

Mallory and Irvine

from "*Into the Silence*" by Wade Davis

Wade Davis is not a mountaineer. He works for National Geographic and is an author of many books on subjects of that magazine's interest. It is not surprising that he has written about the expedition that found Mallory's body.

In the days since the discovery of the body, the entire expedition had become charged with speculation. ...

It was of course in the interest of the expedition, which had already electrified the world with one stunning discovery, to prove that Mallory and Irvine had reached the summit of Everest. In all the excitement, it was only natural for the team members to envision success. Conrad Anker, by contrast, and to his credit, withheld judgement until he could study the route and know the actual ground as a climber. He had found Mallory's body. He alone would carry the memory of that moment to the summit of the mountain. No climber on Everest in 1999 had a greater desire to learn the truth. His conclusions, carefully crafted and drawn from direct personal experience, resonate with authenticity. Unless and until further discoveries are made, they must surely be considered definitive.

Anker's reservations are several. First, there is the matter of clothing and equipment. Mallory and Irvine had primitive crampons, but they could not use them at high elevation, as the leather straps impaired their circulation and increased the risk of frostbite. On his summit climb Anker found crampons essential; he never removed them, even on the rock face of the Second Step. He and his companion, Dave Hahn, also had the advantage of fixed ropes, which greatly facilitated route finding and the speed, ease, and safety of descent. All of their climbing ropes were made of nylon, with a breaking strength seven times that of the cotton weaves used by the British in the 1920s. Anker had modern climbing aids, a rack of cams and stoppers; Mallory lacked even metal pitons. Both teams climbed with oxygen, but Anker's apparatus weighed fourteen pounds, Mallory's over thirty. Mallory wore seven, perhaps eight, layers of thin silk and wool. Anker had double fleece, a wind parka, and a full down suit with four inches of insulation. In place of leather and hobnails, he had thick nylon boots insulated with closed-cell foam. Mallory covered his head with a leather helmet snatched from the Royal Air Force. Anker had a wool knit hat and a thick down hood engineered into the parka. Despite all of this protection, Anker suffered from the cold, unless he was moving; he found it difficult to imagine how Mallory had managed.

From the accounts of 1924 it is clear that Mallory and Irvine began the last climb physically depleted. They had lost their stove. Limited in their ability to melt snow, they set out for the summit already severely dehydrated. Irvine suffered terribly from the sun; his entire face was blistered and raw. That they left a torch in their tent suggests that they began their day after sunrise; Anker and Hahn, by contrast, set out in the early hours of the morning, at 2 a.m., and returned from their successful summit attempt only at 9:15 p.m., well after dark. They found both the route up the Northeast Ridge daunting, a knife edge of ice and rock, exposed on one side to the Kangshung Face, a drop of 10,000 feet, and on the other, after a fall of a mere 9000 feet to the North Face. Hahn, a highly accomplished mountaineer and in time a veteran of no fewer than 12 successful Everest summit attempts, by his own admission struggled

much of the day, becoming both mentally and physically exhausted. Casting no judgement, neither he nor Anker could imagine what it must have been like for Sandy Irvine, whose experience was so limited.

But the final proof lay in the severity of the Second Step. In 1975 a Chinese expedition has secured an aluminium ladder over the steepest and most perilous pitch. Anker's goal was to climb without making use of this artificial aid, facing the challenge just as Mallory would have done in 1924. The initial ascent of some 45 feet he rated as moderately difficult but not extreme: no trouble for Mallory, though possibly beyond Irvine's abilities. But the next pitch, including the crack crossed by the ladder, was vertical rock, formidably difficult. Anker tried but was unable to free-climb it; the position of the ladder obliged him to set one foot on a rung. He later graded it a "solid 5.10," a technical rating implying a rock challenge far more difficult than anything being attempted by British climbers in Wales or anywhere else in the 1920s. That Mallory and Irvine might have overcome such a pitch, climb made doubly perilous by the exposure of 8000 feet, defied belief. And even had they done so, it was not clear how they could have returned. Conrad and Hahn, like all modern climbers of the Northeast Ridge, counted on rappelling down the Second Step, their ropes anchored to a large and prominent boulder at the top of the final pitch. The climbing ropes available to Mallory and Irvine were neither strong nor long enough for such a rappel. Had they surmounted the Second Step, Mallory and Irvine would have been forced, upon their return, to down-climb, an imposing challenge readily acknowledged by Anker, among the top technical rock climbers of the modern era, as being at the limit of his capabilities.

As Anker and Hahn crested the Second Step and began the long and still dangerous climb toward the summit of Everest, they had answered many of the essential questions. Mallory and Irvine had certainly reached the First Step; this would later be confirmed by the discovery in situ of a discarded oxygen cylinder, which Jochen Hemmleb dated positively to 1924. In all likelihood they overcame the First Step but then turned back either at the foot of the Second Step or somewhere along the ridge between the two. Perhaps in failing light, or blinded by the squall that swept the mountain that afternoon, Mallory removed his goggles as he attempted to find a route down through the slabs of the Yellow Band. Tied as one, perhaps with Mallory on belay, they fell together, not from the height of the Northeast Ridge but far lower on the North Face, quite possibly within easy reach of their highest camp. Indeed, later expeditions would determine that Mallory had come to rest not three hundred yards from the safety of his Camp VI.

Mallory and Irvine may not have reached the summit of Mount Everest, but they did, on that fateful day, climb higher than any human being before them, reaching heights that would not be attained again for nearly 30 years. That they were able to do so, given all they had endured, is surely achievement enough.

The Times
18th August 1924

Asked first whether he thought that Mr. Mallory and Mr. Irvine reached the summit of the mountain, Colonel Norton emphatically declared that he made no such claim. He was rather disturbed to find so many people had read into his message an expression of opinion that the summit had been reached. Mr. Odell, he said, it was true, thought that Everest had been conquered, and Mr. Odell was nearest to the two lost mountaineers. But he himself, in common with the rest of the party, did not think that Mr. Mallory succeeded. This view was based on several reasons. He knew Mallory's mind and habits of thought intimately.

Mallory had the most definite ideas of the responsibility of a leader of a party, and would have been the last man in the world to chance things when accompanied by a youngster like Irvine. Colonel Norton's opinion—though he repeatedly emphasized that it could only be a matter of conjecture—was that the end came through an "ordinary mountaineering accident."

THE LOST CLIMBERS.

Mallory and Irvine were last seen at rather more than 28,200ft. at the top of a little cliff of the last ridge, the only place in the final ascent where one might expect to find actual climbing difficulties. It was loose, unsafe rock, and there was a fall of fresh snow. "I would define the place," said Colonel Norton, "not as difficult, but dangerous." Why Mallory and Irvine were at this spot four hours later than the scheduled time was and would always remain a mystery; Mallory was always a devout believer in the value of an early start, and he would have realized the necessity of getting back to Camp Six at all events by nightfall. The suggested slowness might have been due to disappointment with the oxygen.

A defect, however, though it might have prevented the success of their effort, could not be held responsible for the loss of Mallory and his companion. Another reason why Colonel Norton holds to the theory of an accident is based upon his intimate knowledge of Mallory's character. "I have never known (he said) a man so entirely dominated by the spirit within him," and unless there was an accident he finds it difficult to believe that Mallory's will-power would not have proved triumphant over the difficulties and hardships of the descent.

"The Fight for Everest: 1924" by E F Norton (pub. June 1925)

(p. 130) N E Odell:

"I saw the whole summit ridge and final peak of Everest unveiled. I noticed far away on a snow slope leading up to what seemed to me to be the last step but one from the base of the final pyramid, a tiny object moving and approaching the rock step. A second object followed, and then the first climbed to the top of the step. As I stood intently watching this dramatic appearance, the scene became enveloped in cloud once more, and I could not actually be certain that I saw the second figure join the first.

"Owing to the small portion of the summit ridge uncovered I could not be precisely certain at which of these two 'steps' they were, as in profile and from below they are very similar, but at the time I took it for the upper 'second step'. However I am a little doubtful now whether the latter would not be hidden by the projecting nearer ground from my position below on the face."

Later on, Odell said he saw the first of the two figures actually surmount the step *within the five minutes* of his last glimpse of them.

Everest 1933

In 1933, nine years after Mallory and Irvine disappeared, the very next attempt to climb Everest followed the self-same route they had taken, i.e., the Northeast Ridge. It was also a party of two, Harris and Wager.

In 1924, Mallory and Irvine were supported by Odell. He claimed he saw them moving, and climbing a step of the ridge.

in 1933, Harris and Wager were supported by Shipton and Smythe. They thought they saw them moving, and climbing the ridge, but within moments realised what they were looking at were rocks.

That these two events were separated by nine years is somewhat immaterial. Had the elapsed time been hours rather than years would make no difference – it was the same ridge, the same route, and what each saw would be the same. These two events were so similar that Odell's

apparent sighting ought not be discussed without reference to the Smythe / Shipton experience. Unfortunately, that never happens!

Smythe and Shipton were both better climbers than Odell, Smythe was probably the best mountaineer of the era. Because of their frequent, virtually continual, mountaineering experiences, I would trust their observations more than Odell's. Odell, a geologist, certainly spent a lot of time in the natural environment, but their observational experience of mountain detail, in particular, far exceeded his.

An amazing revelation

Tony Smythe's 2013 biography of his father, Frank, tells of a letter Frank wrote of an observation he made during the 1936 Everest expedition. Smythe studied the surface of the mountain with a telescope and made a discovery. In 1937, he wrote Edward Norton, the leader of the 1924 Everest expedition to tell him what he had seen:

"I was scanning the face from base camp through a high-powered telescope last year, when I saw something queer in a gully below the scree shelf ... Of course it was a long way away and very small, but I've a six/six eyesight and do not believe it was a rock. This object was at precisely the point where Mallory and Irvine would have fallen had they rolled on over the scree slopes ... It's not to be written about, as the press would make an unpleasant sensation."

from "*Everest 1933*" by Hugh Ruttledge

Ruttledge's Chapter VIII was actually written by Frank Smythe:

"The Second Assault" by F. S. Smythe

It was near Camp VI that Shipton suddenly stopped and pointed. "There go Wyn and Waggors on the Second Step," he explained. Sure enough, there were two little dots on a steep snow-slope at the foot of the cliff. We stared hard at them and could have sworn they moved. Then, simultaneously, we realised that they were rocks. And, strangely enough, there were two more rocks perched on a snow-slope immediately above the Step; these again looked like men and appeared to move when stared at. It was somewhere in the neighbourhood of Camp VI that Odell thought he saw Mallory and Irvine. The distance from this point on the Second Step is about one mile, and human figures would appear no larger than dots.

Is it possible that he was similarly tricked by his eyes? His view of the Northeast Ridge was between shifting mists and lasted only a minute or two. The effect of altitude, tiredness, and the strain of climbing combine to impair the efficiency of vision. It was 12:50 p.m. when they were seen. Why were they so late? No one could possibly climb the Second Step in the short time that he saw them; it is quite 100 feet high, vertical for the most part and even overhangs in its upper portion. It is probably unclimbable and certainly desperately difficult. Odell, however, thinks that he may have mistaken the First Step for the Second Step. If so, it is even stranger that they should have been so late. To reach the summit from the First Step and return before nightfall would have been impossible, and Mallory was too fine a mountaineer to throw his life and that of his companion away on impossibilities. On the other hand, they may have decided to go on as far as they could and return by nightfall. Another

point in favour of Odell's view of them is that it is certain that they reached a point very close to the crest of the Northeast Ridge, if not the crest of the Ridge itself.

"Camp Six" by F. S. Smythe

... it is by no means certain that Odell saw them on the Second Step when he had that last dramatic glimpse of them between the mists.

... We were climbing along the Ridge at about 26,500 feet when Eric, who was leading, suddenly stopped and pointed: "There go Wyn and Wagers on the Second Step," he said. I joined him and we stared at the Northeast Ridge, whence the Second Step lifts its steep prow. There were certainly two dots on a small patch of snow at the foot of the Step, and as my gaze concentrated on them they seemed to move. Then, simultaneously, we realised that they were two rocks. And on a snow slope above the Step were two more rocks which seem to move too when we stared hard at them.

It was a strange experience, especially in view of the fact that it was heard about that Odell saw Mallory and Irvine for a few moments between drifting mists, which may have enhanced the illusion of movement? **I do not think he was deceived.** His description is too detailed to allow of a mistake in the first place: most important point of all, he describes one figure as moving up to join the other. But I do not believe they were on the Second Step or that they climbed the Step in the minute or so that he was able to watch them. The Step is fully eighty feet high, and they were carrying heavy oxygen apparatus. Assuming the ascent to be possible, it could hardly take less than half an hour with or without oxygen apparatus, and Odell did not see them for more than a few minutes. His view was between shifting mists, and it is probable that they were traversing one of the two prominent rises in the ridge some distance below the First Step, or the First Step itself. It would be easy to mistake the position of a party on a misty day on a complicated peak like Everest.

Smythe, in "Camp Six", gives the same account he had written for inclusion in Rutledge's book. One would expect his opinions and conclusions expressed in the two versions would be identical, yet they are not! In one, Smythe gives logical reasons why he thinks Odell was deceived yet in the other he thinks Odell was not deceived!

"Adventure of a Mountaineer" by F. S. Smythe (pub. 1940)

In 1924 a third attempt was made. On this occasion Brigadier Norton and Dr Somervell without oxygen apparatus reached a height of 28,000 feet. There Somervell collapsed owing to a bad throat, and Norton went on alone and got to a height of 28,000 feet before exhaustion forced him to retreat. Two days later another attempt was made, this time with oxygen apparatus, by Mallory and Irvine; they never returned, and what happened to them can only be conjectured.

Mr N. E. Odell believes that he saw them when climbing by himself up towards Camp Six, though his view was quickly obscured by mists. **They were apparently going strong for the top.** Whether they fell, or died from exhaustion, may never be determined, though an ice-axe, which can only have belonged to one of them, was discovered later.

I feel let down by Smythe in this (1940) book. He mentions Odell's sighting and Odell's 'They were apparently going strong for the top.' which, unfortunately, reads as though it's Smythe

giving his opinion. This conflicts with his previous opinion (1933), that seems to make so much sense, and that he and Shipton had discussed and agreed upon.

The 1938 Everest expedition team included Smythe, Shipton and Odell. What a golden opportunity for them to discuss Odell's sighting and its interpretation by Smythe and Shipton. Whether they did or didn't we will never know for nothing was ever said about it.

from "*Everest 1933*" by Hugh Ruttledge

The four men of this year's expedition who have been near the "second rock step" are very doubtful is to be climbed at all; they are quite sure that no man, however skilful, could climb it in five minutes. ... Supposing them to be right, what then did Odell see? I suggest to the incident which occurred during Smythe than Shipton's ascent to Camp VI, offers a reasonable explanation.

... If Odell really saw them near the second step so late as 12:50 p.m., the questions arise whether they could possibly have completed the ascent at all, and whether Mallory would have gone on at all costs, regardless of the danger of being benighted. Norton firmly believes that Mallory had a full sense of his responsibility. If, on the other hand, Odell was mistaken, the time factor does not apply and we know nothing further of the party's movements.

Mallory was a member of the first three expeditions to Mt Everest, 1921, 1922 and 1924. The first was a reconnaissance to explore and reconnoitre potential routes and – if possible – make an ascent. 1922 and 1924 were all out attempts.

Mallory's wife, Ruth Turner (6 Oct 1892 – 6 Jan 1942); m 1914; Children:
Frances Clare (19 Sep 1915 – 2001),
Beridge Ruth, ("Berry"), (16 Sep 1917 – 1953),
John (born 21 Aug 1920).

An item of circumstantial evidence from Mallory's body (found 1999) suggests he may have reached the summit. Mallory's daughter, Frances (age 84), said that Mallory carried a photograph of his wife on his person with the intention of leaving it on the summit. This photo was not found on Mallory's body. Does this prove anything? Consider:

- Mallory went on three Everest expeditions. Did he take Ruth's photograph on all three?
- Ruth never said publicly that he carried her photograph on Everest expeditions.
- Frances would have to have been told about it by Ruth, no later than 1941.
- The first we heard of the photograph was in 1999, when Frances, aged 84, told us.
- Did Frances invent the story. Was it her emotional response to glorify her father's fate?
- For Mallory to carry his wife's photograph, is an emotional, yet understandable, thing to do.
- But why didn't he, also, carry photographs of his three children to leave on the summit?
- Something's not right here. Because of nothing about the children raises doubts, suggesting Frances's story is a fiction.

Mallory was a forgetful person. Even if he had Ruth's photograph, can one say for sure he had it with him on all three Everest expeditions? He wrote lists, but was that because he had a bad memory. A list was found. Did he forget to carry it? He left the torch at Camp VI which meant they might have to return to camp in pitch darkness. He forgot his compass, and so was unable to check his direction after the cloud enclosed them. He lost the Unna Cooker, and with no means of melting snow, he and Irvine were dangerously dehydrated.

Dear Odell, We're awfully sorry to have left things in such a mess – our Unna Cooker rolled down the slope at the last moment. In the tent I must have left a compass – for the Lord's sake rescue it: we are without. G Mallory

Norton and Somervell were able to start their summit bid at 6:40 am, later than originally planned. A spilled water bottle caused the delay, and a new quantity had to be melted. But the litre of water each man took was wholly inadequate for their climb.

In 1933, the First Assault (Harris & Wager) aimed to climb the Northeast Ridge, just as had Mallory and Irvine nine years earlier. ... the Thermos flask, prepared the night before, had not been able to keep its contents warm, and they were obliged to spend an hour heating water (obtained, of course, from snow) over a "Tommy cooker."

A point to consider

Although there are two opposing schools of thought, (1) those who think Mallory and Irvine got to the top and (2) those who think they didn't, there is one critical factor that is *never* considered by either party and yet it is so obvious. Odell says he saw Mallory and Irvine for a couple of minutes before they were hidden by cloud. The cloud never lifted all day, so how could they find their way to the summit? At best, it was highly unlikely they could have reached the summit, but once the cloud cover arrived it was impossible.

There is no gentle slope to the summit, but cliffs and gaps in the ridge. After a few such ups and downs and sidling around rock outcrops it would be impossible for them to tell whether they were going north, south, east or west. But let's assume they got to the top; which way was down? Every way was down! The very wind that had moved the clouds to hide them from view from below, or the squall that swept the mountain that afternoon, would very likely have whipped up spindrift and covered their footprints. So, which way down – 10,000 feet down the Kangshung Face to the south or 9,000 down the North Face? Without a compass, how could they tell which way to go?

On a few climbs, when I have been heading to or from a summit, cloud has closed in. One time, when nearing a summit pyramid cloud descended, blocking the view in all directions. The immediate vicinity was fairly flat, so which way up to the summit? I did a test but the ground sloped down. I made no more tests but just waited for the cloud to go. When it cleared, I checked my test route – it was in the wrong direction and to the top of a 1000 foot cliff. Assume Mallory and Irvine waited for the cloud to clear away – it could take hours. What would happen to them? They would freeze! Conrad Anker stated (above) what he wore *had double fleece, a wind parka, and a full down suit with four inches of insulation ... he had thick nylon boots insulated with closed-cell foam ... a wool knit hat and a thick down hood engineered into the parka. Despite all of this protection, Anker suffered from the cold, **unless he was moving**; he found it difficult to imagine how Mallory had managed.*

Sandy Irvine

Though George Leigh Mallory is the person everyone talks about in regard to the Everest tragedy, the real victim was Andrew Irvine. He was not a mountaineer, in fact, had never climbed a mountain. Some years before, Noel Odell climbed a 3000 ft mountain in Wales and met Sandy Irvine at the top. Irvine had got there on his motorbike. Odell invited Irvine to join his Spitzbergen expedition, which he did, but that was not a mountain climbing expedition. Later, he joined the 1924 Mt Everest team, as an oxygen apparatus expert. One assumes Odell was a driving force in his recruitment.

Despite Irvine's skill with oxygen equipment, he ought never have been part of a climbing team, particularly on the Northeast Ridge. He knew almost nothing about mountaineering and absolutely nothing about rock climbing. But because of his oxygen equipment expertise, and that alone, he was chosen by Norton, the leader of the expedition, to join Mallory on a route, that for all he knew might involve hard rock climbing. Mallory, too, showed a serious lack of judgement in allowing Irvine to accompany him on such a likely dangerous exploit.

If anything went wrong with Mallory, it would be the end of Irvine. And that is what happened, something did go wrong with Mallory. In my opinion he did not fall, he simply collapsed from a number of problems, both physical and natural, and he ended up sliding down the slope until he was brought to a stop by the rope joining him to Irvine. The causes of his collapse were physical, dehydration and severe cold. The natural problem was cloud cover, limiting the range of vision and hiding the way down to Camp VI. Maybe some snow, too. Also, there was a significant drop in barometric pressure [which was proven], resulting in storms and a cold wind. If there was any problem with the oxygen apparatus, necessitating breathing low pressure atmospheric air, even for a short time, it could quickly prove fatal.

And what of Irvine after Mallory's slide down the slope? Did Mallory call out to say he was injured? It wouldn't have mattered, Irvine would have gone down looking for Mallory, anyway. But what then of him? His own death was a certainty. Some day, someone, will resurrect Sandy Irvine, and raise him to his true place in the sun.