

Out of Time

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Will the world's highest mountain yield its secret at last?

Twenty-two years after George Mallory's body was discovered high up on the North face of Mount Everest, an American expedition has found the body of his climbing partner -- Andrew Irvine.

Mallory and Irvine perished in a heroic attempt to scale the hitherto unclimbed peak on the 8th of June 1924. Since then, there has been one unconfirmed sighting of Irvine's frozen corpse, but only now has its exact location been verified. Before the search team interred the body under blocks of limestone, they retrieved from an inside pocket the long sought-after camera that may hold a vital record of Mallory and Irvine's ill-fated ascent.

A representative of Kodak, the makers of the camera, has stated that every effort will be made to process the film. Forty-seven years after Hillary and Tensing made their successful ascent, is the world about to discover that they were not the first to climb Everest? (Story continues [here](#)).

The Guardian, 2nd May 2021

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Oxygen and time; it is the balance between these two factors that will determine whether George Mallory accomplishes his dream. For the more oxygen we carry, the higher we will climb; but the higher we go, the more time we must take, and the less likely it is that we will make it home. And if we do not return to tell our tale, then how will the world know that Mallory succeeded?

Somewhere on the graph of outcomes there must be a compromise that will enable Mallory to reach the summit of Everest. But it is as slippery to grasp as the limestone slabs over which we must climb.

And I fear we have chosen wrongly.

We spent a sleepless night at Camp VI, huddled in our sleeping bags, shivering with the intense cold. At dawn, we emerged into sunlight with the matter of oxygen still unresolved. Mallory wanted to go with two cylinders,

wrote those very words in the note he left for Noel, but I urged him to take a third. He would not hear of it, claiming that even two cylinders was an awful bloody load to carry. He was convinced that eight hours of climbing, assisted by our “bottled English air”, would see us reach the summit. Deep down I knew that Mallory was wrong. But who can gainsay George in matters of climbing? Everyone respects his judgement, even the unlucky Odell, whom everyone in the climbing team believes should have accompanied the great man. But Mallory wants an engineer to fix the oxygen sets, not an experienced climber who might challenge his decisions.

So we trudged out of the camp, blinking in the dazzling sunlight, having discarded everything but the most essential equipment. We carried no flares, no lantern, not even a torch. If we should be delayed, if we should climb too slowly or turn back too late, then...

Now, seven hours after we began our ascent, we stand atop the Second Step, with our oxygen masks pushed aside, our lungs heaving in the skinny air. We shake hands, jubilant at our success. But I am certain that we have expended too much oxygen climbing this rocky bulwark, which rebuffed the valiant Norton and Somervell only days ago. And we are running out of time, too.

I look out into the dizzying gulf, picking out Pumori, Gyanchung and Cho Oyu. Everest’s attendants sparkle in the sunlight, formidable acolytes looming like frozen giants against the infinite azure sky. Then I allow my gaze to fall upon the treacherous slopes of yellowish rock beneath us, already deep in shadow, down which we must trudge later this afternoon if we are to reach Camp VI and safety. As I stand there, trying to marshal my courage for the storm to come, a flurry of snowflakes obscures the view.

I wonder whether Odell has seen us?

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“No,” shouts Mallory above the keening wind. “I will not countenance it.” He is standing on the Northwest ridge, silhouetted against the sky like some roosting bird.

I pull the oxygen mask away from my sunburnt face, wincing with pain. The wind provides an icy balm, one that I know to distrust, for the anaesthetic effect may herald the onset of frostbite.

“George, there is no other way...”

He stares at me for a moment. “One final effort...?”

I shake my head, too exhausted to speak. After a few rasping breaths, I unstrap my oxygen set, which is so much lighter now than when we began our ascent. We discarded our first cylinders three hours ago, just below the First Step. Now my second cylinder is perhaps a quarter-full. There may be another hour’s worth of oxygen left, which when added to the remnants in Mallory’s cylinder might get him close to the summit. Perhaps close enough for him to crawl the rest of the way.

“Take it...please.” I pass the silver tank to him. Despite its bulk, he holds it gingerly, as if he has been given some religious icon or a token of love. The latter is not so very far from the truth.

He shakes his head sadly. “To come this far, and not go on...” His voice crackles with emotion. This is not the stiff-upper-lip Mallory, beloved of the Bermondsey Set; this is a man at the end of his tether, who has been given a chance he feels he does not deserve. But he does deserve it, far more so than I.

Mallory tries to say more, but he is too breathless to speak. Then he turns his back on me so I can attach the extra cylinder to his pack. Mallory is as helpless as ever, an unworldly child adrift in the high Himalayas.

“Set it to minimum flow,” he whispers. I adjust the regulator accordingly. 1.5 litres a minute will be better than nothing, though it less than we have used so far. It will be an awful struggle for Mallory to reach the summit, but he must try. It is the whole of his life.

He takes great gulping breaths through his oxygen mask, then nods once. The equipment is working satisfactorily. To my surprise, he pulls the mask away from his face. He stares up at the ridge and the snow slopes above. Then he turns round and inspects the edge of the Second Step, only thirty feet below.

“I must belay you back down there, before I can continue.”

I shake my head. “No,” I gasp. “There is no time.” I shiver violently, unable to catch my breath.

“Then wait on the sunlit side of the ridge and pray for my return.”

The implication is all too obvious. If Mallory should fall to his death, then I will most certainly share his fate. For no climber on his own, however

experienced, could descend the Second Step unaided.

Our eyes lock for one moment; then he picks up his ice axe and resumes his ascent. Fragments of ice slide down behind him as he trudges up the ridge, back bowed against the freezing wind. I try to watch his progress, but tears well up in my eyes. They freeze into a film that temporarily obscures my view.

“Godspeed, Mallory,” I whisper.

Minutes pass before I realise that in my haste to donate my precious oxygen, I have forgotten to give Mallory something no less important.

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Mallory has been gone almost five hours.

For a while, I was content to sit on the slabs above the Second Step, at peace with the world. I told myself that I had climbed higher than any man except Mallory and had sacrificed my chance so he could climb higher still. From time to time I craned my neck upwards, searching for him. But snow flurries obscured the upper slopes of Everest and any view I might have of him on the summit.

Now the surrounding peaks are tinted blood red, though Everest itself obscures the setting sun from my eyes. Is Mallory witnessing this mesmerising sight from the very top of the world? If so, then we are both done for, because soon dusk will fall upon the North face of Everest. And with darkness will surely come death.

I hunker down on the leeward side of an outcrop of limestone, but the wind scythes through my clothing, seeming to rend the flimsy layers of cotton and wool with its invisible talons. The cold has numbed my body beyond feeling. Soon it will numb my mind.

The cold is killing me.

Realising that I can wait no longer, I stand up and walk to the edge of the Second Step. The descent looks impossible, but I must try. But as I look down towards the limestone slabs beyond, I see something that makes me shiver from more than mere cold; that makes me gasp from more than the rarefied air.

For a thousand feet below, a team of climbers is scouring the upper slopes of Everest. But these men are not Norton, Somervell or Odell, come to search for their stranded colleagues. No, these gaudy, bloated spectres are scouring the

scree slops for something, as if seeking buried treasure. I call out feebly, but they pay me no heed. Bathed in bright morning sunlight, they continue their search regardless, even as dusk falls upon me.

They are impossible.

I turn away and return to my inadequate shelter further up the slope. Death from exposure will bring blessed relief from these tormenting hallucinations.

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Mallory has returned.

His eyes gleam in the pale moonlight, but I cannot read his expression. He is shivering uncontrollably, as I do too. When he tries to speak, the words that issue from his cracked, swollen lips are incoherent, incomprehensible.

“Did you make it...?” My feeble croak floats away on the wind, too faint for Mallory to hear.

He leans over me, shouts into my frostbitten ear. At first, the words seem childish, nonsensical. Then I hear him say “The Dead”. He repeats the words over and over again, until his voice gives way to a racking cough. Suddenly I feel relieved that I neglected to give him the camera. He looks into my eyes for a moment; there is agony there. Then he shakes his head sadly.

“Must leave,” he gasps.

Mallory pulls me to my feet and ties a rope around my waist. I am too weak to help. He indicates with his hand the route we must take. I stare at him, but he is looking up at the summit, a dark mass barely distinguishable from the sky. Then he staggers downhill, his boots squeaking on the snow.

We scramble down the icy slabs towards the Second Step, our way illuminated by starlight and the fitful gleam of the crescent moon. Not many hours ago, we climbed this slope in bright sunlight, as we attempted to scale Mallory’s dream. Now we are two dead men, stumbling in the darkness, descending into a nightmare.

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We almost made it, though in truth we were lucky to get this far. Time and time again one or other of us would slip, would be on the point of sliding away into the darkness, only to find some fortuitous handhold. Even the terrifying

descent of the Second Step failed to claim our lives. But there were other obstacles no less severe: exhaustion, giddiness, dehydration, and the befuddlement that hypoxia brings. Finally, our luck ran out.

For the briefest of moments, it seemed that the rope would hold. I looped it once around the nearest rock and dug my boot-heels into the snow. Then the rope snapped and Mallory was gone, bouncing helplessly down the treacherous slabs like a pebble skidding across the waves. His despairing yell was engulfed by a silence as deep as any ocean.

In a fit of panic, I worked my way down the scree slope, clinging onto all-but-invisible outcrops with little more than blind faith, risking death with every faltering step. I had gone barely twenty feet when I halted, having realised the futility of searching for a dead man in absolute darkness. Everest had claimed Mallory, had made him immortal. It is what he would have wanted.

And soon the mountain shall have me too.

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Now I rest against some other rock — not so very far from the sanctuary of Camp VI, I think, but too far for it to matter. I wheeze feebly in the freezing air and stare out into a void so dark, so profound, it sucks all hope from the soul. I am more tired than mere words can describe. The cold has seeped into my bones and numbed the pain in my heaving lungs. It is extinguishing my life by degrees.

I wish I had died with Mallory.

Instead I have survived just long enough for the searchers to find me. These bloated ghosts of the not-yet-dead are gathered all around me; their heads are bowed, as if in homage to my worldly remains. As before, the searchers are standing in sunlight, while I am freezing to death in the dark.

One of the ghosts bends over me, like a coroner inspecting a corpse. Unseen fingers probe my flimsy garments, seeking out those tokens that will speak of my life and death. It occurs to me that he is searching for the camera. He will have his picture, soon enough. But it will not show him what he wants to see.

For Everest guards her secrets well.

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Everest: The Unsolved Mystery

Yesterday, scientists at the Kodak research centre announced that the film in the

camera found on Andrew Irvine's body four weeks ago contained a single exposed frame. Unfortunately, the photograph — reproduced below — was taken some distance below the summit. Speaking to our reporter Philip Noyce, Everest veteran Joseph Lasker said: "The picture is slightly out of focus and the contrast is poor, but in the distance you can see a climber on the ridge, silhouetted against the sky. It could only be Mallory, climbing the Third Step, about a hundred and fifty metres below the summit. When the photograph is viewed under high magnification, you can just make out a bulge on his back: almost certainly his breathing apparatus.

"Without a summit photograph, we will never know for sure, but I think Mallory might have made it. I really think he might have made it..

The Guardian, 3rd June 2021