

# STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAKE NORTON

Jake Norton has worked as a professional mountain guide and photographer for over twelve years. His climbing and photographic exploits have taken him to the summit of Mount Everest twice, to the summits of continental highpoints Mount McKinley in Alaska and Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, and eighty-six times to the summit of Mount Rainier in Washington. Learn more about Jake's adventures at [www.mountainworldproductions.com](http://www.mountainworldproductions.com).

*Lhotse face, Mount Everest*



Nuptse reflection, Nepal

**T**HE DAY DAWNS CLEAR AND CRISP, SPECTACULAR SUNLIGHT BLUSHING THE NEPAL HIMALAYA TO THE SOUTHWEST. FIVE OF US IN THIS TEAM – DAVE HAHN, CONRAD ANKER, ANDY POLITZ, TAP RICHARDS, AND I – LOAD OUR PACKS AT 25,600-FOOT CAMP V, PERCHED PRECARIOUSLY ON MOUNT EVEREST'S NORTH RIDGE. DAVE, TAP, AND ANDY PLUG INTO THEIR OXYGEN SYSTEMS, WHILE CONRAD AND I LOAD OURS INTO OUR PACKS, BOTH OPTING TO TEST OUR STRENGTH WITHOUT SUPPLEMENTARY OXYGEN FOR A DAY OF CLIMBING ABOVE 8000 METERS. BUT THIS DAY CONTAINS NO PUSH FOR THE SUMMIT. ON THIS DAY WE'RE HOPING TO FIND HISTORY RATHER THAN MAKE IT.

For me, mountains and history – and my fascination with both – have always gone hand in hand.

I grew up in the mountaineering *heartland* of Topsfield, Massachusetts, about 35 miles north of Boston. While many of my early climbs were made in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, my appetite for climbing and history was whetted as a young boy visiting my grandparents in Colorado.

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It was here in Colorado that I would walk through the quaking Aspen trees on the Roaring Fork Valley with my grandparents, eagerly discovering the detritus of old mining camps: a bit of tin, a discarded spoon, maybe a railroad tie or bit of lumber. What was trash to some was a treasure to me, a subtle reminder of those who had come before and made a resounding impact on the mountains I had just begun to love.

As my climbing progressed and developed, so did my zest for learning about those who came before me in the mountains. Finding evidence of their travels in the landscape only heightened my search for experience and for history.

From the 14ers of Colorado to the slopes of Mount Rainier, minor peaks in the Alps, to Kilimanjaro and the Himalaya, various bits and pieces of mountain history sit on bookshelves throughout my house: a rusted piton from the Harvey Carter-era found cragging above Emerald Valley Ranch near Colorado Springs; half of an ancient, handmade ice-axe from the crater rim of Kilimanjaro; rope, pitons, carabiners, tent fabric, and food tins from pre-World War II Everest climbs.

Sure, they're all trash in one way or another. No one, even on eBay, would pay good money for them. But, to me, they're all treasures, for each brings me back to a specific time or place, and well-remembered

climb and experience. And, most importantly, each one reminds me that long before I scrambled into those hills, someone else had been there, charting the course, figuring out the complexities of the route and the climb, testing their mettle and growing their mind and spirit. It is a humbling realization, one which helps me keep my ego in check. Always a good thing in the hills.

While I love looking at those artifacts and remembering the climbs and adventures and histories they represent, my fondest "artifact" is one I can no longer see or touch in person, but rather sits in my memory as the most humbling and poignant day of my climbing career: May 1, 1999, the day we found George Leigh Mallory.

**O**n this day we're hoping to find history rather than make it. We climb strongly across the North Face and into the gullies leading to 8,300-meter Camp VI, perched on the dramatic and rugged terrain of the upper mountain. It's a stunning Himalayan day, nearly breathless with crisp views south to the Indo-Gangetic Plains and west to the Annapurnas. Conrad and I arrive at Camp VI (27,300 feet), collapse onto a rocky platform, unload our oxygen bottles and equipment, and take a needed rest while waiting for

the others to arrive.

Once all collected, we chart our plan: Descend south-southwest from Camp VI, look for blue oxygen bottles from the Chinese 1975 expedition\*, proceed into the snowy basin, fan out to sweep the area for any evidence of George Mallory or Sandy Irvine—or both.

*\*In 1975, Chinese climber Wang Hongbao discovered an "English dead" in the vicinity of his high camp on Everest. Since no one but Mallory & Irvine had died so high on Everest before, it must have been one of their bodies. See Jochen Hemmleb's First Traces: 1933-1991 at <http://www.affimer.org/hemmleb3.html> and First on Everest by Tom Holzel & Audrey Salkeld.*

Fifteen minutes later, gasping for breath as I make my way across jumbles of scree and rubble, I notice a blue patch in my peripheral vision. It's an oxygen bottle, lying in the rock. It's obviously old, machine-capped on both ends, horizontal ribbing along the shaft, and its bright blue paint blasted away by years of rockfall, wind, and weather. A quick radio call describing it to our historian, Jochen Hemmleb, confirms that it is, in fact, a Chinese bottle from 1975. We're in the right area. The bottle goes into my backpack and we move onward.

In another 15 minutes, we're in the pre-determined search area—a jumbled landscape of down-sloping shale, wildly tilted at impossible angles, and cover-



Sunrise on Mt. Rainier

ing about 12 football fields in area. It's a morbid place, to say the least. Our cursory search brings us by numerous bodies of different eras, all having fallen victim to the ambivalent mountain looming above.

I wander about in a shallow gully just above 27,000 feet looking for anything that seems out of place in this inhospitable terrain. I find little—an occasional mitten blown off the hand of an inattentive climber; a discarded sardine can; a Poisk oxygen bottle; and lots of rock, ice, and snow. Above and below, my teammates search similar terrain, moving with precise determination in this unwelcoming basin.

Then Mother Luck comes into the picture. Conrad Anker, scouring a shelf some 50 meters southwest of me, stops to take off his crampons and happens to look over his shoulder, behind and uphill. It's the proverbial "right place at the right time." Not far away, he sees "something white, but not snow and not rock." His interest piqued, he gets up to investigate, and immediately makes a radio call:

*The last time I tried a boulder problem with my hobnails, I fell off, Conrad says.\**

Muffled replies of altitude-induced bewilderment come from Andy, Tap, Dave and I. No one moves an inch. Frustrated, Conrad hops on the radio again: *Mandatory team meeting here... Mandatory team meeting. I have tea and Snickers.*

Glancing to my right, I can see Conrad some fifty meter away, frantically waving his ice axe above his head. Something's up, my feeble mind informs me. Roger that Conrad, I reply and move toward him. Being only a short distance away, I'm the first to reach Conrad's position.

My breath catches in my throat. There, lying in the rubble of the North Face, lays a body, the remains of a fallen hero. The tattered clothing, made of natural fibers, flaps in a gentle breeze.

\*Since many people were listening in on our radio conversations, we had previously decided to speak in a sort of code to disguise any discovery we might make.

A cotton rope is tied around the waist in a bowline-on-a-coil. Leather, hobnailed boots are on the feet. Conrad and I look at each other in disbelief: This is one of them. But which? Mallory or Irvine. No one else from the era had died this high on the mountain. We are, simply put, stunned into silence.

Looking at the body, I realize he is the anomaly in this morbid basin. Many other climbers lay here, all from more recent expeditions than his. Judging by their inhuman, contorted body positions, all had died long before they came to rest where they are now. This climber, however, is different, evidenced by his body position. He had somehow survived – albeit for a brief time – a fall of several hundred feet. It is the same fall that killed others, years later, in the same place. His



hands, after 75 long years, still clutch the mountain-side, the classic position of a falling climber who has dropped his ice axe and, kicking and clawing with all his might, struggled fiercely to arrest his fall. His right ankle is horribly broken in a boot-top fracture; his left leg is crossed over it in a defensive pose. Conrad and I sit silent, awed, humbled as we await the arrival of our teammates.

As historians and archaeologists, we know what we have to do while, as humans, we are hesitant. We all want to tell Mallory and Irvine's story, to tell what happened to these remarkable pioneers 75 years before, and we want to do it respectfully and with care.

Foremost in all of our minds are two questions: Would Mallory and Irvine want their story told? Would

we, in a similar situation, want our stories told?

Unfortunately, we can never know for sure. We can only do what we feel is correct, respectful, and prudent. With that in mind, we begin to investigate the body, delicately chipping away the ice and rock which bar access to his clothing, his pockets, and any evidence they may yield. My breath catches again as I turn over a shirt collar, exposing an ancient laundry label reading G. Mallory. We're with him, George Mallory, the man, the myth, the legend.

Hours pass with few words spoken. Tap Richards and I chip away at ice and rock, locating intriguing artifacts of a bygone era: a custom altimeter made for the 1924 expedition; a box of Swan Vestas matches; a tube of zinc oxide; a tin of beef lozenges. I find notes

and equipment lists in his left breast pocket, and letters from family and friends carefully wrapped in an embroidered handkerchief in the right pocket.

A gust of wind roars up the valley, whipping spindrift snow into my down suit. Chilled, I zip up and continue our investigation and immediately laugh at myself—a self-deprecating laugh. For, here I sit, at 27,000 feet on Everest's North Face, wearing a \$1000 down suit and \$1000 boots, waddling around like a modern-day Michelin Man, examining the remains of a man who scaled these same, unforgiving slopes 75 years earlier dressed only in cotton, wool, and tweed. He wore less on summit day on Everest than I'd wear skiing in Colorado. Amazing.

Before we know it, the sun is sinking toward the

western horizon. We have to return to Camp V tonight – some 1500 feet below. It is time to go. But not just yet.

Moving slowly on the clumsy terrain, painfully aware of the 8000-foot face just below us, we painstakingly gather rocks and sand and gravel and place them atop the body of George Leigh Mallory. Forty-five minutes later, he is covered completely.

Andy Politz pulls out a worn piece of paper and, with the rest of us gathered around, reads a Committal sent to us by Mallory's family from the Bishop of Bristol, England:

*The Lord is full of compassion and mercy, slow to anger and of great goodness. As a father he is tender towards his children, so is the Lord tender to those that fear. For he knows of what we are made.*

We silently bow our heads in personal prayer, pay personal respects to our fallen hero, and begin the descent to Camp V in silence, tears welling in five pairs of eyes.

As I travel the world, climbing and adventuring, the lessons and reminders of our climbing forefathers are not far away. Be it a rusty, old pin in some Colorado crag; or a tent pole from 1938, high on Everest's Northeast Shoulder; or the memories of May 1, 1999, these small relics of days and climbers long past never fail to inspire or humble. Indeed, they are all reminders to me that any accomplishment I make, any ability I have to step a little further, to push harder into the unknown, into uncharted terrain, is only possible because of the efforts of those who came before. When I climb, I am forever reminded of the words of Bernard of Chartres—I am "standing on the shoulders of giants."

*While your mountain adventures may not take you to the slopes of Everest to see artifacts, you can see some of the most famous, learn some lessons of old, in our Museum. Among the artifacts are Pete Schoening's famed 1953 K2 ice axe, Albert Ellingwood's climbing equipment from his pioneering ascents throughout Colorado, and an oxygen bottle from George Mallory's 1922 Everest Expedition.*

*Visit us soon to learn about the giants on whose shoulders we all stand—and climb.*