

On top of the world ... yet just a breath away from death

Climbing Mount Everest, the world's tallest peak, was "the dream of a lifetime" and one of the most challenging initiatives ever undertaken by the Mallory family.



JENGBU SHERPA

By Alan Mallory, Sc' 07 02/19/2009

It was the family trip to end all family trips. Last year, my mother, Barbara (McMurray) Mallory, Artsci'73, father, Dan, Artsci'74, brother, Adam, Sc'08, sister Laura, and I set out to climb Mount Everest, the world's highest peak.

We're a closely knit family from Utopia, Ontario (just west of Barrie), and we enjoy many diverse outdoor activities. Our family opted not to have a television set in the house while my siblings and I were growing up, and so we had to invent other activities to amuse ourselves. We've always enjoyed high-adrenaline physical activities, and my brother and I have frequently built new contraptions and tried new things that usually involved us hurtling through the air or hanging by our fingertips. We're also a very competitive family, a quality which has driven us to set extraordinary goals for ourselves. I think it's mankind's nature to "reach for the top" and to strive to get to greater and higher places. I'm sure all this contributes to our fascination with mountaineering. (And to answer the obvious question ... I don't know if we're related to George Mallory, the ill-fated climber who died on Everest in June 1924. We're trying to find out.)

The chance to climb to the top of the world has been my family's dream for many years, and we decided finally to pursue it. We'd each climbed one or more of the Seven Summits (highest mountains on each of the seven continents), and this helped in our mental and physical preparation for Everest.

A huge amount of preliminary work is involved in an expedition of this magnitude. Just the logistics of trying to get us all together was a nightmare because we're spread all over Ontario. There's also an enormous amount of specialized gear to procure, research to be done, and training to complete.

We set off at the start of April 2008. We left then so we'd arrive at the summit of Everest during the two-week weather window that's near the end of May, during which time the fierce winds and weather usually subside slightly, making summit attempts possible. We flew into Kathmandu, Nepal, where we spent several days before taking a small plane to the town of Lukla at the edge of the Himalayan mountain ranges. From there it's a 10-day trek up the Khumbu

Valley to the Everest Base Camp.

My mother had flown over to Nepal earlier, and my brother joined the rest of us there a few days after he finished writing final exams at Queen's. Eventually the five of us rendezvoused part way up the Khumbu Valley. Unfortunately, my mother wasn't able to continue. She tore her Achilles tendon and a calf muscle on an acclimatization climb and had to abandon the Everest ascent.

About one month of the two that we spent climbing that storied mountain were taken up at the Base Camp, where we got acclimatized. This is extremely important in order to avoid getting an acute high-altitude mountain sicknesses such as cerebral edema or pulmonary edema. If you suffer cerebral edema, blood leaks into your brain, causing temporary or permanent blindness and then death if you don't quickly descend to a lower altitude. Pulmonary edema involves blood leaking into your lungs, and this too can be fatal. You suffocate. Getting used to breathing oxygen-thin air helps to minimize or avoid the likelihood of these and other altitude-related problems.

The basic process involves slowly exposing your body to the higher altitude, giving yourself enough time to adjust to the greatly reduced oxygen and pressure. The best way to do this is by ascending slowly with frequent returns to lower altitudes for rest periods. When the body senses the reduced oxygen at the higher altitude, it responds by triggering the production of more red blood cells. These cells contain the haemoglobin that carries vital oxygen to the body's muscles and organs. On a mountain as high as Everest – 8,848 metres above sea level – the acclimatization process takes a long time, and that's one of the reasons it takes at least two months to climb to the peak.

OUR TREK UP TO THE BASE CAMP was challenging, but relatively safe. There's very little snow or ice there, and most of our heavy gear and supplies were carried by yaks and the local porters we hired. However, although this initial trek isn't difficult, the 5,182-metre elevation of the Base Camp can't be taken lightly. Many people get altitude sickness here, and we saw many climbers having to be rescued by helicopter. Base Camp is located on top of the Khumbu Glacier, which is in constant motion, causing the surrounding ice and rock to change shape frequently. Terrible sicknesses are common here because the reduced oxygen weakens the body's immune system and the living conditions are far from sanitary. Imagine living in the same tent and eating a diet of sardines, spam, and yak meat for more than a month.

Nonetheless, the real challenge of scaling Everest begins above Base Camp. The initial leg to Camp One takes six to eight hours of climbing through the Khumbu icefall. This section is hazardous because it's lined with seracs, huge chunks of ice the size of buildings, which move four to five feet per day. These seracs can fall at any time and do, sometimes crushing people. There are also more than 50 gaping crevasses, some of which are up to eight metres wide, that must be crossed. We did this on aluminum ladders, tied end-to-end with thin ropes. It was frightening. The worst part was that we had to go through the icefall six times during our acclimatization process.

It doesn't get any safer or easier above Camp One. There's a constant risk of avalanches from the peaks on either side of the fairly narrow glacier called the Western Cwm (pronounced "cume")

that leads to Camp Two at just over 6,096 metres. From Camp Two we had to climb the Lhotse Face – an 1,829-metre wall that rises at angles from 45 to 60 degrees and that has two 80-to 90-degree sections that must be scaled. Rock falls and ice avalanches are common here. In fact, two boulders narrowly missed my father and sister.

Camp Three is halfway up the Lhotse Face. Here, shelters have to be carved into the side of the slope. We had to take extreme caution not to slip at Camp Three because the slightest misstep could have resulted in a 900-metre tumble back down to Camp Two. Nobody has ever survived a fall on the Lhotse Face. At Camp Three and above, the air is so thin that it takes every bit of one's willpower just to put one foot in front of the other. We started using oxygen after Camp Three, but the small amount of bottled oxygen we used didn't provide us with much of an increase in energy or speed.

After scaling the two huge rock features known as the Yellow Band and the Geneva Spur, we arrived at Camp Four, 7,925 metres up the mountainside. It is the highest camp before the summit and is in what is known as the "Death Zone." There's so little oxygen here that the human body cannot acclimatize and degrades rapidly. Exposure to the Death Zone for more than a few days is dangerous; people have been known to fall asleep in their tents at this altitude and never wake up. That's what happened to one of the three people who died on Everest while we were there. It was a sobering experience to hear about people dying even as we continued to climb. In fact, as we made our way up the trail we passed a dead climber whose frozen body looked as if it had been lying there for several years.

Usually no one removes bodies from the mountainside because you hardly have enough energy to move, let alone pull someone else along the trail. Sometimes bodies are retrieved if family members or friends are climbing along with the person. Bodies that are lying close to crevasses or cliffs are sometimes pushed over so there aren't corpses littering the trail. It sounds grim, but that's the way it is. Nowadays, Nepalese authorities keep track of who's attempting to climb Everest, so identifying who doesn't come down from the mountain is much easier.

IN ORDER TO REACH THE SUMMIT OF EVEREST during daylight hours, we started the final leg of our ascent to the summit at 8:30 pm after only a few hours in the camp and with no sleep. My sister, Laura, decided not to join us. She was feeling the effects of a virulent stomach amoeba and was throwing up blood. She stayed behind at Camp Four while my father, brother, and I continued on with our two Sherpas. They are local Nepalese climbers, highly skilled and fearless, who know the route. They helped us with our planning and worked to minimize the dangers on the climb. As it turned out, one of them may have saved my life.

Getting to the summit took us 12 hours of steep, gruelling climbing in the pitch black with only small headlamps to guide us. At the summit of Everest it was a relief to have finally reached our objective and to be looking down upon the world from the small plateau there – just two metres by five metres square. The wind was 20-30 km/h, and the temperature was approximately -40 to -50 Celsius. Despite the harsh conditions, we had a 360-degree panoramic view of the Himalayan ranges, as far as the eye can see in all directions. In the morning light, the view was breathtaking.

It was an extreme relief for us to be finally headed back down from the summit, but our worst scares were yet to come.

Not far below the summit, I ran out of oxygen. I was terrified as my limbs began to shake, and my core body temperature began to drop. I was faced with the realization that I might die up there, as 207 unfortunate souls before me had. Mercifully, one of our two Sherpa guides bravely gave me his oxygen bottle – his lungs being better able to cope with the thin air – and I was able to continue. The six-hour descent was very dangerous and presented a huge mental challenge because our minds and bodies were completely exhausted.

Our second scare came the next day. Although my sister wasn't able to go to the summit with us, by the following day she felt recovered enough to set out on the climb with a Sherpa guide. She planned to call us on her radio when she reached the top, but we heard nothing. We were terrified that she'd fallen to her death. We had no way of knowing that the batteries in her radio had given out, leaving her unable to communicate with anyone until she got down from the summit to Camp Four.

Although climbing Mount Everest was filled with constant danger and hardships, my family and I agreed that the experience as a whole was a positive one. Individually, we pushed our bodies to their absolute limit and tested our willpower every step of the way. In doing so, we learned a lot about ourselves. We also learned that anything is possible if you want it badly enough. Each of us fulfilled the dream of a lifetime. What made it even more incredible was being able to do it together as a family.