

THE EVEREST STORY

What is the most exciting and difficult thing in the world to do? You can run a marathon in the desert, travel around the world by bicycle, cross Antarctica on foot – the list goes on and on. But for one group of people the dream is to climb to the summit of Everest – a place where perhaps one day they can stand for a few minutes, and know that they are higher than anybody else in the world.

When the British climber George Mallory was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest, he said, 'Because it's there.' Many of those who come to the mountain are strong and brave, and some are lucky. But all are part of a story that has danger, success, death, and mystery at its centre. This is the story of Everest.

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TIM VICARY

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1 The body – 1999

A group of five climbers move slowly across the north face of Everest. Suddenly, one of them sees something strange on the rocks below him. Something whiter than the snow. Carefully, he climbs down towards it. Then he calls his friends on his radio.

‘Come down here,’ he says. ‘Look at this.’

Coming closer, they see it is the dead body of a climber. The wind has blown some of the clothes from the body, and the skin is clean and white, like new stone. In the icy cold, it looks like the body of a man who died a few days ago. But the bits of clothes that are still on the body are old, brown and grey – nothing like the brightly coloured clothes that modern climbers wear. The body is lying face down. Above the head, the fingers of one hand are dug into the icy ground. One leg is broken in two places below the knee, and the other leg is lying over it. The body looks strong and healthy, they think, like the body of a runner or dancer.

The climbers photograph the body carefully. Then, very gently, they touch the dead man’s clothes – the hobnail boots, the trousers and shirt made of wool. How little he was wearing, they think, on this icy cold mountain. ‘I walk out on the street in Seattle with more clothing than he had on,’ one of them says. Yet here they are at 8,155 metres on Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world.

Who is this man? He can only be one of two people, they think. But which one? Then they find a name inside his shirt. ‘George Leigh Mallory’, it says.

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But who is George Leigh Mallory? Why are these climbers so interested in him? How did he die, and what happened to him before he died? Where is his friend, Andrew Irvine?

And the most important question of all – was this man, George Mallory, the first man to reach the summit of Everest?

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2

Dangers

The climbers do not stay long with the body, because Mount Everest is one of the most dangerous places in the world. There are many things that make it difficult to stay alive here. The most important of these is the height.

The top of Everest is 8,850 metres above sea level. As you climb up the mountain, the air becomes thinner – it has less and less oxygen. Most people live less than 900 metres above sea level, where the air is full of oxygen. Above 2,000 metres the air is thinner, and people find it harder to breathe. At 4,000 metres it is harder still, and at 5,000 metres most people begin to feel ill. They get headaches, feel tired, and breathe quickly all the time, like someone who has run a long way.

In 1921, when Mallory first went to Everest, no one had climbed a mountain higher than 7,500 metres, and many people did not think it was possible. ‘If climbers don’t have enough oxygen, they’ll be too tired to climb,’ they said. ‘And they won’t be able to think clearly, either. So they will make stupid mistakes – forget to eat and drink, or talk to people who are not there. Perhaps they’ll die.’

But the need for oxygen is not the only problem on Everest. There is also the weather. Almost every week there are winds of 100 or even 200 kph (kilometres per hour). It is difficult to walk or even stand up in these winds. The wind can blow climbers off the edge of the mountain, thousands of metres to the valley below. Climbers sometimes sit in their tents for

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days, unable to sleep because of the noise, and afraid that the wind will blow their tents away.

And then there is the cold. Temperatures on Everest often fall below -20°C , but the wind makes that feel much colder.

But before anyone can climb Everest they have to get there. Tibet in China is to the north of Everest, and Nepal is to the south, and until 1950, Nepal refused to let any foreign climbers enter their country. So the earliest climbers, like Mallory and Irvine, had to get to Everest from the north, through Tibet. And that was not easy at all.

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3 Through Tibet to Everest – 1921

Until the early nineteenth century, nobody in the west knew about Mount Everest. People in Tibet knew, of course – they called it Chomolungma: ‘Goddess Mother of the World’, and to people in Nepal it was Sagarmatha: ‘Goddess of the Sky’. But no one in Tibet or Nepal had ever climbed the mountain – they thought that was a very strange idea. And no foreign person had ever been so far into the Himalayas.

But in the 1830s a British soldier called George Everest was making maps in north India. He made the first maps of the Himalayas, and measured the height of some of the mountains. But Everest finished his work in 1843, and he never saw Chomolungma. The first British man to see the mountain was Everest’s friend, Andrew Waugh. In 1852 Radhanath Sikdhar, who worked for Waugh, said he had discovered the highest mountain in the world. It was measured carefully many times. Then in 1856 Waugh said that this was the highest mountain in the world. He gave it the name of his old friend, George Everest, in 1865.

But very few British people were able to enter Tibet or Nepal at that time. So it was not until 1921 that the first British expedition went to see if it was possible to climb the mountain. There were nine British climbers on this expedition, and one of them was George Mallory.

To get to Everest, the climbers had to walk 500 kilometres through Tibet. Their Tibetan porters carried everything

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they needed: food, tents, clothes, cameras, and climbing equipment.

It was a long, difficult journey which took a month. They were always climbing – at first through river valleys with tall trees, colourful flowers and birds – then onto a wide stony place where nothing grew. There was no sound except the wind, and all the time the air was becoming thinner.

The climbers walked past Tibetan villages high up on the sides of mountains, and came to Rongbuk, the highest monastery in the world, 4,800 metres above sea level. The monks in the monastery looked at the visitors in surprise, wondering why they wanted to climb the dangerous mountain.

The climbers decided that the best way to get onto the mountain was to go up the East Rongbuk Glacier. From there they planned to climb to the North Col, a small flat place on the north ridge of Everest.

By this time it was late in the year, and the winds were getting stronger. They had not planned to get to the summit this year, but only to look for a way up. But on 23 September 1921, Mallory, with two other climbers and three porters, climbed up the steep ice wall of the East Rongbuk Glacier. When they reached the snow ridge of the North Col the next

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day, they could see the summit, 1,800 metres above them. But at 7,000 metres it was difficult to breathe, and they moved slowly. And they could hardly stand up in the strong icy winds.

They would have to go down, and come back next year.

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