him, a nurse plunged a plastic tube down Lim's trachea and vacuumed out his lungs. Soon he was filling four large jars a day with greenish goo.

Two weeks went by before Lim

his forehead and prayed. A kind nurse wiped his face and kept him entertained with gossip about the wards. And a stranger, BK Lim (no relation), heard of his illness and came to the hospital. BK, a banker who had survived GBS, hoped that his presence could cheer Lim up.

"You conquered Everest," he said. "You can overcome this disorder – get on your feet and be well again like me." David's hand made an almost imperceptible sideways movement, but one unmistakably signalling 'No, no!'

Something must be wrong! BK thought as he called the nurse to Lim's bedside. But when he later told his wife about it, she solved the mystery. "No, darling," she said. "David meant, 'No, no, I didn't conquer Mount Everest! Edwin and Swee did.'"

Thereafter BK returned to the hospital almost every day. Most of the

Lim's body began to shut down. He lost control of his limbs, then he couldn't breathe

hit bottom. Something snapped inside him and grief washed over him like an ocean wave. If he could, he would have sobbed. Instead, cold tears ran silently down his frozen cheeks.

LIM'S PARENTS had flown in from Malaysia; his mother now stroked

time, he just sat at Lim's bedside.

Slowly Lim's condition began to improve. First he could move a hand, then turn his head. Feeling started to return to his limbs. One after another, the tubes and sensors came off. He still breathed through the hole in his neck, but on August 15 a special valve was

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fitted, allowing him to speak. "Ha-llo," he croaked to BK, who was at Lim's bedside. The two men began talking, hesitantly at first, until they discovered they were both film buffs. Their discussion soon became animated. A friendship began to grow.

Wilfred Tok, a climbing instructor who had known Lim since 1994, came by one day with a glossy photo book about Mont Blanc. Lim's hands were still almost dead, and he had to wet his fingers to turn the pages. But as he looked at the soaring vistas of this world-famous mountain in southeastern France, he felt an immense longing stir within him.

In September 1999, after weeks of physical therapy, Lim managed to get out of bed by himself, and in early November, almost six

to know what our limits are."

His gaze fell on the stone from the top of Mount Everest. He had to find out.

DAVID LIM telephoned Wilfred Tok one day in late 1999. "Aconcagua," he said. "The Stone Sentinel. It's a 7000-metre peak in Argentina, the highest in the Americas. Will you come with me?"

A rocky, icy lump of a mountain lashed by high winds and unpredictable weather, the Sentinel was hard, Lim knew, but not impossibly so. And it would tell him whether he was ready for bigger things.

Tok knew what Aconcagua would mean to his friend. But he was committed to climbing Mount Kenya in Africa at the time. When the trip

"Aconcagua," Lim said. **"The Stone Sentinel. It's a 7000-metre peak in Argentina. Will you come?"**

months after falling ill, he went home. And then he started to write *Mountain to Climb*, an account of the Everest expedition, and of his illness.

"It is the unknown in our hearts, and the unanswered questions that drive us to the next peak," Lim wrote with his right hand, his left hanging limp by his side. "It is the need

fell through a month later, he immediately called Lim. "I'll come," he said.

Had David's legs allowed him, he would have danced.

IN FEBRUARY 2000, the two men from the Mountaineering Society of Singapore set up base camp at 4100 metres. Lim's hands were still a prob-



lem – he had to open food bags with his teeth. But the months of physical therapy, and training on Bukit Timah and in the local gym had paid off. With a leg brace and a couple of ski poles to help him, Lim could keep pace with his younger and fitter climbing buddy.

Still, with only one good leg, crossing waist-deep streams was a serious hazard. So Tok would move ahead, then hold out a ski pole for Lim to grab.

At 4900 metres they camped and rested to prepare for the summit. Then, on February 14, disaster struck. As Lim turned on the gas to make morning tea, the camp stove exploded into a huge fireball.

Tok dove forwards, grabbing the

flaming stove by its base and hurling it out the tent. His face was red and blistered.

If he needed a doctor, Lim thought, they'd have to head back. But Tok was smiling. "No damage done, Dave. But where's the tea?"

Early on February 17, they struck out for the summit from their last camp at 5900 metres.

A freezing wind was howling as the two climbers pressed on through a brown wasteland flecked with snow and ice. Turning one corner, Lim was buffeted by turbulence so strong it almost knocked him off his feet. He hesitated.

Other parties were starting to come down, and on an exposed ridge 50 metres above, a lone climber hopped



High profile – Lim’s conquest of Aconcagua also helped raise awareness for the Society for the Physically Disabled in Singapore

about as the wind threatened to hurl him off the mountain.

“That’s it,” David said. “We’re not going anywhere today.” Miserably, they turned back to camp.

The gale blew on and off for another 48 hours. Finally, Lim felt it was safe to make another attempt. *It’s just a question of putting one foot after the other*, he said to himself, trying to ignore his burning thigh muscles. They crossed a broad glacier, then stared at the Canaleta, a narrow gully of sand and shale that rose steeply to the summit 400 metres above.

Lim stepped up the slope – and slid almost all the way back as the loose terrain gave way. He gritted

his teeth. Two steps up and one down it would have to be.

By 4.30 p.m. the summit was still 150 metres away, and other climbing parties were heading back. It would be dangerous to be alone on the mountain when night fell, but Lim’s spirit refused to accept defeat. He stabbed a gloved finger towards the summit.

“Let’s push this one a bit,” he said, gasping for breath. He knew the descent would be easier and the weather was holding.

An hour later, Lim scrambled onto a small plateau where a metal cross marked the summit. He sat down and, from the roof of the Americas, looked out onto the peaks below.

One More Mountain

When Tok breasted the summit five minutes later, the two men embraced. Night was gathering as they started down, the stars lighting their way. Lim’s mind was already filling with plans. There was much he wanted to do.

On March 21, 2001, David Lim slipped the Everest stone into his pocket and left for Tibet at the head of Singapore’s second Mount Everest expedition. Among those to see him off was Maureen Da Costa, the pretty nurse who had entertained him with gossip. She was now his steady girlfriend.

On May 26, barely 200 metres away

from Camp 5, the last stop en route to the summit, fatigue brought on by fighting heavy winds for eight hours forced Lim to turn back. “The climb showed me where my physical limits lie,” says Lim, now back in Singapore. “Each climb is another stage in my recovery and, each time I get stronger – mentally and physically.”

For now, Lim has put the rock away for safekeeping and will concentrate on developing Singapore’s mountaineering community and motivating people to conquer their personal “Everests” through his consulting company. He plans a return to the high peaks of the Himalayas in 2002.