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## *Essay on May 1, 1999*

May 1, 1999. A date that means little to many. A month or so before school's end and summer's beginning. The onset of warm weather, green leaves, and chirping birds. For me and for several others, however, that day will live on forever in our hearts, minds, and souls. One beautiful, lucky day. A brush with history. A step back in time. A life changing moment in so many ways. I find it difficult to adequately put into words what that simple date means to me. Perhaps a verbal retrospective can begin to explain it all....

The day dawns clear and crisp at 7,700 meter Camp V perched dramatically on Everest's North Ridge. Tap Richards, Conrad Anker, and I roust ourselves into the unforgiving cold of early morning and start the stoves, welcoming the heat and light their meager flames provide. The day ahead will be a big one: We decided days before to begin our search of the Camp VI area on Everest's North Face from Camp V, for we had – until this point – enjoyed splendid, dry weather. We had to make at least a cursory search of the principle area before any snow fell, thus obscuring evidence of Mallory & Irvine.

We are excited for the day's activities, and hold high hopes for finding evidence of these men who had become the focal point of our thoughts and actions. We laboriously don our boots, strap on crampons, hoist our packs, and begin the climb upward to Camp VI.

Before long, we are in the pre-determined search area: a jumbled landscape, wildly tilted, and covering about 12 football fields of scree and snowfields. It is a morbid area 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; and lots of rock, ice, and snow. Above and below, my teammates search similar terrain.

Suddenly, Mother Luck comes into the picture....Conrad Anker, scouring a shelf some 50 meters southwest of me, stops to take off his crampons and looks over his shoulder; the

proverbial "right place at the right time." As he later described, he saw "something that was white, but it was not snow and it was not rock." When he investigates, he immediately transmits over the radio to all of us: "Mandatory team meeting here...I have tea and Snickers." As a simple result of proximity, I was the first person to reach the site after Conrad. The scene which I came upon – at the terminus of a cliff band at 27,000 feet – was stunning. Neither Conrad nor I could speak at first. Before us, in the characteristic rubble of the North Face, lay the remains of our collective hero. He stood out immediately, not because of clothing but rather posture. We had come across several corpses in the search area that day. All of them were modern climbers – as evidenced by their brightly-colored, nylon clothing – and all of them, it was tragically obvious, had died long before they came to rest where we found them. They lay broken and battered in contorted positions. Mallory, however, was different. It was immediately apparent he had survived his fall, albeit for a brief period. He lay on his belly, head uphill. His arms, after 75 years, still clutched at the terrain beneath him in a position of valiant self-arrest. And, the most telling: His good, unbroken left leg lay in a protective fashion over his left leg, horribly broken in a boot-top fracture of the tibia and fibula.

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 several questions: If we were in their shoes, if one of us died high on Mount Everest in 1924, would we want our story told? Would I want someone to show the world who I was, and what my final days entailed? Would I want my daughter, my son, or my grand-niece, to know what happened to me? Unfortunately, we can never know for sure. We can only do what we feel is correct, respectful, and prudent.

I felt then, and still feel today, that what was correct, respectful, and prudent was to document the scene before me, to photograph the remains of George Leigh Mallory – a climber, a father, a husband, a hero – in order to show the world who he was, to tell his story in ways that words could not, to put into visual perspective what he and the pre-war climbers accomplished, summit or not.

In the two years since that day, much has transpired. I was fortunate in so many ways. My photography, which had long been a personal passion, was published around the world, a led me to start my own photography business. I had the opportunity to share my experiences in slideshows and interviews, and to try and convey to those audiences the respect and awe I had for Mallory, Irvine, and the pre-war climbers. But, most importantly, I was able to interact with history, to go back in time if you will, and interact

in some way with Mallory & Irvine, heroes who I had only known through the writing of others.

As I look back on the expedition and all that transpired afterward, I see some things that, given the 20/20 perspective of hindsight, we would have done differently. Particularly poignant for me has been the publishing of, and subsequent reaction to, my images of George Mallory's remains. I personally, and our expedition collectively, have received scathing condemnations from climbers – and heroes of mine – like Sir Edmund Hillary, Sir Chris Bonington, Doug Scott, Steven Venables, Joe Simpson, and Reinhold Messner.

In the wake of this criticism, I have asked myself time and again: Did we do the right thing? And from my heart has always come the same, resounding answer: YES. We were not and are not body hunters, scavengers, treasure hunters, money-grubbers, or defilers of any sort. We set off in 1999 with reverence and honor for the 1924 climbers, and held that in our hearts throughout. Our intent was, is, and always will be to tell the story of George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Comyn Irvine as we believe they would want it told.

But, alas, another reality: we are human, and prone to mistakes. Certainly, not everything we did in 1999 was the epitome of perfection, and, had we the ability, we would probably go back and change some decisions, alter some courses of action. *Reality*: we cannot. I am reminded of a thought prevalent in Buddhism: Correct intent over correct action. The idea is that no one can ever hope to live life without his or her actions causing some pain, some problem, for someone, somewhere along the line. But, one *can* live with correct intent, always *intending* to do the right thing, although inadvertent mishaps may occur. It is this - a life imbued with correct intent - which we, as humans, must strive for. I know we went into every action in 1999 with correct intent – to honor and cherish the memory of George Leigh Mallory and Andrew Comyn Irvine. And, when all is said and done, I think that is what matters most.